

Learning from lived experience – a guide for professionals supporting children and young people experiencing family violence

***'Family violence is rarely seen
or understood through the eyes
of children and young people.
We are the ones you leave behind.'***

This guide is designed to help practitioners better support children and young people with experiences of family violence.

It was co-produced with Berry Street's Y-Change Lived Experience Consultants – a group of young people who work to challenge the thinking and practices of social systems through their lived experience advocacy and leadership.

Use this guide by reading, reflecting on and coming back to Y-Change's tips, practical activity ideas and direct quotes below.

**Learn from our lived experience and
see family violence through our eyes.**

Under the Family Violence Risk and Management Framework (MARAM) many Victorian workforces have prescribed roles and responsibilities in recognising and responding to children and young people experiencing family violence.

The MARAM Practice Guides provide more information and detailed practice guidance.

This resource provides supplementary information to prompt further consideration and support your development as a family violence professional.

Be curious – seek to understand why we are acting in certain ways

Many children and young people are punished or seen as ‘naughty’ or ‘troublemakers’ if we act out because we have been abused.

Rather than judging us or dropping assumptions, take the time to dig deeper and find out why we are acting in certain ways.

‘If we’re coming in with assumptions, we’re going to make the cycle of violence even deeper.’



Activity:

Reflect on how you check in with children and young people, and ways you could be more intentional about this.

Be curious and ask open-ended questions. Take time to critically reflect on your practice.

Next time you’re having a conversation with a young person, listen without interruption and let us explain our experiences using our own words.



Use language we can understand, or even better – our own

Children and young people don’t always have the language to describe what they’re going through in ways that adults and others around them can understand.

This might be even more difficult for children who do not speak English as their first language or for disabled children who may need additional resources. This results in others not fully understanding what we’re going through.

Don’t assume what we are trying to say. Dive deeper, meet us where we are at and match our language so we can tell our story.

‘I had a feeling something was wrong but didn’t know how to say it or what to say’.

Activity:

Consider your communication approach and what supports the child or young person might need. Practice using accessible and respectful language with colleagues, imagining you are discussing the work with a child or a young person.

Think about language swaps you might make so the child or young person can better understand you.

Stop and check whether the child or young person feels clear and comfortable with the language that is being used. You can ask, “what does that word/phrase mean to you?” and “is there another way you would describe that?”. This can be a collaborative process throughout the conversation.

See us as victim survivors in our own right

Don't assume we are *only witnesses* of family violence. Children and young people can and do experience abuse, neglect and violence from their primary caregivers, including other family members, siblings and intimate partners.

We are victim survivors when we witness family violence *and* when we directly experience abuse, neglect and/or violence.

Don't assume our experiences are the same as our siblings' experiences.



Activity:

It is best practice to ensure we have our own MARAM risk assessment, risk management and safety planning in place (even when your direct contact with us is limited).

Explain why it is important to hear from the child or young person, which includes using genuine body language, tone of voice and in what you're saying. Acknowledge that it can be a hard conversation and give us permission to take breaks.



Understand that we won't always love or be grateful for families who harm us

Many children and young people are made to feel like they must love their families no matter what. Some children and young people might also still feel deep attachment to their families despite violence and abuse.

It is important not to assume how a child or young person feels about the people in their lives who use violence against them. But practitioners must not push a need to love, 'forgive and forget', or be grateful for our families onto us.

Instead, support us to make choices about our own lives and relationships.

'There's this mentality – even in the child protection system – of family reunification. That's not always the case. Families are not the be all and end all.'

Activity:

Explore with the child or young person which relationships are sources of love and safety and which they want to maintain.

Validate our experiences, listen without judgement, and let us respond freely.

Acknowledge that it is okay to take time away from family or dating relationships to consider what relationships feel safe (or otherwise).

It doesn't have to be a forever decision. Asking for and taking space is okay.

Create a safe and inclusive space

Opening up about family violence is often really scary for children and young people.

It's important you take the time to bond with us and help us feel safe. You can do this by sharing a bit about yourself. Go at our pace.

Display *meaningful* signals, posters and objects around your service that shows you are a safe, welcoming and child-friendly place.

'Go at our pace. Don't expect safety in the initial conversation.'



Give us chances to make choices and take back control

Children and young people are often spoken on behalf of and left out of important conversations and decisions that affect our lives.

Create ways for us to make choices and take back control, wherever possible. This might include choices about where we meet, activities we do together, or who we spend our time with.

'Be flexible. There isn't only one way of doing things. Have conversations directly with us and give us choices.'

Activity:

Complete an activity with the child or young person to build rapport. Print the colouring in activity connected to this resource – let the young person pick the colours and craft materials you use to complete the activity.

Seek to understand the things that inspire us, explore our interests, hobbies, music, personal values, and life goals.

Show that you're not in a rush and have time to get to know us.

Activity:

Remind the child or young person that they can make an informed decision about what happens next at each step of the process.

Clearly explain where our choices might be restricted or even non-existent, such as duty of care or information sharing schemes, be open about that from the very start so that it doesn't come as a shock and break trust.

Let the child or young person decide where they would like your meeting to take place. This might be over the phone, outside, at a local café, a playground, or somewhere else entirely.

Reflect on how power shows up when working with children and young people.

Help us navigate the system and understand our rights – be our advocate

Don't just 'talk the talk', but actually keep our rights front of mind. Uphold and put into practice the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Child Safe Standards.

Also help us understand what our rights are using words we can understand. Stand by our side and help us work with services we might be having a hard time accessing.

'Be our advocate. Don't allow it to be always on us to fight for our own rights. Show us that you're on our side. Be an ally in our world.'



Activity:

Be open that you can always learn from the child or young person, and that you genuinely want to hear about how you as a worker or service can be better.

Take the time to explain where we can share feedback or complaints. Support us with our interactions with other services including Child Protection, Courts or Victoria Police, including ensuring our views and voices are heard.



Hold us with care even when we go backwards

Healing from family violence is a lifelong, intergenerational struggle. It's not just lived experience, it's *living* experience.

Recognise that sometimes our choices or mistakes might be part of our healing journey, or our way of coping with the trauma of family violence.

Help by showing us empathy, threading self-care into our time together, modelling healthy relationships, understanding the impacts of trauma and the importance of informed consent, and helping us find places in the world we belong.

'You can say: "You are not alone. I'm going to sit with you, and we are going to figure it out together." It may take longer doing this with a child or young person, but it's crucial for us to know you're here with us.'

Activity:

Support the child or young person to reflect on what has happened. Ask questions such as: "What worked? What didn't work for you?" ... "Is there anything that you would like to do differently next time?" ... "How can I support you right now?" ... "Are there things you'd like us/me to do differently?"

After this, reflect on these conversations in relation to your professional practice.

Critically reflect on your own, your organisation's and the system's actions

Practitioners, family violence services, and systems will not always get it right.

As a practitioner, make time to notice and challenge racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and/or stigma around mental illness perpetuated by you, your organisation, and systems so you can understand *all* of our identities and lived experiences.

'To assume the system is never at fault is ignoring so many people's realities.'



Activity:

Reflect on your own values, assumptions and biases, and those around you. Consider how you can demonstrate cultural safety, support for Aboriginal self-determination, and inclusion in your practice. If you don't examine power dynamics, this may result in children and young people's rights and safety being undermined.



Create opportunities for us to make a difference

Children and young people with lived experience hold so much knowledge and expertise.

Recognise this by asking young survivor advocates to help shape your policies, service design and delivery – and compensating us for doing so.

Create ways for us to have our voices heard and create change in meaningful ways.

'I don't want to be engaged or entertained. I want a platform to speak my truth and make changes that will help other kids who have been through what I have.'

Activity:

Ask yourself whether your organisation currently creates space for partnering meaningfully with children and young people with a lived experience of family violence. Where are the opportunities to embed the lived experience of children and young people in your work?

About Y-Change

Berry Street's Y-Change initiative is a social and systemic change platform for young people aged 18 to 30 with lived experiences of socioeconomic and systemic disadvantage.

As Lived Experience Consultants, the team works to challenge the thinking and practices of social systems through advocacy and leadership.

berrystreet.org.au/y-change

About Berry Street

Berry Street is one of Australia's largest independent family service organisations and has been operating since 1877.

We provide programs to more than 35,000 children, young people and families each year. We believe that children, young people and families should be safe, thriving and hopeful.

berrystreet.org.au

About the illustrator

The artwork and colouring-in activities were created by artist and illustrator, Chadai Chamoun.

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