

**Juvenists Blog 12 September 2013**

**What are the barriers to responding to children exposed to FV?**

In researching our response to children exposed to family violence, I’ve found myself asking the Big Question: Why is it that we don’t have a better response, when we know the cost of not responding? What are the barriers to responding?

The most obvious answer is that these children just aren’t a priority for already stretched resources. But when we consider that emotional abuse is Child Youth and Family’s most notified and most found abuse, you’d think there would be more acknowledgement and a more concerted effort to deal with the issue of family violence.

We could look at cultural and historic reasons for our lack of response. For one, children are small beings, who we struggle to recognise as ‘people’. And family violence has long been seen as being about adults – women as victims and men as perpetrators mostly. Children have been mostly invisible, not recognised as victims in their own right and simply tacked onto their mothers. It’s assumed they’ll ‘come right’ once Mum’s in a safe place and able to parent them securely. This might, however, take the best part of their childhood years during which their emotional, social and intellectual development has been compromised, possibly halted or maimed.

From a child protection perspective, we know we simply can’t go removing all children from their families on the basis of ongoing exposure to family violence. For one thing, it would be hard to prove and enormously disruptive. And there would simply be nowhere for children to be placed, in an already over-stretched sector. And would that impact well on their development or their sense of identity?

But the alternative is to knowingly leave children in violent households where an incident can erupt at any time. This is a terrible conflict. Having to make decisions about risk and safety and choices between the harm of leaving a child at home or uplifting them is already a harsh and horrible reality of child protection and police work. It’s not one they’re looking to multiply. With the media watching like hawks (or so it seems to services) for an incident to occur and fingers to be pointed, we tend to look for cover.

So are we actually turning a blind eye at a systemic, political, professional level by not facing up to the numbers of children exposed to family violence, the terror they live with, or the long-term effects of their trauma? Are we triaging children out, leaving them to cope alone, rather than becoming involved and putting our reputations, or those of our organisations, at risk? But the children are at risk whether we know about them or not, surely? Is the tree still standing in the forest because we’re not there to perceive it?

There is a lot of potential for supporting children in volatile families - by making safety plans with them, giving them information, skills and the ability and freedom to talk about it, building their resilience, being supportive and understanding. Doing this in a strengths-based partnership with a protective parent or family member/s helps us share the responsibility. It also helps them to acknowledge and talk about the violence amongst themselves and to increase their knowledge about the effects of it. Such knowledge can inspire them to escape or end the violence. This work can be done from a school or ECC, health, justice or social service setting.

It seems to me this is an issue that we simply need to face up to. And to get on with designing and supporting existing responses to children – ones that are aimed at helping them disclose, at supporting them while living with violence and at recovering from the trauma once the violence has ended. The societal burdens of mental ill health, violence and poor performance rest on our shoulders if we don’t.