

WHAT'S IN A WORD? THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF DOMESTIC ABUSE INFORMED DOCUMENTATION

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Imagine a scenario where you are tasked with summarising the domestic abuse risk factors for the court in a child custody case. You could summarise the concerns in one of two ways. 'The children in this household have a long history of exposure to family violence which has included physical violence, police involvement, and no contact orders', or 'Mr Smith has engaged in a long history of domestic abuse; including strangulation, sexual assaults, threats and insults. It has impacted the children's functioning in the following ways: missed days in school, forced homelessness with moves into refuge and temporary accommodation, the loss of family income and deprivation of necessary medical and social supports – all caused by Mr Smith's behaviours.'

Which formulation, based on the same fact set, would be the most useful for the court? Which example better captures the lived experience of the child?

Often the primary way practitioners communicate with those who are making decisions about the families they work with is through documentation. Additionally, they rely on the documentation from other professionals to give them the information they need to make complex assessments and recommendations about child safety. While detailed documentation is important in all cases, in domestic abuse cases there is an added concern that information will be presented in a way that is victim blaming, or is not clear about the perpetrator's responsibility for causing harm. Statements like 'the couple has a history of domestic abuse' tells us little about the pattern of behaviour, who is choosing to perpetrate it, or the impact on the child and family functioning. Even the term 'domestic abuse', or latterly 'coercive control', is a jargonistic, umbrella term which can refer to multiple behaviours that may have numerous impacts on each individual child within a family.

The Safe & Together Model is an internationally recognised suite of tools and interventions designed to help child and family serving practitioners become domestic abuse-informed. It offers language, thinking and practices that help increase accountability for perpetrators as parents, reduce victim blaming and improve outcomes for children and families. The Safe & Together Institute has recently undertaken training events with Nagalro, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru and a comprehensive training and coaching programme for Family Court Australia, which included consultation of forms, tools and processes (The Safe & Together Institute, 2022a). This has increased interest in how domestic abuse informed documentation is a powerful tool in creating safety and making good decisions for children in the Family Courts and child-protection systems.

What is domestic abuse informed documentation?

Here are some concrete practice tips on how to create more domestic abuse informed documentation:

Hold a perpetrator pattern-based approach – Create behavioural statements of perpetrators' patterns. This should be a comprehensive description, using wide-ranging sources to collect information about perpetrators' behaviours in both current and past relationships. When you are gathering information from practitioners and the family, ask 'how' questions. For example, rather than accepting that 'he isolates her' or 'he controls me', ask: 'How' does he control?; 'How' does he isolate?; 'What does he do?' These questions lead to behavioural statements that are much more likely to support assessments of harm to children.

Map perpetrators' patterns – In order to write good documentation, practitioners need to be able to organise and analyse information, both from the documentation from other professionals and that which has been produced throughout their case work. Case files, interviews and reports can hold a lot of information which is challenging to organise. This can make evaluation of information time-consuming and complex. It can help to have a standard format to 'map' cases, like the Safe & Together (2022b) Perpetrator Pattern Mapping Tool, so that information is easily available and collated under components that centre perpetrator behaviours. Recording the perpetrator's pattern is only the first step. This pattern is a lens through which to view other aspects: the impact on the child and family functioning; the survivor's protective efforts; and the intersection with substance use, mental health and power and privilege.

Do not use jargon or mutualising language – Be aware of domestic abuse destructive language that uses jargon or mutualising language to obscure perpetrators' patterns and responsibility. It will prevent clear communication with other practitioners and the family about what the concerns are and what changes are needed for children to be safe. Be wary of 'cut and paste' from sources who may be using old ways of documenting domestic abuse. Be cautious of opinions masquerading as facts.

Be proportional and think about safety – consider who will see your documentation and issues of confidentiality and safety. Be proportional in the information you share. Consider the need to balance how you justify your conclusions with the impact on the survivor and the need to 'Collaboratively Safety Plan' at times when sharing information is risky (Safe & Together Institute, 2021).

Convey the voice and experience of the child – Good documentation is how we operationalise the voice of the child. Documentation can be strong when it includes the exact words of those involved, when safe to do so. Not only do quotes give exact