

Barnardos landmark study finds children are silent victims of DFV and have nowhere to turn

A landmark research study into the impact of Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) has found that children and young people continue to be regarded as onlookers rather than as co-victims.

“Truth is, the abuse never stopped” by Barnardos Australia was released today at NSW Parliament House in Sydney and reveals the long, dark shadow that DFV casts on children in their later lives with persisting health and psychological impacts.

The report found that seven-in-ten survivors say they had no idea where to seek help and for those who did seek help, more often than not they experienced a negative outcome and the situation worsened.

“Truth is, the abuse never stopped”, calls for whole of system changes that recognise children and young people experiencing DFV are victim survivors in their own right, and the development of measures that address their unique needs.

Based on responses from 149 victim survivors from all over Australia, the report finds there is a lack of identification and response to DFV and coercive control at all levels.

Barnardos Australia CEO Deirdre Cheers said it is time to shift gear and increase education about DFV and appropriate behaviours within the home environment and in communities.

“Children are the silent victims of DFV and yet we know they are forced to manage the impact, often alone, for the rest of their lives.”

“Indeed, recognition of children and young people experiencing DFV as victim survivors in their own right and with their own unique safety and support needs is long overdue.”

“We have to focus more attention on helping people recognise DFV and the difference between harmful and healthy relationships.”

Lead researcher Dr Rob Urquhart said study participants provided an unexpectedly rich collection of first-hand accounts about living with DFV.

“Distressingly, almost half of the respondents said the abuse began when they were very young (four years old or younger) and for almost two thirds of respondents, the abuse lasted most or all of their childhood.”

“Some 37% reported that they had not sought help or support from anyone and many stated that as a child they thought DFV was ‘normal’” Dr Urquhart said.

The cumulative impacts were telling; 88% reported experiencing psychological distress, 79% suffered self-esteem problems and 65% found it difficult to trust other people.

After leaving a violent relationship, mother of five and DFV victim-survivor Tegan

was offered trauma counselling for herself, however trying to source it for her children was practically impossible: “At the time I was told ‘children are resilient, and they’ll get over it but now five years later I’ve had to seek out help for them because I could see they hadn’t processed the trauma. We need to address the problem when it happens, or we are setting them up for problems in later life.”

Barnardos is calling for Federal and NSW governments to increase funding for trauma-informed child counselling and therapy, additional domestic and family violence specialist workers and an increase in integrated public housing for children and families fleeing domestic violence. Mandatory national domestic and family violence police training and education programs in early childhood education, primary and secondary schools have also been ear-marked as a priority.

What participants said:

“I felt like I wanted to protect my mum all the time. I thought about killing my father many times in my teen years. Mum often fled with us kids (5) and I would go to a friend’s house if she couldn’t get me a bed somewhere at a relative’s. I felt helpless, useless, traumatised and lacking in confidence.”

“I dissociated. I cut myself. I found other ways to bring pain to myself even as a very young child because I was taught I had to have pain to have love and care.”

“I was in fear for my life. I didn’t learn boundaries of relationships. I didn’t learn right from wrong. I didn’t learn self-care.”

[A copy of the research report is available here.](#)

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About Barnardos Australia

Barnardos Australia is here because every child needs a champion. A children’s charity for over 100 years, we listen, we act, and we advocate for the safety of children at risk of abuse and neglect, providing family support programs and services that empower children to reach their full potential. When it comes to protecting vulnerable children from abuse, we never give up. We are dedicated to the prevention of trauma in children, and support families to be the best parents they can be. We help children to recover and thrive, and we find safe homes for them through foster care and open adoption.

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