



Understanding Children's Safety and Resilience in the Context of Family Violence

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Overview

- Background
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Limitations
- Findings
- Implications
- Strengths



Current Understandings Within Children and Family Violence Research

- Family violence has a **negative impact** on children's physical, emotional and psychological well-being (Kitzmann, 2003)
- Research **samples** of children should be **broadened** (Överlien, 2010)
- **Primary care** has focused on women's experiences of family violence but not children's experiences (Taft, 2006)
- **Children's voices** and children's own perspectives have been missing (Eriksson, 2010)

Addressing the Research Gap



Research Questions

- How do mothers and children understand children's safety & resilience in the context of family violence?
- How is safety and resilience realised in the context of family violence?
- What are the implications for developing a primary care response to children experiencing family violence?

Methods

PRIMARY CARE SAMPLE

- **23** Children aged 8 – 24yrs
- **18** Mothers
aged late 20s – mid 50s
- **18** Combined Abuse (CAS)
 - **15** Severe
 - **3** Physical + other
- Employment/Centrelink

RECRUITMENT

- GP Clinic 1 (11)
- GP Clinic 2 (2)
- Weave (5)

DATA COLLECTION

- **59** Semi-structured audio-recorded interviews
- **3** Focus Groups
(8-12yrs/15-21yrs/mothers)

Limitations

- Small sample size
- Limited recruitment sources
- Non-CALD or Indigenous sampling
- Not longitudinal
- Unable to interview all members of a family:
 - Siblings missing voices
 - Father's missing voices

Ethical Issues

Safety, Distress & Disclosure

- **Danger in research & family relationships**
- **Risk Assessments**
- **Safety Sheets & Protocols**

Creativity

- **Communication options**
- **Activity Books**

(Morris et. al., 2012)

Analytical Theories

Hermeneutic
Phenomenology

- Understanding
- Interpretation

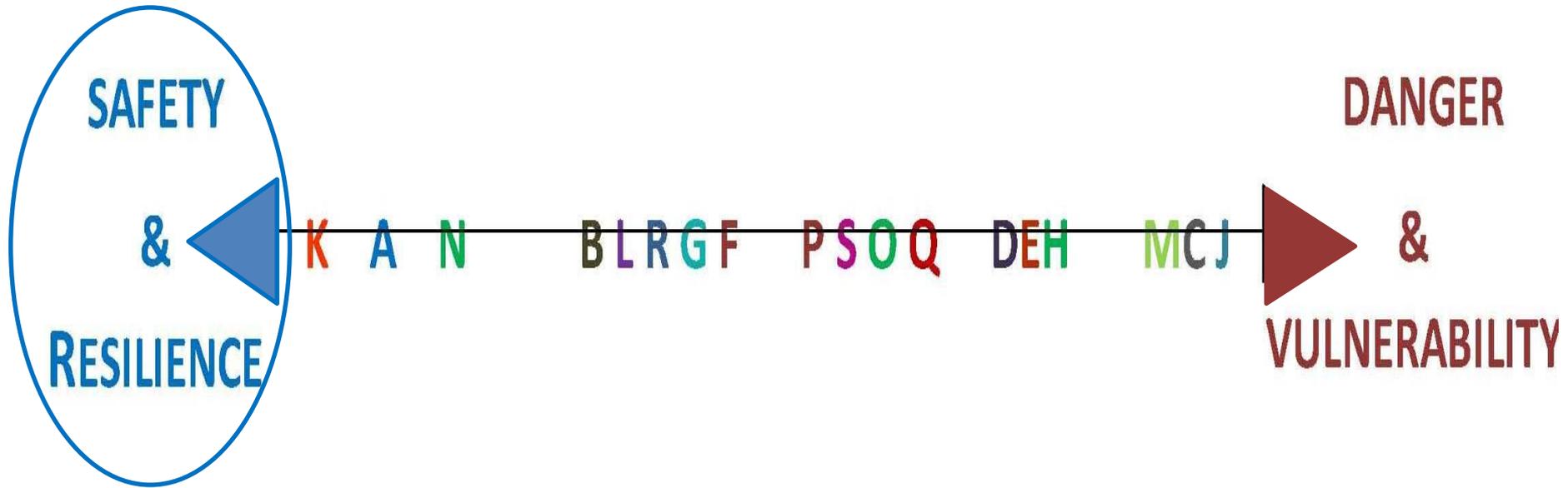
Ethics
of Care

- Empathy
- Care
- Relationship

Dialogical
Ethics

- Communication
- Reciprocity
- Thoughtfulness
- Perspective

Families Continuum of Safety



Finding – Understanding Safety

Research Question 1a

How do mothers and children understand children's safety?

Mothers and children understand children's safety as the interplay of **awareness** of the violence, whether the violence has been **named**, who **cares and protects**, **trust** in self or others and whether the child has **agency**.

Awareness

Fully aware of family violence

Aware of something

I hated seeing Mum getting hurt. I remember one time Mum was in my room, reading a book to me and Dad came in, he was just spitting on her only reason or I suppose the fact that and Mum just wasn't paying attention when they broke up like that they and then Dad went and got a cane stool and...went to throw it at us, so I of enquired and said 'Come on you jumped towards Mum to try and stop it hitting her. But he still threw it anyway. Didn't stop him. I think it hit both of us.

(Tahlia, 18)

Naming: Communication

When & by whom the violence is named:

- Eldest child
- Danger

Open two-way dialogue

I talked to Mum about it and my grandmother (father wanting contact). They weren't pressuring me to do anything that I didn't want to do. They just let me talk it out...and I'd feel better afterwards. We talk about it, we talked about it when it happened...

(Rayne, 18 years)

Care & Protection: Mothers

Modelling safety & values

I think what I really wanted to show her was that...oh without saying it, because, like I said I never wanted to sway her in her opinion of him. I wanted her, she had to learn, she had to know who he was, what he did. I can't tell her that.

Zoe just decided that 'I no longer feel safe there, I'm not going'...And I mean she had to make that herself. People can tell you these things, but you need to make your own...judgements.

(Penelope, mother of Zoe)

Care & Protection: Children

Child as carer and protector

I tried to stop her, because this is how she got bashed up by (ex-partner). And so she just got out of the car and I grabbed her top and she just went and all I heard was screaming and she came back out covered in cuts and bruises.

I tried, but I couldn't get out. I was not allowed to get out of the car because I didn't want to get hurt.

(Natalie, 9)

Trust & Agency

I've had this dream but I know it's not true. We were at my house at the pool and then all of a sudden Niles & just come back in and he's asked for her (mum's) forgiveness and she's just, um just went 'Yes'. And then I got up and I said I'm staying here with Glen, which is my step-dad, is like my real dad. I said 'I'm staying here with Dad, I'm not leaving with you guys. And then Mum was like 'Yes, please come with us'. And I said 'No, I'm not going back there', And then I swam off to the other side to go with Dad...(Zoe, 11)

■ Dialogical ethics:

■ Question roles &

relationships

■ Deciding who to trust/who cares

■ Agency in decision making

Finding – Understanding Resilience

Research Question 1b

How do mothers and children understand children's resilience?

- Children's resilience is understood by mothers **in relation to the adversity** they have experienced
- Children understand resilience more broadly as their **sense of self in the social world.**

Resilience

Mother's Perspective:
Resilience through Adversity

*They're remarkable and people comment how well adjusted they are for **all the shit they go through**. Even physical – they're tough, yeah they're resilient.*

In Year 6 I got my black belt in karate and then I won 'Student of the Year' so I got a sword with that as well. So I was pretty proud of myself, that was a big achievement.

(Kelly, mother of Runey, 11 & Jane, 15)

(Jane, 15)

Child's Perspective:
*Resilience as
Self in Social World*

Key Finding

Research Question 2

How is safety and resilience realised in the context of family violence?

Children require **agency** to **negotiate safety in relationships** during family violence and in post-separation contact.

- **Awareness** of family violence
- Physical and emotional **distance** from the perpetrator, and
- Mother's **modelling** of her values and own sense of safety in relationships
- Child's **sense of their own & their family's resiliency**

Key Finding - Factors

Awareness

Distance From
Perpetrator

AGENCY

Modelling

Resilience

Implications for Assisting Mothers

- Understand the types of danger present for a family, particularly post-separation harassment/intrusion
- Understand mother's ability to model safety
- Facilitate communication between mothers and their children to help make children aware of danger
- Support mothers to create physical distance from the perpetrator
- Advocate for mother's and children's safety in family court processes regarding custody and contact

Implications for Supporting Families

- Appraise the availability of a family's informal supports and assist mothers and children to build these relationships
- For families with good informal support networks, provide information about formal supports
- In the absence of informal supports, facilitate referral to formal supports

Implications for Assisting Children

- Be aware of the child's sense of self and look for indicators of vulnerability or resilience
- Understand that children can remain unsafe post-separation due to forced and unwanted contact with the perpetrator
- Be aware of child's role within the family as receiver or provider of care and protection for self, mother and siblings
- Understand other vulnerabilities that may be present for this child/family

Conclusion

A child cannot 'leave' a violent relationship...

Therefore, practitioners can play a significant role in understanding a child's agency to negotiate safety in their relationships.

Strengths

- Children voices were brought to the fore
- Their experiences were contextualised by hearing from their mothers
- Highlighted the importance children's need for agency to negotiate their safety during family violence and in the post-separation environment



Acknowledgements & Thank you

Participants

23 Children & 18 Mothers

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Questions ?

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