

**INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND
ISSUES IN NSW**

Organisation: Network of Community Activities

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**Response to NSW Government Inquiry into
Domestic Violence Trends and Issues In
NSW.**

**Prepared by
Network of Community Activities
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About Network

Network of Community was established in 1974 and is the peak body for school age care provision in NSW. With 37 years experience working with services and the community, our expertise and leadership is widely recognised. Our membership base consists of nearly 70% of the Out of School Hours (OOSH) Sector in NSW and we participate on a range of state and national committees as an advocate for OOSH services, children and their families.

The objects of Network are:

- To promote and assist with the establishment, development and resourcing of “not for profit” community based activity groups throughout NSW, in particular services, that extend play, care and community engagement opportunities for children 5-14 years in their time out of school hours.
- To represent the interests of Out of School Hours Services within New South Wales and at a national level.
- To collaborate with local communities and other agencies to address the varying needs and issues of school-age children and their families, including children with a disability, children of different cultural, social, linguistic and economic backgrounds and those in isolated situations and, when ever possible, relieve disadvantage within a framework of social justice and reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- To promote the provisions of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 31 (The Child’s Right to Play) and Article 12 (The child’s right to be consulted.)
- To encourage and participate in the establishment of community education, training and other programs to help achieve the objects stated above.
- To take all necessary steps to secure funding and other resources to implement the objects of the association

Introduction

Network welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the NSW Government inquiry into Domestic Violence trends and Issues.

Our organisation commits to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and we believe that implementation of preventative strategies and early intervention in the area of domestic violence is fundamental to protecting children's rights¹.

Our response will cover the role of Out of School Hours Services (OSHC) in supporting early intervention strategies to prevent domestic violence and strategies to support families experiencing domestic violence and what considerations we believe would enhance the response in order to ensure better outcomes for children and their families.

Our submission will focus on three key issues;

- 1. Information Dissemination**
- 2. Role of Children in early intervention**
- 3. Support and education of OSHC Educators**

There are approximately 1000 Out of School Hours services in NSW. These services cater for 5-12 year old children and offer supervised play and leisure opportunities for children before school, after school and during holiday periods. These services can serve as a critical link for families between home and school and between home and the community. Staff working in OSHC services have the capacity to liaise daily with families over an extended period of time up to 7 years during a children's primary years and often more when a family has more than one child. In this regards OSHC services can often be the single most reliable

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Article 19 in UNCROC: " States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational Measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence,while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention .."

and consistent form of support available to NSW families with children 5-12 years, providing a safe context in which to discuss issues and provide opportunities for staff to identify those impacting on the wellbeing of a family.

“We had a family with four children, we worked it out that they ended up using the centre for 13 years, no wonder they keep coming back to visit we were the only stable thing in their lives for a long time.”

OSHC Service Inner Sydney.

Network believes there is a need to recognise the role that OSHC services play in nurturing families and providing support for them. In any early prevention strategy the role of OSHC services should be identified and included in interagency collaboration to ensure a holistic approach to management of Domestic violence and early intervention.

It is not uncommon for interagency collaboration to exclude the OSHC service deeming it as insignificant or having no awareness of the role the service plays in the lives of families.

Out of School Hours Services should be seen as an important community resource and a contributor in the provision of domestic violence early intervention, prevention and support.

1. Information Dissemination through Out of School Hours Services.

As a point of information dissemination to a wide range of families, children’s services in NSW can be a valuable partner. The 1000 OSHC services in NSW are second only to schools in accessing a range of families with school age children in a part time, casual or temporary basis across the 52 weeks of the year.

OSHC services have a much longer and more consistent relationship with many families than the majority of other service type organisations. The ability to use the OSHC services as opportunities to increase a families access to resources and referral support is an important one not just for immediate victims of domestic violence but for the extended network of family and friends that also use the services and can in turn increase the level of information dissemination.

Information that is targeted and appropriate for display or dissemination in OSHC services could provide an important additional source of delivery for any early intervention approach throughout children’s services aimed not only to families but to children as well.

Industry newsletters and magazines² as well as individual Service newsletters and family handbooks could provide a means of ready reference to referral services with follow up support available through literature supplied at the point of contact in the service.

Children are often overlooked in the information dissemination process and so any materials developed for families could also be revised with the goal of providing children with information appropriate to their age and development.

2. Importance of the Role of Children in Early Intervention

In targeting the approach for early intervention it should also be noted that children of school age have a high rate of comprehension and understanding and can be contributors to information as well as assist in the transfer of information³.

Children can be effective and important advocates for domestic violence prevention. For this reason there should be readily available information targeted at children that acknowledges their largely unrecognised role in prevention and early intervention of Domestic violence.

The role of children in prevention and early intervention of Domestic violence can be threefold;

1. In identifying domestic violence situations and seeking support for their family.
2. In identifying domestic violence situations in the lives of their friends and reporting their concerns.
3. In long term prevention of domestic violence by participating in awareness raising activities and education to break the cycle of abuse.

Children of school age have the ability to communicate concerns to their caregivers and confide with their peers with whom they have close personal relationships. Domestic violence can therefore affect not just the child whose family is involved but have flow on effects to their friends and peers through disclosures and shared confidences.

² Network of Community Activities produces 2 quarterly newsletters and a quarterly newspaper for its members that is sent to all services and an online email alert system and website is also available for information dissemination.

³ Article 13.2 UNCRC - The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

“Oh yeah, he has a really mean family.....his cousin bashes him all the time and his cousin is 22 and no one in the family stops him. Sometimes even his dad bashes him up. He was crying at school the other day telling us but said not to say anything.”

“....oh yeah but remember he is a bully too, he bashes kids at school, so they are all a really mean family.”

Two 12 year old girls overheard discussing a boy in their class.

In identifying the role of children in early intervention they need to be empowered to know how to identify domestic violence and what to do if this occurs. In some cases children overlook domestic violence as a cause for concern because of the involvement of family or rationalise the behaviour based on the child victims own coping response to justify what most adults would perceive as domestic violence.

In the OSHC service children develop relationships with staff that are informal and unstructured, generally calling staff by their first name and developing an ongoing sustained relationship that can last many years. In most instances this relationship assumes the role of a trusted member of the child's extended family rather than that of a paid professional.

As we were eating breakfast at morning care I was gently teasing a little 6-year-old boy about how sleepy he was some mornings when he arrives. When I said I would need to yell out “Wake up Jeff” he replied, “ No come to my house at night and yell “Stop it Dad””. He then he revealed to me that his mother and father were involved in physical altercations that would make his mother cry. He disclosed that when this happened he would take his baby sister from her bed and go and hide under his bed until the fighting stopped.

Co-ordinator of an OSHC service, inner city Sydney

It is the nature of this relationship that provides for children an opportunity to disclose situations they are uncomfortable with and seek support. It also provides an opportunity for staff to work with children through discussion, play experiences and role modelling to build their resilience and awareness of coping strategies for future relationships and this act in a preventative capacity.

3. Provision of Support and Training For School Age Care Educators.

Unlike schools OSHC services have the capacity to have regular contact with families for sometimes up to 7 years per child including school holidays and times of high stress such as Christmas. Due to sign in and out procedures most families are required to personally attend the service to collect or drop off children signing them in and out of the service. This provides a mechanism for regular personal contact and exchange of information, support and intervention with family members by OSHC Educators. It is not unusual for a child's primary

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carer to have minimal contact with their child's teacher but engage in daily conversation with an OSHC educator.

Staff are therefore an important and underutilised resource in early intervention. At present there is limited education and support provided to school age care educators to assist them to identify and respond to domestic violence. As a result there can be missed opportunities for early intervention and signs of domestic violence could be overlooked or misread.

"I was talking to a parent and she casually referred to the violent and aggressive behaviour of her partner on the weekend. I realised she had no idea that what she was experiencing on a regular basis was so wrong and not normal. When I asked her how I could help she laughed at me and said it was nothing, her dad had been the same and she coped., What do you do then?"

OSHC Educator.

Regular information or training sessions should be available to staff that are specifically targeted to the unique nature of OSHC services. This professional development could be further supported by fact sheets and/or a resource guide for easy staff reference in services.

Content that Network recommends should be included in any training or resource information for staff;

- Identification of indicators of Domestic Violence
- Role of staff in managing disclosure by children of domestic violence..
- Role of staff in reporting domestic violence
- Supporting children through different scenarios of domestic violence
- Definition of AVO's and their applications.
- Legalities of AVO enforcement and role of staff particularly scenarios where children wish to go with a parent who is the subject of an AVO
- Referral agencies and support groups for referrals and counselling.

Network of Community Activities could act as a conduit for both circulation of the resources and tailoring of the training to meet the needs of services and would support further collaboration in this regard.

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Recommendations for the Inquiry into Trends and Issues in Domestic Violence;

- That Out of School Hours Services (OSHC) be identified as important contributors to Domestic violence prevention and early intervention.
- Out of School Hours (OSHC) representation be secured in interagency collaboration on prevention and early intervention in domestic violence.
- The role of children be acknowledged and strategies to engage with them be incorporated into the development of prevention and early intervention strategies.
- Information and resources appropriate for use in the Out of School Hours setting be developed and disseminated to all NSW OSHC services.
- In collaboration with the peak body, Network of Community Activities develop accessible and targeted training and resources for Out of School Hours sector on identifying and responding to domestic violence.

For Further Information.

