

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND FAMILY CONFLICT

CHILD AND YOUTH-CENTRED APPROACHES FOR PRACTICE

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Institute of Child
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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE NO.20/2018

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The Institute of Child Protection Studies Research to Practice Series links the findings of research undertaken by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, to the development of policy and practice in the area of child, youth and family welfare.

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RESEARCH PROJECT

Melbourne City Mission commissioned the Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies to conduct research on the relationship between family conflict and youth homelessness. The purpose of the research is to support improved approaches to working with young people and their families to resolve family conflict and prevent homelessness. To do so, it investigated how family conflict relates to, and impacts on, youth homelessness.

The research team undertook qualitative research with young people, parents and carers, as well as with practitioners who work with young people and families. This research conducted seven focus groups, including three groups of young people who had experienced (or were at risk of) homelessness, three groups of parents of young people with an experience of family conflict; and one group of Melbourne City Mission staff working with young people and families experiencing conflict or homelessness. Participants included 21 young people aged 16 to 24 years, eight parent/guardians, and 10 staff from Melbourne City Mission, including managers, case workers, social workers and youth workers. The findings focused on three areas; how family conflict is understood and experienced, the sources of family conflict, and the circumstances in which family conflict turns into homelessness.

You can find the full report here:

[http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/1402152/Roche S and Barker J. 2017. Youth homelessness and its relationship with family conflict - FIN.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/1402152/Roche_S_and_Barker_J._2017._Youth_homelessness_and_its_relationship_with_family_conflict_-_FIN.pdf)



HOW IS FAMILY CONFLICT EXPERIENCED AND UNDERSTOOD BY YOUNG PEOPLE?

The research found two types of inter-related family conflict common to experiences for families with young people who had been, or were at risk, of homelessness:

1. Overt and situational

'Overt and situational' family conflict refers to expressive and evident actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature. They are 'overt' in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the situational context in which they occur.

"When I have conflicts with my family... they'd rise up to violence. My mum would start yelling and then my brother and sister would get involved. Then because I didn't fight, they'd beat up on me until I fought back" (Young Person).

This could include; verbal aggression, arguments, disagreements, criticism, or negative communication, as well as violence or passive aggressive or negative body language.

2. Latent and on-going

'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict underscoring family life. Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance or incident of 'overt and situational' conflict and is typically ongoing in nature. It is frequently experienced in discreet and implicit forms of family functioning, feelings and generalised atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict.

“So that's what conflict is, pretty much; just not being able to escape that constant atmospheric negativity that just has an impact on how you feel as a person. [It] just drives you mental because it just makes you think that the world is just nothing but a place of crap, pretty much” (Young Person).

This could include; unresolved tension and conflict, a family atmosphere of mistrust, hostility or negativity, feeling unsafe or uncomfortable, or an absence of warmth, care and consideration in family life. The relationship between overt and situational conflict and latent and on-going conflict is complex and interrelated. Characteristics of both types of conflict can exist in the child and young persons and families life simultaneously, however often family conflict begins as latent and ongoing, and over time manifests into ‘overt and situational’ forms of conflict.

Practitioners: use the research to support recognition and validation of experiences of family conflict with young people and their family throughout your practice. Consider the following child-and youth-centred practice actions:

Identify and discuss

1. Using the definitions provided above, investigate the types of family conflict that your client is experiencing.
2. Explore the types of family conflict experienced by your client.
3. Discuss the impact of family conflict with your client in relation to their wellbeing.

Act

1. Validate and confirm the family conflict described by your client.
2. Work to identify and engage a range of services that may make a difference.

Reflect – Have I...

1. Placed the experiences of children and young people at the centre of actions, decisions or plans?
2. Ensured the child or young person is aware of what is happening and been provided with the opportunity and necessary supports to express their views and wishes?

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF FAMILY CONFLICT?

The study identified sources of family conflict occurring at three levels: (1) micro – individual, (2) meso – familial; and (3) macro – socio-cultural. These levels detail the range of influences on family conflict and show how each source of family conflict is interlinked and relates to family conflict. Micro (individual) sources of family conflict refer to the types and experiences of conflict involving incidents, events and behaviours that lead to ‘overt and situational’ conflict. These sources mostly pertain to the actions and behaviours of individuals who are directly involved in the conflict itself.

“Yeah, you feel like you're talking to a brick wall, it just gets you frustrated and it's going to start an argument” (Young Person).

Meso (familial) sources of family conflict refer to underlying family functioning and the home environment that can lead to family conflict. These sources of family conflict have an indirect relationship to family conflict, yet have a strong influence over the environment and conditions in which conflict manifests. This category draws attention to how problematic family relationships can be an organising principle of the family. These sources of conflict typically pertain to pervasive and ongoing behaviours and functioning of a family, which can be understood more broadly as family cultures.

“It’s about trust I reckon. Sometimes when your family loses trust in you they don’t want to support you because they’ve lost that trust. You just spin-out” (Young Person).

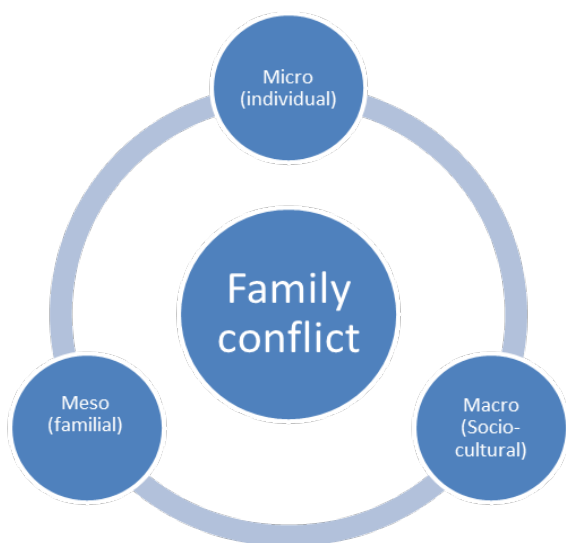
Macro (socio-cultural) sources of conflict are the structural stresses on families, the social conditions in which conflict manifests, and the impact of intergenerational trauma and family dysfunction.

“...all this social disadvantage and poverty and social media, they are all there but... what is missing is a real connection, which stems from the early attachment and it goes through later on.” (Staff).

The following table details the three levels of family conflict and the source of that conflict for participants.

CATEGORY OF CONFLICT	SOURCE OF CONFLICT
<p>Micro (individual)</p> <p>Incidents, events and behaviours that cause family conflict.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Routine conflict and general disagreement - Conflict and tension over behaviours such as; chores, or the use of internet/social media - Verbal aggression and conflict including arguments and criticism - Violence
<p>Meso (familial)</p> <p>Family functioning and home environments that cause family conflict.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conflict as an organising principle of family life -Disintegration of trust in family -Absence of love in family -Strong feelings of abandonment
<p>Macro (socio-cultural)</p> <p>Structural and historical stresses, social conditions and community level influences on family conflict.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Poverty and financial marginalisation -Unemployment -Unstable housing -Family histories and experiences of dysfunction and trauma -Contexts of mental illness and substance abuse

The model below highlights the multidimensional factors of family conflict and can be utilised for practice and policy purposes. It demonstrates the range of influences on family conflict, and the relationship between multiple sources of family conflict. It also highlights the varied iterations of family conflict and the multiple points in which interventions with families might be possible.



Practitioners: use the research to support an understanding of the sources of family conflict in your practice and explore with your clients what is behind family conflict.

Consider the following child-and youth-centred practice actions:

Identify and discuss

1. Discuss with your client the sources of the family conflict that they are experiencing.
2. Using examples, discuss with your client the sources of family conflict across each domain (pg. 4 - Micro, Meso and Macro).
3. Explore with your client how these sources are linked to family conflict in daily life.

Act

1. Act with your client to reduce the impact of these sources of family conflict.
2. Persevere to engage with the family even where resistance is encountered.

Reflect – Have I...

1. Considered the likely effect on the child or young person of changes to their circumstances, including separation from a parent or anyone else whom they have been living with?
2. Identified parental and family strengths, and supported them to meet the child or young person's needs?
3. Identified how the parent's problems may be affecting their parenting capacity, relationship with the child or young person and capacity to provide their needs?

Be aware of!

1. Regularly seeing the child or young person one-on-one and being vigilant to parental resistance to requests.
2. Ensuring the child or young person and their family understand the youth justice process and their role, responsibilities and rights in the process.

WHAT ARE THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH FAMILY CONFLICT CONTRIBUTES TO HOMELESSNESS?

The report explored the scenarios in which family conflict turns contributes to homelessness. Young people largely reported feeling pushed into experiences of homelessness, based on a range of factors. Young people detailed that leaving home was a highly considered decision, typically in response to ongoing family conflict, and the observation that their family situation due to conflict was markedly different from other families. One of the most significant factors was if family conflict was ongoing and without a foreseeable conclusion.

“...you kind of just get to that point where you're like... I need to put myself in a [different] situation - I'm not happy. I'm not safe. You just see yourself slipping into this really awful, really dark routine that you don't want to be in anymore....It's like it's been years and months of constant awfulness and conflict. You just get to that point where you're like, I need to leave. This needs to happen... If something doesn't change, then it's just all going to get worse” (Young person).

Another factor relating to significant and ongoing experiences of violence, abuse and neglect relates to experiences of violence and substance dependence in the family home.

“...my parents did drugs, alcohol, all that crap, physical abuse, so I grew up in and out of different foster homes and I was living with some pretty shady people. So that's what got me doing stupid shit and illegal stuff, because the people that lived, that's how I grew up. I grew up around that stuff” (Young person).

In addition, for young people, observing other families enjoying each other's company, spending time with each other and communicating effectively provoked a realisation of their own family's dysfunction and poor relationships. These observations allowed young people to reflect on and assess their own family's dysfunction and conflict.

“For me one time I went to an ex-girlfriend's house over the weekend and then this one day I just kind of like broke down because seeing how her family interacts, you know, they look like a real family... it kind of gave me the feeling of warmth...” (Young person).

Young people described their decisions to leave home as a highly considered one, taken over a long time. For participants, their experiences of family conflict reached a 'tipping point' in which homelessness became a more attractive living scenario.

“You kind of think - I remember doing this; I was just weighing it in my mind. Like is the warmth of my bed at night worth all of this? Or is a roof over my head worth all of this? It's weighing the options, in a way” (Young person).

SUMMARY

Policy and practice can benefit from improved understandings of how family conflict is experienced and understood. Participants in this research revealed their experiences and understandings of family conflict. Among all participants, conflict was a fixture of family life and relationships, but was experienced in different ways, in different times and contexts. Experiences of family conflict were grouped into two categories; 'overt and situational' and 'latent and ongoing' (see page 3).

'Overt and situational' family conflict refers to expressive and demonstrable actions and behaviours that are antagonistic in nature. They are 'overt' in that they are explicit forms of conflict, largely identifiable as conflict, have an immediate impact on participants, and are often based on the situational context in which they occur. 'Latent and ongoing' family conflict is accumulated and unresolved conflict underscoring family life. Experiences of 'latent' conflict occur beyond the instance or incident of 'overt and situational' conflict and are typically ongoing in nature. It is frequently experienced in discreet and unapparent forms of family functioning, feelings and generalized

atmosphere of family life, often not yet manifested into 'overt and situational' forms of conflict. These definitions can be utilised in practice to provide a name and lens to view and understand family conflict that is not otherwise recognised or explicitly identifiable. This is valuable particularly for young people and parents who struggle to identify and define their experiences of family conflict in all of its forms and can find it hard to justify or identify their feeling of being unsafe, unwanted, and uncomfortable.

Practitioners: use the research to support your practice to prevent or limit homelessness for young people experiencing family conflict. Consider the following child-and youth-centred practice actions:

Identify and discuss

1. Discuss and reflect with the child/young person the circumstances in which family conflict is impacting on their homelessness.

2. Discuss ways to minimise the impact, and what this might look like.

Act

1. Assist to reduce the impact of the circumstances leading to experiences of homelessness.

2. Support young people's highly considered decisions.

3. Ensure that where the children or young people cannot return home safely, plans are made in a timely manner and are culturally appropriate.

Reflect – Have I...

1. Ensured linkage to services and supports as early as possible.

2. Ensured that where a child or young person is in imminent danger, immediate action is taken in line with legislative requirements, policies and procedures.