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

- Safety & Resilience
- Australian
- Children’s voices
- Primary Care Population
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.
I hated seeing Mum getting hurt. I remember one time Mum was in my room, reading a book to me and Dad was spitting on her and Mum just wasn’t paying attention when they broke up like that they told us, that was only because I kind of enquired and said ‘Come on you know, what’s going on?’ Like you know I could sense it. (Max, 24)

I did sense when things were going badly as a kid. And you know the only reason or I suppose the fact that and Mum just wasn’t paying attention when Dad went and got a cane stool and went to throw it at us, so I 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)
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.

(Amelia, 15)
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 Nigel’s 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)
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.

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

Child’s Perspective: Resilience as Self in Social World

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.

(Jane, 15)
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
- 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
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Participants
23 Children & 18 Mothers

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Questions ?

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