

The other victims

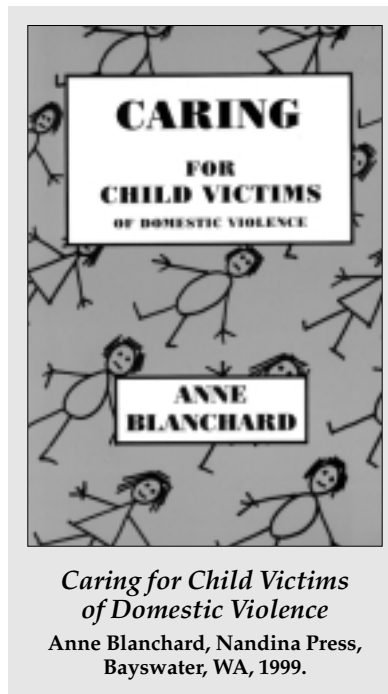
Liz Poole

This book is a welcome addition to the slowly but steadily growing number of texts, papers and research reports into practice and policy issues concerning children living in domestic violence. *Caring for Child Victims of Domestic Violence* addresses the need for practice-based material that can offer a comprehensive guide through the range of issues for workers in the field. It is squarely aimed at assisting the work of children's workers (particularly refuge workers) while still being highly relevant to others who work with children exposed to domestic violence.

From the outset, the title of the book communicates Blanchard's understanding and approach to the issue. Whereas children living in domestic violence are often described as 'child witnesses' or 'children exposed to domestic violence', the approach here is less ambiguous, choosing instead to use the description 'child victims' of domestic violence.

The importance of unequivocally believing that all domestic violence does harm to children is an argument afforded substance through the book's thorough examination of the consequences for children and young people. Ideas about children's development, Blanchard argues, explain in large part the degree to which there is still a level of minimising the effects on children living in domestic violence, both within services that work with children and the broader community.

As Blanchard (p. 7) says: 'There is also a general ignorance in adult society about the way children develop emotionally. This stems from the belief that, because their cognitive development is immature and they cannot express themselves verbally, they lack any depth of feeling and emotion as well. We put children last in many instances because we believe they have no really deep feelings, just superficial ones. We like to picture them as "happy innocents". It is notable that services for child victims of domestic violence are only now being developed, long after



services for the women victims and even the male perpetrators of the violence have been in existence.'

According to Blanchard, the task of caring for child victims of domestic violence requires workers to have knowledge about the effects on children of the damage done, and of children's own survival strategies. In equal parts the book provides an account of the consequences for child victims and a focus on the practical strategies to improve the situation for the children and their mothers. Chapters that deal with the experience for children include: The effects of domestic violence; Children's experience of domestic violence; Identifying hurting children; The child's eye view of alcohol and domestic violence; and Adolescents growing up with domestic violence.

Current reports, articles and pamphlets often have to condense the information about the effects on children. This book is able to elaborate on those effects that are often seen listed in point form, such as low self-esteem, aggressive

behaviour, frequent illness. The section 'How children survive' (in Chapter 2) provides insights into the coping methods adopted by children in domestic violence.

The book uses quotes from research into children's experience of domestic violence to illustrate and support its claims.

For example, on p. 29: 'Children from violent homes are often very compliant: *As a young child I was always trying to do the right thing, plan what would please him, work out what he might want*'.

And on p. 31: 'They contain their anger within themselves and wait for the opportunity to leave home. They become extremely emotionally controlled, not displaying their feelings. One person described it to me as: *You develop a sense of being in total control in that situation. So inside you're feeling very scared and frightened but outside you're being very cool, calm and collected*'.

This section (p. 30) also describes some of the ways in which children attempt to maintain their sense of self and self-esteem. 'Rather than accept their home life with passive tolerance and submission, they register a determination not to give way to despair but to fight back. *How I dealt with my stepfather was that I set myself challenges, like when I learnt to ride a bike when I was eight . . . there was a very steep hill near the school and my challenge was to ride up it. Get to the top of the hill! Then I felt I could do anything*. By successfully accomplishing the challenges she set herself, she retained confidence in herself, which otherwise would have been dissipated by the negative attitude of her father.'

Blanchard examines the effects of the violence on the relationship between the mother and child in a number of different contexts. In looking at the experience of adolescents the role of the mother is discussed: 'For children from violent homes, adolescence has problems beyond those normally experienced by the majority of children. A

mother, suffering from her own emotional problems, may have considerable difficulty controlling her teenage children, partly because of her own inertia or because she feels guilty that she has caused the child's problem by remaining too long with her violent partner.' (page 85)

The second half of the book provides practical strategies. Some of the chapters include: Communicating with children; Group work with children from violent homes; Creative ideas for working with children; and Helping mothers to cope with distressed children. In the chapter on Supporting the distressed child, information is provided about ways to deal with angry children. The author makes the point that it may be difficult for workers not to react, however it is important to get through this 'testing out' period in order to be able to modify the children's behaviour and so have a helpful impact on them.

The book suggests (p. 118): 'Setting up a play environment where aggressive children can act out their anger in a safe situation . . . Play dough, which can be thumped around and squeezed is ideal . . . Dolls and toy animals are also useful because children can act out the scenes they have witnessed. Children will do this over and over again in an effort to come to terms with their experiences. *One boy constantly played with two dolls who bashed each other up. Then he would bring an 'ambulance' to take them away.*'

Throughout these chapters Blanchard emphasises the importance of interventions that involve the mother as a way of ensuring that the process of healing will be more likely to continue in the future.

There is a discussion of two of the key policy issues in this area – the interface of child protection and domestic violence services, and family law reform. Blanchard stresses the need for greater cooperation between agencies and highlights some of the positive changes in law reform (p. 212): 'The Family Law Reform Act 1995 contains provisions which require the court to ensure any order made with respect to children is consistent with any family violence order (Hon Justice Alistair Nicholls 1997).'

Chapter 12, entitled Working in a multicultural environment, provides a good overview of the specific issues and different experiences for Aboriginal children and children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. In particular these children will likely have been affected by the hurtful and often rejecting attitudes of the dominant culture. The need to be sensitive to the diverse cultural and

child raising practices is discussed and the importance of employing staff from similar backgrounds is stressed.

Finally the last two chapters address survival strategies for workers and a discussion about prevention. There is information about the issues for workers who themselves have been child victims of domestic violence and some encouraging words for children's workers on the vital role they play in domestic violence and child abuse prevention.

'By their attitudes and the information they can impart to the women and children with whom they come into contact they can demonstrate non-violent ways of resolving conflict and empower them to stand up for their rights to live a life without fear and violence . . . It is important that

workers stop and take a little of their time to collect and pass on their valuable information and insights..by collecting statistics..raising issues at staff meetings, and being prepared to take part in studies or research.' (p. 217)

Caring for Child Victims of Domestic Violence contains enough useful information to make it substantial without being 'heavy' text. The book uses plain language and obviously reflects workers' experiences in the field. It will be a useful resource of ideas for children's workers and it should provide a valuable introduction for those newly entering the field, and for students.

Caring for Child Victims of Domestic Violence can be purchased for \$21.50 from Nandina Press, PO Box 1329, Wangara, WA 6947. Phone/fax (08) 9306 1759.

CHILDPROTECT

New email discussion list

Hosted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, *childprotect* is an email discussion list developed as a vehicle for the discussion of child abuse prevention and child protection research, policy and practice issues.

It aims to promote the exchange of information and ideas between Australasian and other professionals working in the field of child abuse prevention and child protection. These include child protection workers, other health and welfare service providers; people working in the criminal justice system, in education and training, or in policy and service planning; and researchers and information providers.

Topics for discussion may include:

- requests for research, policy or practice information;
- developments and changes to child protection and child abuse prevention;
- best practice in child abuse prevention and child protection;
- the discussion of broader family violence issues;
- education and training issues;
- notices about upcoming conferences, workshops, events;
- pointers to new publications, online papers, resources/links and Web sites.

To join *childprotect* send the following email:

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The list owner is Adam Tomison, Research Adviser of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. For any problems contact Adam on owner-childprotect@aifs.org.au