



# Making children visible


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Changing the future  
for children impacted  
by domestic and  
family violence



**Barnardos**  
**Australia**

Because **every child**  
needs a champion



## **Barnardos Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live and work.**

We acknowledge Elders past and present who have walked and managed these lands for many generations and recognise their ongoing contribution.

We acknowledge the children who are our hope for a brighter future.

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Barnardos Australia's vision is to empower every child to reach their full potential, with children's well-being at the centre of everything we do. We support children and families for as long as it takes, to move beyond the issues for which they seek help for and meet the needs of their children so they can have access to opportunity and success.



# A message from our CEO



I want to begin by acknowledging a stark and painful truth: domestic and family violence (DFV) remains one of the most critical issues facing Australia today. In 2024, stories of violence against women and children continue to fill our headlines, reminding us of the devastating and preventable losses felt by families across the country. But behind the news, many more families and children live with the daily reality of fear and harm—often invisible, yet deeply impacted.

The scale of DFV is alarming. One in four Australian children are exposed to DFV\*, and tragically, one child is killed every fortnight by a parent or step-parent. Our research report, *Truth is the Abuse Never Stopped*, details the long-term impact of DFV on children. The harm extends beyond the immediate; 88% of child

victims suffer from enduring psychological distress\*\*, with effects on their self-confidence, mental and physical health, education, and social well-being that can last a lifetime.

Our Barnardos Australia teams, who work on the frontline, see every day the toll that DFV takes on children and young people seeking our help. The pain these children endure is real, and their voices must be heard. While recent government actions, such as new funding for child specialist workers and laws criminalising coercive control, mark important progress, they are just the start of addressing the complex needs of child survivors. Tailored, age-appropriate support for these children is urgently needed.

At Barnardos, we are committed to advocating for and with these children and young people. We continue to call on the Government to improve the policies, laws, and practices that affect their lives. By ensuring they receive the support necessary to heal, we can disrupt the cycle of intergenerational trauma and give these children—and our communities—hope for a life free from violence and fear.

Thank you for joining us in this work. Together, we can help drive the change that these children deserve.

**Deirdre Cheers**  
**Chief Executive Officer, Barnardos Australia**

\*Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse 2011 - The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Literature Review

\*\* The truth is the abuse never stopped 2022 Dr Robert Urquhart and Jennifer Doyle

# The impact of domestic and family violence on children can last a life-time



**1 in 4 children  
have experienced  
domestic and  
family violence\***

**Domestic and family violence (DFV) is any behaviour in an intimate or family relationship which is violent, threatening, coercive or controlling, causing a person to live in fear.**

DFV can happen in intimate relationships, and family relationships. DFV can impact anyone and happens in every community, all cultures, and to people in every age and income group. It's important to remember that DFV is not just physical. It's any threatening or controlling behaviour which involves a repeated pattern of behaviour to control you. It can involve behaviour that makes you feel scared, threatened or denies you freedom. Domestic violence is never the victim's fault.

At Barnardos, we believe that every child has the right to grow up in a home free from violence and abuse. Our research report, *Truth is the abuse never stopped*, shows the majority of DFV child victims have suffered lifelong psychological distress and low self-esteem as a result of their experiences.

Many victim-survivors indicated that as a child or young person they didn't know where to go for help. They were also afraid that telling someone would make things worse, and generally felt helpless about their situation. For us this is a very concerning results as it means children are not getting the right help when they truly need it.

This portrays a rather grim outlook for children who are in the throes of family violence trying to seek a way out or perhaps taking on the burden of responsibility for finding safety. It also shows the reality that children's voices often go unheard when it comes to violence; they are the invisible victims.

A recent Domestic Violence Death Review Team report revealed that, of the known 550 DFV murders, 18% were children. **Amongst the survivors, at least 370 children were left behind – their mothers, and sometimes fathers, killed. In 90% of those cases the children were exposed to domestic violence before the homicide.**

We can no longer use the 'resilience' of children as an excuse to ignore their trauma. Long after the abuse has stopped, the devastating impact of DFV remains. The following statistics from our research report provide evidence of the lasting impacts DFV has.

## **Children exposed to DFV are^**

**At a 36% greater risk of depression, a 49% greater risk of experiencing anxiety, and an almost 60% greater risk of self-harming behaviours.**

**Twice as likely to be diagnosed with a substance use disorder.**

**Almost five times more likely to receive a mental health service by the time they reached 18 years of age (79% versus 16%).**

**At greatest risk of homelessness due to Domestic and Family Violence.**

\*\*Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse 2011 - The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Literature Review

^The truth is the abuse never stopped - by Dr Robert Urquhart & Jennifer Doyle 2022

## The impact of DFV on children and young people<sup>^</sup>



**88%**

experienced psychological distress.



**79%**

experienced low self esteem



**65%**

Found it difficult to trust other people



**64%**

Didn't feel safe at home



**62%**

were often sad and lonely



**47%**

experienced physical harm

## There is a clear link between domestic violence and homelessness

The current housing crisis in Australia is leaving families with two choices: staying in unsafe, violent homes and relationships where they are at serious risk of harm, or becoming homeless. 1 in 2 families are turned away from refuges everyday because they are full. There are no affordable housing options for single parents escaping violence in NSW. Often the perpetrator stays in the family home while the Mum and children have to flee, instantly making them homeless.

## Domestic violence and removal of children from birth families (foster care)

When a mother and her children leave a violent home and are unable to secure 'safe' accommodation, the children are at risk of being removed from their mother and placed into foster care arrangements. The condition of many houses being offered through social housing are so decrepit that child protection would not consider them 'safe'. This places the protective parent in an impossible situation and can cause even more trauma for a mother and her children.

## Domestic violence in regional and rural areas

In regional and rural areas help is scarce. Many towns have no 24 hour police stations, and some are four or more hours away from the local police station. If a family manages to escape a violent home and find a place in a refuge, it could be four or more hours away which means children can't attend school and their education suffers.

## The link between domestic violence and poverty

One of the main reasons women do not leave violent relationships is a lack of money or financial independence. In addition to the high costs of relocation, housing and other safety measures, many victims also experience financial abuse where their wages and spending are controlled by the perpetrator. For children, this financial control can leave them socially isolated from their peers and put their safety even further out of reach. Women and children should be able to leave unsafe situations without being forced into poverty. Choosing between meals or medicine is not a decision a mother should ever have to make for her children.

<sup>^</sup>The truth is the abuse never stopped - by Dr Robert Urquhart & Jennifer Doyle 2022

# Sisters Jade and Willow\* thought their mum was going to die from violence at the hands of their dad.

In the past, Jade and Willow's mum Alicia\* had been so badly injured she had ended up in hospital. The two sisters were not sure if their mum would be lucky to survive another attack from their dad.

Since they were little, 11-year-old Jade and 8-year-old Willow would spend hours huddled in the crawl space under the house. They knew where the hot-water pipe peeked out of the beams, so they could wrap their hands around it during winter to stay warm. Most importantly, they knew they had to stay completely quiet in there until there was no more yelling and their mum had stopped sobbing. **Only then was it safe to come out.**

In the weeks leading up to last Christmas, Alicia experienced a change in the violence at home. The beatings were getting more brutal and more frequent. She'd even been to the Emergency department for one of her injuries, where a nurse told her about Barnardos domestic and family violence services. As things escalated at home, Alicia began to fear for her life, and for the safety of her girls. She took the nurse's advice, went to a payphone and called Barnardos. Which is where the wraparound support for Alicia, Jade and Willow began.

Our trauma-informed caseworkers listened to Alicia's story, making sure that no matter what range of services we helped her with, she'd only have to tell it once. During the conversation, they realised that for Alicia and her girls, the most important thing was to create an 'escape plan'.

For anyone in an abusive or unsafe home, an escape plan is vital. Every plan is different, and unique to each family's circumstances. But the goal of all escape plans is the same: to give mums like Alicia and children like Jade and Willow the strategies they need to protect themselves, and escape the violence safely. A big part of Alicia's plan was learning how to pack an 'escape bag' for her and her girls. She couldn't let her husband find out she wanted to leave him. Alicia's escape bag wasn't much bigger than a small handbag and only contained essentials like birth certificates, prescriptions, bank statements and a mobile phone with a new pay-as-you-go SIM. But for Alicia, Jade and Willow, having that escape plan meant they were able to leave and never return.

One day Alicia's husband fell unconscious from alcohol, so she grabbed her escape bag, called her terrified girls out of the crawl space, and walked with them to a waiting taxi. By the time the girls' father realised they were gone, they were already safe. The taxi took them straight to the Barnardos crisis accommodation. There, our staff welcomed them and made sure they had access to 24/7 emergency and crisis support. And that they had a safe place to stay while we helped Alicia find a permanent new home for her and her girls.

For families fleeing violence, this kind of care is essential. Domestic and family violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness in children in Australia. Without it, women like Alicia, and children like Jade and Willow would face a terrible choice: risk their lives by staying in the violent home, or risk sleeping on the streets.

When the girls arrived at crisis accommodation, they were quiet, withdrawn and jumpy. They wouldn't make eye contact and struggled to trust anyone. Attending therapy sessions through Barnardos helped the girls process the terrible things they'd been through. They learned how to cope with extreme anxiety and hyper-vigilance caused by years of living in fear. Little by little, they began to heal, feeling safe and confident again.





**No child should fear  
for their life.**



# We are diligently working to combat the crisis of domestic and family violence in Australia

**Barnardos is helping children, young people and families experiencing DFV with both immediate needs and longer-term support.**

Every single Barnardos centre in NSW and ACT has seen the incredibly harmful impact that DFV has on children and young people, with far reaching consequences on their lives no matter what age they experience it. Hence our drive to support these children and their families. Our approach is always focused on the best outcome for children and young people, but alongside this, we provide integrated programs and services to support families with everything they need to heal and move forward from the trauma caused by DFV.

In addition to working directly with families Barnardos is advocating for nation-wide policy change so children are recognised as victims and have equal, adequate access to services. We work to proactively engage with families so that change can be made early, thus reducing mental and physical harm to children and young people. In some cases we will also work with the perpetrator so that families can heal properly.

Our programs and services are designed to support children and young people impacted by DFV to recover and thrive. We assist women and children escaping domestic violence with safe housing, counselling, education and practical support. We ensure children and young people remain engaged with their education through before and after school programs. And our youth services give young people a safe place to be themselves, share their story and rebuild their self-belief and trust in others again.

It's one of our primary goals to become a Domestic Violence Informed organisation and Domestic Violence Proficient in all that we do. This means our team have the skills to ensure that victim's safety is never compromised. This ensures we can meet the urgent and specific needs of the communities we work in.



SAFETY PLANNING



TRANSITIONAL  
ACCOMMODATION



HOME VISITING



PARENTING SUPPORT

## Our focus areas of support



YOUTH PROGRAMS



DFV EDUCATION &  
COUNSELLING



DFV SUPPORT  
GROUPS



DFV PHONE  
SUPPORT



### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT**

The aim of this program is to keep children safe, reduce parental stress and strengthen families. We work closely with families and their children who have experienced or are experiencing DFV to identify their needs and strengths so we may provide tailored support for each individual. The support is reviewed every three months and is designed to empower families to make long-term, meaningful changes.

The service provides: home visiting, safety planning, domestic violence education, Court support, parenting support and education, budgeting and household management, practical assistance and coordination of specialist assessments and referrals, group work, and referrals to programs within Barnardos.

### **LEARN TO LIVE AGAIN – WOMEN'S DFV SUPPORT GROUP**

This is an eight-week program, created wholly by Barnardos, for mothers who have experienced DFV. As a therapeutic style group, rather than psycho-educational, this service helps women identify the skills they have within to cope with, and heal from their trauma. The group helps reconnect women to themselves, their bodies, their family and to the community around them. It also aims to heal and strengthen the bond between women and their children, providing a platform for women to support their children's experiences of lived trauma.

### **DFV PHONE SUPPORT - LINKER**

LINKER is an after-hours telephone support service for women (and most often their children) across Western NSW who have escaped DFV situations and accessed emergency short-term accommodation. A specialist LINKER worker proactively contacts the client via phone call and text message, offering personalised and consistent support as required during their time of crisis and transition through homelessness to post-crisis stability.

LINKER offers flexible out-of-hours support (5pm-9am every day of the week) to clients referred by emergency accommodation providers. Clients particularly value the LINKER Service accessibility and capacity for phone-based support from another town, allowing for a more anonymous relationship, thus respecting confidentiality concerns, which can be challenging in small communities. Barnardos created this service to address the social isolation and hardships of victims in regional areas. It has been providing vital support to families since 2016. As an out-of-hours service, it has been particularly critical in preventing families from returning to the perpetrator due to lack of support in regional areas.

### **SAFE AND TOGETHER™**

The Safe and Together™ Model is an internationally recognised suite of tools and interventions designed to help child and family support workers become DFV-informed. This child-centred model derives its name from the concept that children are best served when we can work toward keeping them safe and together with the non-offending parent (the adult domestic violence survivor). The model provides a framework for partnering with DFV survivors and intervening with perpetrators in order to enhance the safety and wellbeing of children.

Right across our organisation, in every program and support role, we are seeking to embed a Safe and Together approach in how we respond to children, young people and families who are survivors and resisters of DFV.

### **EDUCATING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

Barnardos facilitates Love Bites, a respectful relationships program for young people aged 11-17 years. Love Bites is based on best practice research as recommended by the Federal Government, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearing House and other leading academics in the area of violence against women.

### **THERAPEUTIC GROUPS AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Barnardos facilitates therapeutic groups for women and children who have experienced family violence. They are usually groups facilitated over 6-8 week periods and focus on resilience and healing from DFV. These include Learn to Live Again, Book of Me, and Out of the Darkness. Barnardos also conducts an eight-week education awareness group program called Healthy Relationships, which explores what domestic violence is and how it impacts children. These groups are run in our Penrith and Auburn Children's Family Centres.

# Advocates for change

**It is time to recognise children and young people as victim survivors of domestic and family violence and not just bystanders who are unimpacted. It is critical that children have access to their own trauma counselling and other specialist DFV services.**

Barnardos Australia asks that the Federal and all State and Territory Governments act on the following five areas of priority:

- 1** Recognise children and young people as equal victims of domestic and family violence in policy, programs and service delivery across every Territory and State and ensure that this is prioritised and implemented as part of the First Action Plan 2023-2027 under the National Plan to End Violence Towards Women and Children 2022-2032.
- 2** Prioritise children and young people who are victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, and ensure they receive immediate and effective trauma-informed counselling and therapy.
- 3** Provide funding for domestic and family violence child specialist workers in all seven Barnardos Children's Family centres to ensure children and young people are supported in their own right with case management and support.
- 4** Increase funding for safe, secure and affordable social housing for children and families fleeing domestic violence situations, including crisis, transitional and long-term housing in order to directly prevent children needing to enter out-of-home care.
- 5** Prioritise primary prevention and fund age-appropriate domestic and family violence education programs which are nationally consistent across early childhood education, primary and secondary schools.

We also maintain excellent working relationships with the following peak organisations to ensure policy alignment and to amplify our collective actions:







# Join us in being champions for thousands of Australian children

At Barnardos, we are ensuring that our staff are properly equipped to deal with the range of challenges children and young people are facing, particularly with the crisis levels of exposure to DFV which we know are harmful and cause life-long issues.

By donating in support of the children and families we work with, you are not only helping us tackle the primary causes of domestic and family violence. Your contribution can fund:

**EDUCATION AND TRAINING INITIATIVES:** Love bites programs, Safe and Together Model training for caseworkers, Learning to Live again program for mothers who are victims of DFV

**EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE:** Physical escape packs, emergency accommodation, food and vouchers.

**COUNSELLING:** Specialised trauma-informed care for children and young people, which we know is crucial in being able to provide the right support for those who have experienced DFV. Having a DFV specialist caseworker in every Barnardos Children's Family Centre is one of our primary goals.

**SAFE HOUSING:** We help parents, children and young people find safe, transitional accommodation once they are ready to leave the emergency shelter and provide essential household items so that they can live safely and away from potential harm.

**DFV SPECIFIC SUPPORT:** Our programs and services connect our children and families with counsellors, program managers, referral services, community groups, playgroups and Learning Centres so that families do not feel alone and helpless such as the vital DV Linker program which is one of our most important services we offer mothers who are trying to escape violence. Our Youth Programs such as Reconnect and Streetwork help young people who are at risk of being homeless due to DFV.

Your generosity can help create sustainable change and uplift local Australian communities. Every dollar you give, empowers victim survivors of DFV and gives them the opportunity to be in control of their own lives and those of their children once more.

If you would like to learn more about our work with children, young people and families in the area of DFV or to donate please visit our website [barnardos.org.au/stopdv](https://barnardos.org.au/stopdv)

Together, we can help children and young people overcome the impact of domestic and family violence through our specialised support services that focus on healing from DFV, to build an Australia where everyone has the chance to have a brighter future again.



DONATE OR  
FIND OUT MORE



For more information on how you  
can help us fulfil our vision for  
Australian children contact our  
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**[philanthropy@barnardos.org.au](mailto:philanthropy@barnardos.org.au) or  
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