

Research Brief

Strategies for effective family violence education

Introduction

The recent Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (VRCFV) identified family violence education as a priority focus for workforce development across health, education, community and justice sectors. In response to these recommendations, the Victorian Government announced a \$95.4 million-dollar investment in workforce education and launched a [10-year Industry Plan](#) that aims to ensure that workers across health, education, community and justice services are family violence literate and have the requisite skills for their roles in preventing, identifying and responding to family violence (Family Safety Victoria, 2017; Victorian Government, n.d.).

The Role of Gender in Family Violence Education

Central to all family violence curriculum is the gendered dynamics of this complex social problem. In addition to the gendered patterns of perpetration and victimisation, research findings show that family violence is a gendered phenomenon with an association between attitudes to gender and attitudes towards violence against women. Violence supportive attitudes have been linked to traditional attitudes towards gender roles and low support for gender equality (Australian Institute of Criminology, The Social Research Centre, & VicHealth, 2010; Uthman, Lawoko & Moradi, 2009; VicHealth, 2014; Webster et al., 2018). These findings about the association between attitudes to gender and attitudes to violence against women suggest that effective education strategies must address not only individuals' attitudes towards violence against women but also the social fabric in which violence supportive attitudes are formed and sustained. Effective education must challenge conceptualisations of gender roles and masculinity that reinforce violence supportive beliefs (Australian Institute of Criminology et al., 2010; Flood & Pease, 2009; Heise, 1998; Uthman, Lawoko, & Moradi, 2009; VicHealth, 2014).

Emerging work on violence prevention curriculum in the primary prevention field lends support for the centrality of gender in family violence education interventions. Work by Barker, Ricardo and Nascimento and colleagues suggests that gender-transformative approaches which include critical discussions of gender and masculinity are more likely to lead to behaviour and attitude change (Barker, Ricardo, & Nascimento, 2007; Barker, Ricardo, Nascimento, Olukoya, & Santos, 2010; Casey, Carlson, Bulls, & Yager, 2018). Together this work indicates that interventions that not only address but seek to transform the beliefs, values and discourses that support and condone gender-based violence are more likely to be effective. Well-designed education will encourage critical self-reflection by professionals about their own beliefs and attitudes towards gender and the impact on their practice. Ultimately the objectives are to facilitate on-going paradigm shifts in responses to family violence.

Practice Principles for Teaching and Learning

Little evidence exists about the most effective pedagogical practices for teaching about family violence and to date, research on pedagogical approaches is limited to the health sector (Joyce, Jung, Lucia, Kavanagh, & Afonso, 2015; Lewis et al., 2017; McMahon, Postmus, Warrener, Plummer, & Schwartz, 2013; Pomeroy et al., 2011). For instance, Forgey and colleagues (2013) explored the use of experiential learning activities to train Army social workers in intimate partner violence (IPV) assessments.

This research evaluated curriculum using simulated clients to teach social workers employed in the Army Family Advocacy Program to use a new IPV assessment protocol (Forgey et al., 2013). This small scale study provides some support for the effectiveness of using simulated clients to teach IPV assessment procedures (Forgey et al., 2013). Participation in the program enhanced participants' interviewing skills as well as their knowledge and exploration of the content areas explored in the IPV assessment, namely the presenting incident, history of IPV and client background (Forgey et al., 2013).

Another small scale study has evaluated the effectiveness of a peer education approach to teaching police officers about IPV. Blaney's (2010) evaluation of a specialist IPV course based on focus groups with 30 participating officers one year after the course revealed that the police officers had increased understanding of IPV, the rationale for risk assessment procedures and the application of the criminal code to IPV incidents. Some police officers reported that the course fostered critical reflection on their own biases and how these influenced their responses to IPV incidents (Blaney, 2010).

These pedagogical approaches to family violence education align with evidence from broader workplace learning literature that learning for work is most effective if based on active pedagogies that mimic the ways in which individuals learn in the workplace (Billett, 2001, 2013; Hager & Halliday, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Such pedagogies embed learning in the work context and provide opportunities for applying knowledge and developing deep understanding of its meaning in practice (Billett, 2001; Schröder, 2017; Wenger, 1998). Experiential learning strategies, such as simulations and role plays that actively involve learners in applying knowledge as they acquire it are more effective than passive learning experiences such as lectures. In particular, active, experiential learning experiences that mirror informal and incidental adult learning are more likely to motivate and engage adult learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Where such strategies are based on applying knowledge to authentic workplace situations, learners are better prepared to apply their new knowledge and understandings in their work (Billett, 2013).

Sustaining Workforce Capability

Individuals in an organisation do not learn effectively in isolation and education strategies that seek to upskill workers are unlikely to be effective unless they are part of broader whole-of-organisation cultural change work (Senge, 1990). Previous research on police family violence education and training shows that capability building is a continuous process and underscores the need for career-long training (Blaney, 2010; O'Dell, 2007; Ruff, 2012). Sustained commitment to a well designed and delivered program will be needed to effect practice change in workforces that intersect with family violence.

Need for Further Research

To date, most family violence education interventions in Australia, as in other countries, have targeted health professionals. Whilst family violence literacy programs aimed at other professions exist, most of these activities have not been formally documented or evaluated. Existing evaluations of such programs often focus on training satisfaction that is, whether participants found the training enjoyable and useful (Leppäkoski, Flinck, & Paavilainen, 2015). More methodologically rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of education initiatives in embedding understandings of gendered family violence dynamics and patterns is required to support broad-based workplace changes in family violence practice.

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