
KEEPING CONGREGATIONS SAFE:

IDENTIFYING FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



Keeping Congregations Safe: Identifying Family Violence and Supporting Families

Theology and Belief

The Uniting Church affirms the following biblical and theological understandings:

- All people are created in the image of God and are known and loved by God.
- Every person is of infinite worth and entitled to live with dignity and each person's life and humanity needs to be protected or the human community and its reflection of God are diminished.
- As Christians we base our values on Jesus, who in his life and ministry loved and respected women and men, girls and boys, and people of all ages.
- We recognise Jesus' specific care for people who were powerless and those who were vulnerable.
- Our commitment to the equality of men and women and respect for all humans underlies our rejection of any form of violence.
- People grow into their fullest humanity when they are nurtured in situations of love, trust and safety – people should not have to live in fear.
- The Basis of Union (Par 11) calls us to engage with literary, historical and scientific enquiry and to stand in relationship with contemporary society in ways that will help us understand our own nature and mission. Therefore, we must listen to the voices that inform us about Domestic and Family Violence and be willing to join others working to overcome this violence.
- The Basis of Union (Par 18) notes the Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in our life.

We acknowledge that:

- We live in a world where women are often treated as less than equal;
- Some violent men who are members and adherents of Christian churches have used phrases in the Bible to reinforce their power in intimate relationships;
- Theologies and teachings which support a power imbalance in family relationship can nurture an environment in which violence and other forms of abuse are present;

and

- The lifelong commitment of marriage does not mean that people should stay in violent relationships. There are times when “divorce may be the only creative and life-giving direction to take”.

We give thanks for:

- The courage and witness of those who have come forward to share their stories of Domestic and Family Violence within the Church and the wider community; and
- The ways in which light has been shed on the serious issue of family violence including through the work of public figures, journalists and government commissions.

Myths/misconceptions

There are many myths and misconceptions about family violence, often in relation to who are the usual victims and perpetrators.

Activity

A friend is talking to you about someone in the congregation that is experiencing family violence. They tell you they think the violence has been exaggerated by the victim because “women always do that.” They tell you that it is difficult to believe because the woman’s husband is active in the community, doesn’t drink alcohol and holds a good job. They continue to say that “if it was that bad she would have left already.” This person finishes by saying that the perpetrator of violence is a good father and that even if he was abusive towards their mother that it would not be impacting the children, therefore his access to them should not be monitored.

What myths/misconceptions can you see in this story?

Let’s have a look at 5 common myths. The following are from the Safe Steps website:

MYTH: Family violence only happens in poor, uneducated or minority families.

FACT: Family violence occurs among all types of families, regardless of income, profession, religion, ethnicity, educational level or race.

MYTH: If a woman was in real danger, she would just leave. If she hasn’t left, it can’t be that bad.

FACT: A woman is at highest risk of extreme violence, including murder, when she does leave an abuser. Many women stay because they are extremely fearful for themselves or their children if they do leave. If a woman chooses to stay in an abusive relationship, it doesn’t mean the situation isn’t bad, it means she’s worried leaving might make it even worse.

Other reasons why a woman might stay in a violent environment include:

- Fear, low self-esteem, shame, guilt
- Lack of financial independence
- Desire to maintain the family unit; there may be family pressure to keep the family together
- Belief that the partner can and will change
- Isolation – lack of family and social support networks

MYTH: Children aren’t really affected by family violence between their parents.

FACT: seeing one parent being violent to another and growing up in an unpredictable, fear-filled environment can have significant negative impact on children. Studies have shown children exposed to family violence are at greater risk of developing depression and experiencing behaviour problems. They can also suffer at school, developing poor reading and language skills, and struggling to make and maintain friendships. Under Victorian law, if someone is abusive towards their partner or spouse in front of a child, they can be charged with child abuse.

MYTH: Violent men come from violent homes.

FACT: It is true that some men who are violent come from violent backgrounds, but many men who abuse women and children do not. Many men who do come from abusive backgrounds are not violent towards women and children. The relationship between exposure to violence in childhood and becoming an adult perpetrator is complex, but the fact is that violence is a choice. We can all choose to not act violently.

MYTH: Lots of women make false claims about family violence or exaggerate how bad the abuse is.

FACT: False claims about family violence are extremely rare. 80% of women who experience violence from a current partner don't contact the police about it. When talking to family, friends and others, women are more likely to downplay their experience of violence than exaggerate it.

<https://safesteps.org.au/understanding-family-violence/family-violence-myths-facts/>

What is Family Violence?

Definition

Defining family violence can be difficult both because of the diverse make up of family units and the various ways perpetrators use to commit the violence. The two definitions below are from the Victorian Government and Safe Steps, the family violence crisis interventions service for Victoria.

“Family and domestic violence is any violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour that occurs in current or past family, domestic or intimate relationships ... Family violence may involve overt or subtle exploitation of power imbalances and may consist of isolated incidents or patterns of abuse over a period of time.”

[What is family violence? | Victorian Government \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au/what-is-family-violence)

Family violence is defined as: “...any **threatening, coercive, dominating or abusive behaviour** that occurs between people in a family, domestic or intimate relationship, or former intimate relationship, **that causes the person experiencing the behaviour to feel fear.**”

Family violence is not an argument once in a while, it is a continuous pattern of abusive behaviour perpetrated by one person towards another, often using multiple tactics.”

<https://www.safesteps.org.au/understanding-family-violence/what-is-family-violence/>

These definitions highlight the power imbalance, the coercive control and the experience of fear by the victim of the violence.

Types of family violence relationships

In the past the term “domestic violence” was used to refer to family violence incidents, however as our understanding of the dynamic of family violence has increased this has changed. We recognise family violence isn't only between intimate partners who live together, but can be perpetrated whenever there is a “family like” relationship.

Included in these “family like” relationships are multiple and complex relationships within various CALD communities, the LGBTQI+ community and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Here are some examples of family violence relationships:

Intimate partner abuse: violent behaviour by a current or former spouse or partner against the other spouse or partner.

Dating abuse: violent behaviour by a casual partner against the other partner.

Child abuse: violent behaviour or mistreatment towards a child or young person by a parent or caregiver. Under Victorian law, exposing a child to any form of family violence is also a reportable child abuse offence. If a person is abusive towards their spouse or partner in front of their child or children, child abuse has occurred.

Elder abuse: violent behaviour or mistreatment towards an older person by a partner or family member, often including financial abuse, controlling behaviours and/or neglect

Parental abuse: violent behaviour towards a parent by an adolescent child or dependant.

<https://www.safesteps.org.au/understanding-family-violence/what-is-family-violence/>

Types of Family Violence

Family violence is not only physical or sexual abuse, although these types of abuse have a higher risk of the victim being murdered or seriously injured. Family violence often begins in much more subtle ways and increases slowly over time. The aim of family violence is to gain and maintain control of the other person.

Family violence can include (but is not limited to):

Physical abuse: direct assault on the body, such as slapping, punching, kicking, shaking or pushing, which may include the use of weapons or objects. Physical abuse can also include throwing objects, the denial of food and the destruction of property. Violence can be towards or threatened towards other family members or animals such as family pets.

Sexual abuse: any form of rape, unwanted or forced sexual activity, sexual threats and insults, restricting access to contraception or refusing to wear a condom.

Verbal abuse: intimidation, verbal attacks, threats, insults, name-calling, yelling or humiliation. Themes might relate to body shape, sexuality, intelligence or ability as a parent.

Psychological or emotional abuse: blaming or ignoring the person ('sulking'), treating the person as inferior, frequently saying their behaviour is inappropriate, questioning their sense of reality (also known as gaslighting), emotional blackmail or suicide threats or attempts. It can include controlling the person's mental health access to medication (over or under dosing) or to mental health support (such as counselling).

Stalking: constantly making phone calls, or sending text messages, emails, faxes, letters or unwanted gifts. Loitering near the person's home or workplace. Spying on or following the person, including through the use of electronic means.

Social isolation: isolating the victim from their family and friends, such as forbidding or preventing contact with them and ongoing rudeness to family and friends. The perpetrator might insist the person moves far away from family support or employment opportunities.

Financial abuse: maintaining control of family finances, such as restricting access to bank accounts, wages or pensions, providing a small 'allowance', hiding assets, preventing the person from working, sabotaging interviews or meetings, and theft.

Spiritual abuse: Using religious texts to justify violent behaviours; ridiculing a person's religious beliefs and culture or preventing them from being part of a religion or cultural group.

Neglect: often failing to meet the basic physical or psychological needs of the person who needs care, such as a person with a disability. This might include failing to protect them from physical harm or danger or stopping them from getting medical care. It can also be neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, the other person's basic emotional needs.

Other ways violence can be perpetrated:

Controlling visas and or passports. Threatening to have a visa revoked and have a person sent back to an unsafe social situation.

Controlling access to technology such as the internet, social media or even basic household items such as a washing machine.

Utilising the systems in place to perpetrate violence such as Child Protection, Family Law courts

What causes family violence?

It is important to remember that a perpetrator chooses how they behave, and do this to have control over someone else. Often perpetrators will make excuses for their behavior and claim they lost control. They may blame stress, finances, money or work as the catalyst for the violence.

Although there are many factors that may predict or "drive" family violence there is no single cause. Social factors such as financial stress or substance use can certainly drive family violence however they are not the direct cause of family violence.

"The drivers of family violence at a societal level are complex. They include structural gender inequality and community attitudes and social norms about gender and violence more generally.

Evidence shows that a major driver of family violence in our community is gender inequality – that is, the unequal distribution of power, resources, and choice based on someone's gender identity. For example, in individual relationships this inequality plays out in the belief that a man is entitled to exercise power and control over his partner and children. It can also show up in the belief that gender diverse or non-binary people are less deserving of safety and social inclusion.

Family violence occurs in all cultures, communities and across all demographics including age, gender and socioeconomic status. However, specific groups experience unique impacts and systematic barriers due to factors such as ableism, ageism, criminal history, homophobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination.

What causes family violence? | Safe and Equal

Family Violence Statistics

One woman is killed nearly every week in Australia due to family violence.

In 2018–19, 35 women were killed by an intimate partner (all but one a male intimate partner).

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology 'Homicide in Australia 2018–19'

On average, police attend a family violence incident every six minutes in Victoria

Source: Crime Statistics Agency

In 2019–20, Victoria Police attended 88,214 family violence incidents. A 'family incident' is defined as an incident attended by Victoria Police where a Risk Assessment and Risk Management Report (also known as an L17 form) was completed.

Intimate partner violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Australian women aged 18 – 44, and contributes an estimated 5.1 per cent of the burden of disease for women aged 18 – 44 (ANROWS, 2016).

Victim survivors experience higher rates of violence from a perpetrator after the relationship has ended

Source: [Australian Bureau of Statistics' \(ABS\) 2016 Personal Safety Survey](#)

In Australia, an estimated 3 per cent of women (275,000) experienced violence by a current partner whereas 15 per cent of women (1.4 million) experienced violence by a previous partner. In Australia, an estimated 1.7 per cent of men (150,300) experienced violence by a current partner whereas approximately 4.4 per cent of men (397,300) experienced violence by a previous partner.

The survey collected information from men and women aged 18 years and over about violence they experienced since the age of 15. The term 'partner' is used to describe a person the respondent currently lives with, or has lived with at some point, in a married or de facto relationship. Violence includes physical and sexual assault and threats.

Aboriginal women are 33 times more likely to be hospitalised by family violence than non-Aboriginal women

Source: [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Indigenous Community Safety Snapshot \(July 2015 to June 2017\)](#)

In Australia, First Nations women accounted for more than 35 per cent of all hospitalisations for family violence, and most specified a spouse or domestic partner as the perpetrator (62 per cent) in 2016–17 (AIHW analysis of National Hospital Morbidity Database). It is important to note that most violence against Aboriginal women is perpetrated by non-Aboriginal people. In 2011, 85 per cent of Aboriginal women in Melbourne had a non-Aboriginal partner ([Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2013](#)).

Women with a disability are almost 40 per cent more likely to experience family violence than other women

Source: [ABS Personal Safety Survey](#)

In 2016, an estimated 5.9 per cent (172,800) of women with a disability or long-term health condition experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared to 4.3 per cent (274,400) of those with no disability or long-term health condition.

The proportion of men who experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the survey was similar for men with a disability or long-term health condition (5.6 per cent) and men without a disability or long-term health condition (6.2 per cent).

Women with a disability are twice as likely to experience violence from a partner than men with a disability

Source: [ABS Disability and Violence – In Focus: Crime and Justice Statistics](#)

This research from the ABS found that in 2016, 1.8 per cent of persons living with disability or a long-term health condition experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a cohabiting partner (102,300 including 2.5 per cent of women and 1.1 per cent of men) and 5.6 per cent experienced emotional abuse by a partner (322,300 including 6.3 per cent of women and 4.7 per cent of men). The term 'partner' describes a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point, in a married or de facto relationship.

Temporary visa holders face barriers to accessing safety and support when they experience family violence in Australia, which have been intensified by COVID-19

Source: [Monash University 'Family violence and temporary visa holders during COVID-19' 2020](#)

Social discrimination and systemic and structural barriers can make it very difficult for people to get the help they need. Migrant and refugee women encounter increased barriers to support, partly due to visa-based eligibility for services, language barriers and limited knowledge of the service system.

[Family, domestic and sexual violence - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

[\(aihw.gov.au\)](http://aihw.gov.au)

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children

Source: [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Specialist homelessness services annual report](#)

Family and domestic violence is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia (FaHCSIA 2008). Those who have experienced family and domestic violence made up 41 per cent of Specialist Homelessness Services clients in 2019–20.

Family violence can disadvantage a person's income, employment, education, housing security and general participation in social and civic life ([Our Watch, VicHealth and PwC, 2015](#)).

Children growing up in environments where family violence occurs may also be more likely to require additional support to meet milestones, regulate their emotions and behaviours, engage in education and sustain positive relationships with others. ¹ Related to this is the significant impact of family violence on the development of positive attachment and bonds between children and their parents or carers ([Katz, E., 2019](#)).

Women are at greater risk of experiencing violence from an intimate partner during pregnancy and post partum. According to the 2012 ABS' Personal Safety Survey (2013) **36%** of women over the age of 18 have experienced physical or sexual violence by a known perpetrator since the age of 15. Of those women, 22% experienced physical violence during pregnancy by a *current partner* and 25% have experienced violence during pregnancy from a *previous partner*. Of those who experienced violence during pregnancy by a previous partner, 25% indicated that the violence first occurred during pregnancy.

Another Australian study of 1,507 first time mothers found that 29% of mothers experienced intimate partner violence before their child turned four (Gartland, Woolhouse, Mensah, Hegarty, Hiscock, & Brown (2014).

According to a report from KPMG, the cost of family violence in Victoria was estimated to be \$5.3 billion in 2015–16.

Activity

Consider the following-

- What statistic surprised you most?
- What other questions do you have about violence?

How to recognize family violence

The following are behaviors that a perpetrator may exhibit towards someone experiencing family violence:

- Makes the victim feel uncomfortable or afraid
- Often puts the victim down, humiliates them, or makes them feel worthless
- Constantly checks up on what the victim is doing or where they are going
- Tries to stop the victim from seeing their own friends or family
- Makes the victim feel afraid to disagree or say 'no' to them
- Constantly accuses the victim of flirting with others when this isn't true
- Tells the victim how the household finances should be spent, or stops them having any money for themselves
- Stops the victim from receiving medical help
- Scares or hurts the victim by being violent (for example, hitting, choking, smashing things, locking them in, driving dangerously to frighten them)
- Pressures or forces the victim to do sexual things that they don't want to do
- Threatens to hurt the victim, or to kill themselves, if the victim says they want to end the relationship
- Interferes with the victim's online access or access to the phone
- Hurts children (and/or pets) or performs violent actions in front of children

Sometimes it is difficult to pinpoint specific behaviors as perpetrators can be deceptive, especially to those outside the relationship. Their behaviors however may make a victim feel any of the following:

- fearful or scared
- anxious
- sick
- numb
- like they have no confidence
- as if they are "crazy"
- so stressed that they have trouble sleeping because of these feelings
- physical symptoms, such as tense muscles or a racing heart beat because of these feelings
- unable to concentrate because of these feelings

Signs that you might see in someone who may be experiencing family violence in an intimate partner relationship include:

- they are afraid of or anxious to please their partner
- their partner often orders them about or makes all the decisions
- they don't have access to an ATM card or they have a financial allowance
- they seem anxious, depressed, avoid eye contact or have lost confidence
- they have physical injuries, often with unlikely explanations
- they regularly cancel appointments
- they get constant calls or texts from a current or ex-partner

<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/domestic-violence/about/how-to-recognise-dv>

<https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/identifying-family-violence/>

Activity

Consider the following scenarios and think about if this would be family violence or not:

- A couple argue constantly.
- A woman tells you her husband won't let her have access to money as she is too stupid to manage it.
- A woman tells you she's "too afraid to think" what would happen if her husband got home and the house was not clean.
- A man tells you he needs to confirm with his wife before committing to an event.
- A child says he feels afraid when his parents argue as his father sometimes punches walls, but he has never hit him or his mother.
- A woman tells you her husband comes to doctor's appointments with her because she gets anxious otherwise.
- A man says he has to tell his wife where he is at all time and she monitors his whereabouts via his mobile phone.

How can you help?

When you are concerned about someone experiencing family violence there are three things you can do to help:

- ask them if they are safe at home
- listen
- safety plan.

Asking someone if they feel unsafe

Asking someone if they are experiencing family violence is difficult even for trained professionals. It is however very powerful to name behaviours and what you are seeing to someone experiencing family violence. It can empower someone who has been experiencing family violence and other emotional abuse by showing them that other people can see what is happening.

It might be helpful to prepare questions or phrases that mention the specific behaviour you have seen, such as:

“I can understand this might be difficult for you to talk about. I am concerned about you and would like to help.”

“You seem to be a bit anxious about responding to your partner’s texts straight away. Is everything okay at home?”

“When you said earlier that your partner lashes out at you, I’m wondering if you can tell me what that means?”

It is important to be non-judgmental and supportive. The most helpful thing you can do is let the person know you are there to support them.

The four most important things you can do are:

- Listen without interruption or judgement.
- Reflect back that the violence is not their fault and it’s never justifiable.
- Believe and validate their experiences.
- Provide information that will support the target of family violence to make their own choices (as much as possible) in what happens next.

Let them know about specialist family violence services that can offer professional support.

If they are not ready to talk – that’s okay. Tell them you are here for them when they are ready.

If you want more support, you can contact any of these services:

Intouch- Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence- 1800 755 988

1800 Respect -1800 737 732

Safe Steps - 1800 015 188

Men’s referral Service - 1300 766 491

You can ask for an interpreter- at no cost to you.

Safety planning

Ending an abusive relationship can be a very risky or dangerous time. Staying open, available and supportive is key to helping individuals on their journey to safety. Safety planning isn’t necessarily a plan to leave, it can include how to increase safety while remaining in the home, and discussing when the risk will be high enough to leave.

Some things to consider:

- Let a trusted family member, friend, co-worker or neighbour know the situation.
- Develop a plan for when you need help like code words you can text if you're in trouble or a visual signal like a porch light [on equals no danger, off equals trouble].
- If you are injured, go to a doctor or an emergency room and report what happened to you.
Ask that they document your visit.
- Keep a journal of all violent incidents, noting dates, events and threats made- leave this with someone outside the home
- Plan with your children and identify a safe place for them. Reassure them that their job is to stay safe, not to protect you.
- If violence escalates stay away from the kitchen and bathroom as these are risky areas.
- Ask friends or family members to hold some cash for you and copies (or originals if possible) of important documents such as passports, birth certificates, Medicare card etc.)

It is also important to remember your role as a support person. There are professionals as outlined below who can provide intensive support to leave a violent relationship.

Activity

Consider the following-

- What are some ways a victim could be supported in a congregational context?

Should we address the perpetrator?

As people of faith, we recognise there is always space for empathy, forgiveness and self-improvement. We do however need to act wisely and ensure that any desire to change is genuine while not putting anyone else at risk.

It is important we identify and name any violent behaviour we see. This can be as simple as letting someone know sexist jokes aren't funny or acceptable in your congregation. Other examples could be letting someone know that it is family violence/unacceptable if they make comments such as "I'd never let my wife do X" or "you need to put her in her place," etc. Allowing this behaviour to continue and agreeing with statements or jokes tells a perpetrator that their behaviour is acceptable.

Relationship counselling is never recommended while there is ongoing violence of any sort. There is a difference between a dysfunctional relationship and someone's choice to use violence to control their partner.

Always ensure it is safe to discuss violent behaviours with a perpetrator. When discussing violence with a perpetrator it is important to be clear and direct about what behaviours are unacceptable. Do not allow space for blaming the victim. We need to ensure we are not being used by the perpetrator to continue the abuse even if it seems innocent; such as by passing on messages or by giving information about what the victim has said, where they are or what they are doing.

Activity

Consider the following-

- What are some difficulties of pastorally caring for both the victim and the perpetrator within a congregation?
- How would you make a congregation safe for a victim while also attempting to support a perpetrator to change their behaviour?
- What would you do if it became clear the perpetrator does not want to change their behaviour?

Referral Pathways

This list of services is to support those experiencing and leaving family violence, including support for perpetrators to change their behaviors, for people fleeing family violence and for children. Every state and often local government area is different with what supports are offered, who is eligible and how long the wait is for service.

If it is an emergency call 000.

If you have concerns about the safety of a child refer to the Responding to and Reporting Child Abuse Policy.

Vic:

<https://www.dvrcv.org.au/support-services/victorian-services>
<https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-statewide-support-services>

Tasmania:

<https://www.safeathome.tas.gov.au/services/counselling>
<https://www.dvrcv.org.au/talk-someone/services-other-states/tas>

NSW:

<https://www.safensw.org.au/help>
<https://www.dvrcv.org.au/talk-someone/services-other-states/nsw>

Activity

Consider the following-

- Do you know what services are available in your area?
- How would you find them?

If you are feeling unsure about anything or want to be able to speak to someone about a situation, contact the Culture of Safety Unit.

Self-Care

These are difficult conversations to have and can bring up some challenging emotions for ourselves. It is important to always make sure we are looking after ourselves.

Your self-care plan should be as unique as you!

Some areas to consider include:

Physical – things that keep us physically fit and well

Psychological – things that foster creativity and self-awareness

Social- ways to engage and gain support from others

Moral- things that give you purpose in the world

Spiritual – things that help your soul, like prayer and meditation.

Activity

- How do you look after yourself?
- Who can you speak to if you have had a difficult or traumatic conversation?

