



# What about the (children?)

**The Voices of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse  
Children affected by Family Violence**

**Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service**



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Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of IWDVS and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Body Shop.



# Introduction

Children who come to Australia to live have the same needs as those born here. As new arrivals, however, they need those who support them to show sensitivity and understanding for some of the additional issues they face. The Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service (IWDVS) has a long history of supporting women and children, providing them with culturally sensitive and linguistic support. The assistance provided to accompanying children has led to questions about the skills required to work with children more directly. One of the purposes of this project was to enhance our service's understanding of the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and to share this knowledge with other services in the family violence sector.

## Impact of Family Violence on Children

By promoting secure and loving primary relationships, children thrive with the confidence they need to learn new skills and reach their potential.

In its report *Towards Collaboration – A Resource Guide for Child Protection and Family Violence Services* (2004), the Department of Human Services (DHS) recognises the pervasive impact of family violence and its devastating effects on children. A range of issues has been identified through the support IWDVS provides to women and their children who have experienced and witnessed the trauma of family violence. Regularly witnessing family violence can have serious consequences on a child's emotional, behavioural and neurological development. The impact of family violence on CALD families mirrors the impact felt amongst families in the broader community.

The DHS Resource Guide (2004) identifies seven principles that underpin Child Protection practice in this area. IWDVS acknowledges the fundamental importance of these principles, which include taking measures to ensure a child's safety, enhancing the mother's capacity to protect her child and addressing the behaviour of the person who uses violence. IWDVS seeks to work collaboratively with Child Protection Services to ensure and promote children's safety and wellbeing.

This paper will highlight the specific impact of family violence upon CALD families and the importance of bilingual and bicultural approaches to supporting children. Through their work with CALD children, IWDVS understands the importance of being able to talk to children directly. IWDVS has concerns about Victoria's long waiting lists for children's services - as well as the shortage of multicultural child clinicians such as play therapists, art therapists and psychologists. There is further need for ethno-specific children's support groups and research into how a child's proficiency in English affects their opportunities and ability to disclose their frightening experiences of family violence.



# What about the Children?

To establish this project, three different groups were formed for Vietnamese, Turkish and Chinese children. Using bilingual facilitators and art therapists, the project focused on helping children to recognise emotions and learn words to identify their emotions; enabling them to share their feelings with others. While English was the predominant language used in the groups, the findings reflected the importance of providing children with an opportunity to disclose their stories in the language of their choice.

At times throughout the sessions, the bilingual facilitators needed to translate some verbal terminology to clarify its meaning and ensure the responses given reflected an accurate understanding of what was being asked. Also significant was the need to understand how a child's culture influences how they tell their stories - to ensure the support provided is sensitive and effective. These groups highlighted the significant needs of our smallest new Australians and the importance of having specialist bilingual and bicultural children's workers and services.

## Corruption of Childhood

Childhood should be a time for having fun, learning new skills, being loved, nurtured and protected. Children should be able to grow up in a home that is safe, secure and free from violence. Children's wellbeing relies on being able to predict their environment and work out safe social rules and boundaries. When family relationships are harmonious and loving, children form healthy attachments with their caregivers who they know will love and protect them. This provides them with the confidence they require to learn new skills, find and maintain positive relationships and fulfil their potential both at school and in their life in general.<sup>1</sup>

The sad reality is that home is not like this for many children. Family violence is experienced and/or witnessed by approximately one quarter of young people living in Australia.<sup>2</sup> The effects on a child's life can be devastating, particularly when they are afraid to disclose their stories, when they do not trust anyone to listen, believe them or help make things better.

For children who are part of families who have migrated to Australia, the effect of family violence is compounded by several factors. These include being in a new country, learning a new language and set of cultural norms and being removed from extended families, friends and community support networks. Some children also carry the burden of experiencing discrimination at school and in the community at large.

## Cognitive and Language Development

The Victorian Family Violence Database provides evidence that in approximately 65 per cent of family violence incidents recorded by police in each of the years 1999–2000 and 2003–2004, there were records of at least one child present. Of those children reported to be present, forty per cent were aged between 0–4 years. Children aged between 5–9 years or 10–16 years were almost equally as likely to be present when police attended family violence incidents.<sup>3</sup>

A child's ability to talk about family violence and other forms of abuse relies on their cognitive and language development. As a child grows, they develop the skills to understand and express themselves in more complex ways. It is important to ensure that questions directed to children are appropriate to their age.

This is especially true of children coming to live in Australia who do not speak English as their first language. The 2006 census reveals that 30,375 of Victorian children (four per cent) aged from birth to 11 years have a low proficiency in English.<sup>4</sup>

1 UNICEF and The Body Shop, 2006, *Stop violence in the home*

2 Indermaur, D., 2001, *Young Australians and Domestic Violence, Trends and issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*

3 Department of Human Services Victoria, 2004, *The Victorian family violence database five-year report – 1999 to 2004: Towards Collaboration – A resource guide for Child Protection and family violence services*

4 Census Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, *Population Diversity in Local Councils – Table 8. Victoria: Language and other English speakers with low English proficiency by Age*



## Disclosing Family Violence

Children's inability to answer certain questions should not be confused with doubt in the veracity of their story. Therapists and other professionals involved in supporting children from CALD backgrounds must ensure they have a clear understanding not only of child development theories but also the individual child's cognitive and language skills. Other non-verbal techniques may be used to elicit information and/or support the child with their healing.

These may include expression through drawing and play. Rather than verbally disclosing the presence of family violence, a child may express their fear through their behaviour (as explained later in this report). This will be even more relevant for immigrant children who do not speak English as their first language. While children's support services may engage interpreters, it is important to appreciate that language cannot be separated from culture. Often verbal expressions cannot be translated exactly. Interpreters convey the meaning rather than the literal translation of each word in the sentence. Even if a child chooses to speak English when disclosing a frightening experience, the words and expressions they use will be influenced by their cultural background and will therefore be explained and expressed in different ways.<sup>5</sup>

It is crucial that family violence agencies, early intervention, children and protective services engage bilingual and bicultural professionals to support children with a low proficiency of English. These specialist workers are required to ensure that children are at their most comfortable when disclosing the frightening events they have experienced and to ensure they are supported appropriately.

Specialist bilingual and bicultural workers empower IWDVS and the family violence sector as well as serving to provide better links and supports to the Department of Human Services and other related children's and family violence services.

## Definition of Family Violence

Most current literature indicates that family violence refers to a pattern of ongoing, manipulative or controlling violence occurring between people who are, or were formerly, in an intimate relationship. Violence can include physical, verbal, sexual, economic, social or emotional abuse. Although the definition is gender neutral, the vast majority of those experiencing violence are women and children while those most likely to use violence are male.

Family violence is a human rights abuse. Most research agrees that the prevalence of family violence is not influenced by ethnicity. When a child discloses family violence, we need to focus on the violent behaviour rather than on the cultural background of the family.<sup>6</sup>

## How can Witnessing and/or Experiencing Family Violence Affect Children?

Children are influenced by the way their parents cope and respond to difficult life experiences. Most children become extremely frightened when they regularly witness violent acts towards someone they love. In turn, this creates emotional and behavioural problems that affect many facets of a child's life.

The way a child responds to repeated family violence can have a range of severe and lasting effects: (NB Many of these behaviours can also be exhibited by children for reasons other than an experience of family violence).

<sup>5</sup> Aldunate, R., Immigrant Women's Support Services Inc., 1999, Issues for women of non-English speaking backgrounds

<sup>6</sup> Aldunate, R., *ibid*

# A Child's Anxiety, Fears and Attachment

## Anxiety and Fear

The effect of family violence is influenced by a child's age, developmental level, temperament, intelligence and gender. Children thrive when they can predict their environment and when they have consistent social rules and boundaries. When a child experiences family violence, they often live in a state of fear and have a heightened level of arousal and anxiety.

## Summary of the effects of anxiety and fear on children

- Becoming increasingly anxious or fearful
- Experiencing sleeping difficulties, such as nightmares
- Regression to an earlier stage of development, such as thumb sucking and bedwetting
- Displaying speech difficulties, such as stuttering
- Experiencing stress-related illnesses, such as headaches or stomach pain
- Depression
- Poor school performance <sup>7</sup>

## Attachment

It is believed that the first attachment a child makes with their primary care givers forms the template they use for all other relationships in their lives, shaping their long term emotional wellbeing when they become adults.

With a secure attachment, a child's emotional needs are met quickly and effectively. The child uses their parent/carer as a secure base from which to explore and learn about the world. This helps them in all aspects of their development and provides the greatest opportunity to live a life protected from stress, anxiety or trauma.

## Summary of the effects of attachment trauma on children

- Feelings of mistrust, shame, anger, helplessness, low self esteem, depression or apathy
- Difficulties developing and maintaining friendships
- Social and emotional problems such as limited social skills and a lack of empathy
- Failure to develop age appropriate physical and verbal skills
- Problems with trust, distorted expectations of relationships, and distorted beliefs about male and female roles
- Belief that violence in families is normal and okay
- Learning that the only way to get what you want is by using violence
- Susceptibility to illness and eating disorders<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Nemours Foundation, 1995, *Kids health for parents: Anxiety, Fears and Phobias*

<sup>8</sup> Helpguide.com, 2001, *Attachment disorders – Insecure attachment and reactive attachment disorder*

# A child's self-esteem

## Self esteem

Self esteem refers to a set of beliefs we have about ourselves. It influences our attitudes, behaviours and our emotional wellbeing

## Summary of the effects of low self esteem on children

- Poor self esteem, self confidence and trust in themselves
- Blaming themselves for the violence <sup>9</sup>

## Behaviour

Children learn how to behave in a socially appropriate way by observing their parents, family members, peers, other significant people and society at large. Most commonly, if children behave well, they are rewarded and if they do not, they may receive negative responses. The way they see others behave and how they are responded to will influence a child's behaviour.

In addition, when children experience life events that they find challenging, there may be other ways they exhibit their emotions (such as anxiety, fear and anger).

## Summary of the effects of family violence on a child's behaviour

- Starting to withdraw from people and events
- Experiencing bullying
- Displaying bullying, aggressive or destructive behaviour
- Missing school to stay near a parent who is hurt
- Starting to show cruelty to animals
- Displaying risky behaviour
- Running away from home
- Misusing drugs and alcohol (in young adults)
- Some research has found that girls show more internalising behaviour such as depression, anxiety and withdrawal, and that boys show more externalising behaviour such as increased activity levels and aggression.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Raising Children Network – The Australian Parenting Network, 2006, *More than arguments: domestic violence*

<sup>10</sup> Raising children network, *ibid*

# A child's development

## A child's development

From the moment of birth, infants grow, develop and learn about their world. This process continues throughout childhood to adulthood. A child's development can be measured through social, physical and cognitive developmental milestones. If a child is not provided with the experiences and safe environment to develop their skills and learn, they may be unable to reach their full potential.

## Summary of the effects of family violence on a child's development

- When infants and small children experience intense emotional stress, the development of their brains can be adversely affected.
- When a pregnant mother experiences intense emotional stress, the foetus' brain development can also be adversely affected.
- This can impair their cognitive, emotional and sensory growth.
- Children may then have difficulty learning the new skills they need to help them function in their world.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Department of Community Services' Fourth Domestic violence forum, 2002, Domestic Violence and its impact on children's development



# The Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service understands the following additional issues experienced by CALD children

## Personal trauma for CALD children

- Children can be further traumatised if they are relied upon as an interpreter for a mother who has been subject to family violence and is accessing support services. This role can have significant negative effects on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the child
- Children may have witnessed other violence in their homeland
- Children may have been forced to flee their home, risking dangerous journeys and uncertain futures in the hope of finding a safe home
- Children may have lost their family networks, extended family, friends and all that is familiar
- Children may have spent time in a refugee camp or after an escape, may have been held in detention in a supposedly 'safe' country
- Children may also be separated from a parent in the country that receives them as refugees
- Children may experience further trauma witnessing the conditions of detention and how the uncertainty of their situation impacts on their parent/parents' health and ability to protect them

## Personal challenges for CALD children

- It would be challenging for a child to be in a new country with no/or limited friendships
- Other challenges include learning a new language, learning a new set of cultural norms and behaviour; and adjusting to formal schooling

## Challenges to CALD children in the community

- Culturally relevant services may not be available due to shifts in migration patterns
- Experiencing discrimination and racism at school and in the community
- Service gaps, such as lack of culturally appropriate mental health and primary prevention services, mean that immigrant children may not receive the support they need to recover from witnessing family violence
- Living in a new home where people don't understand their culture or history
- If the child or their family do not have permanent residency visas, they will have limited and/or restricted access to resources and supports available<sup>12</sup>

# Protective Factors for Immigrant Children and their Communities

In addition to challenges faced by immigrant children to Australia, there are also many protective factors that may help support these children through difficult life events.

- Emphasis on extended family and community ties can result in children having a network of consistent caring adults to nurture and support them
- This community network can help the child to develop a strong cultural identity
- A connection to a faith community can be an important and protective factor
- Resourcefulness and resiliency developed as a response to all the new things they need to learn as a new immigrant <sup>13</sup>

# Our Children's Groups (Chinese, Vietnamese and Turkish

**(NB No photos used in this publication identify children who have experienced family violence. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participant children.)**

IWDVS have run ethno-specific focus groups for children who have experienced family violence. The main objectives were to help children identify their emotions, learn words to express their feelings, and to explore alternative ways to respond and cope with difficult life events.

Three separate groups were developed for children from Chinese, Vietnamese and Turkish families. A bilingual worker and an art therapist facilitated each group. The children who took part were between 6 and 12 years of age and came from families where family violence had been reported.

Given the single session nature of the project, children were not asked explicit questions about their family violence experience. Instead, they were advised they would be attending a day filled with art and games with the opportunity to talk about emotions. Children entered their respective groups with enthusiasm, engaging with each other and initiating games. The children took part in designing a Group Contract, negotiating appropriate ways that they and their peers should behave during the day.

While it was anticipated that children would find it difficult to share their feelings and thoughts in a new group setting, they seemed to enjoy the art activities and greetings that started the day. Each child's general feelings were initially explored through line, colour and shape.



## Group Activity: Making a Mandala - Turkish Group

Children were asked to draw a picture of something that represented them. This artwork was then joined together to form a group mandala highlighting the emotions that the children shared in common.

*"The Turkish flag is important to me. So are books because I like reading."*

- Ayse

*"I drew Ben-10 (a cartoon character) because it's cool."*

- Emre

*"I drew a square as sometimes I feel trapped and alone"*

- Samira

*"It is a happy girl, and it's me."*

- Emine

*"It's my flags and me. I also wanted to add my family and dad but didn't have time. It's a happy picture and I felt good drawing it."*

- Tony

*"These are cars, they're my favourite."*

- Hakan

*"It is a Ben-10 character. I like it."*

- Kaya

*"I drew a Turkish flag. It is me, it's where I am from."*

- Kerem

*"I drew lots of colourful flowers, because I like them. Stars are another one of my favourite shapes."*

- Lauren

*"I drew about shopping because that is what I like. I did a project about shopping at school like this as well."*

- Fatma



## Emotions

The afternoon session focused on the influence that emotions have on behaviour. Through dressing up games, mask making and the 'my island' exercise, facilitators encouraged children to focus on how they respond to situations they found difficult and explored different ways they could act.

## Sharing Emotions

Towards the end of the day, the children were encouraged to think about coping strategies when experiencing difficult emotions. They were asked to draw a picture of different facial expressions relating to various emotions. When discussing whether they shared their emotions more deeply with others, some children reported a variety of fears about this emotional disclosure.

The list below outlines some of the reasons children gave to explain why they felt uncomfortable when sharing their emotions:

- "It can make the situation worse"
- "People could laugh at you and pick on you"
- "It's hard to trust people"
- "They could tell other people"

*"This picture is of me happy and smiling"*  
- Dzlem

## Emotions and Behavioural Responses

There were some commonalities found in children's responses across all three groups. When exploring what they do when they feel angry or when they see someone else being angry, some children's responses included:

"I go to my room"  
"I play video games"  
"I hide under a blanket"

Some of the comments below are from the Vietnamese children when they were encouraged to explore sadness.

Yuan repeatedly said that he felt unsafe to talk to others about his emotions. He drew some faces to express his emotions. Unlike some of the other children, Yuan was good at finding words to express his emotions: "I get sad when I am excluded", and "I get angry when I am hurt".

Mei Ling shared with the facilitator that she is not happy at home. The art therapist noticed that she drew a number of pictures that expressed her sadness. When asked about her drawings, she explained that she wished, "Mum didn't always say no".

Ming drew a crying face and wrote the words "bullied" and "cry". He shared that he finds it hard to trust and talk to others about his emotions at school or at home. Lian drew a "crazy" face and wrote "I will be crazy when my toys are being thrown in the toilet". Hua said that when scared, "I hide in my room"

Other quotes about how children respond when they feel sad included:

"I go for a walk."  
"I watch TV."  
"I talk to my Mum or someone I trust."

# Coping through Relaxation

In each session, the day ended by having a relaxation session where children were paired together. They listened to soothing music and placed crystals gently on each other, taking turns to relax.

Upon being reunited with their mothers, children were assisted by the bilingual facilitator to answer pictorial evaluations of the session. Some children said they wanted more sessions and that “It was just like school but doing art.”

# Evaluation and Recommendations

Some common themes arose across each of the three groups. Most children appeared happy and cheerful throughout the activities. However, their artwork and how they used words to describe their drawings sometimes depicted immense feelings of sadness, frustration, confusion and isolation at home and at school.

In general, children found it hard to put words to their emotions. Some of the children needed assistance from their bilingual worker to find the words they could use to identify their emotions. Some children also stated that they found it hard to talk about their emotions with others as they felt unsafe or as one child put it, “I don’t have a person I can talk to.” There were several times throughout each session that clarity was provided to children by translating questions from English to the child’s respective first language.

Children experienced difficulty understanding some of the verbal terminology used in several activities. Some children were better able to express their emotions through pictures and drawings than through verbal language. In the Turkish group, a popular TV character revered by some of the boys influenced perceptions of emotions connected with facial expressions. For some boys, an angry face was used when they thought something was “cool.” This highlighted how important it is to ensure that we have an accurate understanding of how children interpret and give meaning to facial expressions.

Some of the girls and boys in the Chinese group shared that they felt both “trapped” and “sad” at home. This could be due to financial difficulties and the subsequent lack of extra curricula activities to look forward to after school. The Chinese group highlighted the need to be sensitive to a cultural belief that it is not appropriate to “talk behind other people’s backs”. Building rapport over several sessions

may allow these children to gain confidence and trust in other people to share their experiences and emotions. They need to understand that sharing experiences is an important part of looking after themselves and is not a betrayal of family members.

The way a child expresses their inner feelings is influenced by their culture. For example, in the Vietnamese group, it was felt that feelings were not expressed by some children due to cultural expectations regarding what you can say in your public life where they must “learn to save face”. Therefore, in a group environment Vietnamese children will not share experiences that are giving negative impressions of their family.

In future sessions, it would be helpful to engage an additional bilingual worker to ensure all the children were supported to engage more meaningfully in the sessions. Future sessions would also be spread over several days to ensure maximum participation and sustained energy levels amongst the children. This would also enable the building of trust and rapport, allowing facilitators to work with the children on an individual basis to better support their recovery. Some children said they would like to have more of these sessions. IWDVS would also like to see this happen, believing that more support groups would be beneficial for children.

Through the use of games and art, children were supported to learn about their emotions and appropriate reactions - and find words to express their emotions. Support groups are particularly beneficial for CALD children who have experienced family violence to ensure their voices are heard and to learn strategies to enable them to cope with difficult experiences and recover from the trauma of those experiences.

# Conclusions

As a result of the learnings from this project, the Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service further appreciates the complexity involved in understanding and interpreting the stories of family violence disclosed by CALD children. Professionals supporting children from CALD backgrounds have a duty to provide them with an opportunity to express themselves freely in the language of their choice. Without this specialist service and expertise, the true impact of the children’s experiences will be lost. These children need their stories to be heard in the context of their particular circumstances. Like all children who experience trauma, those from CALD backgrounds deserve their stories to be understood. Agencies can then more accurately assess the children’s needs and provide focused and effective services. Then, like all children, those from CALD backgrounds can start the process of healing.

# Children's Healing

Children who have experienced family violence can find healing if some of the adults in their lives support, listen and believe them. These people can include parents, teachers, social workers, relatives, refuge workers etc. Having bilingual and bicultural workers is important for CALD children to ensure their stories are understood in context of the cultural nuances that influence how they share their experiences.

## Supports to Heal

### All Children

- Violence can often be unpredictable and therefore, regular routines such as attending school and recreational activities can help create a sense of security and wellbeing
- Therapists and children's workers can support children in peer groups, individually, as a whole family system, and/or with their siblings
- Multi-agency approach (holistic and integrated services)
- Helpful discussions with trusted adults that family violence is wrong
- Positive role models of alternative ways to communicate and interact in social settings and close personal relationships
- Offer fun, safe experiences for children and youth – eg theatre, poetry, music, dance and the visual arts (young children are more likely to attend recreational activities than conventional counselling services)
- Creative play therapy has been found to be useful in assisting children to heal after witnessing/ experiencing family violence
- Teaching relaxation methods and self soothing statements

- School based policies such as anti-bullying, conflict resolution and anxiety related programs can help children develop positive values, attitudes and/or skills to deal with violent behaviour
- Services in a child's life e.g. child care, schools, doctors, nurses etc. need to be sensitive to how behaviour is affected by family violence
- Public education that violence is wrong and has serious consequences
- Provide parents with respectful information about the effects of family violence on children and parenting tools to support children's success in school and life (using a strengths based approach)<sup>14</sup>

## Additional Supports to Heal

### CALD Children

- Provide bilingual and bicultural children's workers
- Involve immigrant youth and families in planning and leadership positions
- Partner and share resources, particularly in relation to utilising culturally specific services and resources
- Provide cross-cultural training for agencies involved in supporting immigrant women and children to ensure understanding of various cultural practices in relation to childcare, bedtime routines, sleeping arrangements etc.
- Provide family centred, strengths based services – being sensitive to various cultural practices (using empowerment models)
- Assisting men to change their violent behaviour
- Liaising with community and religious leaders to discuss family violence issues





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# What about the (children?)

**The Voices of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse  
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