How Should I Respond to Domestic and Family Violence?

Before you read this fact sheet, read Domestic and Family Violence and What is the Impact of Domestic and Family Violence?

Mandatory Reporting

In NSW, domestic and family violence must be reported if you reasonably suspect that a child is at risk of significant harm. You must also report historical domestic and family violence (a report of past domestic and family violence of an adult, child or young person, even if it happened many years ago).

How to make a report of domestic and family violence?

💻 Complete the Mandatory Reporting Guide (MRG) tool.

☎ Call the Child Protection Helpline on 132 111.

What happens next?

When a report is made about suspected domestic and family violence, it is DCJ's role to ensure the child's safety by:

- reviewing the reported information and determining the most appropriate next step, which could involve NSW Police and/or NSW Health, through the Joint Child Protection Response Program
- applying formal assessment tools to understand whether the child is at risk of significant risk of harm from domestic and family violence
- developing safety plans for the child, in consultation with the child, trusted parent or carer and NGO practitioner
- leading Children's Court action and assisting with providing evidence for criminal convictions.

It is your role to:

- as soon as possible after hearing a disclosure, document the information you heard, as close as possible to the child's exact words, so you are able to provide that information to DCJ and/or the police as needed
- refrain from conducting a formal, investigative interview of the child or gathering evidence. This is the responsibility of DCJ practitioners and/or police officers

- respond appropriately when you reasonably suspect that a child has or is living in a home where there is domestic and family violence. Responding appropriately means applying your agency's policies and procedures and the advice in these fact sheets
- report the suspected abuse by completing the Mandatory Reporting Guide and when indicated, reporting to the Child Protection Helpline
- support DCJ's assessment, for example, by participating in a pre-assessment consultation (PAC) or supporting the interview process
- support the child, trusted parent or carer as they participate in the investigation and assessment process
- support the implementation of the child's safety or case plan
- provide casework that helps keep the child safe and to heal from the domestic and family violence they have experienced. This may involve continuing to respond to disclosures from the child
- provide any relevant information to DCJ that will continue to keep the child safe
- undertake a reportable conduct investigation regarding the child's carer as needed, adhering to any advice from DCJ, especially the JCPPR.

Tip: Many child protection practitioners are afraid of contaminating evidence. These fears can come from a desire to make sure our questions do not hinder a criminal investigation or impact on the child's credibility during a criminal justice process.

It is important to remember that not all disclosures will lead to prosecution and as practitioners, our primary role must always be to ensure children's safety. If we prioritise prosecution outcomes over safety, we inadvertently run the risk of not hearing children's worries and may lose opportunities to build a relationship with the child

The Power of Your Words

What you write and say about violence and control towards women and the children in their care matters. Your language is never neutral — it is filled with meaning. From the way you respond when a woman tells you her partner has hit her, to the phrases you choose

when documenting that violence — your words are powerful and always have consequences.

How to Use Language When Speaking About and Documenting Violence

The language we use to describe violence can conceal, mutualise, minimise, or relieve the perpetrator of responsibility. It can also blame the victim or make her mutually responsible for the violence. This is the common discourse in society. Alternatively, words can hold people who use violence accountable and recognise the people who are hurt by it.

Be Clear About Violence and Who is Responsible:

- Use language that reveals the deliberate and patterned nature of violence.
- Avoid words that mutualise violence or suggest consent — words like fight and argument do not explain who did what to whom.
- Avoid words like sex, intercourse and other phrases that eroticise violence and fail to identify who is using violence and who is being hurt by it.
- Keep the acts of violence and the identity of the man who uses violence apparent in conversations and all documentation.

Don't say	**Do say**
Violent relationship	Paul is violent against Liz
Violence in the relationship	Domestic and family violence
Violent family	Domestic and family violence
Incident between Paul and Liz	Paul hit Liz in the face and broke her eye socket.

Liz was assaulted Liz was hit Domestic incident Violent incident Violent event Argument Altercation Fight	
The violence The abuse	Paul's use of violence against Liz Paul's violence against Liz
Violent incidents Incidents	Pattern of violence and control Use of violence and control
DV	Domestic violence
DFV	Domestic and family violence
The perpetrator	Paul

Compare these statements on violence:

1. "Magda is in a domestic violence relationship. Magda was assaulted during a domestic altercation."

This statement:

- mutualises violence

- uses the term ‘domestic violence relationship’ implicating Magda as responsible in some way for her situation
- doesn’t explicitly report who hurt Magda or how
- doesn’t report what effect the violence has on Magda
- reports on a single incident with no mention of where it fits in a pattern of violence
- focuses on Magda with no mention of who is using violence.

2. “Magda and Martin are in a relationship and live together with Magda’s two children. Martin regularly uses violence towards Magda. In his latest assault on her, Martin pulled Magda’s hair and pushed her head into a wall. Magda had swelling, bruising and a cut on her forehead as a result. She has also hurt her wrist trying to defend herself against Martin. Magda says this level of injury is a fortnightly occurrence.”

This statement:

- makes it clear Magda and Martin are in a relationship and live together in a home with two children
- reports of a pattern of violence where Martin severely injures Magda
- details the way Martin has hurt Magda in this latest incident
- describes the injury Magda sustained as a result of Martin’s violence
- makes Martin the focus and subject when reporting on violence — ‘Martin pulled Magda’s hair’
- makes Martin responsible for his use of violence over Magda
- records how Magda is using resistance — in this case physically defending herself

In the video The Language of Violence Dr Allan Wade from the City University of Seattle talks about how using mutualising language minimises a perpetrator's responsibility for the violence. He discusses how using response-based language acknowledges the resistance of women and children to the man's violence, restores dignity and holds perpetrators accountable.

Ask Yourself Check in Questions and Reflections

For example:

- Am I privileging a particular voice?
- How can I be most helpful to the child, young person, child and parent or carer?
- Am I being helpful or causing harm?
- Have I asked for feedback?
- Is the person causing harm being asked to take responsibility?
- Am I using language that is blaming or clarifies the nature of the violence?

Value and Acknowledge Acts of Resistance

Women and children experience domestic and family violence resist in a range of obvious and covert ways. Resistance can be mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual. By recognising, valuing and acknowledging the ways they resist, we can:

- support the growth of their dignity, power, and self- esteem
- help them overcome feelings of self-blame and responsibility
- develop a complete picture about the safety of the children in the home and the woman's role in keeping the children safe.

It's important to remember that a woman and child's acts of resistance do not equal safety. Uncovering resistance can often reveal more danger or risk factors and therefore provides better accuracy in assessing a child's safety. For example, a child may get in between parents or carers when the man is violent toward the woman. They may go to a neighbour's home where there are unsafe adults. They may use substances or self-harm behaviours to block out the emotional pain carried living in violence.

For more information about resistance and how to respond, see: Understanding Resistance in Practice.

Talking to Men Who Use Violence and Control

Our role is to listen with empathy to men, to understand their experiences, beliefs and perceptions. We acknowledge and respect their role as fathers and caregivers. We do this while also letting him know that his use of violence is never excusable.

How we speak about domestic and family violence — both in practice and society more broadly — has traditionally focused on victims.

When a woman is hurt by a man's violence and control, she is expected to lead the action — she must be brave and leave her partner, she must take the risk of leaving her home, and she must do all this to be a good mother to her children.

But there is no domestic and family violence without a perpetrator. The man makes decisions to use violence and can make decisions to stop using violence. Historically, we have failed to hold men accountable for their violence and we have minimised their role as a parent or carer. This has made them 'invisible' in child protection practice.

Men often do not connect their violence and control towards their partners with an impact on their children. This can happen regardless of the fact many men will use their children in an attempt to gain power and control over women, often by undermining the mother/female carer-child relationship as a form of abuse.

Engaging men who use violence and control is critical. It is key to keeping women and children safe. When you engage the man who uses violence in your work you:

- recognise his important role as father or caregiver
- enhance the safety of the woman and child by creating a network of accountability around the man
- hold him to account for his violence and control
- place responsibility on him to end the violence and control
- link him to support to create the changes he needs
- make the man's patterned use of violence more visible — this helps us better understand how his violence has hurt the child (or may hurt them in the future)
- help build understanding around how the man responds to the violence
- build an understanding of how he responds to the woman and child's acts of resistance
- let him know his behaviours are being watched.

Worry and apprehension — how this shapes your responses

You may feel anxious and lack confidence about engaging with a man who uses violence. This may lead you to avoidance. You may worry that he may use violence against you. Some women practitioners may feel intimidated by the gender power imbalance that has been magnified by his use of violence.

You may also feel 'out of practice' having these conversations with men because our focus has historically been on interventions with mothers. Rodney Vlais insightfully talks about this as 'knocking quieter at the front door' in the hope the man does not answer.
This is indeed challenging work, however it is important to remember that by not engaging the man, you place the burden of responsibility (and consequences) on the woman to have these conversations with him.
Ask yourself: Am I feeling anxious about engaging with the man? What can I do to alleviate this and build confidence? Draw on a 'critical friend' or manager to work out how you can respond to this power imbalance. How can I keep myself strong for this child?

It's important to approach your conversations with men who use violence with curiosity and collaboration. You can demonstrate an empathic approach without agreeing with his behaviour. A curious and collaborative approach involves:

- sitting alongside him to look at his violence
- helping him notice the impact of his violence on his partner, child and family
- taking opportunities to invite him into the process of change
- forming an alliance with him in the change process
- demonstrating empathy toward him when he demonstrates an ability to empathise with those around him who have been impacted by his violence.

This table demonstrates the benefits of remaining curious and collaborative to affect change, rather than an approach which creates collusion with the man or where the men who use violence make you feel coerced.

Collusion	Curiosity/collaboration	Coercion
Conversations feel truthful but aid a purpose to win you over/control you	They feel vulnerable and have an internal conflict during conversations	Conflict between all parties, they feel angry/unsupported in conversations
An alliance is formed suiting them	An alliance is formed that is aligned to change	Resistance/obstruction rather than alliance
Sit alongside them to look at the behaviour of others	Sit alongside them to look at their abusive behaviour	Confrontation of wrongdoings
Blaming you for not taking their side	They come to value your support	They dislike you and put you down

Focus on the impact that stays on them where there is no room to look at others	Focus on the impact that is on others	Focus on bad behaviour and impact on others rather than self, where they are defensive
No opportunity for you to challenge behaviour/actions	Gentle invitation for you to challenge their own behaviour/actions	High level of challenge/conflict with no opportunity for change
You empathise with their victim stance	You empathise when they show/feel guilty	There is no empathy at all

Adapted from Education Centre Against Violence, 2019

The tools you'll need to remain curious and collaborative are the same you use with all children and families:

- Relationship-Based Practice
- Empathy
- Supporting Change
- Motivational Interviewing

To learn more about these tools, see Working with Families in Preservation and Restoration, Supporting Parents in Restoration and Relationship-Based Practice.

It's important to reflect on your hopes and worries about talking with men who use violence. Group reflective sessions are a great opportunity to reflect with others as well as discuss and practice your conversation tools. See Reflective Practice, Reflective Practice – Practice Tips and Group Reflective Practice.

For examples on how to navigate a conversation with a man who uses violence see Tips for engaging men on their use of family violence.

There are specific programs and counselling services for men who have used violence and who want to develop healthy relationships with others, including: Men's Behaviour Change Program, Changing for Good, and Engage2Change.

How can I connect with Children and Young People who have experienced Domestic and Family Violence?

Domestic and family violence is usually a secret. Children and young people regularly go unnoticed and, if they are very young, their contribution is dismissed — even by professionals like us. This silence is isolating, lonely and reinforces a message that they are worthless and unlovable.

It's more frightening for children if nobody talks to them about the violence. But some professionals worry that talking about the violence may traumatise or alarm them.

It's important to remember that children know the violence exists. They live with it. They already have their beliefs and feelings about it. When you connect with them you help share this burden, giving children the chance to feel supported, listened to and seen.

> Safety must always come first. If you are worried that speaking to the child could put them at direct risk of violence, focus on creating safety first. Always return to speak with the child when it is safe to do so.

Helpful ways you can respond to children when they disclose domestic and family violence include being:

- warm, open and approachable
- interested in them and express genuine care
- able to notice their emotions
- capable of hearing their story
- able to remain calm and child focussed.

If a child discloses, they were or are experiencing domestic and family violence, reassure them and:

- respond by being calm and listening carefully
- let the child tell their story freely in their own way
- take their word seriously
- let them know you believe them and that telling someone what happened was the right thing to do

- thank them for coming to you and acknowledge how difficult it may have been to disclose
- tell a child that it is not their fault
- notice how they tried to protect themselves and others
- identify and name a child's strengths, including their acts of resistance
- identify and name protective factors in the child's life, including trusted adults, and other relationships that can be built on
- tell them what will happen next.

For more information see: Talking with teens about family violence (video), a podcast of young people telling their stories of living with domestic and family violence, and the Working with Young People factsheet.

Other resources to use in your work with children and young people include:

- The Hideout - A UK-based website for children experiencing domestic and family violence. If there is a possibility that the family may need to relocate to a refuge to be safe, you can use the 'virtual refuge' tool on this page to talk to children about what it might be like in a refuge.
- David Mandel's Safe and Together Model of practice - The Safe and Together Tool is a helpful way to build on from the child taking about or showing you how they respond to violence. The tool can also introduce the idea of safety with the child, hear from them about what makes them feel safe and support safety planning. It is also a good way for parents to understand what each child needs in order to feel safe.

Kids Helpline— Remember to talk to children about how to use the Kids Helpline in a way that does not put them at further risk from the man — such as phoning from a public phone, school or friends house.

How can I Support a Woman who has experienced Domestic and Family Violence?

- Tell them — through our words and actions — that they are not responsible for starting or stopping the violence.
- Tell them we believe them in words and in actions.

- Show them we know they think about the child's safety and are there to help them to keep the child safe.
- Help them know what supports and services are available to them in response to their needs.
- Do everything we can to support them to keep their child and family safe and together.

Tips to start your work with women

- Ask her where and when she can talk, when to ring and when to visit.
- Acknowledge that the burden of confronting the perpetrator should not rest with her.
- Acknowledge that your intervention may have unintended negative consequences for her. Work on ways to minimise these.
- Ask her what she thinks would be the best time and place to talk to the perpetrator.
- Ask her what worries her about us talking to her partner.
- Show her the power and control wheel and talk about the man's actions.
- Help her to understand how violence impacts on children.
- Focus on repairing the adult-child bond disrupted by the man's violence.

Consult

If the child, parent and/or carer is Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, it's important to have regular culturally appropriate consultation with family, community partners, other organisations and consultants.

The consultations will help you understand and respond to cultural factors/influences and the way they can impact on domestic and family violence disclosure and support. For example, in some cultures, men have authority over women. This may impact on a child's ability to disclose and the way in which a mother or female carer feels able to work with you. Another example is the child of a recently arrived migrant family who is unable to disclose because of their limited English language skills and social isolation.

For more information, see Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Families and Protocols for Working with Aboriginal people and communities.

Find therapeutic help

It's important that children who have experienced domestic and family violence and/or their trusted parent/carer have access to therapeutic intervention that promotes trauma processing and healing. You can help find the right therapeutic intervention by:

- Considering options in consultation with the child and parent or carer
- Identifying therapeutic specialists in your agency who can either provide therapy or refer to an appropriate external service
- Working closely with the DCJ Community Services Centre or Child and Family District Unit (CFDU) where the child lives, and Joint Child Protection Response Program, to identify an appropriate service
- Identifying an appropriate service through NSW Health.

Access Victims Support Scheme

A child who has experienced domestic and family violence may be eligible for counselling, financial support, information and referrals from the NSW government, as a victim of a violent crime.

Find out more by accessing Victims Support Scheme or calling (Mon-Fri 9am-5pm):

Victims Access Line 1800 633 063

Aboriginal Contact Line 1800 019 123

If the child is in the care of the Minister, use the form available on the site to make an application to Victim's Services on the child's behalf. Talk to the child and their carer to help identify what support they need. Document this on the application form for Victims Services to consider.

If the child is not in the care of the Minister, you have an obligation to explain they may be entitled to victims support and refer them to the Victims Support Scheme.

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