

## Junior Secondary Guidance Officer – Anna Willis

### How intimate partner violence affects children's health



Childhood should be a happy and carefree time, but often it doesn't work out that way. Children are exposed to all the stresses and strains that affect the families and communities in which they grow up. Recent research shows this can have lifelong implications for health.

In a study conducted by our research group at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, we found one in three children (and their mothers)

in the study had experienced intimate partner violence or domestic abuse by the time the children in the study turned ten.

Findings from the same study, published today in the British Medical Journal's Archives of Childhood Disorders, show children exposed to intimate partner violence by age ten are two to three times more likely to have a psychiatric diagnosis and/or emotional and behavioural difficulties.

And it isn't just children's mental health affected, but their physical health and development too. We found children exposed to intimate partner violence were also two to three times more likely to have impaired language skills, sleep problems, elevated blood pressure and asthma.

### Mothers' and children's health are linked

Our research highlights the extent to which the health and well-being of mothers and their children are inextricably linked. In our paper published in BMJ Open earlier this year, we showed mothers who had experienced intimate partner violence in the ten years after the birth of their first child were three to five times more likely to experience anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress (PTSD) symptoms. And they were around twice as likely to experience back pain and incontinence.

This extra burden of ill health experienced by both women and children exposed to intimate partner violence compounds other social and economic challenges women face in trying to achieve safety for themselves and their children. It's critical women and children in need of support to heal and recover from the impact of intimate partner violence are able to access affordable and culturally appropriate health care.

Studies consistently show there are many barriers women have to overcome, including shame, fear of judgement, and cost and availability of health care and other support services in regional communities. For women whose first language isn't English, and Aboriginal women, there are extra cultural, language and systems-level barriers. Systems-level barriers include the persistence of cultural stereotypes, limited availability of language services, and experiences of discrimination when seeking care and support.



**Achieving the best possible outcomes**

While the type and severity of adversity may overwhelm some children, there's evidence individual skills (such as the ability to regulate emotions), relationships with extended family, and supportive school environments that foster a sense of belonging do support children's resilience. Communities, schools and health services all have important roles to play in fostering children's resilience and supporting mothers to access care for their children when needed.

Anyone at risk of family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault can seek help 24 hours a day, seven days a week, either online or by calling 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732). Information is also available in 28 languages other than English. If this article has raised issues for you or if you're concerned about someone you know, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or beyondblue on 1300 22 4636.

Read the original article (<https://theconversation.com/how-intimate-partner-violence-affects-childrens-health-159132>).