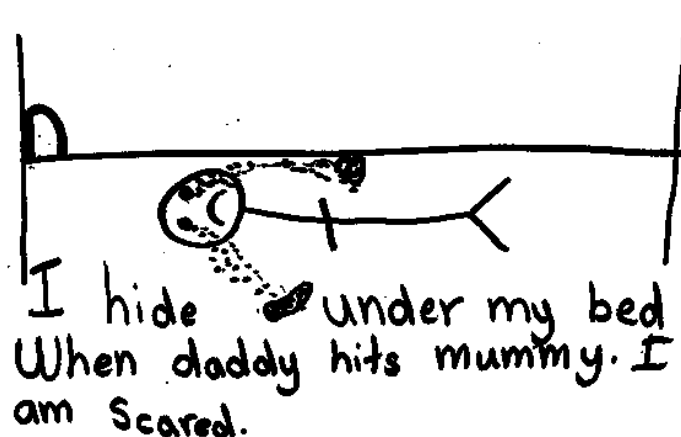


They didn't see it. They were sleeping.

The voices of children who live with family violence,
as heard by **KID**shine



By Prachi Mittal and Holly Carrington

May 2012

Introduction

Of 27 OECD countries, New Zealand recorded the third highest child homicide rate of children up to the age of 14 (Unicef, 2003). About 10 children are killed every year in New Zealand by a member(s) of their family. Further, at least 74,785 children and young people aged under 17 were present at family violence situations attended by Police in 2008. And Child Youth and Family received 49,063 reports of abuse that required further action in 2006 (Ministry of Social Development, 2009).

There is a direct relationship between partner abuse and child abuse. Emotional and behavioural problems for children who witness abuse (of one parent by the other) mirror those of children who are physically abused.

The longterm impact on children is the same, whether they witness abuse between parents or are the direct targets of abuse (Mertin and Mohr, 2002) (Runyan, 2006) (Carroll, 1994).

“All types of violence involving adults were rated higher in terms of impact than violence involving children. When adults were involved in the event, it not only had more impact on the child but also affected their coping strategies and decisions about disclosure. In most measures of impact, witnessing violence had more effect on children than direct exposure to violence. In all cases, witnessing the different forms of violence against adults had the most impact (Carroll-Lind et al, 2011).”

Most mothers who are abused try to protect their children from being exposed to the violence, but a child is not protected if they hear or see abusive behaviour, or even experience the aftereffects, e.g. a mother who is depressed, anxious, injured, etc..

Adults often think or hope that children don't realise that their mothers are being abused ('the children were asleep,' 'they were outside playing,' 'too little to understand,' etc). However, studies show that children can often give detailed descriptions of the abuse that their parents thought they weren't even aware of.

Even children pretending to be asleep can describe in detail what they have heard.

“The bad noises come when I'm asleep.” (KIDshine client – young boy)

Research has established that the experience of children in their very earliest years—well before they have language—impacts on the brain and its control of social and emotional behaviour (see www.brainwave.org.nz).

The effects on children of being exposed to violence may not show up straight away. It can take days, weeks, months or even years. Because of the delay, parents, teachers and professionals can easily make the mistake of blaming the child for being 'difficult' or 'naughty'.

Children learn from observing and reacting to what they see happen in their families. By six years old, children will have learnt a great deal about the roles expected of them and the kind of behaviour associated with those roles.

Children may become very unreasonable and hard to manage, even blame their mothers and loved ones for what has happened. They may start to believe that violence is normal and acceptable and behave aggressively themselves. As adults, they may think it is OK to be violent in their relationships, as this is what has been role-modelled for them.

There can be problems at school with bullying other children or being bullied, disobedience and poor academic behaviour. They may also become super achievers, hiding the emotional damage of domestic abuse. They may be frightened into being unusually well behaved or extremely helpful and take on jobs too big for their age. Children may become clingy. They may act as if it's their job to look after adults.

Older children can show anti-social behaviour, have suicidal thoughts, or escape into drugs and alcohol. The violence they see may be repeated in their own lives and relationships as they grow older.



With regards to intimate partner violence, professionals' efforts have generally concentrated on the 'direct' victims of domestic violence, i.e. usually adult women. Far less consideration has been given to the needs of the children involved, if they were not direct targets of the violence themselves. These children have often been referred to as the 'secondary' victims (Peled, 1996).

Giving children a sense of control is essential for their development. Giving a voice to children has been identified and recognized internationally as a child's right. Article 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which New Zealand is a signatory) says:

"States' Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

New Zealand's Children, Young People & Their Families Act 1989, Section 5, states:

"Consideration should be given

- *to the wishes of the child,*
- *as can be reasonably ascertained.*
- *given weight as is appropriate in the circumstances, having regard to the age, maturity and culture of the child or young person.*

Endeavours should be made to obtain the support of the child or young person to any decision or action."

KIDshine listens to the voices of children who witness domestic violence. This report is a snapshot of children's voices heard by KIDshine Advocates. Our hope is that this report will help others to hear and understand children who are traumatised by domestic violence.



KIDshine is a rapid response service for children who have witnessed family violence. The service is designed to be a brief and structured intervention with a goal to reduce the level of repeat violence and stress on children by giving families an opportunity to understand the impact on the children.

KIDshine Advocates listen to what children say, how they understand their situation and how they cope with the violence in their home.

KIDshine provides the following service:

- A Child Advocate will visit a family up to four times.
- A Women's Advocate accompanies the Child Advocate on the first visit. This advocate focuses on the mother of the child, talking with her about the history and her perception of the impact of the violence on the child and her assessment of risk.
- The first visit will take place as soon as possible after an incidence of violence, usually in the family home.
- The children will receive immediate support in dealing with the trauma of what has happened.
- Mothers and other family members will be provided with information about how best to support their children.
- The family will receive assistance in dealing with the shared trauma of family violence. Referrals will be made to meet the needs of the children and caregiver, e.g. lawyer, ongoing counselling, court-approved domestic violence programmes, etc.
- Caregivers who are adult victims of domestic violence will be offered a referral for ongoing advocacy and support (to Shine in Auckland City and North Shore).

Sessions with KIDshine Advocates include:

- Dual intervention with a Women's Advocate and Child Advocate.
- Establishing rapport and trust with the child.
- Developing safety plans for the child.
- Talking with the child in ways that allow them to begin to make sense of what has happened in their home.
- Making an assessment of the level of trauma experienced and referring the child for ongoing help if needed.
- Discussion with the parent about the effects the violence has had upon the child.
- Suggestions for how to manage and assist a child who has been traumatized.
- Follow up referrals made to appropriate services for ongoing intervention.

The KIDshine service is assessed through evaluation forms filled in on the final visit by both the mother (or other primary caregiver) and the children. The mother's evaluation includes the following questions:

1. How safe do you feel now?
2. How safe do you think your children are?
3. How easy is it for you to talk with your child/ren about the violence?
4. How do you think your child/ren are doing at the moment? Overall wellbeing?
 - a. Is it easy for her/him to get and stay asleep/nightmares
 - b. Do you think he/she is constantly worrying about what might happen to themselves or you
 - c. How is their schooling going, have the teachers spoken to you about anything they may have noticed?

The child's evaluation asks similar questions, including:

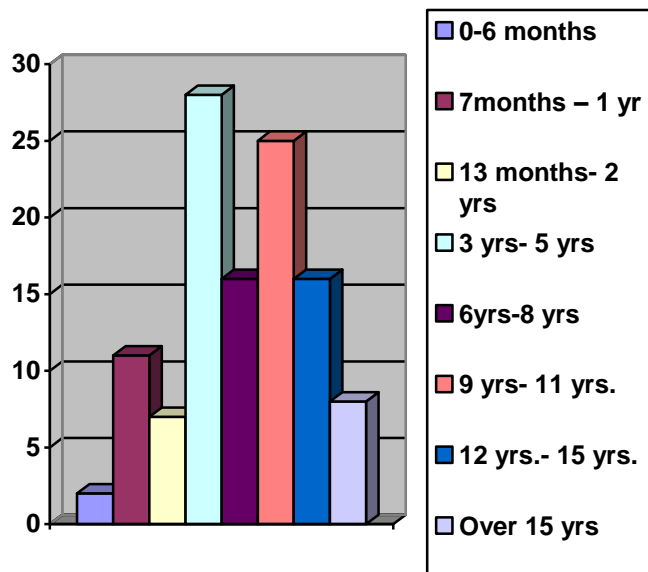
1. How safe do you feel now?
2. How easy is it for you to talk with Mum?
3. How do you think you are doing at the moment? Overall wellbeing?
 - a. Is it easy for you to get and stay asleep?
 - b. Do you have nightmares?
 - c. Do you worry constantly about what might happen to yourself or *mum*?

KIDshine is currently provided in Central Auckland and on Auckland's North Shore. In any given year the number of families offered the KIDshine service has been limited by the amount of funding available.

This paper analyses KIDshine reports from January-July 2010; which covered a total of 62 families and 137 children, as follows:

Age Group	No. of children
0-6 months	2
7months – 1 yr	11
13 months- 2 yrs	7
3 yrs- 5 yrs	28
6yrs-8 yrs	16
9 yrs- 11 yrs.	25
12yrs - 15 yrs.	16
Over 15 yrs	8

Age group of children

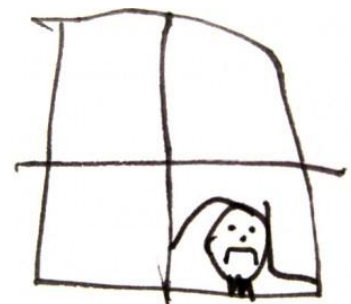


There was no age data available for 24 of these children.

Children are aware of the violence

Children do not have to see violence to be affected by it. Research suggests that up to 90% of children living in violent homes are aware of the abuse; many of these children never actually ‘see’ the violence.

“Jaffe et al. (1990) found that children often provide detailed recollections of the very events they were not supposed to have witnessed. Reports by children and by adults of their childhood experiences suggest that parents may severely underestimate the degree to which their children are exposed to the violence (Carroll-Lind et al, 2011, p. 5).”



A study done in the UK by Women’s Aid and Body Shop stated:

“The children and young people who contributed to Kidspeak clearly wanted to be listened to, and they wanted their views and experiences to be taken seriously. They wanted adults to believe them and, most importantly, not to patronise them – just as they believed and supported each other. While they were living with the violence, they often felt frightened and helpless, and did not know what – if anything – they could do. Some children and young people said their parents had tried to protect them from knowing about the domestic violence – but without success (p. 28).”

KIDshine reports show a similar picture, confirming that children are aware of the violence at home even if no one talks to them about it.

KIDshine Advocates routinely ask children, "What kinds of things do Mum and Dad (boyfriend, partner) fight about? Do they fight very often?"

Responses from the children included:

- (11 yr old girl) *"I think my Dad would drink a lot then he would annoy my mum."*
- (11 yr old girl) *"Just little things...like usual things, like about me and he used to get jealous... You could see it in him, he was mean to me a lot... Every week or month and uncle would run outside because he was not used to fighting."*
- (9 yr old boy) *"The fact that they did not live well together."* When prompted with – 'Why do you think there is so much fighting?' he added, *"Cos he's got Bipolar and he cannot control that well."*
- (7 yr old girl) *"They argue about me and my brothers cos they are in houses too, but sometimes they do and sometimes they don't when I'm around, they only fight a couple of times a week."*
- (8 yr old) *"They yell at each other... when my mum has money and she don't give him any they fight...Dad punch mum because she would not let him go to Kava cos it's long cos once he took long...I wish my Dad would not punch my mum."*
- (14 yr old boy) *"Usually it's about something that happens, they both get angry at each other."* When asked what is the something that happens he said, *"Me and my 10 year old sister cause most of it and usually drinking."*

KIDshine Advocates also ask, "What usually happens when there is fighting? Do they yell at each other? How does the hitting usually start?"

Children's responses included:

- (7 yr old) *"It starts beginning of me, then my brother, then my sister bullying me when I go to her house in North...sometimes mum says to my dad I'm going to stab you, but she just saying it because it starts with a slap and a punch then it all begins."*
- (11 yr old girl) *"Well he would get grumpy... grumpier... start yelling...start hitting and then breaking other things...he broke the curtains in the house and punched holes in the walls."*
- (8 yr old boy) *"Yes, he punched mum in the stomach when she was pregnant, my mum told us he hit her."*
- (young boy) *"A lot of stuff because they have beers and bourbons, she got a knife and got my dad's hand and there was bleeding on the walls."*
- (unknown age) *"Drinking and yelling."*

Children respond to the violence that they experience or witness

Children's exposure to domestic violence may be traumatic, and may increase their long-term risk for a multitude of psychological, behavioural, social and educational problems (Geffner, Igelman, & Zellner, 2003). One investigation found that 84% of children studied could probably be diagnosed with DSM-IV disorders (Diamond- Haas, 2005). In school-age children low self-esteem and depressive symptoms seem common, and these children have been described as more anxious, sad, worried, fearful, and withdrawn than their peers (Onyskiw, 2003).



Some studies have revealed no effects attributable to exposure to domestic violence. However, others have indicated that exposed children may tend to handle frustration poorly and have more difficulty regulating their emotions in interpersonal interactions. They lack effective problem solving skills and conflict-resolution strategies, misinterpreting ambiguous interpersonal situations as potentially threatening and attributing hostile intent to another person (Onyskiw, 2003).

One 4 year old boy visited by a KIDshine Advocate had witnessed violence between his mother and her partner. He displayed aggressive behaviour similar to that of the perpetrator, calling his mother names such as, *"you are stupid, a jerk."* He also *"hit"* his mother and *"tapped her repeatedly on the arm."* He expressed a desire to self-harm. He said *"I'm just stupid, aren't I."* *"I am jerk."* His mother told the KIDshine Advocate, *"Sometimes he punches himself in the head."* He had nightmares *"every other night for two years."* (Excerpts from conversation between KIDshine Advocate and the boy's mother.)

Following is an excerpt from a conversation between a KIDshine Advocate and two siblings, a 10 year old boy and 7 year old girl.

- KIDshine: What do you do when there is fighting in the home?
(older boy) *"I hide under my bed or under my computer table or on the roof sometimes."*
(younger girl) *"I used to hide in the shower or hide in the cupboard up high."*
- KIDshine: Do you ever have trouble sleeping at night? Why? Do you have nightmares?
(older boy) *"I have nightmares cos Mum got hurt"*
(younger girl) *"I have super nightmares when he punched my Mum."*
- KIDshine: Do you ever get hit or hurt when there is fighting?
(older boy) *"Yeah, he punched me and yelled at me... I got punched when I told Mum and him to break it up and he said shut up."*
(younger girl) *"He went to hit Mum and then Mum moved and he hit me."*

Following is an excerpt from a conversation between a KIDshine Advocate and a 10 year old girl:

- KIDshine: Do you think about your parents fighting?
(girl) *"Yeah,... well it sort of worries me, I feel sad and then when I think about it, I think of all the times. These thoughts come up when I am far away like from mum."*

KIDshine: Are you ever hurt in the fighting?
(girl) *“Just when I was little by dad, like sometimes he used to hit me and then when I got bigger and I had called the police he stopped hitting me.”*

One KIDshine report about a 7 year old girl says that, after witnessing violence at home between mother and her partner, ‘she lashes out with anger at school and at home and she said, “ I don’t know why”. She also agreed that she feels better after she has hit someone or something.’

Following are excerpts from a KIDshine Advocate’s conversation with a 7 year old:

KIDshine: Do you find that you think about your parents fighting a lot?
Child: *“Umm yeah...that they should stop arguing when I am around”.*

KIDshine: Do these thoughts ever come in school or while you are playing?
Child: *“Umm... when it’s lunchtime, cos I always get sad at lunchtime cos I don’t have anyone to play with cos they pick on me and say that I can’t play.”*

KIDshine: Why do you think there is so much fighting?
Child: *“Probably cos they angry at me cos sometimes I have to do dishes and clean up.”*

Children cope with what they see and experience

KIDshine Advocates routinely ask children, “What do you do when there is fighting in the home?”

The responses from the children of one family were:

(11 yr old girl) *“Sometimes I feel like calling the police but I don’t cos I think mum will get angry and they fight in their bedroom. I take them [her brother and sister] to my room.”*

(8 yr old boy) *“Sometimes when the fight happen our aunty and uncle get us and sometimes we go down stairs in the car and sometimes we go to our uncle’s.”*

(6 yr old girl) *“We go in the room and go under the blanket, all of us.”*

Responses to the same question from other children included:

(5 yr old) *“No, at the back of my sheet I write [offender’s name] then I go crisscross and then my teacher knows I hate him.”*

(9 yr old girl) *“I just turn the music on and did not listen, sometimes I had fun and ignored the fighting and sometimes I would run away.”*

(8 yr old boy) *"If we were awake we would try and get the phone and call the police."*

(10 yr old girl) *"I would go into my room and sometimes wait and call the police, I would hide the phone from my dad."*

(9 yr old girl) *"I can hear the yelling all the way from my friend's, I feel upset and I just stay at my friend's, and yeah I tell them stuff when I am there and feel sad."*

Children worry as a result of the violence

One 9 year old boy said, *"There isn't anything worrying me other than the safety of my brothers in case he [the boy's father] finds out where we live."* He went on to say, *"If you know him [the father], don't tell him where we live please."*

Children often blame themselves for the violence at home and worry about how to make it stop. Older siblings frequently take the role of the caretaker for other siblings and often try to protect and look after their mother.

Many children feel guilty and confused. They are often emotionally attached to the perpetrator of the violence, especially if he is their father. They may feel conflicted about what to do and how to feel. For example, they don't want to see their father go to jail or be punished, but they also don't want to see their mother beaten up. They may feel pressured to choose one parent over the other, and it is often safest for them to side with the perpetrator, as their experience is that he always 'wins'.



Following are some examples of children's worries expressed to KIDshine Advocates.

An 11 yr old girl spoke about how she worries that her mother might go into another abusive relationship. She did not want her to have another relationship, and she feared for her mother's life every time she went out of the house.

When asked what happens when mum gets angry, one boy said, *"She sometimes says that she wants to resign her duties as a mother...it was scary when she said this for the first time."*

(14 yr old boy) *"Cos they don't love each other, cos mum says it all the time, so does Dad and they don't act like it, cos they always yelling and fighting, pretty much our whole life really."*

(10 yr old sister) *"The fighting, it's bad and it's not fair on us both cos we have not done anything wrong and we have to hear it and stuff."*

(10 yr old boy) *"I'm worried about Mum and what about if she gets hurt by him."*

(5 yr old boy) *"I'm worried about ___ [his 2 yr old brother]."*

(14 yr old boy) *"That he is always angry and that he's always in a bad mood."*

(10 yr old girl) *"That he could get angry and that he could take it out on us."*

(17 yr old boy) *"Just trying to keep dad away from mum."*

(11 yr old girl) *"That my dad will get out of jail and come looking for mum and come here but nana is tough enough and she will back him off, scare him away."*

(10 yr old girl) *"He does not know where we have moved, I don't want to go live with him, I don't want him to know where I live... I would try not to watch but I did see him fighting and he held a knife up to my mum's neck...maybe I was 7 years old."*

What children want

Children want to be heard. They want their concerns to be taken seriously. They need a safety plan so they know what to do if there are any further incidents. They need their mothers to talk to them about the violence, and not to pretend as if it hasn't happened or isn't happening.

KIDshine Advocates routinely ask, "What would you like to see happen to make it better?"

Children's responses included:

(4 yr old) *"Mummy and dad to be nice and be nice together."*

(9 yr old girl) *"We would like to get a new house, not bad fighting cos I don't like adults fighting and smokes."*

(11 yr old girl) *"My sisters come live with me and for Dad to just leave us alone."*

(10 yr old boy) *"No fighting, no yelling."*

(5 yr old boy) *"They should be nice to each other."*

(15 yr old boy) *"For this to stop, the fighting, Dad would be here, no more fighting and yelling."*

(11 yr old girl) *"That they could just accept that they don't really love each other anymore."*

(7 yr old girl) *"If he does not come over every single time and then we happy... and sometimes I hear my mum and dad running and my big sister try and stop them."*

(10 yr old girl) *"For me and mum to see each other more, a lot."*



The impact on the bond between mother and child



A mother who is a victim of domestic violence will often be unable to meet the emotional and sometimes even physical needs of her children. This may be because she is too distracted, depressed, or anxious, or may be a result of exhaustion or coping with injuries. Her lack of emotional availability almost always impacts on her attachment with her children. A mother's attachment with her children may be further impacted by children learning from the perpetrator to disrespect their mother and/or the children siding with the perpetrator

because it's safer. Often the children see their mother as responsible for staying, leaving, or returning, and as a result, direct their anger at her, because it is too frightening to be overtly angry at the one who causes the violence.

Mothers and children almost always do not talk to each other about the abuse while living with it, as it may be unsafe or they may be trying to protect each other. It is often very difficult for good communication and attachment to be restored once the mother and children are safe from abuse, because the abuse has impacted on the bond in all of these ways.

One of the purposes of KIDshine is to re-establish the bonds between a mother and her children. This is one of the most important ways that KIDshine helps to ensure the future wellbeing of children who are traumatised by family violence.

This is because failure to form secure attachments early in life can have a negative impact on behaviour in later childhood and throughout the life (Ainsworth, 1970). For example, in the school environment, securely attached children generally relate well to peers, while those who are not securely attached tend to either bully peers or be victimized by peers (Jacobsen & Hoffman, 1997). Adults who are secure in their romantic relationships are more likely to recall their childhood relationships with a parent as being affectionate, caring, and accepting (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Conclusion

“The level of children’s exposure to violence in this country is relatively high, and New Zealand appears to be a more violent country for children than was previously realised. The perceptions of the children in this study were that their experiences had a notable impact on their wellbeing. Furthermore, observation of violent events was rated as having a more powerful impact on children than their own victimisation. For many children the conclusion can be drawn that bullying is part of their childhood. Reporting the effects of their violent experiences highlighted the special vulnerability of children. Adults must assume responsibility to reduce our children’s exposure to violence because New Zealand cannot afford the devastating effects of failing to protect its children (Carroll-Lind et al, 2011).”

There is a spectrum of professionals who respond to family violence – including police, judges, lawyer for child, social workers, counselors, probation officers, health professionals, teachers, and on and on. All of these professionals must learn how to talk to children safely and effectively in situations of domestic violence. At a most basic level, when professionals encounter a child who has witnessed domestic violence, they can and should help the child by doing the following:

- Do not assume that a child is not affected or less affected by violence if he/she was not the direct target of the violence
- Ask the child about the violence at home, acknowledge how difficult and upsetting this is for this child, and be prepared to listen how they feel about it.
- Assure the child that it's not their fault and they should not feel responsible.
- Do not ask the child to take sides. Let them know that it is okay to love their Dad (or whoever is the violent parent), even if they hate the violence and acknowledge how difficult this is. In other words, judge only the violent behavior – “It's not okay to hit others.” Do not judge the violent parent or make statements like “Your father is a bad man.”
- Ask them how they have tried to keep themselves (and siblings) safe before, and congratulate them for strategies that have been successful.
- Talk to the child about what they can do if the violence happens again, i.e. a safety plan. This can be as basic as teaching them how to dial 111, and go into a different room from where the violence is happening.
- Let them know that it is not their job to protect their mother, or whomever the adult victim is. The only thing they should worry about when violence is happening, is keeping themselves safe.
- Many children, particularly the older children in a family, feel responsible for younger siblings. Let children know that they should look after younger siblings when violence is happening, but *only if* they are old enough to handle this responsibility and *only if* it is safe to do so. For example, their safety plan may be to go into a different room from where the violence is happening and take their younger siblings with them.
- Finally, do what you can to ensure that the child is kept safe. This may mean referring the child to Child Youth and Family, talking to the mother (or adult victim) about where she can get help (i.e. ring the Shine Helpline 0508-744-633), and/or confronting the father (or violent adult) about his violence if it is safe to do so.

Children should not be living in violent households. But the reality is that they often do. Given this reality, we as a society need to be better at recognizing when domestic abuse is happening, and far better at intervening to protect the victims – both adults and children.

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