



Children & Family Violence

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What is family violence?

Definitions vary but usually include tamariki or rangatahi

- seeing
- hearing
- intervening in, and/or
- experiencing the effects of

physical or sexual assaults, or verbal abuse, between their parents or caregivers.

NZ family violence statistics*

How common is family violence in Aotearoa?

- NZ has very high rates of intimate partner violence, compared with other OECD nations.
- Most of this violence (70%) occurs in households with tamariki.
- Two of NZ's longitudinal studies (The Dunedin, and Christchurch Health & Development) found that between 24% and 40% of participants reported threats or actual violence by a parent, while they were growing up.
- There is widespread agreement that the rate of family violence is under-reported.

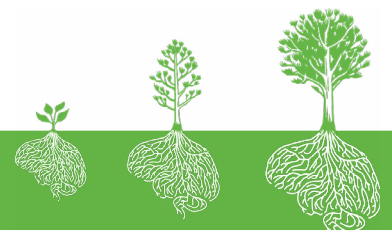
*See article below for references

NB Statistics vary depending on definitions and research methods.

Family violence during pregnancy

Women are more likely to experience family violence when they are pregnant, than at any other time. Possible effects on pēpi include:

- being born prematurely, low birth-weight or small for gestational age, increasing the risk of later poor health
- exposure to their mother's increased stress hormones can change how the genes involved in brain development work
- miscarriage of pēpi
- death of the mother
- challenges in the mother-pēpi relationship.



Possible effects for tamariki

Negative effects can occur in many areas, including:

- cognitive ability (e.g. ability to learn)
- brain development and function
- social skills (e.g. making friends)
- emotional well-being (e.g. mental health challenges)
- physical health (e.g. eating and sleeping difficulties)
- school attendance & achievement (e.g. staying home to protect their mother)
- intergenerational cycles of violence.

Exposure to family violence can affect tamariki brain development

This includes:

- physical changes in the developing brain, including the way genes responsible for the stress response system are expressed
- the HPA (Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal) axis, part of the stress response system can become dysregulated due to the stress tamariki experience. Brain and behavioural changes can be helpful responses in a highly stressful situation, but create difficulties for tamariki in other environments (e.g. learning to tune out noise may be helpful at home, but make it hard for tamariki to learn at school).

Protective factors

Protective factors, which increase the chance of tamariki doing well, include:

- family support (e.g. stable connections with caring adults)
- school support (e.g. warm and caring relationships with teachers)
- skilled professional support, as needed.

The more protective factors tamariki have, the more likely they are to develop in healthy ways.

Individual differences

Tamariki are unique and will be affected differently, even when their experiences seem similar. Some things influencing these differences are:

- genes
- gender
- age
- severity and amount of exposure
- other risk, and protective, factors.

Points to note

- Violence, but also the *threat* of violence, is harmful to tamariki.
- Tamariki do not have to see violence occurring, to be harmed by it.
- Tamariki do not always show the effects of family violence immediately. There can be a 'silent period' of months or years.
- Anyone can be affected by family violence, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, or income.

To sum up

- Tamariki, of any age, can be harmed by exposure to family violence
- The consequences can be life-long, affecting many areas of their development and wellbeing
- Tamariki have better outcomes when family violence is identified early, and appropriate support provided.

Glossary of te reo Māori words:

pēpi – baby, infant
rangatahi – adolescents
tamariki – children

Want to know more?

See this article for more details, and references:
Family Violence: children get hurt

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/family-violence-children-get-hurt/>

