

Partnering with Families Who are Experiencing Domestic Violence

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Abstract: This paper examines how early childhood education can support families experiencing domestic violence (DV). It outlines the forms of DV, its negative effects on children and families, and the common needs for safety, emotional support, and social resources. Barriers to accessing early childhood services—such as fear, shame, and mistrust—are discussed. Strategies include creating safe and inclusive environments, using trauma-sensitive approaches, valuing family strengths, and fostering collaboration between parents, educators, and professionals. Early childhood settings are highlighted as key places to identify, support, and include families affected by DV.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Early Childhood Education, Emotional Support, Trauma-Sensitive Approach, Family Collaboration, inclusion

1. Introduction

In current society, the number of families who experience domestic violence is increasing, this requires early childhood educators to take a close eye to the issues of domestic violence, such as its forms and impacts on the individuals who experience it. According to the NSW Government Department of Community and Justice (2019), domestic violence breaks people's lives apart and affects children, women, family and community on varying degrees. Therefore, this report aims to explore the needs, issues and barriers to the inclusive early childhood education for families who are experiencing domestic violence (DV). Readers' knowledge about the suffering of families exposed to DV when they are on the margins could be enhanced. Meanwhile, strategies for early childhood teachers to better address the barriers faced by families exposed to DV are also identified.

2. Definition of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is the violence by one person against another person in a family or close relationship. There is usually an imbalance of power between each family member. In other words, perpetrators are powering over and trying to control victims through fear and violence^[1]. Domestic violence can be divided into two different forms as physical and non-physical behaviors. Compared with non-physical violence, physical violence is more obvious to be detected by an outsider. Because it is the physical force that an perpetrator directly applies on a victim's body, such as kicking or hitting. However, non-physical violence can occur in different forms, which includes verbal, psychological, emotional and financial abuse^[2]. A person doesn't need to experience all types of domestic violence to be considered as being abused. However, both physical and non-physical domestic violence have substantial negative impacts on the families' daily life. For example, other family members may feel a high level of fear and stress at home and lack of trusting relationships with surrounding people. The victims' emotional wellbeing, such as a sense of safety, trust and self-esteem will be negatively impacted by being exposed to DV^[3].

3. Typical issues & Specific needs

Families who experience domestic violence may face some typical issues and specific needs, if these are not addressed or met, they may experience disadvantage and marginalisation. It is quite common for children to be the victim in this family type; thus, they can be one of the starting points to talk about the life of the families which are exposed to domestic violence. Exposure of domestic violence results in children's poor developmental outcomes, with the aspects of academic performance, social and emotional functioning^[3]. A child who experiences domestic abuse sometimes not just means that he is being directly physically abused, but includes a range of physical or non-physical aggressions, so as professional early childhood teachers, we have to observe the children more carefully in order to detect any suspicions^[1]. For example, some children are mentally and emotionally affected by living in a family that has experienced domestic violence, are depressed all day, having trouble in concentrating in class and their academic performance suffers greatly. At the same time, these children may feel ashamed of their family situation, be reluctant to get along with their peers, and may not even be able to keep up with their development in all areas. The various effects of domestic violence on children can leave families exposed to domestic violence to be marginalised.

According to Davies and Berger (2019), experiencing domestic violence increases the risk of childhood social difficulties, mental ill-health, and learning disorder etc. Children growing up in families exposed to domestic violence are often forced to choose between their parents. Some children may suffer direct abuse or be harmed by protecting the abused parent. There are also children who have no choice but to compromise with the perpetrator of the abuse in order to get on with their lives. But in either case, it can have a huge impact on the child's physical and emotional well-being^[1]. For example, if the child gives in to the perpetrator, then he has to witness the parent being abused in various ways and even forced to carry out the abuse, then the child may become weak at heart and even worse, the child may become a new perpetrator in the future. Such problems leave family members living in fear and may even perpetuate the cycle of violence into the next generation of families, keeping these families marginalised. Drawn from family systems theory, what affects one member of the family, impacts upon the rest^[4]. When children suffer from the problems brought by exposing to domestic violence listed above, the other family members have also been affected too. For instance, the family may have to spend time and pay extra fees to send their children to different services to acquire intervention. At thistime, one parent may leave the workforce to look after the child at home. Hence, it becomes more possible for the family to become financially unstable, then, gradually being disadvantaged or marginalised in the society. Then, domestic violence may limit the family's willingness and capacity to access social support in the society. And the lack of support may lead the family to experience disadvantage and marginalisation.

Family members who experience domestic violence have specific needs for both physical safety and emotional wellbeing^[5]. For instance, when the violence occurs, the victims may have to move into crisis housing to ensure their physical safety, hence, the unstable housing may limit the family's access and capacity to actively seek appropriate social support. It is important to note that forcibly separating young children from their parents is not always an effective way to stop domestic violence when considering the protection of their physical safety, as domestic violence is not only about physical harm, but forcible separation can lead to ongoing financial abuse and even to the child being used as a weapon to cause a range of other problems^[1].

Furthermore, children in the family which experiences domestic violence emphasise their needs for emotional wellbeing and trustworthy relationships to heal their wounds^[1]. Early years settings provide opportunities for young children to build trustworthy relationships. Firstly, children in this family type need to be provided with the opportunities to talk, to be listened to, and taken seriously ^[5]. This opens up the window for children to express their own feelings and thoughts. Being taken seriously means that children need to be informed, included and empowered ^[5]. Through being viewed as active participants to participate in the decision making about the matters which affect their life, both children and adults can get voices heard, and their special needs are more likely to be met. While on the other hand, if the particular issue and needs are not well dealt with, it tends to be more possible for families who experience domestic violence to experience disadvantage or marginalisation. In addition, families exposed to domestic violence may have the needs for diverse social support, such as community support service to help them overcome the difficulties.

4. Barriers & Strategies

Children and their families who experience DV may encounter difficulties to access ECEC services and thus recognising, identifying and understanding those barriers is indispensable.

One of the barriers for getting access to ECEC services is the concealment of home circumstances of non-offending parents. On the one hand, parents would feel a sense of shame to disclose their suffering. On the other hand, they are afraid that this would lead to the condition that their children become the target of bullying and teasing in the center^[6]. It indicates that the reluctance to trust people surrounding them prevents children and non-offending parents from sharing their shameful feelings and stigma about their home situations so that they might compound their isolation without seeking assistance. Thus, creating a safe, protective and inclusive environment for children and their non-offending parents to open communications with educators plays a critical role in ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of communications and understanding their concerns and needs of their home circumstances ^[3].

However, the intervention of educators might penetrate their private area of family circumstances which easily leads to feelings of discomfort, shame and guilt and fear of exposing their hidden behaviours^[7]. It is essential to have an awareness of providing trauma-sensitive circumstances to acknowledge children domestic violence, recommend appropriate intervention and forge trust relationships with children and non-offending parents^{[8][9]}. Also, rather than mainly concentrating on problematising families' situations as issues, focusing on the inherent interests, strengths and resources of children and their families could increase children's and non-offending parents' authority and empowerment so as to make positive changes and reduce negative impacts on their lives^{[10][11]}. It is critical for educators to create an environment in which children's and their families' unique strengths are celebrated, and children and their non-offending parents have the feeling of being respected and heard^[12]. All teaching approaches are necessary to include all children's and their non-offending parents' needs and desires, and thus embed them into the daily routine of service with educators and peers.

On the other hand, non-offending parents are anxious about the consequences of disclosure and hence refuse to seek assistance from ECEC services out of fear of child removal^{[13][7]}. Research has shown that non-offending parents might confront insensitive educators and social workers and inadequate services which positions separation as the end of intervention^[13]. It results in a deep mistrust with non-offending parents and develops negative effects on their children and themselves such as becoming isolated and having negative emotions as children have a secure attachment with non-offending parents^{[14][1]}.

Also, the threat of removing children makes non-offending parents feel unsupported, and enhances their own sense of powerlessness^[7]. Hence, providing a third space for non-offending parents, educators and professionals could allow them to understand different funds of knowledge, bridge diverse knowledge and experiences from individuals, and develop a shared goal through mutual acknowledgement and decision-making^[15]. The third space involves non-offending parents, educators and professionals to cooperatively work in private and ethical ways such as engaging in private regular meetings, and online sharing and discussion through 'Story Park'. Since educators facilitate parents to discuss their expectations of their children and offer approaches to support them in making their own choices and achieving mutual goals, families may have the feeling of being valued and respected in the service. It is crucial for educators to place emphasis on an empathic approach especially active listening and be aware of boundaries and not making judgements on children and their families^[16]. In consideration of all children and their families having varied situations and attitudes, it is significant that educators accept and respond sensitively to diverse families as children and their non-offending parents respond to their experiences of domestic violence in unique ways^[6].

Moreover, taking account of the emotions of children, non-offending parents and perpetrators upon reporting domestic violence is indispensable as some children desire to continually contact their abusive parents^[14]. As Buckley et al. (2007) demonstrate that the relationship between child, the abusive parent and the non-offending is complicated, with viewing the abusive parent in positive and negative aspects and having a secure attachment with the non-offending parent. It could challenge educators and professionals to consider how to include children and their families to have non-punitive assistance and support^[13].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, domestic violence is a serious problem that affects everyone in these types of families and leaves these families on the margins. Families affected by domestic violence need the help and attention of all sectors of society, and early childhood education institutions are a good entry point to provide quality help. Both physical and non-physical domestic violence have varying degrees of impact on all family members, other individuals related to the family and even the entire community. Family members who are experiencing domestic violence might be afraid to talk about the sufferings they are facing for a variety of reasons, because of their stress or timidity. In this case, it is necessary for the educators to build on their capacity in responding to the victims' disclosure of their home situations. Early childhood settings play an important role in providing a safe environment for children to talk, express themselves and to be listened to, as well as building trust and positive relationships with families to assist them to better overcome the difficulties. This requires early childhood educators to effectively identify various types of domestic violence, understanding the typical issues and specific needs they might have, applying appropriate strategies to address the barriers and fostering access and inclusion of the families exposed to domestic violence.

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