

Providing assistance to children exposed to family violence

A recent address to the 6th World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights by Law Commissioner Judge Peter Boshier and barrister and solicitor Jennifer Wademan makes an impassioned plea for a more proactive response – a juvenist one, by my reckoning – to children and young people exposed to family violence. After giving a succinct summary of the short and long-term effects of exposure to family violence on children and young people, it then describes the far-sighted provisions for children in our 1995 Domestic Violence Act and goes on to focus on funded programme provision for children included in Protection Orders. Article 30 of the Act specifies that the principle objective of such programmes must be to assist the child with the effects of the violence and lists ten goals this should incorporate. It covers 20 sessions in a group programme and 10 if a child or young person is attending individual sessions. This is fabulous stuff!

However, despite approximately 8000 children per year being included under Protection Orders, only 791 referrals were made to programmes in the 2011-12 financial year.

Furthermore, that number of 8000 is a tiny proportion of children exposed to family violence if we consider that Police are called out to roughly 80,000 domestic incidents per year, which they themselves consider to be only 20% of actual incidents. It has been estimated that children are present or resident at around 50% of incidents. That's a lot of terror and trauma occurring for large numbers of our children and young people, the vast majority of whom are not covered by Protection Orders. And a huge cost to society.

Boshier and Wademan bemoan the fact that such programmes are not available to all children exposed to FV, whether under a Protection Order or not. They also recommend funding is made available throughout a child's development, even well after the violence has stopped. They feel there is an urgent need to improve our response to children exposed to family violence - a view loudly cheered by the Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project and everyone at WAVES.

Meanwhile, while we have a framework making free assistance available to a small proportion of these children, we are not, for whatever reason, ensuring that they, at least, benefit from this. What is this all about? Do we not know that children exposed to family violence need at least as much personal support as their parents? Are we unaware of the long-term impacts on children and young people of exposure to family violence? Do they know they are entitled to between 10 and 20 sessions to help their recovery? Or do we believe that making them safe is all that's required? Perhaps we feel there are insurmountable obstacles – an absence of local programmes, parental disinterest or limitations such as transport issues?

Let's be proactive juvenists and go the extra mile to find solutions.

We'd be interested to hear your frustrations or queries about getting children to free programmes, whether under the Domestic Violence Act or other sources. Email me on deborah@waves.org.nz

And check out Boshier, Peter; Wademan, Jennifer (2013) **Domestic Violence and the impact on children's lives**. <http://www.justice.govt.nz/courts/family-court/publications/speeches-and-papers>



Judge Peter Boshier

Jennifer Wademan

