

Media Release
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Bridging domestic violence knowledge gaps even more critical amidst COVID-19 pandemic

Domestic violence research experts say frontline health and community workers may be unable to recognise instances of family and domestic violence, amidst concerns that COVID-19 social distancing restrictions will escalate the issue.

“Every practitioner working with families needs to have a specialist understanding of domestic violence so they can recognise it and address the issue with parents for the safety and mental health of the entire family,” according to leading domestic violence researcher, Professor Sarah Wendt from Flinders University.

“COVID-19 has forced the majority of Australians to stay home, but for many, home is not a safe place to be. We’ve seen Google searches for domestic violence support skyrocket in recent months, making the Federal Government’s extra funding for domestic violence support services vital now that the risk is higher than ever.

“That funding must be complemented by growing the ability of all frontline workers – from hospital staff to educators, drug and alcohol counsellors and GPs – to recognise the signs of domestic violence and provide early intervention.”

With one in four Australian women affected by family and domestic violence¹, Professor Wendt says a child suffers when violence, abuse, fear and control are present in a household, compromising the parent-child relationship and impacting the child’s mental health now and in the future.

“If these specialist skills form part of frontline workers’ capability, they will be able to open the door on the subject so children can be better protected to support their ongoing health and safety,” she said.

Professor Wendt’s call to fill gaps in practitioners’ knowledge is backed by Mission Australia’s *Out of the Shadows* report, which recommended that all staff working with families receive training and information to better support women and children at risk of family and domestic violence, along with homelessness.

To build family workers’ knowledge and understanding, the federally funded Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health has developed a training program focusing on how children are affected by family and domestic violence. The program arms practitioners with information and advice on how to discuss the topic with parents and consider how children are affected.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017

Emerging Minds' Workforce Development Manager, Dan Moss says silence is the leading cause of adverse impacts on children affected by family and domestic violence.

"Children often blame themselves for what is happening and without help to make sense of the situation, their self-esteem and sense of self is affected, and the impact can be lifelong," Mr Moss said.

"We know that both men and women impacted by family and domestic violence are seeking support, but if practitioners don't ask questions, then those affected don't have the confidence to disclose the violence and make plans to support children's social and emotional wellbeing and safety.

"If we can intervene earlier by working with both parents to focus on reducing and managing the impact of family violence on children, then we can minimise the immediate and long-term consequences on children's mental health."

The Emerging Minds e-learning courses, *The Impact of FDV on the Child: An Introduction* and *FDV and Child-Aware Practice: Principles and Practice* highlight how a child's relationships, physical health and social and emotional wellbeing are affected, and how to respond to prevent immediate and long-term consequences for children's mental health.

The courses were developed with input and support from Professor Wendt, specialist violence services, women's safety services, general adult and child services, child mental health experts and mothers with lived experience of family and domestic violence.

Those impacted by sexual assault, family and domestic violence can obtain advice and referrals from 1800RESPECT - phone 1800 737 732 or visit 1800RESPECT.org.au

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Emerging Minds

Emerging Minds is dedicated to advancing the mental health and emotional wellbeing of Australian infants, children, adolescents and their families. The organisation leads the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health. Emerging Minds develops mental health policy, services, interventions, training, programs and resources in response to the needs of professionals, children and their families. We partner with family members, national and international organisations to implement evidence-based practice into the Australian context. Our resources are freely available at www.emergingminds.com.au.

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