

Childhood Exposure to Domestic and Family Violence

Executive Summary

Domestic and family violence occurs across all age, socioeconomic and demographic groups, but predominantly affects women and children.¹

There is mounting empirical evidence of the effects of exposure to domestic and family violence on children's development, and a growing recognition of the ways these harms can manifest in intergenerational cycles of trauma, violence and disadvantage.²

Impacts on children's behaviour, schooling, cognitive development and physical and mental well-being include:

- impaired cognitive functioning;
- poorer academic outcomes;
- increased aggression;
- lack of emotional control;
- destructive behaviours;
- learning difficulties;
- depression and poor mental well-being;
- low self-esteem;
- low school attendance; and
- bullying.³

The cumulative effects of long-term exposure to violence might result in an inability to regulate emotion, and cognitive and behavioural developmental delays.⁴

There is evidence of a link between exposure to family violence in childhood and the intergenerational transmission of violence,⁵ as well as alcohol and drug use.⁶ Children whose formative years are affected are vulnerable to developing long term mental health issues, which is itself a risk factor for both experiencing and perpetrating family violence.⁷

The potential relevance of evidence of childhood exposure to domestic and family violence in sentencing proceedings includes an assessment of *moral culpability*; moderating the weight to be given to *general deterrence*; and determining the weight to be given to *specific deterrence and protection of the community*. There may also be issues relating to the likelihood of *hardship in custody*, a finding of *special circumstances* and the shaping of conditions to enhance prospects of *rehabilitation*.

¹ Council of Australian Governments, [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Their Children](#) (2011) 1.

² Australian Institute of Family Studies, [Children's Exposure to Domestic and Family Violence: Key Issues and Responses](#) (Report, 2015) 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Janet Phillips and Penny Vandenbroek, '[Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in Australia: An Overview of the Issues](#)' (Research Paper, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, 14 October 2014); Royal Commission into Family Violence, [Final Report](#) (2018) vol 2, 111.

⁵ Royal Commission into Family Violence, [Final Report](#) (2018) vol 1, 37.

⁶ See [Phillips and Vandenbroek](#) (n 4) 14.

⁷ Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, [Submission No 37](#) to Australian Human Rights Commission, [Examination of Children Affected by Family Violence](#) (June 2015) 11.