

A pink wireframe map of Australia is positioned in the top right and bottom left corners of the page. The map is composed of interconnected lines forming a mesh structure. Scattered around the map are various pink geometric shapes, including triangles and squares, some of which are semi-transparent. The background is white with a subtle pink gradient.

**LISTEN
TO HER.
ACT
NOW.**

**The
experiences
and impact
of child
abuse on
Australian
girls**

SUMMARY REPORT RELEASED
ON INTERNATIONAL DAY OF
THE GIRL 2023

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we come together to conduct our research and recognise that these lands have always been places of learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders – past and present – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their ongoing leadership in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence.

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We would also like to acknowledge project members on the wider study from which this summary report draws – Dr Hayley Boxall, Professor JaneMaree Maher, Professor Steven Roberts and Dr Kathryn Benier, as well as Kate Thomas who provided invaluable research assistance during the project establishment phase.

Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon led this project in her capacity as Director of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre. The Report findings are wholly independent of Kate Fitz-Gibbon's role as Chair of Respect Victoria.

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Introduction

There is increasing recognition across Australia and internationally of the significant harms and impacts of domestic and family violence, including child abuse, upon children and young people (see, for example, Haslam et al., 2023). Findings from the recently released Australian Child Maltreatment Study highlights the gendered nature of maltreatment, affecting girls at higher rates. This study lends further evidence to the detrimental effects on long-term outcomes for children, including an increased risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes, self-harming behaviours and suicide attempts (Haslam et al., 2023). These results reiterate the need to act now, with urgency and holistic, trauma-informed responses (Meyer & Fitz-Gibbon, 2022; Meyer, Fitz-Gibbon & Moore, 2022).

Simultaneously, and as a result of recent inquiries conducted at the state and national level (see, for example, Fitz-Gibbon et al, 2022c, 2022d; RCFV, 2016; Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, 2015; Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, 2021; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2021), there has been unprecedented policy and practice reform directly focused on the intersecting areas of children and young people, domestic and family violence, sexual assault services, and institutional response to child sexual abuse. The findings from these successive national and state-based inquiries have consistently concluded that system responses to children and young people have to date failed to meet the needs of young people, and that transformative reform is required. For example, in 2016 the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) recognised children as the 'silent victims' of family violence (see further O'Brien & Fitz-Gibbon, 2016). Fast forward five years and the consultations to inform the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (DSS, 2022, see Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022c, 2022d) documented the ongoing need for whole of system responses to children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right to form a central focus of the forthcoming plan. That Plan, released in late 2022, does included an acknowledgement of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right. This project joins a growing chorus of work that is calling on the Australian Government to ensure that commitment, to truly listen to children's voices and deliver child-centric responses to meet the needs of young victim-survivors, is realised within the lifespan of the National Plan.

While research in this area has developed significantly in recent years, particularly following the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study (Haslam et al., 2023), there remains a relative paucity of evidence on the range of abusive behaviours experienced by girls during childhood. Importantly, in the context of increasing awareness of the importance of learning from lived experience there is limited research in this field which draws directly upon the experiences of children and young people with lived and living experience of domestic and family, including child abuse. Released to coincide with the 2023 United Nations International Day of the Girl, this Summary Report seeks to contribute to that gap in current research.

Study design

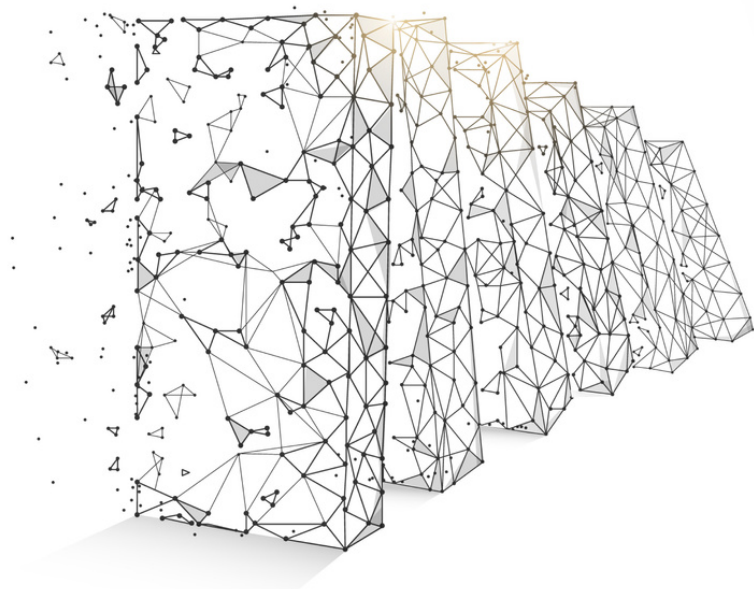
The wider study on young people's use and experiences of violence in the home (see Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a and 2022b) was conducted throughout 2021 and 2022, with survey data being collected through online research panels managed by Open Research Unit (ORU) during September and October 2021. Surveys were administered to young people living in Australia who were 16 to 20 years old at time of survey completion. Because the sample was recruited using non-probability protocols, the survey is not representative of the broader Australian population (16 to 20 years old). A total of 5,021 young people participated in the online survey. Participants were asked a series of questions of quantitative and qualitative questions including about their sociodemographic characteristics, their current living arrangements, their experiences and use of different forms of violence in the home, related impacts, disclosure experiences and support needs.

This summary report presents quantitative and qualitative findings from the survey responses received from participants who were assigned female at birth and identified as female at the time of the national survey data collection (n=3209). Of these 3209 participants 5% identified as Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander (n=166), 85% identified as Australian-born (n=2726), and 7.5% reported speaking a main language other than English at home (n=239). The mean age of girls who participated in the survey was 18 years old.

Survey responses were received from girls in each Australian state and territory with the majority of responses received from female participants in New South Wales (n=1754) and Victoria (n=1454). However, all other states were represented – Queensland (n=729), Western Australia (n=556), South Australia (n=315), Australian Capital Territory (n=102), Tasmania (n=53) and Northern Territory (n=12).

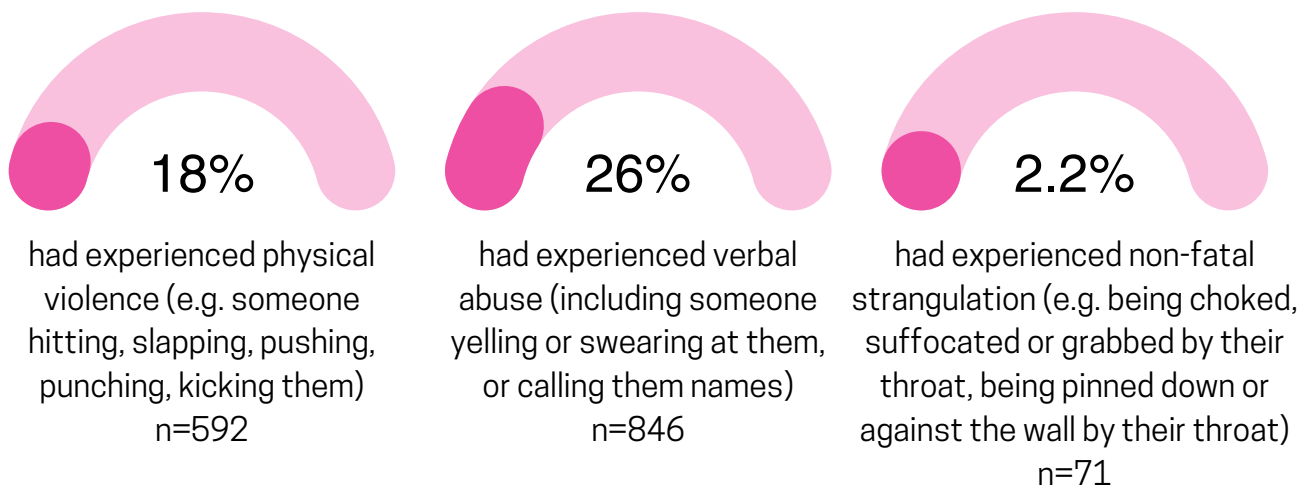
At the time of survey completion, the vast majority of female participants identified that they were living with family (n=2710), with only a small number of participants nominating other living arrangements, including living with friends (n=125), living on their own (n=106), and living in shared housing (n=182). There were 20 female participants that were living in temporary accommodation, 2 in crisis accommodation and 10 living in out of home care at the time of survey completion.

For further demographic details on the survey participants in the full national survey see Fitz-Gibbon et al. (2022a).



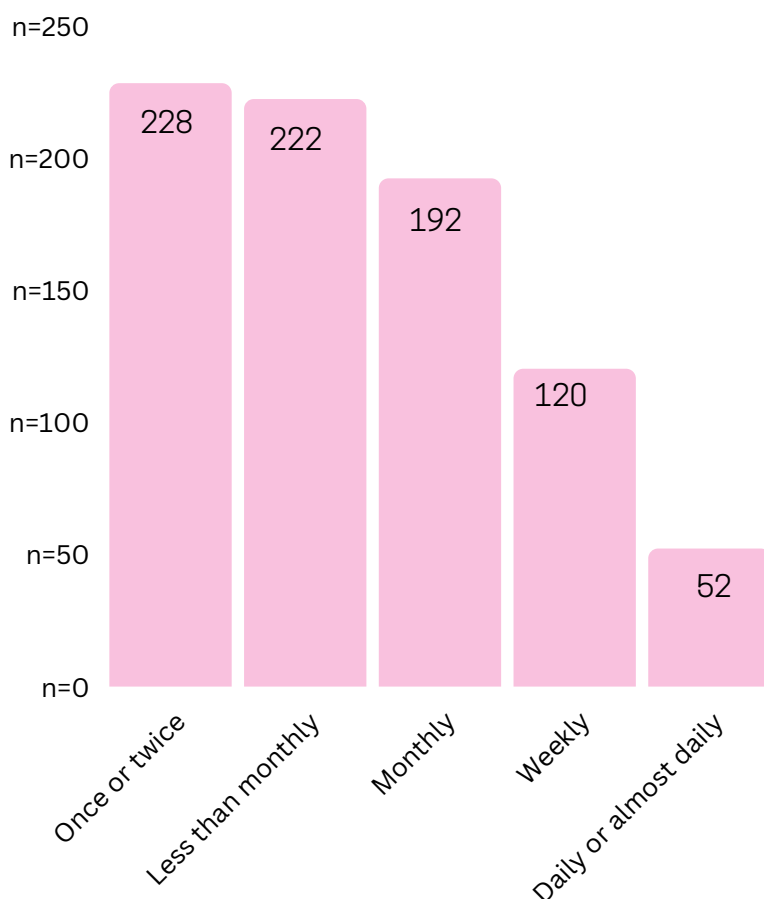
Australian girls' experiences of child abuse

Survey participants were asked about a range of different domestic and family violence victimisation experiences. For the purpose of this report, we focus on three forms of child abuse: physical violence, verbal abuse and non-fatal strangulation. Our analysis examines self-reported experiences of these forms of abuse, along with related impacts and disclosures. Of the 3209 female participants included in this report, 1,209 (38%) had experienced one or more types of abuse. Specifically:



In the following sections of the report, we present our study data on young girls' experiences of physical violence, verbal abuse, and non-fatal strangulation.

Experiences of physical violence



The survey invited participants to describe the frequency of the child abuse experienced. Of those 592 girls who had experienced physical violence from a family member during their childhood, the frequency reported is shown in the chart here (left).

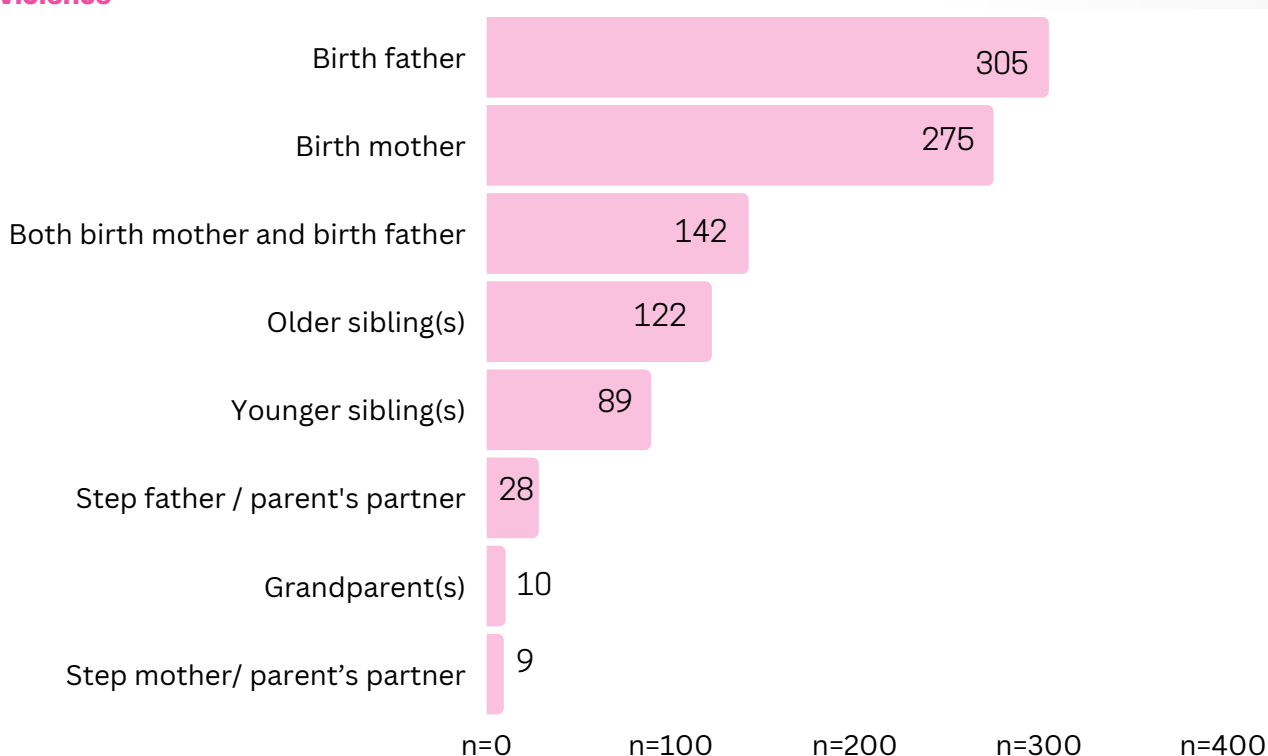
While many of the survey respondents who had experienced physical violence from a family member were unable to recall the age at which the abusive behaviour started, of those that were able to recall the age of onset, this ranged from 4 years old to 12 years old. 1 in 3 girls who had experienced physical violence during their childhood identified that it first started before they started school or during primary school.

Graph: Frequency of experiences of physical violence

Recognising the need to build greater understandings of who perpetrates domestic and family violence, the survey invited girls to identify who in their family had perpetrated physical violence against them during their childhood. Participants could select as many options as applied to their individual circumstances. Of the 592 girls who reported experiencing physical abuse, there were 1,002 perpetrators identified. This alerts to young victim-survivors' experiences of physical victimisation by multiple family members.



Graph: Relationship to the family member using physical violence



For 35 of the girls within this study who had experienced physical violence perpetrated by a family member during their childhood, that violence was reported to the police. Young girls described a range of outcomes of reporting, including that the family member was warned, fined, an intervention order was put in place or that no action was taken by the police.

While several participants did not cite who had reported to the police, of those participants that did, police reporting came from friends, neighbour, counsellor, child services, their mother, and another family member. There were a small number of girls that had self-reported to the police (n=6).

Beyond the police, young girls had disclosed their victimisation experiences to a range of different people, beyond immediate family members, including friend(s) (n=127) and teachers or school counsellors (n=41).

266 girls stated that they had not told anyone of their experience of physical violence by a family member during their childhood. Reasons cited for non-disclosure were diverse. Of those girls who had not told anyone, 15 per cent cited that they were afraid no one would believe them (n=41), and 34 per cent cited that they didn't think anyone could do anything to help them (n=90). Young girls were also concerned as to the consequences of disclosing their victimisation with 25 per cent citing that they did not disclose because they were afraid 'things might get worse' (n=66) and 30% citing that they didn't disclose because they didn't want to get the family member(s) using physical violence into trouble (n=80).

Critically, of those 592 girls in this study who experienced physical violence during their childhood 13% stated that they didn't understand what was happening to them was not their fault (n=79), and 15% stated that they didn't understand what was happening to them was wrong (n=91).

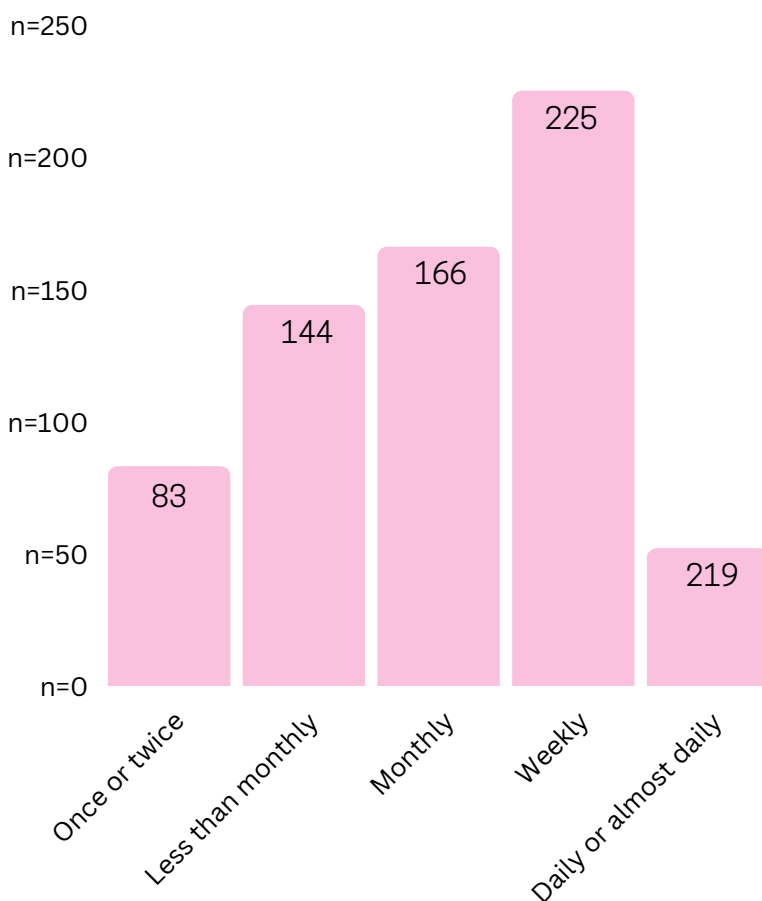


there's no one to talk to about this stuff because once you tell someone, what can they do?

My brother wasn't helpful as it was more of a subject to bond over rather than speak about.

least helpful was school counsellors as they were not understanding or compassionate.

Experiences of verbal abuse



Recent research has highlighted the detrimental effects of non-physical abuse on children (see, for example, Dube et al., 2023; Haslam et al., 2023). As noted above, in this study 1 in 4 girls had experienced verbal abuse (including someone yelling or swearing at you, or calling you names) from at least one family member during their childhood. Of these 846 girls, the frequency with which verbal abuse was experienced is captured in the graph here (left).

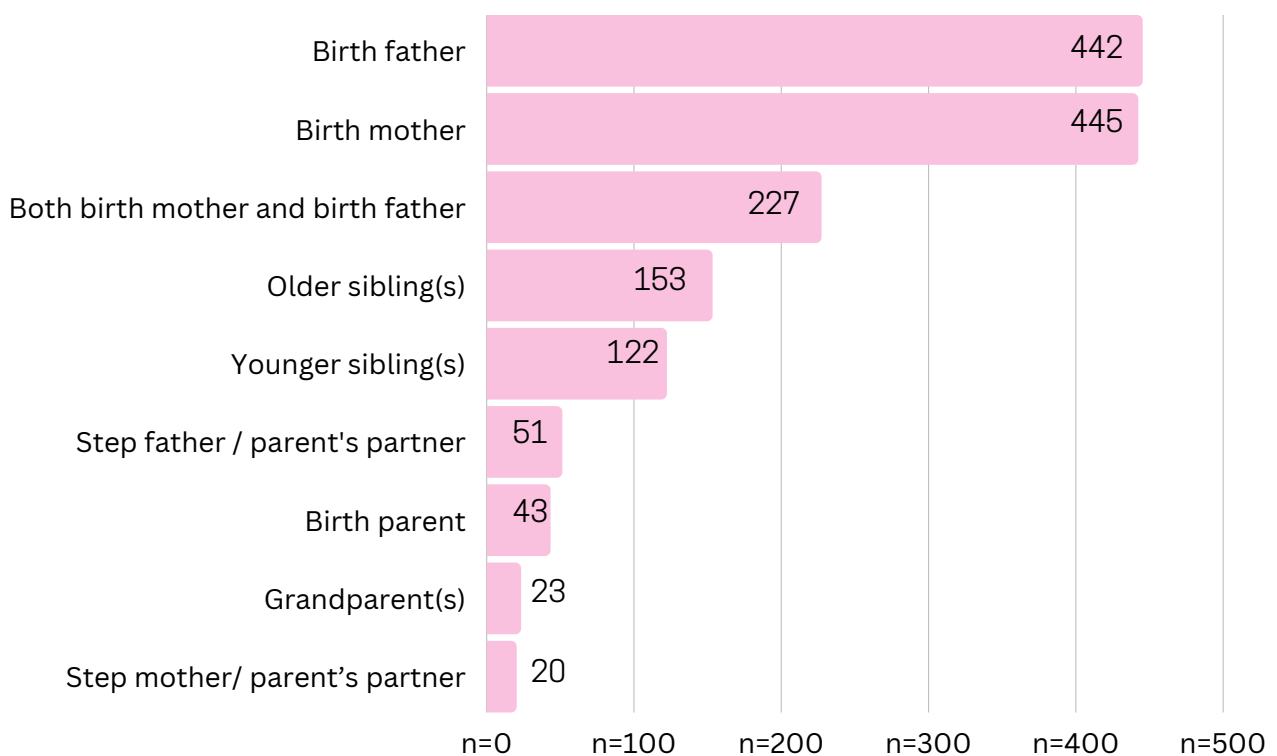
In contrast to acts of physical abuse, which were most commonly experienced once or twice in the lifetime of the participant, the frequency of verbal abuse was stark – with girls reporting that verbal abuse was most likely to be experienced on a daily or weekly basis.

Graph: Frequency of experiences of verbal abuse

Half of the girls who reported experiencing verbal abuse from a family member were 'unsure' of the age at which this abusive behaviour began (n=421). Of those that were able to recall the age of onset, 92 girls reported that verbal abuse from a family member was experienced from the time they were 5 years old or younger. By 10 years old, 29% of the girls in this sub sample had experienced verbal abuse from at least one family member (n=247). 117 girls recalled the age of onset of verbal abuse as between the ages of 11 and 14 years old, and 46 girls recalled the age of onset of verbal abuse as between the ages of 15 and 17 years old.

For the girls in our study, the perpetrators of verbal abuse within the family were diverse. Similar to perpetrators identified by victim-survivors who had experienced physical violence, the 846 victim-survivors of verbal abuse identified 1,526 perpetrators, further alerting to experiences of verbal abuse by multiple perpetrators.

Graph: Relationship to the family member using verbal abuse



Experiences of verbal abuse often co-occurred with experiences of the other forms of child abuse examined in this report. For example, of the 846 girls who had experienced verbal abuse perpetrated by a family member during their childhood, the following abusive behaviours perpetrated by a family member were co-occurring:

- 57% had also experienced physical violence (n=482)
- 8% had also experienced strangulation (n=65)

Tellingly among the 846 girls who had experienced verbal abuse perpetrated by a family member during their childhood there were no survey respondents who had not experienced at least one other form of child abuse, including those types of child abuse not examined specifically in this summary report but captured in the broader study (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a). This highlights the importance of understanding and recognising the co-occurrence of abusive behaviours.

Within the sample of girls who had experienced verbal abuse perpetrated by a family member, 43% stated that they had not told anyone about the abuse they experienced during childhood. Of those that did disclose their experience of child abuse to an individual outside of their family, they reported telling:

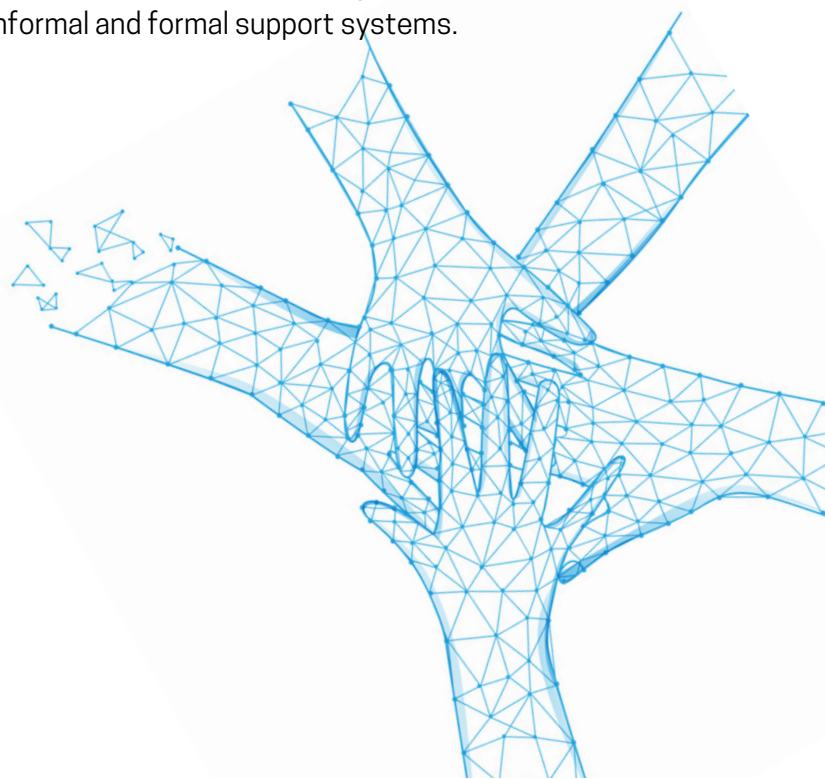
- a school counsellor and/or teacher (n=82)
- a friend (n=41)
- a grandparent (n=40)
- a youth supporter/counsellor (n=37)
- a child and youth mental health worker (n=33)

Disclosures to other immediate family members were substantially higher than for individuals outside of the family with 93 girls stating they disclosed to their brother, 146 to their sister, 187 to their mother, and 102 to their father. While this indicates some level of help-seeking within the family, it is important to note that despite 444 young girls reporting weekly or daily experiences of verbal abuse in this survey, disclosure rates and thus access to referral pathways and support services beyond family remained relatively low.

Returning to the 43% of girls that did not disclose their experience of verbal child abuse, through the survey we sought to better understand the reasons why young people do not disclose their victimisation. For those girls who had experience verbal abuse, among other forms of child abuse, we found that the reasons for not reporting related to:

- fear of not being believed (n=45)
- believing that no one could help (n=147)
- lacking understanding that what was happening was wrong (n=106)
- believing the abuse was their fault (n=90)
- fearing that disclosing would lead to worse experiences (n=93)
- not wanting to get the perpetrator into trouble (n=87)

These findings provide key insights into the reason why young people experienced DFV may not disclose their victimisation to support services. Building better understandings of the reasons why children and young people do not disclose their experiences of DFV during childhood is critical to addressing the barriers to help seeking across informal and formal support systems.

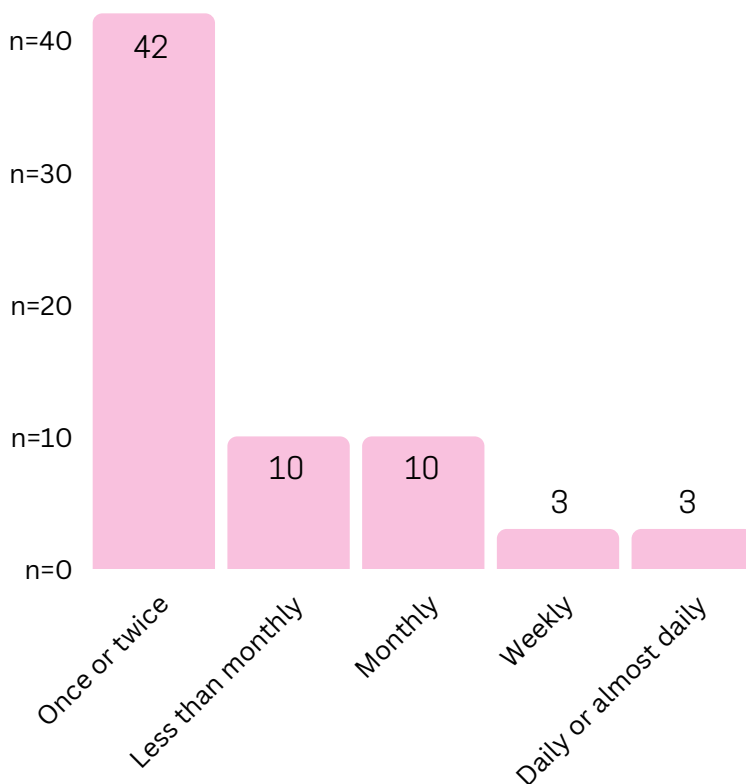


Experiences of non-fatal strangulation

There has been increasing attention over the last decade to acts of non-fatal strangulation. A growing body of research has examined the risk and impacts of non-fatal strangulation (see, for example, Bichard, Byrne, Saville & Coetzer, 2022; Monahan, Purushotham & Biegon, 2019; Valera et al., 2022; Victoire, De Boos & Lynch, 2022), the role of the criminal law in responding to acts of non-fatal strangulation (see, for example, Bettinson, 2002; Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2021, 2022; Reckdenwald, King & Pritchard, 2020), and the impact of violent pornography on the proliferation of strangulation/choking behaviours among children and young people (see, among others, Contos, 2023). In this study there were 71 Australian girls who had experienced non-fatal strangulation perpetrated by a family member.

Graph: Frequency of experiences of non-fatal strangulation

n=50



Over half of girls with experiences of non-fatal strangulation were unable to recall the age of onset. However, there were eight girls within this study that recalled an act of non-fatal strangulation perpetrated by a family violence occurring before they were 10 years old and 15 girls that reported that an act of non-fatal strangulation occurred during primary school.

Acts of non-fatal strangulation were most commonly perpetrated within the home by a parent, followed by an older sibling. Specifically, for the 71 girls who had experienced strangulation during their childhood, this abuse was perpetrated by:

- birth mother (n=22)
- birth father (n=29)
- younger sibling(s) (n=4)
- older sibling(s) (n=16)

Of the 71 girls who had experienced non-fatal strangulation perpetrated by a family member only six girls indicated that their experience had been reported to the police. This accounts for less than 10 per cent of cases (8.5%). Of the small number which were reported to the police a range of outcomes were reported, including subsequent court processes, and imposition of an intervention order.

Just under half of the girls who experienced non-fatal strangulation perpetrated by a family member disclosed that victimisation to someone (46%, n=33). Given the severity of the act perpetrated, the reasons for non-disclosure were particularly interesting here, with girls citing the following reasons for non-disclosure:

- Fear of not being believed (n=10)
- Didn't think anyone could help (n=13)
- Didn't understand that what was happening to them was wrong (n=10)
- Didn't understand that what was happening to them was not their fault (n=8)
- Fear that things might get worse if they disclosed (n=10)
- Not wanting to get the person who perpetrated the abuse in trouble (n=9)

This highlights that even where child abuse ranging at the severe, high risk end of abusive behaviours, victim-survivors may underestimate the severity and harm associated with the behaviour, experience feelings of self-blame and a sense of no one believing them or being able to help. Along with the high prevalence rates of other impactful abusive behaviours, such as physical and verbal abuse, this reiterates the critical need for child-centred interventions and awareness raising campaigns.

When asked what supports would have helped during their experience of child abuse, in line with the findings from the broader national study (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022b) the girls who had experienced non-fatal strangulation were strikingly modest in their help seeking requests. Common among qualitative responses provided was the need for a safe place, and an identifiable trusted adult to safely disclose to (on this, see also Fitz-Gibbon, McGowan & Stewart, 2023).



Talking to someone about it who told me it wasn't ok or normal.

A supportive school counsellor, somewhere to stay in moments of violence.

If I had never been born.

If someone had asked and actually done something rather than turn away when I needed them.

A safe place, someone who listened.

The impacts of family violence on Australian girls

As part of our broader study from which this sample report draws, we sought to better understand the impacts of victimisation experiences on children and young people's lives. This included the impacts of violence experienced among other family members during childhood, experiences of child abuse and the impacts of using violence towards other family members during childhood (see Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022a). That analysis revealed that the broader impacts of family violence on children and young people are significant and reach into all aspects of their lives, including emotional, physical, social, educational, and cultural impacts.

When focusing in on the impacts reported by girls in this study the descriptions of the wide ranging and multi-faceted impacts of that violence on their lives are similarly significant. Of the 3,209 girls who responded to the survey the following impacts of their experiences of violence in the home were recorded:

- 46% reported emotional impacts (n=1468)
- 14% reported physical impacts (n=456)
- 27% reported social impacts (n=855)
- 20% reported educational impacts (n=627)
- 7% reported cultural impacts (n=231)

The physical impacts of DFV experienced by girls in this study were varied, including injuries (including bruises, lacerations and scars), experiences of fatigue, panic attacks, binge eating, weight gain and loss, and insomnia. Numerous girls described presenting to a hospital to seek medical treatment for the physical impacts of their victimisation experiences.

I didn't really trust myself after. I felt like everything was my fault and the things that happened were all mine. It is continuing to take a long time to really understand that it wasn't a dream and it really happened, but the blame isn't all on me and I should just learn from it and forget it.

It has left me feeling scared every time, my dad is drinking or has anger issues. I always have to be careful of what I'm doing or saying all the time. Every time I think back on it, I cry.

I have hated my body and hated myself thinking it was my fault.

I flinch when someone moves, and I cry when someone raises their voice at me.

The trauma sometimes makes it hard to fall asleep as I can hear it in my head over and over.

Has taken a massive hit to my self-esteem and confidence, therefore not making me comfortable as myself which kind of translates into my social interactions - I don't have any permanent relationships in my life outside of my blood family, everyone else has kind of left.

I didn't interact with many people as I didn't want them to become too close to me and see what my life was like.

I was mute for a lot of my early life due to fear of saying something wrong and being punished for it.

There is a significant body of research which has documented the ways in which domestic abusers utilise social isolation as a strategy through which to control and enact further harm upon the victim (see, for example, Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Meyer, 2012, 2016). Less has been written, particularly with a focus on children and young people, on isolation as a longer-term impact of family violence. For the girls in this study isolation following experiences of child abuse and other experiences of family violence was a commonly identified social impact. Numerous young people described feeling isolated, and struggling to form trusting relationships including with family, friends and intimate partners. In some cases, social isolation occurred as an impact of low school attendance or school withdrawal (often linked to unresolved trauma experiences), while in other cases it was the result of social anxiety. For the girls in this study, social anxiety manifested in a range of ways including a fear of trusting people, inability to make and retain friends, difficult holding conversations, and inability to feel safe in crowded spaces. For some young people the decision to be isolated from friends was a deliberate one as a result of a fear that any friends may find out about their undisclosed victimisation experiences.

1 in 5 girls who had experienced forms of family violence during their childhood identified that it impacted their education. The educational impacts cited were wide ranging, including school absence, school withdrawal, lack of interest in school, inability to focus and concentrate during school, and impacts on academic achievement.

Recent research has drawn attention to the need to better understand the intersection between suicide and young person's experiences of DFV (Meyer et al., 2023). While the survey did not include a specific question on suicidal ideation or attempted suicide, in the open-text questions on the impacts of DFV during childhood a number of children and young people described their victimisation experiences as leading to self-harm, suicide attempts, and suicidal ideation (also described by respondents as suicidal thoughts).

Specifically, there were 31 girls who had experienced child abuse and cited suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts as an impact of their violence. This sub-sample of girls reported severe and often cumulative experiences of child abuse, including physical violence, verbal abuse, threats to harm and kill, sexual abuse, and/or strangulation.

“

Became a lot quieter, lost confidence and felt suicidal all the time.

My self-confidence plummeted, I hated who I was and constantly blamed myself for being abused. I'm so used to being punished that even if I didn't cause an accident I blame myself. I also became severely depressed and suicidal.

I have been suicidal since I was 6 years old.

Became a lot quieter, lost confidence and felt suicidal all the time.

The need for a national policy and practice shift

This summary report presents the voices and child abuse experiences of young girls in Australia, detailing their experiences of abuse within the home, and the impacts of family violence on their lives. The findings alert to the extensive experiences of abuse among Australian girls, along with diverse and often lasting effects of childhood victimisation experiences. Further, despite the harms associated with growing up with violence in the home extending well beyond childhood, help-seeking opportunities for young people remain limited.

The National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (DSS, 2022) includes two critical commitments that are highly relevant in addressing young people's experiences of child abuse victimisation, and their support needs – first the National Plan includes a much-needed acknowledgement of children as victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence in their own right (on this, see further Meyer & Fitz-Gibbon, 2022). This forms the critical basis to developing and delivering awareness raising and educational campaigns recognising children as victim-survivors in their own right along with the development and substantive funding of crisis and long-term recovery support for children and young people as help-seekers and service users in their own right.

Second, the National Plan includes four pillars which provide the overarching organisation for the National Plan and the commitments which stem from it. The four pillars are prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. As we have argued elsewhere (Meyer, Fitz-Gibbon & Moore, 2022), for too long Australian national and state system responses to children and young people experiencing different forms of abuse have seen children only as extensions of their primary carer, failing to recognise and adequately respond to the individual child's unique safety, support and recovery needs. Delivering on the ambitions of the National Plan's final pillar on recovery and healing is critically important to ensuring that the current generation of children and young people in Australia who have experienced or are currently experiencing violence along with its significant and often long-lasting impacts, are provided with the whole of system supports and services required to promote healing and recovery and disrupt the intergenerational transmission of family violence.

As noted by the Australian Child Maltreatment (Haslam et al., 2023), we have critical relevant evidence from multiple studies on children's experiences of violence in the home now and we can't afford not to act. We must listen to children and young people's voices and act now if we are to realise the National Plan's ambitious goal of ending domestic, family and sexual violence in one generation and support the recovery of those experiencing childhood abuse and other forms of family violence.



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