

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: Plans for Increased Collaboration

Violence as a whole has been a growing problem in Canadian communities, and it is seen as especially damaging when it occurs within the homes. A large amount of research and work has been designed to aid in this field, however, there appears to be little coordination between the different facets of violence prevention. In particular two areas, child protection and domestic violence advocates have had difficulty in communication and interaction despite their commonalities. This is due in part to the ways in which these areas developed such as the initial grass roots campaigns, and the legislation that governs them today. As each area has developed and become specialized there has been an increasing fracturing between these two fields.

The author of this paper is working from the perspective of experience within the domestic violence and shelter systems. As a result, this author has been able to witness several examples of conflict and negative feelings that have been placed on child protection work. This paper will examine the links between child abuse and domestic violence and demonstrate the need for further coordination of services between these two fields. Also, an overview of some of the conflicting viewpoints will be examined with an attempt to offer some suggestions for how these viewpoints can collaborate to help create a violence free society.

While it has been stated that these two groups do not often work together, there is a large body of research that demonstrates the commonalities that exist between the two types of violence. For example, statistics as high as 70% have been reported related to the number of abused women in shelters who report that some form of child abuse had also been occurring within the home. (McKay, 1994) This is a staggering number, and

one that can most likely be enlarged when women's fears regarding Children's Aid Societies are examined. This fear means that it is likely that several women do not report child abuse for fear of having their children apprehended. Also, with the new legislation stating that witnessing domestic violence is a form of child abuse, the numbers of children at risk in these situations is very high. It has also been found that domestic violence is present in the most dangerous cases of child abuse up to 70% of the time, such as those including critical injury or death of the child. (Fleck-Henderson, 2000) Also, one disturbing statistic shows that women who have been abused by their partners are at least eight times more likely to abuse their children than those women who have not been abused. (Mills et al, 2000) These statistics demonstrate the dangerous link that exists between domestic violence and child abuse cases.

With such an apparent connection between these problems it can be stated that there is a need for professionals working in both fields to have an understanding of the characteristics of both problems and how they affect one another. For example, it would be beneficial for child protection workers to recognize a mother's fear to fully disclose even her own abuse due to the power imbalances that exist between worker and mother. Also, it is equally important for domestic violence advocates to further examine the children coming into shelter system and to have more thorough assessments, which examine areas of potential abuse when interviewing clients entering the shelter.

Examples such as those listed above have been difficult in the past due to several value conflicts that exist within these two groups. The first main difference between them is the focus of their work. Domestic violence advocates work on behalf of the mother and they aim to provide women choice and freedom in making decisions

regarding their own safety. On the other hand child welfare providers work on behalf of the child with the aim to ensure the child's safety, and at times this requires the mothers to be in services involuntarily. (McKay, 1994) The difference that exists between the definition of client and the forms of interventions used, have created some conflicts in services and have made it difficult for full collaboration in the past.

It has been found that domestic violence advocates have been hesitant to provide full disclosure regarding the potential for child abuse by their clients, and as a result have been accused of potentially damaging child welfare investigations. (McKay, 1994) This has most likely developed out of the belief that exists in domestic violence work that apprehension of children, due to failure to protect, is blaming the mother for her abuse. (Fleck-Henderson, 2000) For example women who do not leave the home where abuse is occurring are seen by child welfare workers as putting their children at risk. Domestic violence experts would state that there are many factors at work including intimidation and control by the male partners that should be examined more thoroughly, and as a result there has been a continual tension between these two groups. It is also important to note that often the women and children are more at risk when they decide to leave the home. (Fleck-Henderson, 2000) This is an important factor for child welfare workers to have knowledge about. These examples point to an area where collaboration of a shared knowledge base would be beneficial and could help to increase children's safety.

Another area where fracturing has occurred in the past is the lack of knowledge that exists surrounding common characteristics of each form of violence that would be beneficial for both groups to share. For example, child welfare workers are not fully trained on the ability to assess for the presence of domestic violence. This is a crucial

skill to learn, due to the increased likelihood for a child death to occur in a home where domestic violence occurs. (Fleck-Henderson, 2000) Specifically, the main goal that exists, in aiming for collaboration between these two systems, is the issue of maintaining child safety foremost while still acknowledging the impact on women who have been abused themselves, and not re-victimizing them. There is a need to help to empower women in this situation in order to help increase their cooperation in investigations, and increase safety within their home for everyone involved. Mother's can be vital resources and witnesses in child welfare work and it would increase child safety if women felt confident to share their experiences truthfully. With this goal in mind several ideas for interventions will be discussed in further detail in the remainder of the paper.

In order for any type of collaboration to be reached it is essential that both groups gain some training regarding the important factors that affect them. For example, domestic violence advocates need to be informed of the impacts of domestic violence on children. A common belief in domestic violence work is that if the mother is free from abuse then her children will be safe as well, but little emphasis has been placed on the long-term damage that can exist indefinitely for the children who have witnessed the abuse. It has been found that children who have witnessed abuse in their homes are more likely to have insecure attachments, and are more likely to be aggressive, as well as experience many other emotional, psychological and physical effects. (Markward, 1997) This author would argue that it is essential for domestic violence advocates to gain knowledge about the effects on all members of the family, especially those at most risk for internalizing damaging beliefs and behaviours.

One way in which this knowledge can be gained is through the use of psycho educational groups focused on the impact of witnessing abuse. Nova Vita, a women's shelter in Brantford, has been progressive on this front by broadening their treatment focus to include the impact on children. The group that is offered is co-led by domestic violence experts, child welfare workers and children's mental health workers who share their specialized knowledge with each other, and with groups of mothers, in order to spread awareness, and to aid in the healing of children. This intervention is based on the core belief that all of the people in these groups are invested in seeing the children become healed, and to break the cycle of violence that has been found to exist in some families. This common goal breaks down any conflicting philosophies and enables the different groups to collaborate effectively.

Increased knowledge is also necessary in the area of approaching mothers and asking for their cooperation. As it currently stands there is a fear that women will lose their children due to the power that the Children's Aid Society holds. This author holds the belief that much of the fear of power could be diminished if the communication during an investigation was altered in some ways. For example, it would be beneficial if social workers in child protection were trained in the use of anti-oppressive practice, and used it within their work. In particular the concept of examining one's own social location and recognizing the power that they hold is very effective in helping to diminish power differentials. (Swan, 2002) This can be demonstrated to clients by the use of statements such as "I understand that it must be difficult to have to share this information with someone you hardly know. It must feel very intimidating for me to come into your home. I recognize this and I want to make this as easy as possible, but I also want to

ensure that what needs to be done is completed. You know more about your situation than anyone else, and you will be a tremendous help. Do you think that we could work together to ensure that your daughter is kept safe?" An interaction such as this could be more effective in investigations rather than simply stating, "You need to answer these questions for me."

The former statement suggests that the worker is acknowledging the uncomfortable feelings that probably exist while still acknowledging the severity of the situation. Also the worker is helping to empower the woman by pointing out her strengths and potential assistance to the investigation. By taking time to work on communication that is both respectful and honest, the child protection worker could increase the likelihood of women's full cooperation. This would also help to improve the likelihood of a child's continued safety. In this way, both the goals of domestic violence workers and child protection workers are met in a positive way that helps both mothers and their children.

Another effective technique for improving collaboration is to have these two groups share working space and common clients. One example of this is also demonstrated at Nova Vita, where two Children's Aid Workers have offices within the shelter, and as a result have a unique viewpoint of several of their clients. This type of set up can be quite beneficial because the two groups of workers are closely connected, and can easily case conference with one another regarding common clients, and in doing so will be able to share their unique expertise on the situation. Also, this allows the child protection workers to gain rapport with the women that they would not often be able to achieve in the early stages of typical investigation situations. The women themselves

may also feel more comfortable with a worker who has been a somewhat constant contact in their lives since the time they first enter the shelter. Rather than experiencing several workers, one constant worker who is often available to them by easy access, could be seen as a benefit.

These options for various forms of collaboration are an attempt to offer ways in which the often conflicted groups of domestic violence workers and child protection workers can work together to better help clients and keep children safe. It has been widely shown that there is an important link between domestic violence and child abuse, and this demonstrates the need for increased collaboration between the often fragmented systems. Through the use of increased knowledge and specific collaborations in groups and work space both groups can gain vital expertise from one another. Although these groups will always have differences due to their backgrounds and current governing legislation it is important to ensure that any possible changes that would help to aid in creating a violence free society in general is the focus.

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