Domestic Violence, Risk Assessment and the Infant: Complexities and Challenges

Dr Emma Symes
Clinical Psychologist
Tweddle Infant and Perinatal Psychology Service
Family Violence in Victoria

- 44 family violence related deaths in 2014
- >65,000 family violence incidents reported to police 2013-14
- Estimated cost to Victorian economy $3.4 billion (2009)
Case Study
In order to determine what is in the best interest of a child, two primary considerations are outlined in the Family Law Act (s60CC)

- The benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both parents

- The need to protect the child from physical or psychological harm from being subjected to, or exposed to, abuse, neglect or family violence (Section 60CC of the Act).
Obstructive or Protective?

- Willingness
- Protective/Over protective?
- Withholding?
- PTSD

Careful, objective assessment of risk required
Research indicates that women are often good predictors of their own level of risk (safety often depends upon this)

(Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework and Practice Guidelines 1-3; version 2, Department of Human Services, Victoria, 2012)
Best model for assessing risk in context of family violence must be structured and informed by:

1. **Victim’s own assessment** of her safety and risk levels

2. **Sound evidence base** which identifies factors that indicate an increased risk of reoccurrence of family violence

3. The **professional judgement** of the person making the assessment, which takes into account the above and includes all other information known about the victim and her situation. (Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF), Dept. Human Services, 2nd edition, 2012)
# Preliminary assessment

Aide memoire

Note: these risk factors should be explored through the course of a conversation rather than in checklist fashion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factors for victims</th>
<th>Presence of factor</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy/new birth *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression/mental health issue</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever verbalized or had suicidal ideas or tried to commit suicide</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factors for perpetrators</th>
<th>Presence of factor</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of weapon in most recent event *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to weapons *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever harmed or threatened to harm victim</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever tried to choke the victim *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever threatened to kill victim *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill children *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill other family members</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever harmed or threatened to harm or kill pets or other animals *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has ever threatened or tried to commit suicide *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalking of victim *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault of victim *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous or current breach of Intervention Order</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and/or alcohol misuse/abuse *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsession/jealous behaviour toward victim *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling behaviours *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression/mental health issue</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of violent behaviour (not family violence)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship factors</th>
<th>Presence of factor</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recent separation *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalation—increase in severity and/or frequency of violence *</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial difficulties</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Items marked with an asterisk are the most important ones to explore.
Pregnancy and DV

• One of the strongest predictors of violence during pregnancy, is past violence

• 3-30% of women

• Lower rates of violence during pregnancy cf before pregnancy (comprehensive review see Taillieu & Brownridge, 2010)

• Violence during pregnancy tends to be a risk factor for more severe violence.

• Violence in pregnancy is considered to be a significant indicator of future harm to woman and child (Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management, DHS, 2012; Taillieu & Brownridge, 2010).
Violence appears to be related to jealously in male partner. (Tailleu, & Brownbridge, 2010; Van Parys, Deschepper, Michielsen, Temmerman, & Verstraelen, 2014).

Campbell, Oliver and Bullock (1993) proposed four categories of violence during pregnancy –

- Jealously of unborn baby
- Anger toward unborn baby
- Pregnancy specific violence not directed at baby per se
- ‘Business as usual’ continuation of usual violence
Violence in pregnancy had been shown to be a risk factor for insecure attachment amongst infants at one year of age.

But if these women left the violent relationship, the child was more likely to demonstrate secure attachment by age 4.

Women who left violent relationships were also more likely to have more balanced maternal representations in the postpartum period.

(150 women, strange situation)

Baby in utero

- HPA axis and neural systems involved in memory, attention and self-regulation.

- Once born, these babies more prone to dysregulation, placing greater demands upon already traumatised mother...

- May negatively alter her developing representations of baby (Levendosky, Lannert & Yalch, 2012)
Recent Separation and Domestic Violence

- Period following separation is a period of heightened risk (data suggests first two months particularly heightened risk) DHS 2012

- Separation not the end of the relationship, still tied to partner because of child.

- Violence may escalate to new levels during this period, may be even more risk
Intimate Partner Homicide

Aust. Institute Criminology ABS data June 2002 to June 2012:

• High proportion of homicides in Australia occur within families (41%).

• 129 deaths a year on average

• Gendered pattern to homicides involving intimate partners (many more women killed by men (75%))
Intimate Partner Homicide

- The highest proportion of domestic/family homicides were perpetrated against intimate partners
  - Intimate partner: 56% (n=654)
  - Children: 21%
  - Parents: 12%
  - Siblings: 3%
  - Other family: 8%

Cussen & Bryant (2015)
Filicide

• Approximately 25 children in Australia die as a result of filicide each year. (Brown, Tyson & Arias, 2014).

  ▪ Younger children are at higher risk, children under 12 months of age highest risk

  ▪ Kirkwood (2012) discussed Retaliatory Filicides primarily perpetrated by fathers, with intention of harming mothers

  ▪ Link with DV (mother of child is also usually a victim), substance abuse, separation, mental illness (Brown, Tyson & Arias, 2014)
PTSD and DV

• DV associated with high rates of PTSD and depression in women.

• Psychological abuse more damaging, more likely to be associate with PTSD than physical violence.
  (Arias & Pape, 1999; Howard, Oram, Galley, Trevillion & Feder, 2013)

• Stalking was also predictive of PTSD symptomatology, even when the effects of physical violence, injuries and sexual coercion were controlled
  (Mechanic, Weaver & Resick, 2008)

• Severity of PTSD symptoms mediated by
  • a history of abuse as a child and
  • social support
    (eg Tramayne, 2012)
Mother-Infant Relationship

- Maternal attributions – vulnerability in child
- Reduced capacity for ‘being with’, less flexibility, openness
- Difficulties with mutual regulation of emotion
- Reason for optimism
- What about the father?
Engaging Fathers

• Tap into motivation to be good dad to this infant
• Problem solving focus – can you find better ways to get your needs met? To solve problems?
• Make it clear what is in it for him

• Unconscious gender bias in set up of therapeutic services
• Engagement skills – clinician and Service
• Clinical skills for working with DV
• Risk – needs appropriate organisational policies and procedures
• Co-ordination between services
In the absence of cooperation, when parents remain at odds in this manner, there are no winners, only losers

(Kirkwood, 2012)


Thank you