

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FAMILY

The terms of reference for this Inquiry require the Committee to consider a number of factors that may contribute to youth violence, including family breakdown. The Committee believes that the earliest years of a child's life are the most formative and that family factors are crucial during this time, as well as in later stages of development.

This chapter examines the relationship between a range of factors associated with a young person's family environment and his or her behaviour. The links between youth violence and family violence; child abuse; discipline and physical punishment; family breakdown; and other family pressures are examined by considering available research evidence. A range of family support programs is also discussed.

4.1 FAMILY VIOLENCE

The National Committee on Violence (1990:103) concluded that one of the most important contributing factors to violence in society is the experience of violent behaviours in the immediate family as a child grows up.

Family violence can impact on young people in a number of ways. Violent behaviour by parents can provide inappropriate role modelling:

Where students have seen very violent behaviour modelled at home, and they from a very young age see people responding quickly in stressful periods with violence, that tends to be the way they learn to behave themselves, rather than perhaps using more appropriate strategies (Davidson Briefing, 17.09.93).

A three-year study of more than 6,000 Victorian police reports of domestic violence found that thousands of young people witness violent domestic disputes with untold psychological results. The section of the study which examined 3,003 reports from 1989-1990 found that 79% of disputes involving a weapon and 65% of disputes involving a firearm were reported from households with children under five years (Wearing, 1992:257). Witnessing spousal violence could contribute to violence against women partners being viewed as appropriate behaviour.

Children may also be more at risk of violence in families characterised by spousal conflict. In examining 982 records of initial inquiries to one Clerk of Courts, it was found that children were involved in 217 cases. Children were present during the incident in 45% of these cases; threatened in 14% of cases; and assaulted, molested, or abused in 25% of these disputes (Wearing, 1992:361).

In a review of research studies on the effects of family violence, Fantasia and Linqvist (1989) found a 129% greater chance of child maltreatment in a home where conjugal violence was present. They also theorised that the effects of violence on children as 'unintended victims' were likely to persist into adulthood and perpetuate inter-generational violence.

Evidence to the Committee suggests that violence within the family can result in behavioural problems in young people. The submission from Boys' Town suggested that the households of their clients are often characterised by a higher proportion of physical and sexual abuse, domestic conflict and confrontation than boys at mainstream schools. Approximately 36% of the households of Boys' Town clients had been characterised by the physical abuse of the adult female in the household. Over 50% of all boys in the program had been abusive at school or to a member of the public (Submission 31).

The Committee has also heard evidence that suggests young violent offenders appearing before the courts

have either experienced violence, probably in their own family, or have witnessed violence, again in their own family or community. They are people who do not think much of themselves and for that reason do not care much about what happens to other people (Blackmore Evidence, 28.07.94).

The effect of this violence can also lead to the victimisation of peers at school. As discussed in Section 3.7, research suggests that bullies are likely to come from family backgrounds characterised by violence. The Committee heard that these young people:

May feel powerless against their parents, whereas if there is a "victim" in the school they will take that frustration, that pain, that anger out on that "victim" (Seed Evidence, 10.02.94).

There may, however, also be a significant incidence of young people perpetrating violence against family members. The Committee heard evidence regarding this issue from a clinical psychologist and Manager of the Adolescent Family Therapy and Mediation Service, Resources for Adolescents and Parents (RAPS). RAPS was established by the federal Attorney-General through Relationships Australia to serve young people between the ages of 10 and 24 years who are at risk of being homeless, or whose families are likely to break down.

From 1992 to 1994 the service had seen 994 clients, and turned away significantly more than this number as a result of limited resources. Of the 994 cases, 46% of these young people had been physically, emotionally and verbally violent to a parent, usually their mother. An additional 31% were emotionally and verbally abusive without being physically violent. This form of abuse was not the primary problem identified in the referral to RAPS, and only became evident after consultations commenced. It was suggested to the Committee that over 70% per cent of those young people have come from families where there has been spousal violence, and a lack of respect for the wife and mother:

In all the situations of violence of young people there has been a clear demonstration that the young person, and often the male care-giver, do not believe that the woman is a good enough parent, nor can she control young people (Condonis Evidence, 29.05.94).

Gelles and Cornell (1987, cited in Blumel *et al*, 1993:135) have also identified a correlation between domestic violence and violence perpetrated by young people against their parents. They found mothers were more likely to be abused by their children if they were also abused by their spouse. They concluded that violence as a means of resolving conflict may produce

higher rates of all forms of family violence, particularly violence by young people directed to their mothers.

The Committee heard that the extent of abuse of parents by their children is largely hidden by

parents who, when asked whether their child is violent, will usually deny it they feel a huge amount of shame and guilt that they have somehow damaged their child and have created somebody who is violent (Condonis Evidence, 29.08.94).

Improved training for counsellors, psychiatrists and social workers in recognising youth violence within the family and young people who are sexually abusive was recommended to address this issue. The Committee supports this approach, and recommends that appropriate advice and assistance be extended to those working with families experiencing violence.

It was also suggested that the use of apprehended violence orders in cases of youth violence in the family may be beneficial:

in about 96% of [cases] where the orders were either discussed or taken out, the physical violence stopped (Condonis Evidence, 29.08.94).

The importance of support and counselling for young people who experience family violence was also stressed to the Committee:

In my experience, all young people who have faced violence in their childhood will at some stage lash out [but] it only takes one person to recognise the trauma that young person has faced, and say to that young person "I understand" for that young person to be able to deal with that pain (Brown Evidence 25.10.93).

It was suggested to the Committee that while issues such as domestic violence are increasingly being recognised, discussed and condemned, this attitude is yet to flow down through all levels of society. The President of the NSW Teachers' Federation suggested that there may be a conflict between the influences of parents and teachers on a child's behaviour. Different messages may be given on issues such as the acceptability of sexual harassment, and it was suggested that in these situations the influence of parents will be more powerful (Cross Evidence, 11.10.93).

A pilot study of 38 mothers and 71 children in western Sydney has found, however, that schools can be havens for children who experience domestic violence and distract them from their unhappy home life (Fry, 1994:8).

Despite their disrupted home lives, the children who experienced domestic violence often achieved positive results at school and were able to meet the school's expectations, challenging a conventional view that the children of violent households will become poor students and school drop-outs.

Since teachers have a mandatory responsibility to report the abuse of children, they require education to assist them in this responsibility. The Committee is aware that there were formerly officers in the Department of Education appointed on a regional basis to educate

teachers to better recognise abuse and meet their reporting obligations. The Committee believes this need continues and that specialist officers are required to provide this education and training.

Schools can also play a role in reducing the inter-generational cycle of violence. The Department of School Education's anti-violence kit, *Resources for Teaching Against Violence*, includes a section outlining resources for teaching on non-violent relationships.

In Victoria, four specially trained young people were employed through funding from the Department of Community Services from 1991 to 1994 to educate other teenagers about how to stop family violence. The peer education project was run by the organisation, Young People in Need, and was the first of its kind in Australia. Over 2,000 young people from schools, refuges and youth clubs took part in the workshops which were designed with the help of the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, the Community Council Against Violence, the Victorian Youth Advocacy Network and Victoria Police. Of 170 workshop participants completing evaluations in April 1994, 156 young people indicated that they felt it was better having young people give information than adults. The Committee recognises that education on family violence may be an important violence prevention strategy, and believes the Juvenile Crime Prevention Unit in the Attorney-General's Department should review such peer education projects in the area of family violence.

The Committee recognises the importance of responsible and effective parenting. One submission to the Committee suggested that parents should undertake a "commitment of awareness" at a child's birth regarding the destructive quality of violence and abuse (Submission 24). The Committee believes families should be provided with adequate support, and programs are discussed in Section 4.6.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the Ministers for Community Services and Health develop an awareness campaign and training strategies to assist those working with families where violence by young people towards parents or other family members is occurring.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That the Minister for Education appoint sufficient specialist officers to ensure school counsellors and teachers are appropriately trained to recognise and provide support to children experiencing violence in their homes and meet their mandatory reporting obligations.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That the Attorney General direct the Juvenile Crime Prevention Unit to review peer education projects that address family violence, such as the Victorian Young People in Need project, and consider supporting the development of a New South Wales equivalent.

4.2 CHILD ABUSE

Of all Australians, infants up to twelve months are the age group at greatest risk of violent death (National Committee on Violence, 1990:41). During the course of this Inquiry, several incidents of violence resulting in the deaths of young children and babies at the hands of "care-givers" came to the attention of the public. While individual cases and statistical data illustrate the extreme physical effects of child abuse, evidence suggests that the physical and sexual abuse of young people can also produce psychological effects which may lead to later violence.

The Committee heard that 85% of abuse of children occurs within the family. In New South Wales, confirmed reports of physical abuse have increased in the past five years by 67%, following the introduction of the *Children's (Care and Protection) Act* in 1987 to provide for the reporting of cases of child abuse. The Committee was informed that physical abuse tends to increase dramatically for children aged 12 to 15 years, due to adolescent-parent conflict (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

One housing worker suggested to the Committee that, from her experience,

in nearly every instance of children committing serious crime, they have been victims of abuse themselves — abuse that has either been proven in court or has been expressed to us and we believe that their backgrounds have been violent (Clay Evidence, 29.04.94).

The backgrounds of students attending alternative education facilities visited by the Committee reveal significant levels of abuse. Approximately 32% of boys referred to the Boys' Town program in 1991-1993 had themselves been physically abused, and 10% sexually abused (Submission 31). A 1992 survey of students at Campbell House School for Special Purposes (SSP) suggested that 28% of boys and 22% of girls had been physically abused. Approximately 67% of girls and 10% of boys had been sexually abused. Of the total student population, 64% of students had a history of violent behaviour. The Social Issues Committee's report on juvenile justice reports that over 90% of girls in juvenile justice institutions have been sexually abused (Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1992:139).

A range of other studies also suggest a relationship between abuse and violent behaviour. In a study of 14 juveniles condemned to death in the United States, it was found that twelve had been brutally physically abused, and five had been sexually abused (Lewis *et al.*, 1988:584). A study of the family characteristics of 15 Death Row inmates in the United States found documented extraordinary physical and/or child sexual abuse in 13 cases, murderous behaviours of parents toward children in 8 cases and hostility and neglect throughout childhood and adulthood (Feldman *et al.*, 1986).

Tartar and associates (1984, cited in Feldman *et al.*, 1986:345) and Reidy (1977, cited in Feldman *et al.*, 1986:345) found violent behaviours to be more prevalent in abused children than in nonabused children. **What such research indicates is that the protection of children from abuse is of fundamental importance in preventing violence.**

This is not to say, however, that child abuse will inevitably lead to later violent behaviour or abuse. Gutierrez and Reich (1981, cited in Feldman *et al.*, 1986:345) and Rolston (1971, cited in Feldman *et al.*, 1986:345) reported that withdrawal, placid behaviour, truancy, and running away were often characteristic of abused children.

The Committee recognises that not all children who have been abused will go on to abuse others. However, it appears the majority of those who abuse others have themselves been abused, and this learned behaviour must be addressed.

In NSW, the seriousness of child abuse and the importance of intervention has increasingly been placed on the public agenda. As previously mentioned, the reporting of child abuse has been mandatory for groups of professionals since 1987. For the last five years, the NSW Police Service and Department of Community Services have participated in the annual Operation Paradox, which encourages people with information on child abuse to contact authorities. A record 900 calls were received during Operation Paradox in 1994.

Some members of the Committee have concerns regarding the efficacy of focussing on short-term campaigns encouraging notifications in isolation without adequate resources to follow up reported cases and devote attention to prevention. While the Committee believes the Government should maintain a commitment to promoting the notification of child abuse by on-going initiatives throughout the year, including short-term campaigns, it is also important to ensure a commitment to a broad on-going response to child abuse. The Committee believes that adequate resources must be allocated to investigating allegations that result from publicity campaigns, and to ensuring that appropriate action is taken. The response of the Department of Community Services in preventing and addressing child abuse is further discussed in Chapter 13.

The problems associated with the removal of children following the notification of child abuse have also been raised in evidence:

[These children] believe that those who, without a doubt are supposed to love them unconditionally, such as their parents and family, have let them down. Very often we see kids who are victims of abuse who are taken out of their homes they end up doing a lot of things which are unacceptable [and] end up as victims of a society that is not looking after them really well (Clay Evidence, 29.04.94).

These issues can be exacerbated by the on-going problems associated with homelessness. The Committee believes that appropriate counselling and support for children taken into care is essential.

The NSW Child Protection Council has recently released a report, "Culture: No Excuse" which suggests that cultural isolation, language barriers and ignorance of the law contribute to the incidence of child abuse in ethnic communities. The report calls for the collection of statistical data from which to assess community needs (NSW Child Protection Council, 1994:9).

One response to the physical abuse of babies has been an advertising campaign, funded under the Federal Government's national child abuse strategy, developed to warn parents and child carers of the dangers of shaking babies. The campaign won an Australian Violence Prevention Award in 1994. The Committee endorses this approach and believes such campaigns should continue to be supported and promoted by the NSW Government.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that sufficient resources are provided for adequate investigation and follow-up of reports of child abuse received in response to campaigns.

4.3 DISCIPLINE AND PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

Research conducted by Dr Alan Russell suggests parents who take a positive approach to child-rearing, rather than a negative approach concentrating on discipline, are likely to bring up better-behaved children. Dr Russell studied 60 Australian families with children aged 6 or 7, and found girls respond to affection from their parents while boys are less likely to misbehave if parents become involved in their interests (Flinders Journal, 1994).

A discussion paper, *Legal and Social Aspects of the Physical Punishment of Children* was recently commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health under the auspices of the National Child Protection Council. The report found that

- the majority opinion in child-rearing advice appears to be quite firmly against the use of physical punishment (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995:13).
 - studies have demonstrated the children of parents who rely on physical punishment are less likely to resist temptation without external constraints; are less willing to confess and accept responsibility; and are more likely to base their judgements on fear of detection and punishment rather than on internalised standards of morality (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995:85).
 - physical punishment (especially frequent and severe) tends to be related to:
 - children being rated as more aggressive by their peers
 - children being less popular with their peers
 - children being more physically and verbally aggressive with their parents and siblings
 - higher delinquency rates in schools
 - the probability of being either a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence
 - the likelihood of having a criminal record (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995:89).
 - physical punishment may reinforce unwanted behaviours since negative attention is better than none; the punishment itself may bring status; it encourages children to avoid the punisher; and enhances the value of forbidden fruits (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995:92).
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However, the discussion paper found that physical punishment is still widely accepted and used in Australia and in other similar countries, although there is some evidence that its acceptance is declining (Cashmore and de Haas, 1995:75).

Several submissions from members of the public to this Inquiry suggest that a lack of parental discipline contributes to youth violence. One member of the public claimed children feel insecure without parental discipline and example, and become resentful towards society (Submission 4).

The Committee heard that many parents of non-English speaking backgrounds consulted by the Youth Advisory Council felt that if they do not use some form of physical punishment or a severe disciplinary approach, children will not listen to or respect their parents (Ghaleb Evidence, 10.02.94).

However, the Committee also heard that the condoning of physical disciplining of children by parents can lead to young people accepting high levels of brutality as inevitable:

A larger number of young people, particularly young boys, feel it is acceptable that their fathers beat them (Brown Evidence 25.10.93).

Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway have all outlawed the physical punishment of children. In New South Wales, the common law defence of lawful correction applies to the physical punishment of children.

The federal discussion paper concludes that change needs to happen at both the social and individual levels:

At the societal level, a starting point would be to abandon or modify the law that condones 'reasonable chastisement' and replace it with such positive principles of care for children, like those found in Scandinavian law (Cashmore & de Haas, 1995:123).

However, the discussion paper argues that legal change must be preceded by public debate and accompanied by an education campaign to inform the public of the reasons for the change and to educate them about appropriate alternatives to physical punishment (Cashmore & de Haas, 1995:130).

In response to the Commonwealth discussion paper, the NSW Minister for Community Services has also called for a frank public debate on the implications of smacking and other forms of physical punishment, and noted the report encourages the community to discuss positive ways of disciplining and guiding children. He suggested that Australian social attitudes were moving away from the systematic physical disciplining of children such as the use of canes and belts common in previous generations. The Minister said he believed that children needed the same legal protection as adults in relation to physical assault, particularly where disciplinary action had resulted in deaths or serious injury to children (Minister for Community Services, 1995).

The report of the National Committee on Violence states:

The Committee strongly condemns the use of physical violence in disciplining children. The long-term aim should be to abolish such practices. In the

interim, this objective is best achieved by education (National Committee on Violence, 1990:180).

The Committee supports the National Committee on Violence in concluding that education in non-violent disciplinary methods is preferable to any legislative change. The issue of corporal punishment in schools is addressed in Section 8.3.5.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That the Minister for Community Services develop and implement community education campaigns to discourage the physical punishment of children and provide information about non-violent disciplinary methods.

4.4 FAMILY PRESSURES

The Committee has heard that it is not only the impact of family violence which can place strains on families and young people. Unemployment and high school retention rates also mean that families have the responsibility of looking after children for a longer period of time:

parents who have three or four children continuing at school until an older age have to work for longer, may have to bite into their superannuation and live in a household with three or four big, burly adolescents or young adults—quite often plus their partners—and their friends. Enormous strains are placed on families (Bessant Evidence, 28.07.94).

The unrealistic expectations and pressures parents may place on young people to perform and be achievers may also have damaging effects. One young person told the Committee that:

Most of my friends who are still offending come from very well-off families and their parents expect them to do well and go on to be doctors and lawyers They don't perform too well in school so they have a great deal of frustration, and they take that frustration out on their parents and the community (Ullrich Evidence, 28.07.94).

Differential treatment of children within the family based on different levels of academic achievement can also foster frustration and low self-esteem:

maybe you have got one [child] that doesn't get the As, gets the Cs and the Ds, and they are put down on At least with physical abuse the bruises and the pain go away in a couple of days. Mental abuse takes years to get over (Williams Evidence, 28.07.94).

Adverse social and economic pressures on parents may also lead to inadequate support for children. This is not to suggest, however, that disadvantaged families will necessarily be dysfunctional or that all advantaged families will offer a safe and supportive environment for young people.

Appropriate parental supervision may be particularly relevant to certain stages of childhood and adolescent development.

A study of the medical histories of 109 delinquents and 109 non-delinquent children in the United States revealed that the delinquent group had significantly more hospital contacts and accidents prior to the age of four years, and between the ages of 14 and 16 years. Increased motor capacities and heightened impulses, accompanied by as yet undeveloped inner behavioural controls for these new traits, are characteristic of both age periods. The researchers contend that inadequate parental support or protection during these times can result in accident and injuries as a consequence of impulsive behaviour, and may contribute to delinquency (Lewis and Shanok, 1977).

It was suggested to the Committee that a number of the families of young people who are violent outside the home are dual earner families, with both parents working to sustain the family economically, and a resultant lack of parental supervision:

A lot of these kids range around doing what they want; they usually get up to a lot of mischief (Condonis Evidence, 29.08.94).

Labour Force Statistics suggest that in families with 15 to 24 year old dependants, both spouses were employed in 53% of cases. In families with dependants in both this age group and younger, both spouses were employed in 62.5% of cases (Hartley and Wolcott, 1994:35).

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions on the effect of parents' work commitments on children. The National Research Council of the US National Academy of Sciences has reviewed available evidence of the effects on children of having mothers who work. They concluded that:

- existing research has not demonstrated that mothers' employment per se has consistent direct effects, either positive or negative, on children's development and educational outcomes;
- there are few differences in the pattern of children's daily activities - the places they go, and the people they meet - that can be attributed directly and solely to mother's employment, except that employed mothers and their children spend less time together (but not necessarily less time actively involved in shared activities); and
- children's development of peer relationships, especially friendships is largely unaffected by mother's work-force participation per se (Hayes and Kamerman, 1983, cited in Burns and Goodnow, 1985:92).

A recent NSW Government phone-in has found that increasing work pressures and the need to spend more time at the office are damaging family life. Almost 70% of the 700 people who called a hotline set up by the Minister for the Status of Women reported work pressures prevented them spending sufficient time with their families (NSW Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women, 1994:6).

The NSW phone-in also revealed that the pressures of juggling work and family also resulted in major conflict at home in 12% of cases, including tension between partners or marriage breakdown (NSW Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women, 1994:13).

An increasingly noted phenomenon is children arriving at school without having had breakfast. Community groups and schools have begun to step in to meet this area of need.

It is clear that economic realities dictate that both parents in many families must work to sustain themselves. Both men and women should be encouraged and supported in the careers of their choice. At the same time, families that wish to have a home-maker parent for their growing children should be facilitated in that choice, and emphasis needs to be placed on providing adequate physical and emotional nurturing in all families, working or not.

In New South Wales, moves to create more family-friendly workplaces include more flexible work arrangements in the NSW public sector, such as flexitime and job sharing. The Committee supports these initiatives and encourages their further development and extension.

The Committee believes that the issue of childcare is central to supporting families, and that a continued Commonwealth, State and community co-operation is essential for increasing childcare support. The current National Child Care Strategy will provide funding for 1,988 long day care places and 5,723 outside School Hours Care places in New South Wales. Approximately 100 childcare centres have been established in school grounds by private providers licensed by the Department of Community Services (Minister for Education, 1995c).

However, the Committee believes that there are insufficient options for the care of 12 to 15 year old children outside of school hours, and recommends that the Departments of Community Services, Sport and Recreation and Education collaborate on the expansion of programs for this age group. This is part of the Committee's key recommendation which focuses on the need to provide young people with appropriate employment and leisure activities.

Other family support initiatives are discussed in Section 4.6.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That the Minister for Industrial Relations ensure the continuation of workplace reform to provide more flexible working arrangements to support families.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That the Ministers for Community Services, Sport and Recreation and Education collaborate on the expansion of outside school hours programs specifically designed to meet the needs of 12 to 15 year olds.

4.5 FAMILY BREAKDOWN

The Committee has heard that family breakdown is a relatively common feature in the background of young offenders:

Consistent with all juvenile offenders, whether they are violent offenders or not, family break-down has a lot to do with it. More than 50 per cent of those who end up before the courts are living with only one parent for one reason or another (Blackmore Evidence, 28.07.94).

The Committee was informed that over 77% of boys in the Boys' Town program in 1991-1993 came from single parent or blended families, and half of the remaining households were characterised by marital problems.

However, a simple causal relationship cannot be stated, as family breakdown may have occurred in conjunction with, or be followed by, a range of factors that may contribute to feelings of anger and frustration, and many young people experience parental divorce without resort to crime and violence.

The breakdown of the family often results in the woman and children becoming economically disadvantaged:

It is the reality of struggling daily and being ignored by society at large that is often the catalyst for violence. That is the real issue here (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94).

Labour force statistics suggest that approximately 40% of single female parents with dependants aged 15 to 24 and younger are not employed (Hartley and Wolcott, 1994:34).

The relationship between socio-economic status and youth violence is further discussed in Chapter Five. Family breakdown may also lead to problems of inadequate parental supervision, due to the added pressures on single parents. Many young people lack the guidance needed to reinforce the differences between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94). Loneliness and boredom can also lead to frustration.

The circumstances of the family breakdown may also have a considerable effect on the child. Violence in families experiencing divorce or separation can damage the parenting ability of adults as well as the emotional well-being of the children. A report examining two U.S studies of 140 couples divorcing or separating found that 75% of the couples reported incidents of physical aggression. Separation-engendered and post-divorce trauma was found to be associated with uncharacteristic acts of violence by either or both partners in or around the separation or the post-divorce period. The report found that parent-child relationships and child adjustment were significantly impaired in families characterised by inter-parental violence, compared with families where there was high conflict of a non-violent kind (Johnston, 1994: 7).

Blended families may also lead some young people to develop feelings which may result in behavioural problems. If either parent marries again, the stepfather or stepmother may have children, and may be uninterested in their step-children. The Committee heard that subsequent feelings of rejection or exclusion may lead to violent attention-seeking behaviour (Berry

Evidence, 10.02.94). Children from step-families are over-represented in the population of homeless and unsupported young people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989:89). In other cases, however, young people can gain from extended family networks, and develop close relationships or enhanced self-reliance (Hartley and Wolcott, 1994:59).

The Committee has heard, however, that family breakdown may, in certain cases, have constructive effects:

where a woman takes her children and leaves a violent relationship, where they are supported and given assistance and the offender is brought to justice for his crime, this type of family breakdown sends a very important message to male youth — violence is not okay, it is not cool, it is a crime and it will be punished (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94).

In addition, where family breakdown removes people from an abusive and violent environment, it can have a positive effect. Studies of aggressive children living in violent families have indicated that when a family breaks down and children go to live in families which have a lower level of hostility and aggression, the children's aggression level decreases. When the new family has similar or higher levels of aggression or violence, the level of the child's aggression remains high:

It is not just the breakdown of a family that is the contributory factor. Some families have a pretty noxious influence on children (Waters Evidence, 26.04.94).

In a submission to the Committee, the Women's Action Alliance contends that a violent home environment and the lack of a stable two-parent home are linked to violent and anti-social behaviour (Submission 34).

However, it was suggested to the Committee that a review of delinquency research indicates that there is no clear, direct relationship between family breakdown and youthful offending. Where family factors do appear to have some identified relationship, it is related to the level of support provided for young people in the home (Alder Evidence, 29.07.94).

Dunlop and Burns (1988) reinforce this point in their analysis of youth in divorcing families. Their sample consisted of youth from both intact and divorcing families. The data showed no differences in self-image score between the two groups. One conclusion drawn was that, given there was a caring relationship with at least one parent, youth can cope with divorce with resilience and courage, provided they are not exposed to continuing conflict in the family (Dunlop and Burns, 1988:115).

Support for young people involved in the breakdown of their family may be a particularly important ameliorating factor for boys. It was suggested to the Committee that if, following family breakdown, young men are unable to express their feelings, hurt and needs due to masculine constraints, these legitimate emotions may be channelled into the only male emotion they consider appropriate - anger:

In this instance we believe the violent behaviour is due to the constraints of male gender roles (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94).

The Committee also heard of some cases where young people have experienced family violence and subsequent family breakdown, and after the separation of their parents have become violent to their mother. It was suggested to the Committee that when there is no longer a male figure being violent, the adolescent may

take over the father's role to the point where he or she will actually batter a woman to get her to do what he or she says (Condonis Evidence, 29.08.94).

According to the latest statistical profile of NSW, lone-parent families with dependent children represented 9% of all families in 1992 (Schwager and Farrell, 1994:6). Based on the Institute of Family Studies research, the data suggest the number of divorces involving children under 18 years of age has decreased over the past decade from 60% of all divorces in 1982 to 47% in 1992 (Schwager and Farrell, 1994:19).

The Women's Action Alliance believes the solution to youth violence lies largely in the strength of the family itself. The submission recommends an increased emphasis on the value of marriage, with pre-marriage courses, marriage education and parenting skills courses supported, including an extension of the Parents as Teachers pilot program, discussed in Section 4.6.5 below (Submission 34).

A range of family support programs is discussed in the following section.

4.6 FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The Committee has heard of a range of programs which are attempting to constructively assist families in crisis, or assist in the development of parenting skills which can have long-term social benefits. This section reviews a range of such programs.

As a key recommendation, the Committee believes that family support programs should be fully evaluated and co-ordinated and successful programs offered throughout the State, especially to parents with children in the crucial first three years of their life.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That the Minister for Community Services and Minister for Health ensure that family support programs are fully evaluated and coordinated and successful programs offered state-wide, especially to parents of children in the crucial first three years of their life.

4.6.1 Adolescent Parent Mediation Project

This project will aim to reduce the number of teenagers permanently leaving home by utilising mediation in an attempt to resolve family conflict.

The Department of Community Services awarded the tender to pilot the adolescent parent mediation service in the inner west, south-west and southern Sydney to Unifam, an agency of

the Uniting Church. This pilot will be evaluated after 12 months. Unifam will be working closely with the Department of Community Services in identifying families who may benefit from this assistance (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

4.6.2 Intensive Family-based Support Project

The Department of Community Services has also been involved in piloting an Intensive Family-based Support Project in south-western Sydney, operated by Burnside, an agency of the Uniting Church. The program is modelled on the U.S. "Homebuilders" program, which in 20 years of operation, has kept 7,000 children with their families. The project commenced in March 1994 and had achieved initially positive results, with an 80% success rate (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94). The service provides an intensive four to six weeks home based program for families in crisis where children are at the point of removal because of protective concerns or where adolescent crises are evident. The program aims to help children remain at home and not move into the substitute care system. Parents are assisted in creating a safe or more protective and caring environment for their children, and in learning coping skills. Intervention by four case-workers in the first six months of the pilot enabled 43 children to remain with their families.

A second pilot is about to commence on the far North Coast which will provide a service to Aboriginal families, with the primary focus of preventing inappropriate out-of-home placements for Aboriginal children. This pilot will initially be under the auspices of the Department of Community Services, but the Department aims to develop the service and then put it to tender. The reference group that has been established to develop the project consists mainly of Aboriginal elders (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

These pilot projects will be evaluated so that the Department can determine the value of extended or refining the programs (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

4.6.3 Parent Information and Help Line

A parent information and help line, operated by Centacare, was launched in November 1994. The information and help line provides a range of information and referral assistance on family issues, including early childhood and adolescent problems (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

4.6.4 Home Visitation Programs

The Department of Community Services and the Department of Health have jointly been involved in the development of home visitation programs. Two projects are to operate in south-western Sydney and a further project is to be run by the Benevolent Society in the eastern suburbs, inner-west and city areas. The Sutherland Family Network, a joint project of Rotary and the Sutherland Hospital and Community Health Service, operates the Rotary Home Support Service for families with new babies.

The programs aim to support families by providing volunteers to assist mothers in early parenting.

The Department of Community Services also funds a "vulnerable families" project to assist non-government agencies to target children in the zero to three year range. A 21-year research program in New Zealand identified assisting parents with children before they reached three years of age as a critical issue in preventing difficulties in adolescence (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

The Come-In Centre, a youth resource centre sponsored by the Catholic Church in Paddington, also provides a parent mentoring program. The Committee heard evidence from a young person with a history of homelessness and violence who is now a mother and is being supported by the Centre:

If I see [my son] hitting anyone I'm right on top of him, I won't stand for it. ... You have got to cultivate them and show them what is right and what is wrong and you have to teach them to respect other people's wishes to get that respect back, and you have got to show them that there are other ways besides violence (Williams Evidence, 28.07.94).

The Assistant Director of the Centre stated that:

We are trying to support the mother to learn how to parent in such a way that she does not repeat the mistakes that other people have perpetrated on her. That is the importance of putting in place substantial resources that allow you to change the culture of violence at a very early age (Leary Evidence, 28.07.94).

The Director of the Social Policy Directorate has completed an information package of all parenting projects that have been trialled. The Committee heard of a visitation program that originated in Colorado and is being trialled in Newcastle (Schwager Evidence, 29.07.94).

4.6.5 Parents as Teachers Program

The Parents as Teachers Program, which was developed in the United States, has been officially trialled in three areas of NSW since 1991. During the course of the Inquiry, the Committee heard evidence from the parenting consultants and several parents involved in the program operating from Tolland Public School in Wagga Wagga. Manly Public School and Sadleir Public School (Liverpool) have also been involved in the pilot project.

The Parents as Teachers Program is run by parenting consultants who are trained to service 80 families within the area. They offer individual and group sessions for families including home visits, and also printed information on child development issues, books and toys.

The Committee heard from parents involved in the program that benefits include improved communication, decision-making, enhanced natural abilities in areas such as self-directed play, and increased confidence. Parents internalise the values of the program, and learn to foster the inherent worth of their children (Jones and McDonald Evidence, 12.08.94). The program is a voluntary scheme.

A preliminary evaluation of the communication status of two year old children involved in the pilot projects has been conducted. The results of the evaluation suggest that significantly more

children in each of the three areas fall into the normal and above normal communication categories than would be expected of two year old children in the general population. The findings echo results from the major trial of Parents and Teachers conducted in the U.S. state of Missouri in the 1980s. However, the report concedes that:

Whether this can be attributed to participation in the Parents as Teachers program alone cannot be determined from the current statistical analysis. Further analysis looking at the impact of family, social, medical and program participation variables of communication status would be required (McAllister, 1993:9).

The findings compare favourably with previous data from three and four year old children, and further statistical analysis and evaluation at older ages, when standardised tests can be used, should help address the question of the impact of the program more fully.

In 1995 the Parents as Teachers Program was to be extended to an additional seven schools, so that there will be a program in every educational region, as follows:

- Hunter - Wallsend South Public School;
- Western NSW - Bowen Public School;
- Metropolitan West - Madang Avenue Public School;
- Metropolitan East - Punchbowl Public School;
- North West NSW - Moree Public School;
- North Coast - Ballina Public School; and
- South Coast - Warilla Public School.

This expansion of the Parents as Teachers Program will result in the program being available to over 3,000 children and their parents.

It is expected that because of the success of the program so far, parents involved in the program to date will continue their involvement in their child's education when they enrol at school (Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1994d).

4.6.6 Aboriginal Parenting

The Committee heard from the Director of the Social Policy Directorate that in investigating issues relating to young people in Bourke, Walgett and Moree, the Community Youth Support Taskforce became aware that the past treatment of Aboriginal families by various governments has left a damaging legacy:

we are dealing with parents who are only one generation removed from the missions that closed in the 1960s and deep inside many of these people is a covert belief that they are not the real parents, that government agencies are

the parents. That is the kind of parenting those people had, their parents were powerless and it was the Government that made decisions about their welfare and about what was required of them (Schwager Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Director contended that basic support systems need to be put in place, including visitation programs, and that child care centres and pre-schools should be used as education centres (Schwager Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Committee supports programs such as the Intensive Family-based Support Project discussed in Section 4.6.2 that involve the Aboriginal community in the development of family support programs. Every assistance should be given by government to support Aboriginal communities in developing specific programs for their needs. The Committee believes these programs should be evaluated to assess the efficacy and feasibility of implementation throughout New South Wales.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that pilot programs to assist Aboriginal parents are fully evaluated and successful programs are offered statewide.

4.6.7 Parenting Skills in Schools

The Committee supports an educative approach to parenting skills.

The core syllabus of the key learning area of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education in the Year 7 to 10 curriculum contains ten content strands. Within these content strands, there are 61 mandatory key ideas around which classroom units are designed in individual schools. The Interpersonal Relationships strand contains the key idea that "family and group membership can help to satisfy many personal needs". Suggested content under this key idea includes parenting skills. A number of other content strands are also relevant to the development of skills in this area, including personal awareness and personal choice. A Young Mothers in Education program is also planned for development. The Committee believes that parenting skills should be seen as an important aspect of the Personal Development, Health and Physical Education Syllabus and that schools should ensure they are duly emphasised in classroom teaching.

4.7 CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

- The Committee recognises that not all children who have been abused will go on to abuse others. However, it appears the majority of those who abuse others have themselves been abused, and this learned behaviour must be addressed.

- Although the Government should maintain a commitment to promoting the notification of child abuse by on-going initiatives throughout the year, including short-term campaigns, it is also important to ensure a commitment to a broad on-going response to **child abuse**.
- Appropriate **advice and assistance** should be extended to those working with families experiencing violence. As teachers have a mandatory responsibility to report the abuse of children, they require education to assist them in this responsibility. Appropriate counselling and support for children taken into care is also essential.
- **Adverse social and economic pressures** on parents may also lead to inadequate support for children. Emphasis needs to be placed on providing adequate physical and emotional nurturing in all families, working or not.
- The issue of **childcare** is central to supporting families, and continued Commonwealth, State and community co-operation is essential for increasing child-care support. As part of the Committee's key recommendation on employment and leisure, government agencies should collaborate on the expansion of outside school hours programs specifically designed to meet the needs of 12 to 15 year olds.
- A simple causal relationship between **family breakdown** and youth violence cannot be stated. Family breakdown may have occurred in conjunction with, or be followed by, a range of factors that may contribute to feelings of anger and frustration. Many young people experience parental divorce without resorting to crime and violence. Furthermore, where family breakdown removes people from an abusive and violent environment, it can have a positive effect.
- As a key recommendation, the Committee believes family support programs should be fully evaluated and co-ordinated, with successful programs offered state-wide, especially to parents of children in the crucial first three years of their life.
