Supporting Children Made Homeless by Family Violence

By Dr Angela Spinney, ISR, Swinburne University

This article explores the negative impacts on children both from experiencing domestic violence (DV) and from being made homeless and discusses how front line workers and mothers can help to ameliorate this damage. The information for this paper comes from three main sources; a review of the literature on children, homelessness and DV; the author’s work as Research Officer on the Salvation Army Safe from the Start project in Tasmania (Spinney, 2008); and the evaluation of the Safe from the Start project by UTAS (Quenberth and Bell, 2008).

DV can usefully be described as a pattern of coercive behaviour used to maintain control over a partner, through a combination of physical, emotional, sexual or financial abuse, enforced social isolation and intimidation (Baker and Cunningham, 2004).

Most of the women and children who attempt to access DV refuges, or who sleep in cars, or stay with friends or family, do actually have a family home but feel unable to remain because of the violence and intimidation they have experienced there. The loss of their home means that the family will face considerable social and personal disruption, as well as financial disadvantage (Chung et al., 2000). A double whammy of disadvantage therefore occurs for children who both experience, and are made homeless by DV.

Women are more vulnerable than men to poverty because they have a weaker position in the labour market. They are therefore disadvantaged in their ability to access housing, and their experiences of the housing system are different from those of men. Relationship breakdown almost always leads to women becoming poorer (Chung et al., 2000; Cramer and Carter, 2002; Smith, 2005; Adkins, 2003), and gender is an important factor in determining housing options available and choices made.

This growing feminisation of poverty is linked to a changing image of homelessness from single males to women with children, and lack of income is the primary underlying reason for becoming homeless in Australia (Adkins, 2003).

The majority of households require two incomes to enter owner-occupation, and this is one of the reasons why DV can lead to a major risk of housing instability (Smith, 2005). Increasingly this can also be said of private rented accommodation.

Relationships with support networks are often severed in the process of becoming homeless and women and their children can face isolation, emotional trauma and acute economic disadvantage as a result of their decision to leave a violent home.

The impact of this is that almost 10% of homeless people are aged under 12, and many of these have to spend time accommodated in refuges and other temporary emergency accommodation.

Unlike their mothers, children living in refuges are not always given the opportunity to begin to come to terms with their experiences. Indeed, they have tended to be distracted from thinking about what they have been through.

In 2005/6 54,700 children accompanied their parents into SAAP services, and most of these had previously either witnessed or experienced DV and sexual abuse (SAAP, 2006).

Safe from the Start initially took place between September 2007 and May 2008. The original objective of the project was to identify and form a register of intervention activities and therapeutic toys which children’s workers and parents living in refuges could use for working with children aged up to 6 exposed to DV.

The project also trained refuge workers (and later others) how to work with the resources. The rationale was that it is known that under extreme stress children use play for very specific purposes, as they have a need to play out crisis or trauma, and to use their play “to master their fear-provoking pasts and anticipated futures” (Boyd Webb, 2007).

Play can be used as the means of communicating with children, because through toys children can show more adequately than through words how they feel. This means that it can be possible for front-line workers and mothers to play a “first aid” role in allowing young children to explore their experiences. In order to establish which toys and books would be most useful at doing this, materials and resources were sourced from around the English-speaking world.

As part of the participatory process, the materials were presented to the Research Reference Group, (made up of 5 of the refuges in Tasmania, transitional accommodation agencies and support providers), who chose 41 books and toys to trial.

Staff and parents tried out with children’s books and toys that might help them come to terms with the situation they had experienced. In total 120 questionnaires were completed, 52 by mothers living in refuge accommodation and 68 by staff. In addition 17 qualitative interviews were conducted with children’s workers.

The data collected was used to inform the final make up of the Safe from the Start...
toolkit and the content of the training course. Of the 41 products trialled 24 have been included within kit. These include 16 books, an action songs book, four sticker and card sets and three puppets and toys.

General comments received on the products have included Fantastic, wonderful, really effective, created different openings for conversations, Mum’s very happy to participate, and Mum’s said that until using resources they had never thought about children having feelings in all this. Now they are aware they must acknowledge their children’s feelings.

Such feedback about the products chosen for the kits demonstrates some of the benefits of having appropriate books and toys available to be used with children. Quotes from respondents also included:

- After reading this book mother and child had a joint language — could say ‘just like Ruby’ and know what each other means.
- Mum didn’t want to give the book back
- It provided a non-threatening opportunity to discuss feelings. It was an ice-breaker to lead into discussions about a number of different events and how my child was feeling.

During the project evaluation process participants variously described the materials within the kit as:

- a soft entry point or way of opening up a conversation with a child, a way of being able to help children express feelings through a non-confrontational medium, and children being able to identify with story characters of being able to project feelings onto a toy (Gunther and Bell, 2008).

Some parents showed surprise at the kind of feelings children expressed:

- My girls blame themselves a lot. They came out with a lot more thoughts and feelings that I hadn’t realised.
- “The Trouble with Secrets” helped my girls to understand their feelings more. And to realise that it happens to a lot of people.

The evaluation identified that there are three main ways in which the kit can be effectively used; as a tool to help identify signs of abuse, in one to one work with children and as a tool to use with parents (Guenther and Bell, 2008).

The majority of staff contacted during the evaluation process indicated that they were satisfied about the quality and appropriateness of the resources, and the difference the resources made to children.

The project also involved a training component once the kits had been developed. Almost 400 participants, including refuge workers, child protection workers, teachers, psychologists, councillors and police officers attended half-day training courses held in 22 locations in Tasmania, and over 100 of the kits were sold and distributed.

The evaluation found that the resources can be used far beyond the refuges, shelters and crisis recovery scenarios that were first envisaged. This is especially important because much DV and homelessness is not openly disclosed, and most of those affected by homelessness in Australia are unable, or do not chose, to access services.

This year the Safe from the Start project has become national, with “Training the Trainer” courses planned for Victoria, ACT, Queensland, and the Northern Territory, so that staff within organisations can be taught how to teach others why and how to use the kits.

Safe from the Start has advanced our knowledge of how early intervention work can be conducted with children who have been made homeless because of DV.

Projects like this have the potential to play an important part in lessening the damage caused to children and to improving their long-term prospects.

Finding effective methods to tackle the complex disadvantages faced by this specific group is important not only for the children concerned, but also for wider society in terms of breaking the cycle of inter-generational homelessness, social exclusion and disadvantage.

For a full copy of this article, and the bibliography and reference list please contact the author at aspinney@swin.edu.au more information on the Safe from the Start kit and training can be obtained from the Salvation Army Tasmania. Contact Nell Eulenburg at nell.kuilenburg@aus.salvationarmy.org