

**CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE:
THE NATURE, EXTENT AND IMPACT OF THEIR EXPERIENCES**

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that examined children's perceptions of the prevalence, incidence and impact of violence experienced or witnessed by them, and factors that mitigated and reduced its impact. A national survey was undertaken of New Zealand children aged 9 to 13 years, with a representative sample of 2,077 children from 28 randomly selected schools of various sizes, geographic areas and socio-economic neighbourhoods. A questionnaire was developed for children to report the nature and extent of physical, sexual and emotional violence (including bullying) experienced at home, school and in the community. To assess the impact of this violence, as well as children's perceptions of school, their coping experiences and the extent to which they used violence in their own interpersonal relationships, analyses of data examined frequencies, bivariate correlations, t-tests and multiple regressions. Results showed a high prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual violence. The study also examined the ethical considerations and philosophy underpinning research that involves children. Guided by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the findings support the controversial ethical decision to adopt a passive consent procedure and demonstrated children's competence to express the ways in which violence has affected them.

INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of increased rates of violence worldwide have heightened the need to understand what children think about their experiences as victims or witnesses of violence (Amaya-Jackson et al. 2000, Finkelhor et al. 2005, Garbarino 2001, Ghate 2000, Osofsky 1999, Wolfe et al. 2003). Much has been written about children and violence, but less has been written from the viewpoint of the children themselves (Mason and Falloon 2001). However, there is increasing recognition of the value of research that examines the direct experience and perceptions of children (Christensen and James 2000, Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000, Smith et

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al. 2000). The meanings that children attach to their experiences are not necessarily those shared by adults because their conceptions are informed by the impact these events have on them rather than by legislation or research (Lloyd-Smith and Tarr 2000, Maxwell and Carroll-Lind 1998). As argued by Anderson et al. 1994:

... it is only through trying to understand young people's own views of their experiences as victims and witnesses that we can confront the problem in a way that is meaningful and acceptable to them: that is, in a manner which recognises both the reality of those experiences and the legitimacy of their strategies for dealing with them. (p. 66)

Consideration of children's expressed experiences of violence is consistent with Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). Article 12 acknowledges that children are people who have a right to be heard, and it underscores the importance of children having opportunities to express their feelings and views. Therefore, guided by Article 12, this study (Carroll-Lind 2006) aimed to examine children's perceptions of the prevalence, incidence and impact of violence experienced or witnessed by them, and to explore the factors that might mitigate or reduce its impact.

METHOD

A national survey was undertaken of New Zealand children aged 9 to 13 years, with a representative sample of 2,077 children from 28 randomly selected schools of various sizes, geographic areas and socio-economic neighbourhoods. Using the passive consent procedure² facilitated the right of children to report on their experiences of violence. The Ethics Committee carefully weighed and gave credence to the issue of children's rights to protection, and acknowledged and confirmed Article 12 of the UNCROC that grants children the right to speak on matters that concern them. Active consent could have compromised both of these rights. The view was held that protecting the rights of children was more important than parental rights to privacy regarding abuse in the home. As Perry (1997) suggests, violence and abuse are not private issues; they are social issues. The choice of a passive consent procedure proved to be effective in obtaining a high participation rate (93% overall) and enabled children the right to choose for themselves whether or not they wanted to participate.

A questionnaire, *Children's Experiences of Violence (CEVQ)* was developed for children to report their perceptions of the nature, extent and impact of physical, sexual and emotional violence (including bullying) within the context of their own environments (home, school and the community). The questionnaire was also used to gather data on children's perceptions of their coping experiences, the characteristics of their schools, and the extent to which they used violence in their own interpersonal relationships. Analyses of the data examined frequencies, bivariate correlations, t-tests and multiple regressions. Qualitative data are also included in the form of quotes to describe the children's experiences. The quotes support the quantitative data and help to extend understanding of the violent events experienced by the children.

² Passive consent requires only that parents who do *not* give their permission for their child to participate sign and return the consent form. Parents who do not return the form are deemed to have given consent.

RESULTS

First, the data were analysed to reveal the number of children who had ever been victimised (prevalence) and the number of violent or traumatic incidents that had happened to them within the last year (incidence). The types of violence experienced by the children are categorised as physical, sexual or emotional (which, if it happened at school, could also be defined as bullying).

Not all 2,077 participants answered every question. It was emphasised to each group of students before they began that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to. In other cases they did not need to answer each question. For example, if children answered: "No it has never happened to me", then the following questions: How often did it happen?; Who did it?; How bad was it?; were not applicable. So because the numbers of respondents vary for each question, percentages are based on the number of students who answered each particular question.

Examining prevalence extends understanding of how common and widespread children's experiences of violence are and provides an estimate of the extent to which these forms of violence may occur in New Zealand. The participating children were asked whether or not they had either directly or indirectly experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence at some time in their lives. Children were asked whether, within the past year, the violence happened to them and whether they had witnessed violence against others. The latter are events in which the violence was not directed at them, but was directed at others in their presence (e.g. family members, friends, peers, or others within their own communities). The children were also asked about their exposure to violence in the media, such as television, videos and movies.

To determine incidence rates, children who reported experiences of either physical, sexual or emotional violence were asked to indicate in the frequency ("ever happened") columns how many times they had experienced this form of direct or indirect violence within the last year. For example, if they had experienced two events, they wrote "2" in this column. If it had happened to them more than 10 times within the last year, they wrote "L", meaning "lots", in this same column to indicate their high number of experiences involving that particular form of violence.

The data, by their very nature, are skewed because the number of students who reported no direct or indirect involvement varied according to the type of violence (physical, sexual or emotional). For example, many children had not experienced any form of sexual violence. Rather than reporting the measures of central tendency, where the real average of the children who experienced violence will be deflated, the results for all single-response answers are presented as frequencies and valid percentages.

The participating children were asked whether or not they had ever experienced a variety of events that were or might have been harmful to them, and in particular, their experiences of direct and indirect physical, emotional and sexual violence. Their violent experiences were categorised according to: "Who did it?" (that is, whether the violence was committed by an adult or another child); "Where did it happen?" (whether the events occurred at home, school or in the community), and whether the events had "happened since Christmas" (that is, within the last year). The children rated the impact of these events on their lives.

This paper only reports on the children who said they had been exposed to some form of violence. The results showed high prevalence rates of physical, sexual and emotional violence experienced by New Zealand children within their homes, schools and communities.

Physical Violence

In the questionnaire, physical violence was defined as “being punched, kicked, beaten or hit, or getting into a physical fight (punch-up)”. Sixty-three percent of children reported having directly experienced physical violence at some time in their lives. Two-thirds reported having witnessed physical violence directed at other children, and nearly 90% reported having seen violence in the media. Although less common, still more than a quarter of the children (27%) reported witnessing violence against adults. (A later questionnaire item provided the participants with an opportunity to self-report their experiences as a perpetrator.)

The participants reported a range of direct experiences of physical violence. Some children simply described what happened to them (“I’ve been punched, grabbed by the throat and hung over a trellis and then thrown on the concrete”; “I have been hit by a steel bar”; “I get hidings all the time and some people hurt me”). When recounting their victimisation, some children identified adults as the perpetrators (“Kicked by somebody I don’t know because my dog went on their land”; “My family start to shout at me and beat me more if I don’t finish my homework”; “I got into a fight with my Mum and I hit her. Then she hit me with the broom and kicked me out of the house”). Others described being victimised by other children (“A boy that is at [name of school] beats me up on the way home”; “Some kids tease me and do wrestling moves on me and I’m getting scabs and bruises”).

These quotes illustrate the nature of the participants’ direct experiences of physical violence. The prevalence of direct violence was high, but the rates for witnessing physical violence in the media and against other children were even higher. While witnessing physical violence against adults was the least prevalent form of violence, the nature of that form of violence was severe, as described by a number of children. For example, “I saw people having a fight. Blood on walls and carpet. Screaming and yelling.”

Much of the witnessed physical violence against adults involved family members. Indicative comments were: “My Mum and her boyfriend always get in arguments and I’ve seen heaps of things get smashed”, and “I watched my Aunty and my Dad fighting with knives inside at night”. The majority of witnessed violence occurred in the children’s homes, but some children did describe witnessing family violence elsewhere. For example, “My Dad hurt Mum in town and made her mouth bleed”. The following quote reflects how children describe such events from a child’s perspective:

“In the Christmas holidays my family went away with our friends, but Dad wasn’t allowed to come because Mum had a something order out on him. But on the third day we were there Dad came because he needed to talk to Mum, and Dad and my Dad’s friends got in a big fight with me, all my sisters and the rest of the camp watching.”

New Zealand’s Domestic Violence Act (1995) defines hearing violence as a form of child abuse, and a number of children reported hearing rather than observing the violence that occurred. For example, one child wrote, “I woke up and heard fighting and banging the walls. I thought my Mum’s boyfriend was beating her up.” Another child said, “When my Mum and Step-Dad broke up they started hitting each other. I was in my room in bed.”

The most prevalent form of physical violence was watching violence on television, videos or movies. A prevalence of 90% suggests that most children living in New Zealand have witnessed violence on television, videos or movies. Most children simply described what they had watched: "I have seen someone get killed by a gun on TV", "Watching people on TV who are dying in hospital [from violence]", "Seeing people on TV drinking and being stupid and crashing". Movies specifically depicting family violence were frequently mentioned: "Well I watched 'Once Were Warriors' when Jake Heke had beaten Beth up and gave her a black eye and bruised her face." The children's developmental age was sometimes reflected in their descriptions of the movies: "When the Germans killed Jews in the war on TV. When you say candyman four times, he comes and kills you with a hook."

Children were also asked to report on the incidence of their direct and indirect experiences of physical violence within the past year. Incidence represents the number of times the children reported their experiences of physical violence "since Christmas" by either witnessing or directly experiencing it themselves. The data indicate that the majority of children had been exposed to either a small amount, or a lot of, physical violence, with the most frequent amount of exposure being in the "1 to 2 times" range (except for witnessing media violence). Witnessing physical violence on television, videos or movies was by far the most common form, with 66% of children reporting they had watched physical violence in the media more than 10 times within the past year.

Some children who reported experiences of physical violence also reported experiencing a range of different types of violent events. These events ranged from physical ("I've been hit with metal or any objects my parents pick up. My Dad abused my Mum when I was young") and sexual violence ("When I got beaten up and when I got chased by a man. When my sister got beaten up by my Dad and when my sister got raped"), to potential kidnapping ("Dad coming and trying to kidnap me. Mum and Dad fighting"). These children all described more than one victimisation, but some children reported multiple experiences:

"I have been followed by a man six times. I got taken off my Dad. Dad went to jail for beating my Step-Mum and assaulting her. I got punched by someone in my family. But I am not telling who. And my Mum is having a bad time at the moment at home."

The children knew their perpetrators in all except 3% of cases, involving strangers (e.g. when reporting violence that happened in the community). Most perpetrators were reported to be in the children's home or school environment, but other known adults, perhaps extended family members or family friends, perpetrated 15% of the violence against children. Siblings were the most frequent perpetrators of physical violence against children (29%). However, when "friends", "classmates", "other children" and "siblings" were combined into a single group representing all children, children committed 81% of physical violence against other children. These findings are consistent with the children's responses that 77% of the violence occurred either at home (36%) or school (41%).

Sexual Violence

In the questionnaire sexual violence was defined as "having unwanted sexual touching or being asked to do unwanted sexual things". The prevalence of sexual violence was much lower than for either physical or emotional violence. Of the children who answered this question, 192 children (11%) said they had directly experienced sexual violence in some form, 7% reported witnessing sexual violence against adults and 10% reported that they observed other children being asked to perform unwanted sexual activities or having

unwanted sexual touching. Most children's experiences of sexual violence were reported as being witnessed on television, videos or movies.

Children's descriptions of sexual violence mainly included reference to their direct victimisation ("My granddad was trying to kiss me but I pushed him away", "Me getting touched down there, being raped"). Sometimes other children were involved ("This man said if we don't run he will rape me. And getting a hiding"). Fewer comments were made about indirect (witnessing) of sexual violence, although one girl wrote: "When I had to watch my best friend made to drop her pants in front of a man and have him smash a beer bottle in her face". These quotes describe serious incidents of sexual abuse. Unlike physical and emotional violence, more adults (41%) were identified as perpetrators of sexual violence against children, with "other known adults" being the largest group of offenders at 19%, followed by strangers (13%) and parents and caregivers (9%).

For the children who directly experienced sexual violence, "once or twice" was the most frequently reported incidence, with 43% reporting a single incident within that year of data collection. A smaller minority (15%) reported experiencing sexual violence on a number of occasions ("lots").

Emotional Violence

Emotional violence was defined as being threatened, called names, ganged up on, left out, not spoken to, narked on, gossiped about, and "having tales told about me". First, children were asked whether emotional violence had ever happened to them as well as whether they had witnessed emotional violence against others. The data yielded high rates of prevalence for direct experience as well as for witnessing emotional violence against other children and witnessing emotional violence in the media. In this study, 88% of the participants reported witnessing emotional violence against other children and 80% reported directly experiencing emotional violence themselves. While not so prevalent, almost a quarter of the sample did report witnessing emotional violence against adults.

The participating children expressed a number of comments that support the quantitative data on emotional abuse. Their quotes could be categorised according to the types of emotional violence described in the CEVQ definition. First, children reported being threatened: "A boy is saying he is going to get me and my friends back for telling on him. He has hurt us before." Some of the threats were made by telephone (e.g. "I got a phone call and they said some scary stuff and they knew my name because they asked for me") or followed up by letter ("My friend rang me up and said mean things to me. Then she sent me a horrible letter that said I was a big show off"). Children also reported sexually explicit threats ("A boy threatened to rape me and threatened to kill me"). These quotes demonstrate the serious nature of some of the threats made against children.

Children predominantly described bullying-type incidents perpetrated by other children. Name-calling was a very common occurrence. Indicative comments included: "People tease me because I shake when I am nervous and they call me Shivery Shake"; "In my class there is a boy. He has been calling me names since last year"; "When my friend said I was a chicken by not climbing a tree"; "When I was playing basketball someone said that I suck". There were also instances of racial bullying: "A girl wouldn't let me sit by her because she said you are an Indian. I am an Indian. When I was with my friends and she said I am a piece of dirt."

Other children reported feeling ganged up on (“When I catch the High School bus they repeatedly trip me up because they like to see me hurt and all because I go to a different school”; and “When some boys in my class have been mean to me. They take my things and will not give it back to me”). Most of the comments applied to the school context, although the following quote reflects being ganged up on at home: “My brother’s friend shut me in a room and only he was in there”.

More often children reported being excluded in the playground (e.g. “Left out when I want to play games”, and “Name calling; nobody wants to play with me”). The term *relational aggression* defines many of the “ganged up on”, “left out” and “gossiped about” comments (“When my friends be nice to me one day and the next day they fight me or hurt my feelings”). Some comments were particularly abusive: “Being left out and being told that flies were hanging around me.”

The last phrase in the CEVQ definition of emotional violence comprised being gossiped about and the target of rumours. Children described a variety of reasons for why other children gossiped about them: “People get mean to me because my Mum goes out with heaps of men”; “My friends turned against me and are being very mean. They always have something to tease me about – like my teeth, what I look like, my reactions and who I hang around with”; “A girl spread it around the school that I liked a boy when I didn’t because she was jealous of me.” Less frequently, the emotional violence involved adults. Indicative comments to illustrate this form of emotional violence included: “Dad’s girlfriend yells at me and swears at me when Dad isn’t around for no reason”, and “People said I would be traded for a dog”.

An important finding is the high number of children ($n = 608$) who said they had experienced emotional violence more than 10 times in the last year, compared to the next highest number of children ($n = 204$) who said they had experienced emotional violence only once. Even when the numbers are combined to indicate children experiencing emotional violence once or twice within the last year ($n = 402$), more children experienced “lots” of emotional violence rather than one or two incidents. Recurrent episodes of emotional violence also occurred with children’s reporting of witnessing emotional violence, whether it was watching it happen to children, adults or in the media. More children reported witnessing over 10 incidents of emotional violence, with the next highest frequency being watching it happen just once. For example, 60% reported watching emotional media violence “lots”, compared to 21% who said they only watched it once or twice. Similarly, 45% of children reported witnessing emotional violence against other children more than 10 times within the last year, compared to 31% who witnessed this happen once or twice. When children described their own direct experiences, they reported that the majority (86%) of emotional violence was perpetrated by children (40% by friends and classmates, 31% by other children and 15% by their siblings).

Impact of Violence on Children

Children who experienced violent events were asked to rate the impact of those violent experiences. For all forms of violence (physical, sexual and emotional) a 1 to 5 Likert-type scale was used to measure the impact, with 1 indicating little or no impact and 5 indicating the highest level of impact. It is likely that children are affected by their experiences differently, and so are likely to rate the impact of similar events differently. To explore the impact of physical, sexual and emotional violence on children, t-tests determined whether

there were significant differences between the means of the impact variables (“happened to me”, “watched happening to other children”, “watched happening to adults” and “watched on TV, videos, or movies”). Similarly, t-tests were the most appropriate statistical test for comparing the impact of the different forms of violence.

All types of witnessing physical violence (against children, against adults and in the media) had more impact on children than their own direct experience of violence. Witnessing physical violence against adults and in the media both had more impact on children than witnessing physical violence against other children. Witnessing violence against adults, however, had more impact than witnessing physical violence in the media. The summary of the physical violence t-tests indicates that physical violence involving adults had the most impact on children. Most described the impact of family violence: “I have watched my Mum and Dad fight and I have been scared that they might break up and it is very frightening for me and my sisters”; “When my aunty’s boyfriend beats her it makes me afraid if I am watching”; “People screaming. I was scared when my Mum and her girlfriend were fighting and her girlfriend was hitting my Mum.”

While most reported feeling afraid, some children described how violent behaviour affected them in other ways, such as not being able to sleep or to get the incident out of their minds. For example:

“When my Mum and Dad had a fight and my Dad wouldn’t stop beating my Mum up and I can’t stop thinking about it, but they don’t do that any more and when my Dad yells at my brother and the way he speaks.”

Sometimes witnessing violence that involved the adults they love most posed a dilemma for children, as in the case of the child who said, “I’ve been scared when my Mum and Dad fight because I don’t know who to go to.”

Similarly to physical violence, witnessing emotional violence in the media and against adults had more impact on children than direct exposure to emotional violence. While witnessing emotional violence against adults and in the media also had more impact than witnessing it against children, witnessing emotional violence against adults had more impact than watching it in the media.

Sexual violence elicited some different results. Children reported their direct experiences of sexual violence as having more impact (in contrast to physical and emotional violence). Real-life sexual violence had more impact on children than watching it in the media. When comparing the different types of violence, the results indicate that while emotional violence was related to higher impact on children than physical violence, sexual violence had the most impact of all three forms of violence. Often disclosure about sexual violence involved the breaking up of the family unit. One girl wrote:

“I have been sexually abused and just had it sorted out and I had to move away from all my friends and family. My brothers always hurt me by calling me names about my weight and size.”

Another said, “My Dad went to jail for raping me.”

All types of violence involving adults were rated higher in terms of impact than violence involving children. When adults were involved in the event, it not only had more impact on

the child but also affected their coping strategies and decisions about disclosure. In most measures of impact, witnessing violence had more effect on children than direct exposure to violence. In all cases, witnessing the different forms of violence against adults had the most impact. Except for sexual violence, even watching violence on television, videos or movies had a greater impact than direct exposure to physical and emotional violence.

The regressions predicted different relationships, depending on the type of violence being analysed. More occurrences of physical and emotional violence increased its impact, but this was not significant in relation to the impact of sexual violence. Physical and emotional violence had more impact on younger children, whereas age was not a predictor for sexual violence. With the coping variables, the only significant predictor was that thinking they might have stopped it or made a difference increased the impact of physical violence. Slight relationships were found between the witnessing of violence and children's self-reporting of their own antisocial behaviour.

Contrary to expectation, the regressions found no relationships between children's experiences of physical, sexual or emotional violence and the decile rating of their school. This is an important finding because it indicates that school factors other than socio-economic ones can interact with children's experiences to reduce the impact of violence on children.

DISCUSSION

Comparison of the three types of violence revealed emotional violence to be the most prevalent form of both direct and indirect violence. Witnessing violence was more prevalent than direct violence, and a key finding was that, with the exception of sexual victimisation, witnessing violence against others was perceived by children to have more impact than violence directed at them. Even witnessing violence in the media was found to have a negative effect on children.

The reasons that children rated the impact of witnessing violence against others as greater than the impact of their own victimisation are difficult to explain. It is possible that children who had never experienced violence themselves were more upset when they witnessed violent events (even on television) and consequently rated it highly for its impact on them. Just as plausible, however, is the explanation that children rated very highly the impact of witnessing violence against someone they love. Thirdly, it is possible that violence witnessed against adults may have had a higher impact because this violence would have been exclusively perpetrated by adults, whereas the violence experienced by children was overwhelmingly perpetrated by other children. Thus the power of adult violence, in comparison to that wielded by children, may have strongly influenced the higher impact ratings.

The finding that witnessing media violence had more impact than witnessing violence against other children was contrary to expectations. It was thought "real life" violence would be considered more serious, in the same way that children perceived the impact of witnessing violence against adults. However, some children described their turmoil of feeling powerless to intervene when witnessing bullying, perhaps for fear of the bullies turning on them. As stated by this boy, "My friend got body slammed before my eyes and I was too weak to help him get up."

Apart from the small percentage of children who reported emotional violence perpetrated by adults (with indicative comments such as “Mum said she didn’t love me. I was sad”; and “Mum has been quite a witch, spelt with a B, and started screaming at me. I’ve tried suicide two times because of her”), the majority of the emotional victimisation could be described as bullying perpetrated by other children. Witnessing relational aggression among their social peer groups was a common form of bullying among these participants. Perhaps the level of impact was high because children were worried it would happen to them next time. Although witnessing emotional violence or bullying had more impact on children than direct experiences of bullying, many children also rated the impact of their own victimisation as high. For example:

“My friend said I was going to get a bash from a fifth former in College. It has been going on for ages but I’m still afraid. It’s stopped now but still I’m scared.”

The impact of emotional violence was increased if it happened at school and underscores the effect that school bullying has on children. This finding has important implications for teachers and schools, who have a legal responsibility to provide a safe learning environment, particularly when the impact of witnessing emotional violence was found to be associated with children’s perceptions of their school in relation to bullying and school safety.

Of the three types of violence, sexual violence was the least prevalent type experienced by children but stood out for being rated decisively higher on its impact. Incidence rates revealed a bimodal distribution, in that most children had either experienced a one-off event or many violent events (i.e. happening more than 10 times within the year of data collection. This finding raised the possibility that for some children the abuse was ongoing at the time of data collection and perpetrated by people they knew.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study identified a number of implications for children and their families, schools and policy. These implications guide the following recommendations. First, violence in society has many sources and requires systematic attention at many levels to reduce its prevalence and incidence. Media violence is the most prevalent form of violence in children’s lives. However, it is also the easiest to address and perhaps the main type of violence that can be prevented. Therefore the implications arising from this study are that parents should monitor what their children watch in the media, and policy makers should examine the types of programmes accessible to children. This conclusion stems from the finding that witnessing violence was a common experience of children, and one that was reported to have a significant impact.

The participating children reported high rates of both direct and indirect violence. Children should feel safe in their homes, in their communities and in their schools. Emotional violence was the most prevalent form of both direct and indirect violence. For many children in New Zealand, the conclusion can also be drawn that bullying is part of their childhood. This form of emotional violence was found to have a negative impact on their lives. Children rated the impact of emotional violence higher than that of physical violence, which suggests that the negative effect of emotional or psychological abuse has implications for schools in relation to bullying.

The study found that all violence involving adults had the greatest impact. This finding serves as a salutary reminder that children should not be placed in situations where they witness arguments and fights between adults. Witnessing violence involving adults also has more impact on children than violence directed at them. This finding highlights, in particular, the adverse effect of family violence.

Policies and programmes that could safeguard children are often based on statistical data that imply a particular need or reason to be concerned about the safety of children. But the number of children involved in family and domestic violence is masked, because it is seldom recorded statistically and, if reported, is usually only recorded in terms of broader family incidences. More accurate data (based on the findings of this study) that reflect the prevalence of children affected by violence could mean that positive government policies and programmes would be implemented to reduce children's experiences of violence. This study addresses these issues of prevalence and incidence of violence against children and provides a valid base from which parents, schools, communities, and professional and government agencies can work together to raise awareness of the impact of violence on children and make decisions about ways to protect them.

The level of children's exposure to violence in this country is relatively high. While the study revealed high prevalence and incidence rates, contextual factors often associated with violence were found to be of minimal practical importance in this study. The study revealed, however, that some of the participating children who experienced violence did not feel they had been well supported by adults. Children who were sexually victimised often chose not to disclose this. Friends were found to be the first line of support for children who did disclose their victimisation. Schools may therefore need to include a more formalised arrangement of peer support. By providing an empathetic and supportive environment, children may be more likely to seek support from adults instead of mainly confiding in their friends.

There is an immediate need for teachers and schools to confront the pervasive issue of bullying in New Zealand schools. Anti-bullying efforts will also be important for providing safe learning environments. Furthermore, as likely witnesses of bullying, peers should be taught to voice their disapproval and intervene. Findings indicate that negative peer interactions can worsen the impact of bullying, so children must be taught to respond appropriately. Schools may be able to intervene effectively to reduce violence if they acknowledge the problem and adopt school-wide philosophies.

While these suggestions make a difference in the lives of children, the study does not provide all of the answers to reducing and mitigating the effects of violence. There are no simple solutions because multi-faceted solutions are required. Government legislative change concerning the use of physical discipline of children, reductions in the portrayal of media violence, providing safe schools with supportive cultures, adult and child education programmes as well as all the other recommendations are not in and of themselves enough to significantly reduce violence against children. Nor can schools and the people who care for children be responsible for all of the ills of society. The challenge now is for the findings of this research study to inform the decision-making of policy makers, which is not easy with research involving children. Children have a different perspective and experience life differently from adults. This difference does not negate the validity of their perspectives and experiences, but as Jamison and Gilbert (2000) stated:

The problem for policy makers is how to understand and give recognition to children's experience of life – including family, school, and other aspects of public life that have an impact on them. This requires a commitment to involving children, learning about ways to involve them, and recognising both real and perceived barriers to their active participation in policy and decision-making processes. (p. 185)

The findings indicate a need to examine the complex interactions of variables that may buffer or exacerbate the negative effects of victimisation, and the literature highlights a variety of protective factors.

CONCLUSION

This study gained valuable insight into children's experiences through procedures that encapsulate children's perspectives about the nature and extent of violent events in their lives. The results acknowledge and support the controversial ethical decision to adopt a passive consent procedure and demonstrate the children's competence to understand the research requirements and their ability to express the ways in which violence has affected their lives. Sanctioned by the University Ethics Committee, the passive consent procedure employed in this study allowed more children to report their experiences of violence, and this procedure is recommended for future studies involving children. Valuing children's perspectives and recognising that they hold the most valid perception of their experiences as recipients and witnesses of violence may mean that adults are able to confront the problem in a way that is meaningful and acceptable to the children who have experienced violence.

The level of children's exposure to violence in this country is relatively high, and New Zealand appears to be a more violent country for children than was previously realised. The perceptions of the children in this study were that their experiences had a notable impact on their wellbeing. Furthermore, observation of violent events was rated as having a more powerful impact on children than their own victimisation. For many children the conclusion can be drawn that bullying is part of their childhood. Reporting the effects of their violent experiences highlighted the special vulnerability of children. Adults must assume responsibility to reduce our children's exposure to violence because New Zealand cannot afford the devastating effects of failing to protect its children.

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