



Funded by



Family Violence Policy Statement

POLICY	FAMILY VIOLENCE	No. 2010-01
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Due for review		June 2012

1) Introduction:

While Dads in Distress Support Services (DIDSS) by its very name appears to be focused mainly on supporting men through separation from their partner and/or children, we actually have the health, safety and well-being of ALL the family uppermost in our mind. As a harm-prevention charity it saddens us that in our modern society of Australia there are men, women and children who are being harmed, and harming one another, in the very place where love and kindness should prevail.

This policy aims to clarify our understanding and response to this enormous social problem. We want other organisations and governments engaged in preventing family violence, as well as our current and prospective staff and volunteers, to know unequivocally that we are part of the solution, not part of the problem. We invite any inquires concerning this policy and any examination of our practices in the genuine desire to keep improving our effectiveness in preventing further violence.

2) Definition:

DIDSS defines Family Violence as any type of abusive behaviour in a family or intimate relationship where one person attempts to gain, regain or maintain control over another, or elicits the help of others (an agent) to achieve control. It can take many forms including; physical violence, sexual assault, emotional abuse, using access to children to punish and threaten, or social or financial control. Abuse does not have to be physical or sexual to be considered family violence.

3) Scope:

- a) DIDSS recognises family violence is neither gender nor age specific. Family violence must be responded to without bias. Family Violence can be perpetrated by men and women in its many forms and can also occur between related siblings and children within blended families. It can involve children perpetrating violence towards parents and other older family members.
- b) DIDSS recognises that violent or abusive behaviour may be present in the following stages of a relationship:
 - i) An ongoing, intact relationship. Often the violence and abuse may be considered 'normal' by both parties involved.
 - ii) Prior to a separation or family breakdown. This may have been one of the reasons why a partner takes the decision to leave the relationship.
 - iii) During the separation process. Separation can be marked by conflict, escalating into violence between parents and other family members where it was previously non-existent.

- iv) Following the separation. One or both parties in a separation may have difficulty accepting the reality of the separation or choose violence or abuse as a means to exercise control in the ongoing conflict over children or property. The risk of violence is particularly high in the first two months after the separation.
- v) In new blended families. Step-siblings, their parents and other family members may be using violence to gain, regain or maintain control over another.

4) General Response:

DIDSS is in complete agreement with the *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework* (published by the Family Violence Coordination Unit, Department for Victorian Communities, 2007) which states that “family violence is a fundamental violation of human rights and is unacceptable in any form.” (p. 20).

DIDSS believes the use of all forms of violence in a family or intimate relationship is always unacceptable and in many instances against the law. We believe that any person using violence is solely responsible for their behaviour and we will work with them to accept that responsibility and connect with services in the community to facilitate behaviour change. In our work with callers, one-on-one and in group settings, we will take the appropriate steps to help ensure the safety of the person/s experiencing abuse. This is a policy stated in our Code of Ethics and further outlined in our training manual.

5) Specific Response:

a) Exercising Diligence

- i) DIDSS staff and volunteers are to be vigilant in their interactions with clients and their families, identifying the presence and/or risk of Family Violence in accordance with the *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework*.
- ii) DIDSS staff and volunteers are to be screened prior and subsequent to their appointment to ensure compliance to the Framework’s objectives, and to receive ongoing training to develop their skills in assessing and managing risk.
- iii) DIDSS staff and volunteers are to recognise that some clients who have used violence, abuse or control are unlikely to disclose, readily or fully, their behaviour.

- iv) DIDSS staff and volunteers are to exercise caution in responding to claims of partner abuse by clients as sometimes claims are made to disguise, excuse or minimise the clients own behaviour.

b) Assessing Risk

- i) When DIDSS staff or volunteers identify a client with family violence issues, a risk assessment is to be conducted, where the appropriate training has been provided, or confirmation sought that this assessment has been undertaken by an appropriate service and the case management, behaviour change program or counselling has been put in place.
- ii) DIDSS staff and volunteers are to consider the factors that have been demonstrated through research to predict risk and the possibility of an episode or escalation of violence.

These include:

- (a) history of violent behaviour toward family members
- (b) history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse towards intimate partners
- (c) access to lethal weapons
- (d) antisocial attitudes and behaviours and affiliations with antisocial peers
- (e) relationship instability, especially recent separation or divorce
- (f) presence of other life stressors
- (g) history of being the witness or victim of family violence or sexual abuse in childhood
- (h) evidence or known diagnosis of mental health problems or personality disorders
- (i) resistance to change and motivation for treatment or engagement with professional supports or referrals
- (j) attitudes that support violence towards women, children, or other family members.

c) Reporting abuse

- i) Where a clear disclosure of a criminal act (including physical abuse, sexual assault, threats, pet abuse, property damage, stalking and breaching intervention orders) has been made directly by the client or other party a notification must be made to the appropriate authority or agency. Ideally the client should be encouraged to self-report the abuse in conjunction with the staff member or volunteer.

- ii) Should the level of risk suggest that some intervention from Police or DOCS/DHS may be warranted, the volunteer will involve the regional coordinator or other senior manager as soon as possible, who will firstly ensure the safety of those at risk by confirming that risk management processes have been followed.
- iii) Where there is insufficient training or skills to make an adequate risk assessment or if there is any doubt of the appropriate course of action to be taken advice must be sought from the regional coordinator, other senior manager or a Family Violence Liaison Officer associated with local police.
- iv) In all situations requiring a response the matter should be clearly documented, filed securely in an electronic folder that is password protected, but accessible to a current or incumbent manager or relevant co-ordinator should they be subpoenaed in the years to come.
- v) The DIDSS staff member or volunteer is required to co-operate with any investigation or trial concerning that case, and present themselves (or a manager in their stead) to provide testimony to the Courts.

6) Responding to male or female clients who have used violent or abusive behaviour

Staff and volunteers are to:

- i) Actively support the client in a non-shaming, non-blaming manner while being clear about the unacceptability of the behaviour and any criminality of such behaviour
- ii) Engage the client on this issue and address the likely consequences of their behaviour for themselves, their partner and family
- iii) Seek a commitment from the client to help ensure the safety of family members
- iv) Challenge them to engage appropriate services and programs that seek to change abusive or violent behaviour
- v) Assess the level of risk and act independently of the client if necessary to ensure the safety of those abused or at significant risk of abuse, in accordance with *The Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework*.
- vi) Report any criminal act (including physical abuse, sexual assault, threats, pet abuse, property damage, stalking and breaching intervention orders) as per section **c)** above

7) Responding to male or female clients who have been abused, controlled or assaulted by a partner or family member

Staff and volunteers are to:

- i) Actively support the client in a non-shaming, non-blaming manner while being clear about the unacceptability of such behaviour used against them.
- ii) Where physical injuries are present assist the client to receive medical treatment where possible.
- iii) Encourage the client to engage professional help to explore the impact of the abuse on them and the children in terms of the level of control, harm and fear they experience.
- iv) Where the client declines professional involvement respect their choice and discuss safety management strategies to reduce the possibility of the conflict escalating, and to develop a safety plan.
- v) Where a child is at risk of abuse or neglect a notification should be made to DOCS/DHS Child Protection or police, irrespective of adult consent.
- vi) Staff and volunteers *with* appropriate training and expertise should assess the level of risk in accordance with *The Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework*. In the absence of evidence-based risk indicators, the victim's own assessment of their level of risk must be taken into account in forming a reasonable belief that a risk is present. The victim should be referred with consent to qualified family violence professionals for preliminary or comprehensive assessments.
- vii) Staff and Volunteers *without* appropriate training and expertise should refer the victim with their consent to the appropriate agency in their region.
- viii) If assistance or guidance is required contact the appropriate co-ordinator or manager, or a Family Violence Liaison Officer associated with local police.

8) Responding to Family Violence in general

- a) Staff and volunteers are required to have a police check to ascertain any criminal convictions which may include acts of violence and abuse.
- b) Staff and volunteers are required to undertake regular supervision and training to ensure personal issues are addressed and their own conflict resolution skills are developed.

- c) Staff and volunteers should actively discourage any disrespectful attitudes to females and males of any age, and ensure that acts of violence and abuse are not condoned.
- d) Staff and volunteers should expend more energy and effort in preventing violence against women, men and children, and supporting those affected by violence, than in debating the degree to which either group are victims.
- e) Staff and volunteers are encouraged to participate in global, national, state and local initiatives and campaigns to address or prevent Family Violence.
- f) Where staff and volunteers are representing Dads in Distress Support Services in a campaign or initiative the relevant co-ordinator or manager will provide support, supervision and resources to ensure their involvement results in maximum benefit to the cause.

9) Conclusion

As an agency that predominately works with men, some of whom may have used violence and abuse, *Dads in Distress Support Services* is an essential entry point into the family violence service system that is currently and predominantly focussed on the prevention of violence against women and children. We are committed to working within that sector to achieve those same objectives. It is reassuring that the *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework* encourages the sector to also work with us.

“A key principle of this framework is that services who work with and help protect women and children must engage with services that work with men, and vice a versa. The central aim of services that work with men who use violence must be to bring about and ensure the safety of women and children or other victims”. (p. 32)