

Separation, inter-parental conflict, and family and domestic violence: Impact and support needs

This fact sheet is based on findings from the *Domestic and family violence and parenting: Mixed method insights into impact and support needs* project. The project examined the impact of domestic and family violence (DFV) on parenting capacity and parent–child relationships in Australia. There were four components to the project:

1. a systematic state of knowledge literature review (Hooker, Kaspiew, & Taft, 2016);
2. an analysis of the *Growing Up in Australia* Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)¹ to examine the impact of inter-parental conflict (IPC) on mothers, fathers, and children;
3. an analysis of two complementary datasets of over 16,000 separated parents from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Family Pathways suite of studies to examine the impact of DFV on relationships between children and mothers and fathers, and on child wellbeing outcomes where parents were separated; and

4. qualitative in-depth interviews with 50 women who had experienced DFV and engaged with services in the domestic and family violence sector, the child protection system, or the family law system. The interviews provided deep insight into how mother–child relationships are affected by DFV, the characteristics of the perpetrators of DFV as fathers, and the extent to which engagement with services in the three sectors supported women to improve or repair relationships with children.²

For further reading, see the complete Horizons report or the summary Compass report.

Definitions and measures

Inter-parental conflict (IPC), why it was included, and how it is different from DFV

IPC refers to verbal or physical conflict between two people who are biological, adoptive, or step-parents of a child (Westrupp, Rose, Nicholson, & Brown, 2015).

IPC over time as reported by mothers is the measure available in the LSAC data that most closely resembles an indicator of DFV. Mothers of children who are part of LSAC were asked about the frequency of arguments, tension, anger, and physical conflict in the couple relationship. These experiences were categorised as “no IPC reported”; “past or emerging IPC”;

where IPC was reported as occurring in the past or currently, but not both; or “persistent IPC”, when reported both in the past and currently.

IPC is likely to be high in couples experiencing DFV, but conflict can exist without being part of a pattern of abusive behaviour where one parent seeks to exert power and control. IPC was included in the *Domestic and family violence and parenting* project to enable an analysis of the valuable LSAC data and to understand the impact of IPC for children and their parents at a population level. However, the IPC measure does not identify which parent initiates the conflict or the extent to which either partner is harmed, and the presence of IPC should not be considered to definitively indicate DFV.

¹ Acknowledgements: This research uses unit record data from *Growing Up in Australia*, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. LSAC is conducted in partnership between the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DSS, AIFS, or the ABS. Jan M. Nicholson, Catram D. Nguyen, Dr Elizabeth M. Westrupp, and Dr Amanda R. Cooklin were supported through the Roberta Holmes Transition to Contemporary Parenthood Program, Judith Lumley Centre, La Trobe University.

² Participants were recruited via an existing Australian Research Council (ARC) project, led by Professor Cathy Humphreys (Humphreys et al., *Fathering, family and domestic violence and intervention challenges*, ARC LP130100172). Names and parts of quotes were edited to protect the identity of participants and their families.

What is *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*?

LSAC is Australia's leading source of research about children's development, wellbeing, and their families. It follows two cohorts of families (the K cohort of children born around 2000 and the B cohort of children born around 2004), each involving around 3000 families in the analyses. Families were from all Australian states and territories and were broadly representative of the Australian population. Data has been collected every 2 years since 2004, with up to five waves of data available for analysis. For the *Domestic and Family Violence and Parenting* project, outcomes for children and parents were assessed at three time-points representing important developmental stages for children: ages 4-5 years and 8-9 years for the B cohort, and age 12-13 years for the K cohort.

Domestic and family violence (DFV)

DFV refers to violence in family settings that involves couples. It may include: violence where one or both are parents to children in the household; violence between former couples who are separated; and violence perpetrated towards family members of the couple, including children. DFV includes physical, psychological and emotional, sexual, financial, and other forms of violence associated with abusive control and coercion (Hooker et al., 2016; Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2011; Campo, 2015).

One part of our research used a measure of violence and abuse from the AIFS Family Pathways suite of studies about separated parents. Parents who participated in these surveys were asked a range of questions about their experiences of emotional abuse and physical hurt by the other parent at different time periods before and after separation. Their experiences were categorised as physical hurt (including emotional abuse), emotional abuse alone, or neither. A limitation of these measures is that the contexts, initiation, severity of harm and power dynamics are not assessed.

What is the AIFS Family Pathways suite of studies?

The *Domestic and family violence and parenting* project used two main surveys from the AIFS Family Pathways suite of studies: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF) and the Survey of Recently Separated Parents 2012 (SRSP). LSSF and SRSP involved large, national samples of recently separated families who were registered with the Australian government for child support payments. These studies have collected detailed interview data from parents on their post-separation parenting arrangements and the relationship between the separated parents, including their experiences of DFV. The LSSF had three waves of data collection, with up to 10,000 parents each time (Wave 1 in 2008, Wave 2 in 2009, Wave 3 in 2012) and an average separation of 15 months duration. The SRSP 2012 involved over 6000 parents, and parents had been separated for 17 months on average.

Prevalence and impact of IPC and DFV before and after separation

IPC between separated and non-separated parents

When the B-cohort children were aged 8-9 years, and the K cohort were 12-13 years, **35-36 percent of mothers reported IPC** across the five waves of data collection. **One in four mothers (26-27%) reported past or emerging IPC**, and **8-9 percent reported persistent IPC**.

Higher levels of current IPC were evident among separated families: reported by **40 percent of mothers of children aged 12-13 years** compared with **10 percent of non-separated families** (K cohort).

DFV before and after separation

Gendered patterns in DFV are evident for separated parents' experiences across the AIFS Family Pathways studies. Mothers reported experiences of DFV more frequently than fathers.

Overall, **one in four mothers and one in six fathers reported experiencing physical hurt before separation. Over one-half of fathers and about two-thirds of mothers reported experiences of emotional abuse before or during separation.**

The **total proportion of parents who reported current or recent experiences of violence or abuse decreased with time**. Reports of physical hurt substantially reduced after separation for both mothers and fathers (LSSF Wave 2: 4-5%; Wave 3: around 2%; SRSP: 5-6%),³ although a gendered pattern was still present.

However, **some form of DFV was sustained post-separation for significant proportions of parents**. The longitudinal data (LSSF) showed that approximately two out of ten fathers and three out of ten mothers reported DFV (mainly emotional abuse) continuing up to 5 years after separation (i.e. they reported DFV in all three waves).

Forms of DFV experienced by the women and children in the qualitative sample

The women who participated in the 50 qualitative interviews had experiences consistent with the more severe end of the spectrum of DFV patterns described previously in Kaspiw et al. (2015). This reflects the fact that the sampling strategy for the qualitative part of the research program specifically recruited women who had used services in one or more of the family violence, child protection, or family law sectors. Of the 50 women, 47 had separated from the perpetrator, and the perpetrator was a biological parent to at least one child for 45 women.

Women **most frequently described controlling and coercive behaviours before separation** (including those who were living with the perpetrator at the time of interview) (n = 37/50), which included rigid routines and unreasonable expectations about housework and children's behaviour. Psychological and verbal abuse to the mother was also frequent, including where the perpetrator made threats to harm, or did harm, her (n = 34/50). **Ten women experienced threats to kill or attempts to kill them before separation.**

DFV continued or escalated in some form post-separation for at least two-thirds of the women. Controlling and coercive behaviours (n = 16/47), verbal abuse (n = 17/47), and stalking (n = 13/47) were frequently present and systems abuse (e.g. vexatious litigation) was also common (n = 29/47). **Physical threats and harm reduced in frequency**, consistent with the AIFS Family Pathways findings in the general population of separated parents. However, financial abuse increased in the post-separation period, with 30 women reporting this abuse in a wide range of forms.

Out of the 50 interviewees, 45 mothers explicitly referred to their children having also been subjected to a form of abuse by the perpetrator of DFV. Forms of child abuse included psychological or emotional abuse (n = 31), physical abuse (n = 17), sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviours (n = 5), witnessing DFV (n = 31), and the child being a direct victim of family violence incidents that targeted his or her mother at the same time (n = 13).

³ The reference time regarding experience of DFV post-separation in LSSF Waves 2 and 3 was in the 12 months prior to the interview. The time frame of post-separation DFV in SRSP 2012 was since separation.

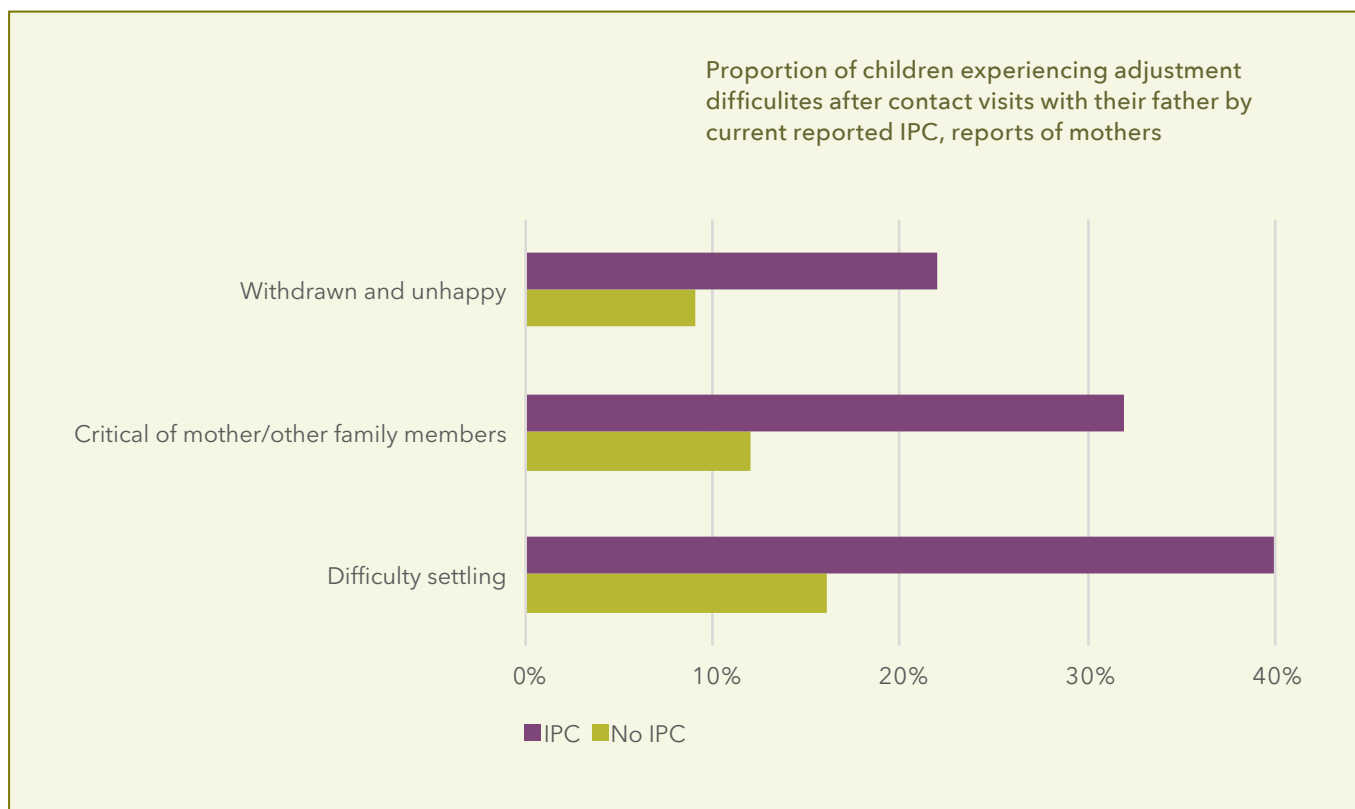
Impact of IPC and DFV after separation: population and qualitative findings

Impact of IPC after parental separation based on the LSAC data for 12-13-year-old children (K cohort)

Overall, the research shows that IPC and DFV are associated with a range of negative consequences for parents and children, including in domains relevant to social and emotional wellbeing and parenting efficacy.

IPC was associated with poorer functioning irrespective of whether parents were separated or not, with the poorest outcomes indicated for mothers and children who were in separated families with ongoing conflict. Separation and IPC were also associated with psychological distress and inconsistent parenting for fathers. IPC was not strongly associated with parenting arrangements in terms of time spent with the child (shared parenting or frequency of father's contact with the child).

Children were more likely to have difficulties adjusting after returning from care time spent with their father in families where mothers reported IPC.



Impact of DFV after parental separation

Consistent with the LSAC findings about IPC and adverse outcomes for parents and children, the AIFS Family Pathways data also showed that DFV has negative consequences for the parent-child relationship and child wellbeing in separated families.

The experience of DFV is linked with **lower levels of perceived flexibility and workability** in relation to parenting arrangements among separated parents, in part because of the association between the poorer quality of inter-parental relationships and safety concerns.

Mothers and fathers who reported experiences of violence or abuse had a higher level of **parenting stress** and reported **poorer relationships with their children** compared with those parents who did not report having this experience. The negative link between parents' satisfaction with their relationship with their child and experiences of DFV appeared to be indirect, via poorer inter-parental relationships, the presence of safety concerns, and poorer parental emotional health associated with experiences of DFV.

Parents who reported a history of DFV also reported **poorer child wellbeing**, regardless of the duration of separation. Child wellbeing reports were particularly negative where parents reported experiencing ongoing DFV.

For mothers, **financial hardship** was a significant factor in the association between DFV and their higher levels of parenting stress and the poorer outcomes for their children's development.

Insights about the impact of DFV after separation from the qualitative study of service users

The abusive behaviours and the consequences described by the women shed more detailed light on some of the experiences behind the population-level patterns of IPC and DFV identified in the LSAC and AIFS Family Pathways studies.

The women's accounts indicate multiple direct and indirect negative effects on their capacity to meet their children's needs as a result of the violence. However, the women also demonstrated significant strength and resilience in dealing with these **material, physical, and psychological consequences**.

Maryanne:

"It's changed my life, completely changed me as a person. I used to be really confident and now I ask someone if I should go to the shops now or in 5 minutes. It feels like my independence has been completely stripped. I have a lot of anxiety, a lot of anxiety, and that's hard to manage on a daily basis.

I think the biggest challenge I've had since separating is trying to mask or hide my anxiety from my children. That's been a particularly challenging parenting experience. Because I've—we've gone through the family court and there's times where he has to see them and I have to drop them to him—hiding my fears and anxiety from them is quite difficult as a mum to, sort of, be there and try and be supportive of them and this process, when internally I'm absolutely frightened for their lives and have so much anxiety I really panic. So as a mother, that part of my relationship with them is quite difficult."

Consistent with the LSAC and AIFS Family Pathways findings, **adverse consequences for children** were also strongly evident, including anxiety, depression, behavioural and social problems, and difficulties at school.

"She doesn't want to have to hear her father's voice. It was hard, I had to put a special ringtone on my phone for him, because it does that every time my phone rings, then she's shaken to a sort of traumatised or triggered mode from the PTSD...Sometimes she feels angry with me because I'm pushing her to talk to him [on the phone] at least enough that she's said something."

The significant association between DFV and **financial hardship** for mothers identified in the AIFS Family Pathways findings was also convincingly established in the qualitative data. Financial abuse emerged as a particularly strong and deleterious feature of severe and sustained patterns of DFV in the interviews with women. Pre-separation and post-separation financial abuse was described as causing **negative material and health consequences for mothers and children** as well as **distress and psychological strain**.

Gabriella's ex-husband blocked her from accessing Centrelink while they were together, and she accumulated debt during this time because he also did not make an adequate contribution to the family. He continued this pattern after separation by avoiding child support. Gabriella explained that their daughter's serious chronic health problems require expensive treatment and the lack of child support had affected her:

"She suffered years of respiratory problems. Which was really, really stressful. And he has never paid any child support. And so I was having to be on waiting lists for attending clinics and things like that and specialists and everything—and then pumping her full of antibiotics while we're waiting to see a specialist. Whereas if he'd been paying his child support, we would have put that child support straight on to see a specialist...And I spent probably a good 12 months dealing with the child support agency, trying to get him to financially support his child."

Support needs of women and children

In the short to medium term, women and children have a range of material, psychological, and support needs after separation from a relationship involving DFV. It is likely that the DFV will continue in some form, most probably as psychological or financial abuse, in the post-separation period. Children may also be directly experiencing abuse. Needs assessment for women and children should focus on identifying needs for housing and financial assistance, legal services for safety and parenting arrangements, and medical and psychological needs. If women are not already connected with a specialist DFV service, then such referrals are likely to be necessary. Women and children should also be referred to programs and professionals that can support restoration of the mother's parenting capacity, address children's therapeutic needs, and support recovery in the mother-child relationship where necessary.

The findings that DFV and abusive behaviour towards children may be sustained over a substantial period of time even after separation indicate that women and children may need ongoing support in dealing with this behaviour. Where relationships between perpetrators and children are being maintained, the

nature of the child's experience when spending time with the perpetrator merits close attention. If children are exposed to abusive or unhealthy behaviour, perpetrators may need to be referred to programs to support the development of healthy parenting, or supervised parenting time or no parenting time may be warranted.

Karla needed significant support from mental health professionals for herself and her daughter when separation was followed by significant engagement with courts:

"They had good sorts of very practical ideas and things that can help to deal with the trauma and the sort of PTSD triggers and so on. And just that they explained to me a bit about what she was going through and how these things have affected her, and what that means in a practical sense. So they both, I think, in their different ways, had some really good sort of useful things to share."

Further policy and program development opportunities

The findings of this research indicate the need for a stronger focus on the implications of DFV for parenting in policy and program development. Recognition that adverse impacts on parenting capacity occur for women who experience DFV and that perpetrators of DFV may engage in unhealthy and directly abusive parenting behaviours should underpin further policy and program development across the DFV, family law, and child protection sectors. There should be a greater emphasis on training to identify and assess harmful parenting behaviours where DFV is occurring across these sectors. In addition, approaches that support recovery in parenting capacity and the restoration of healthy parent-child relationships should

be further developed and expanded. Adjustment in policies and programs in the post-separation area should support the reduction of exposure to DFV either through changing adult behaviour or reducing children's exposure through supervised, limited, or no-time arrangements.

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For more information on this project, see: <https://anrows.org.au/domestic-and-family-violence-and-parenting-mixed-method-insights-impact-and-support-needs>

Acknowledgement of Country

ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

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