

We, the undersigned, are psychologists or psychologists in training working with children and families nationwide. In this work we frequently encounter families involved in the Family Court. Many of these involve allegations of child abuse and domestic violence. We are seriously concerned that children are being ordered contact or residence with parents known to be violent and sometimes being ordered contact or residence with convicted child sex offenders. In some cases these children are also deprived of contact with mothers who have raised the allegations on their behalf in the interests of protecting them from abuse.

We are aware of cases where mothers have been labelled by the court, sometimes by assessment reports, as mentally ill, delusional or unstable after raising allegations and/or producing evidence of abuse of the child by the other parent. It is important that the Court understand the dynamic of the impact of disclosures of sexual abuse on the non-offending parent, for example symptoms of vicarious traumatisation.

There are a number of issues we would like considered by the enquiry:

Lack of demonstrated understanding of children's development needs, especially emotional needs by those involved in Family Court decision making

Lack of demonstrated understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and abuse, and its impact on children by those involved in Family Court decision making

Lack of demonstrated understanding of perpetrators of sexual abuse, and their behaviours such as grooming methods, and their manipulation of the child by those involved in Family Court decision making

Use of inappropriately qualified persons as expert witnesses in some cases.

Lack of communication and integration between the Family Court system, the various Child Protection systems, and the policing and judicial involvement in relation to domestic violence.

Recommendations

We would like all those involved in contributing to decision-making in the Family Court process (Judges, Magistrates, Assessors and Independant Children's Lawyers) to have qualifications and experience in the understanding of child development.

We would like all those involved in contributing to decision-making in the Family Court process (Judges, Magistrates, assessors and Independant Children's Lawyers) to have qualifications and experience in the understanding of child abuse and its effects on children.

We would like all those involved in contributing to decision-making in the Family Court process (Judges, Magistrates, assessors and Independant Children's Lawyers) to have qualifications and experience in the understanding of domestic violence and its effects on children, and of informational and vicarious trauma.

We request that consideration be given to establishing a separate court for all cases involving child abuse (including the witnessing of domestic violence) staffed by qualified experts on child development/child abuse/domestic violence.

We are mindful of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, 2008 and would like the recommendations of that report to be resourced and implemented.

Doncare		
Jenny Corran	Victoria	Private practitioner
Dianne Starkey	New South Wales	Private practitioner
Sarah Blunden	South Australia	Private practitioner
Rita Princi	South Australia	Private practitioner
Dr. Jane Selby	New South Wales	Private practitioner and Research Fellow
CSU		
Alexina Baldini	Victoria	Private practitioner
David Pyman	Victoria	Private practitioner
Celia Smith	Victoria	Private practitioner
Karen Horley	Victoria	Family Dispute Resolution
Practitioner		
Therese Bradshaw	Victoria	Private practitioner
Dr. Carli Growcott	Victoria	Family Services Psychologist
Melanie Jones	Victoria	Private practitioner
Alison Peters	Victoria	Private practitioner
Karen Spanjer	Tasmania	School psychologist
Parnoon Entesari	South Australia	Child and Adolescent Mental
Health Clinical Psych		
Amanda Fothergill	Victoria	Private practitioner
Ann Mitchell	Queensland	Private practitioner
Mariella Aloï	Victoria	Private practitioner
Eddie Gallagher	Victoria	Private practitioner
Carmel O'Connell	New South Wales	Private practitioner
Jennie Dickson	Victoria	Domestic Violence
Advocate (non-psych)		
Holly DeMaria	Victoria	Youth Worker (non-psych)
Julie Mac Donald	Victoria	Creative Arts Therapist and DV
worker (non-psych)		