



Government of **Western Australia**
Department for **Child Protection**
and **Family Support**

REPORTING FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Resource for Journalists

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Background

What is family and domestic violence?¹

Family and domestic violence is behaviour, which results in physical, sexual and/or psychological damage, forced social isolation, economic deprivation, or behaviour that causes the victim to live in fear.

The term is usually used where abuse and violence take place in relationships including: intimate partner relationships; same sex relationships; between siblings; from adolescents to parents; or from family carers to a relative; or a relative with a disability. A key characteristic of family and domestic violence is the use of violence or other forms of abuse to control someone with whom the perpetrator has an intimate or family relationship.

The term domestic violence usually refers to abuse against an intimate partner, while family violence is a broader expression encompassing domestic violence and the abuse of children, the elderly and other family members.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally prefer to use the term “family violence”. This concept describes a matrix of harmful, violent and aggressive behaviours. However, the use of the term “family violence” should not obscure the fact that Aboriginal women and children bear the brunt of family violence.

Some forms of family and domestic violence are generally well recognised by the community such as physical violence. Other forms of family and domestic violence tend to be less well recognised and understood.

There are seven broad categories of abuse that are usually referred to when discussing family and domestic violence and these are outlined below. The key characteristics for any kind of behaviour to be characterised as family and domestic violence is the intent to dominate, control and create fear. Any action/behaviour that is conducted with this intent can be included as a form of abuse:

- physical assault—any behaviour that is intended to cause harm e.g. pushing, slapping, punching, choking and kicking
- sexual assault—forced sexual contact/activity. “Forced” in this context refers to individuals who are physically coerced to participate or who are not in a position to say no as a result of fear, threats or intimidation
- verbal abuse—threats, put-downs, insults, shouting
- emotional/psychological abuse—mind games, manipulation, humiliation, making the person feel worthless or no good
- social isolation—keeping the victim away from friends, family, work and/or other social opportunities
- financial abuse—controlling the money and decisions around its use, taking or limiting money, stealing
- spiritual abuse—keeping someone away from places of worship, or forcing them to participate in spiritual or religious practice that they do not want to be involved with².

When family and domestic violence is occurring in a relationship, more than one form of abuse is usually present. Some victims are never physically abused but experience a range of other behaviour designed to control and intimidate them. Victims of violence often say that physical injuries heal and it's the emotional scars that hurt the most.

Who experiences family and domestic violence?

Family and domestic violence knows no boundaries – victims and perpetrators include people from all cultural and religious backgrounds, socio-economic groups, with and without disabilities, sexual preference, educational level and ages.

Children have unique vulnerabilities in situations of family and domestic violence. Exposure to this causes serious emotional, psychological, social and behavioural harm to children, as well as placing them at increased risk of abuse and neglect. It is recognised that family and domestic violence is now one of the most common reasons for notifications to statutory child protection services. Aboriginal women and children experience rates of family and domestic violence up to three times higher than the non Aboriginal community³.

Family and domestic violence is a gendered crime. Approximately 95 per cent of the victims of family and domestic violence are female, and 90 per cent of the perpetrators are male⁴. The gender based nature of family and domestic violence is an important part of understanding this issue and in finding ways to address the problem.

The Personal Safety Survey⁵ and the Australian Component of the International Violence Against Women Survey⁶ found that between one in three and one in five Australian women experience family and domestic violence in their adult life perpetrated by an intimate partner or family member. Furthermore, one in four children grows up witnessing this abuse⁷.

Why do we need this resource?⁸

The media is the lens through which the general public views family and domestic violence. And while sometimes a story about family and domestic violence will grab headlines and receive intense media coverage, this tends to be short-lived and not sustained beyond a few weeks.

Journalists and the stories they write greatly influence the way people think and act. Therefore, each reporter has a role to play in changing attitudes about this complex social issue.

This resource has been developed to promote responsible and accurate reporting, and to assist journalists to report on family and domestic violence in a proactive and respectful manner. Furthermore, the resource encourages the media to consider the potential impact that their work could have on a victim, particularly the additional trauma that can be suffered as a result of inaccurate and irresponsible reporting.

Statistics

Western Australian data

- Between 2008 and 2013, there were 38,445 Violence Restraining Order applications made in Western Australia⁹.
- Between 2012 and 2013, there were 46,874 family and domestic violence incidents reported to police across the state¹⁰.
- In 2012, there were 1,774 victims of sexual assault in Western Australia, 1,493 (84 per cent) being female. The assaults occurred in residential locations in 72 per cent (1,263) of cases¹¹.
- Between July 2012 and June 2013 there were 27 family and domestic homicides statewide¹².
- Aboriginal women are 45 times more likely to experience family and domestic violence than non-Aboriginal women¹³.

National data

- According to the Personal Safety Survey¹⁴ approximately 1.1 million Australian women had experienced violence by a previous partner since the age of 15. More than half of these women (59 per cent) were pregnant at some time during the violent relationship.
- Of the 59 per cent of women who were pregnant at some time during the violent relationship, 36 per cent reported that violence occurred during a pregnancy and 17 per

cent experienced violence for the first time when they were pregnant¹⁵.

- More than a third (34 per cent) of those women who experienced violence in the relationship said that their children have witnessed the violence¹⁶.
- Between 2011 and 2012, the number of women who had experienced violence by a previous partner since the age of fifteen had increased to 132,500 (1.5 per cent of all women). This is compared to 51,800 men (0.6 per cent of all men)¹⁷.
- Women who have lived with a violent partner are more likely to experience financial difficulties or hardship as a result of the relationship¹⁸.
- In 2012 an estimated 1,310,900 women (15 per cent of all women aged 18 years and over) were sexually assaulted by a known person¹⁹.
- Family and domestic violence is the single biggest health risk to Australian women aged 15 to 44 years²⁰.
- It is also the most common factor contributing to homelessness among women and their children²¹.

Economic cost of family and domestic violence

- Family and domestic violence costs the Australian economy around \$13.6 billion a year²².
- It is estimated that if adequate measures are not put in place to reduce family and domestic violence, these costs will increase to \$15.6 billion in 2021-22²³.

Family and domestic violence and the law

The Western Australian legislation relating to family and domestic violence is the *Restraining Orders Act 1997*.

In Australia both civil law and criminal law is available to protect victims of family and domestic violence.

Many forms of family and domestic violence are criminal offences and charges can be laid for physical assault, sexual assault, making threats about a person's physical safety, stalking, breaching Police Orders and Violence Restraining Orders and damage or stealing of property.

Police Orders are a short term restraining order issued by WA Police. The orders are up to 72 hours in length and are used where there is insufficient evidence to arrest and charge a perpetrator, but police hold concerns for the safety and welfare of those experiencing violence. A Police Order prohibits the perpetrator from making contact with the victim including exclusion from the victim's residence. This 'cooling off' period provides victims of family and domestic violence with an opportunity to seek services and support including application for a Violence Restraining Order should they choose to pursue this option.

A Violence Restraining Order is an order of the court designed to promote the safety of the person/s protected by placing restrictions on the actions and behaviours of the person determined to pose a risk of future harm. The conditions placed on respondents can be tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of the victim including (but not limited to) restrictions on contact or

communication, requiring a party to vacate a premises and removal of, or restricted access to firearms.

The maximum penalty for breaching a Police Order or Violence Restraining Order is a fine of \$6,000 or two years' imprisonment (or both).

More detailed information about family and domestic violence and the law can be found at the [Department of the Attorney General website](#).

Common myths and misconceptions

There are common myths and misconceptions held by the public concerning women experiencing family and domestic violence, and about patterns of family and domestic violence in different cultures and contexts.

Media stories (or a lack thereof) about family and domestic violence can often support and perpetuate some of these myths.

The most apt example of this is the non-reporting of violence and subsequent deaths within Aboriginal communities which society sees as so normal, it's almost forgotten. Normalising this behaviour perpetuates the belief that violence is 'their way of life' and thus, not considered newsworthy.

Family and domestic violence in any culture is heinous and reporting each case as an individual tragedy is the only way awareness can be raised about the seriousness and prevalence of the issue.

Family and domestic violence is caused by substance abuse, stress, employment issues, poverty, failed marriage.

This is not true. Many people who experience these do not hit, stalk, abuse or murder their partners or children. People use violence in the domestic setting because they believe they are entitled to use violence to get what they want.

Not all people who abuse drugs and alcohol are violent, and many men are violent whether they are under the influence

or sober. While alcohol may disinhibit some men and exacerbate the violence, the man's underlying attitudes, values and beliefs are starting point for his use of violence.

He had a difficult or violent upbringing

The suggestion that men who perpetrate violence had traumatic childhoods, or they are repeating the violence they witnessed in their own family backgrounds, cannot account for the very large number of men and women who have been exposed to family and domestic violence and are not violent in adulthood. Nor does it explain how a significant number of men who report happy and non-violent childhoods perpetrate violence in an adult relationship.

Family and domestic violence is a private matter.

Violence that occurs in the home is often still considered a private matter and less serious than violence occurring in public. Violence in the home is at least or 'if not more so' serious and damaging as all other forms of violence and is often a criminal offence.

The victim is to blame – if it was that bad, why didn't she leave?

"Why did she stay?"

"She has a habit of getting involved with men like that"

"They always had relationship issues"

Statements such as these imply the victim is to blame or that 'she asked for it'. People choose to use violence and control and

dominate other family members, however they don't usually use the same tactics on friends, colleagues and bosses.

Victims are not to blame because they stay.

Choosing not to leave the perpetrator is often a considered and strategic choice for a woman. Leaving may entail a loss of income/employment, loss of accommodation, loss of friendship and support networks for the woman and child, shame, disruption to a child's schooling, and increased risk of further assaults, including death.

Deciding to leave the perpetrator is a time of high risk for severe and lethal violence for women and children.

Family and domestic violence is more acceptable in some cultures.

This belief may reflect the negative stereotypes held by some people about other cultures. It is difficult to know the prevalence of family and domestic violence in any community. It may be more difficult for Aboriginal women or women from CaLD communities to leave violent partners, including a lack of social and economic resources, language barriers, racism and inappropriate service responses.

He was a decent bloke.

When reporting incidents of family and domestic violence, it's not uncommon for journalists to hear that the murderer/perpetrator was a sweet and loving husband/father and model employee. However, abusers convey a very different picture to the outside

world, appearing as 'friendly', 'neighbourly', 'hard working' and the type of person who 'wouldn't do such a thing'.

This does not mean that he wasn't violent, abusive and controlling behind closed doors.

Perpetrators of family and domestic violence are not confined to any racial, cultural, age or socio-economic group. They are in all pockets of the community and can be found in varying social circles and professions. It is important to remember that perpetrators purposely conduct themselves appropriately in the community and earn other people's respect to make abuse claims appear false.

Tips on reporting family and domestic violence²⁴

When reporting family and domestic violence, the following list of 'dos and do nots' will assist with painting a more accurate picture.

DO:

- Label the incident as FAMILY AND/OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
 - Avoid calling it a relationship problem, unwanted sex, domestic dispute or anything that minimises the violent behaviour.
 - Be explicit about the relationship between the parties concerned.
 - Name it as a crime.
 - Alert readers to patterns of family and domestic violence, particularly that the violent and controlling behaviour escalates when a woman is trying to leave, or has left the abusive relationship.
- Contextualise the story
 - Provide information about the prevalence, dynamics, incidence, impacts, causes and laws around violence against women.
 - Provide known details about the family and domestic violence history.
 - Ask the police if Police Orders or Violence Restraining Orders were in place and if these had been breached. If so, include this in the report.

- Emphasise the need for a comprehensive and coordinated community
 - response to overcome the problem.
- Be mindful of source selection
 - Include interviews with credentialed sources and be explicit when explaining family and domestic violence crimes as one means for the person perpetrating the abuse to maintain power and control over their partner/child/family member.
 - Include comment from past victims of family and domestic violence and discuss the impact the violence has had on them – this gives victims a voice.
- Acknowledge that family and domestic violence is not a private matter.
 - Report consequences of family violence and highlight the fact that family and domestic violence impacts the community, providing examples such as neighbourhood and workplace safety, the health system, economic productivity and on children.
- Give priority consideration to the safety and confidentiality needs of the victims of family and domestic violence.
 - Ask what information is safe to use i.e. identifying information.
 - Discuss the value of safety planning for women who feel they are at significant risk of family and domestic violence.
- Provide details of local and national support services and contacts with each editorial.
- Always treat victims of family and domestic violence, and their families, with respect and dignity.

DO NOT:

- Do not treat family and domestic violence crimes as unusual or bizarre.
 - Do not report family and domestic violence incidents as an inexplicable, unpredictable tragedy. Be specific about how common it is by reporting statistics about its prevalence.
 - Do not treat this event as an isolated incident. Look into prior history and let the story evolve. In most cases, a pattern of controlling behaviour will be present.
- Do not focus on the victim's behaviour or use victim-blaming language.
 - Do not imply that the victim could have done something to prevent the violence.
 - Do not imply that the perpetrator was in any way justified in his behaviour and ensure the focus remains on his actions and past history. Reinforce that the responsibility for the abuse rests with the person perpetrating the violence.
 - Do not place a reliance on law enforcement or the justice system as the only means of holding perpetrators accountable. Educate the public on how communities can hold perpetrators accountable for their behaviour and how they can improve safety options for those experiencing family and domestic violence. For example, understanding the issues surrounding family and domestic violence, understanding the seriousness and prevalence of the crime, and understanding that safety is a priority for

victims and children, all contributes to a community response and enables the community to support those experiencing it.

- Do not assume some cultures or classes are more violent, and others are not.
 - Family and domestic violence does not discriminate – it occurs across all cultural, religious, age, and socioeconomic groups, and in same sex relationships.
- Do not use sources emotionally connected to the perpetrator or sources that do not have significant or accurate information about the crime or those involved.
- Do not minimise or sensationalise family and domestic violence.
- Do not perpetuate commonly held myths and misconceptions and offer excuses for violent behaviour. Violent and controlling behaviour is a choice, it is not caused by alcohol, drugs or increased stress.

Perpetrators do not 'lose control'. Family and domestic violence is most often premeditated and forms of abuse are used to maintain control over a family member or intimate partner.

Guidelines for interviewing victims and survivors of family and domestic violence

Appropriate source selection is important when reporting family and domestic violence, with regard to the key messages that are communicated and the accuracy of the information. Often, information from police reports, police comments and ‘friends and relatives’ are relied upon as factual and neutral, when actually, there are existing dynamics of abuse and other factors that are not known.

There are challenges when interviewing victims of family and domestic violence due to the trauma they have experienced. The following tips can help when communicating with them about their experiences:

- Always treat the victim and their families and friends with dignity, respect, care, compassion and sensitivity.
- Be aware of your overall attitude and tone and don’t be afraid to open with an expression of concern or sympathy.
- Ensure the questions that will be asked and what is going to be said is well thought-out and rehearsed.
- Develop trust and rapport.
- Discuss ground rules. This is an opportunity for a victim to tell their story, from a world where they previously had no power or control over their own lives. They need to feel in control of their story.

- Suggest/request alternatives and other sources – if the victim is unwilling, or becomes unable to speak, ask them if there are other family members, friends or community members who can speak on their behalf and who are knowledgeable of the events that have occurred.
- Thank them for their time and effort acknowledging how difficult it must be to relive their experience.

Support, information and resources

Details of how to seek help must be provided at the end of all coverage of family and domestic violence. Such information includes:

- **If you, or someone you know are in immediate danger, call the Police on 000.**
- To report an incident of family and domestic violence (non-emergency) call the Police on 131 444. This service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- If it is not an emergency and you need help, there are a number of telephone numbers you can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or services you can contact.
 - [Crisis Care Helpline](#)
(08) 9223 1111 or free call 1800 199 008
 - [Men's Domestic Violence Helpline](#)
Telephone (08) 9223 1199 or free call 1800 000 599
 - [Women's Domestic Violence Helpline](#) (including referral to a women's refuge)
Telephone (08) 9223 1188 or free call 1800 007 339
 - [Sexual Assault Resource Centre](#)
Telephone (08) 9340 1828 or free call 1800 199 888
- [Legal Aid WA Domestic Violence Legal Unit](#) – for help with Violence Restraining Orders and safety issues.
Telephone (08) 9261 6254 or (08) 9261 6320
- [Women's Council for Family and Domestic Violence WA](#)
Telephone (08) 9420 7264

- Victim Support Service, Department of the Attorney General - provides free, confidential counselling and support services for all victims of crime.
- Telephone (08) 9425 2850 or free call 1800 818 988
- For a list of Family Violence Services across metropolitan and regional Western Australia, please visit http://www.victimsofcrime.wa.gov.au/F/family_violence_service.aspx?uid=4170-2512-7364-4335

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