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‘Silent victims’: royal commission recommends better protections for child victims of family violence

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If we are to prevent family violence, we must change the attitudes and social conditions that give rise to it.

Among the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence’s most important recommendations is the powerful acknowledgement that family violence has devastating effects on children. Commissioner Marcia Neave described children as the “silent victims” of family violence.

This important emphasis has been a long time coming.

The commission noted that children have conventionally been overlooked as victims of family violence. This is the legacy of limited or incomplete data-gathering, siloed responses, and complicated referral processes. The result is children enduring harm without the specialised supports to help them cope with the trauma of family violence.

Witnessing violence is experiencing violence

There are myriad ways in which children experience violence in family settings. Children may endure violence directly, or witness violence perpetrated on others. Both scenarios result in severe adverse effects for children in the short and long term.

The impacts that family violence has on children have been broadly acknowledged at the national level. Yet the commission’s suite of recommendations about service responses for child victims of family violence are welcome. They are a highly practical mechanism for ensuring that children’s

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well-being is a central consideration in reforming Victoria's family violence services.

Central to the commission's recommendations is the provision of priority funding to increase specialised therapeutic counselling for children affected by family violence.

Other practical recommendations to ensure child victims are no longer overlooked include:

- incorporating child-specific indicators into risk-assessment processes;
- increasing family violence training; and
- strengthening protocols for child protection workers to ensure appropriate referrals for children and young people.

Multiple recommendations are made to improve children's immediate safety needs. These include improved access to suitable crisis accommodation for women and children, complete with the specialised consultations necessary to support children.

Legislative changes are also recommended, including amendments to allow for the inclusion of children on family violence intervention orders.

The commission's approach of mainstreaming children's well-being throughout all recommendations enhances its child-specific recommendations. The establishment of support and safety hubs, for example, would ensure intake teams include staff trained in children's services and that, where possible, services necessary for children are co-located.

This approach lays the foundation for the multi-sectoral cultural change that is required to ensure children's needs are considered as a matter of course.

Adolescents who use family violence

The commission's report also examined the system's adequacy in preventing and responding to children and young people who perpetrate family violence.

The report found that one in ten family violence incidents reported to Victoria Police in the last five years were perpetrated by a person under 19 years of age.

Where these behaviours occur, specialised response is required to divert young people from the criminal justice system, and to provide the therapeutic support necessary for behavioural change. The report recognised that, at present, there are:

... no systemic responses to the needs of these young people and their families.

The recommendations included:

- extending therapeutic treatment orders to children aged 15-17 years;
- trialling Youth Justice Group Conferencing with Adolescent Family Violence Programs;
- establishing family violence application and respondent worker positions at the Children's Court;
and
- providing support accommodation for young people with violent behaviours.

Cultural change

The commission reinforced the importance of respectful relationship education as a key measure for preventing future violence. This is of critical importance for young people who are victims and/or perpetrators of family violence.

The commission reported that between 2009-10 and 2013-14, children were present at roughly 35% of family violence incidents. Investing resources in the rigorous design, evaluation and delivery of educational programs for children is crucial in challenging the normalisation of violence that is driven by media images and, for some children, by the violence they endure in their own homes.

There is a need for caution here, however, to ensure that preventative efforts of this kind don't pin unfair expectations on children to champion non-violent behaviours when so much around them valorises or condones violence. How realistic is it to expect children to bear responsibility for swimming against such a tide?

Part of the answer to this question lies in the commission's attention to the need for cultural change more generally. If we are to prevent family violence, we must change the attitudes and social conditions that give rise to it.

At the heart of the recommended prevention strategy is an effort to redress the sociocultural power imbalance that devalues women and perpetuates gender inequality. This carries an understanding that wholesale cultural change is required to permanently eradicate family violence. Now is the time for precisely this same understanding about the need to challenge views that allow for the continued harm of children within the home.

Children's experiences of violence have been overlooked for too long. If we seek to change the narrative that devalues women then we must also tackle the cultures of silence and secrecy that allow for the domination of children.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has indicated that cultures of secrecy function to minimise or conceal violence against children. The family violence royal commission has now found that the violence endured by children in the home has been dealt with only marginally.

Together, these findings convey a powerful message about the urgent need to create the cultural

change necessary to ensure children's well-being.

The National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line – 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) – is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.



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