



Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) is a community based organisation that has been actively assisting single adults, young people, families and children and the elderly who have experienced homelessness and or family violence or at risk of homelessness and family violence since 1989. People accessing MOSS experience a range of support issues including family violence, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, serious physical health issues and low education levels. The service strives to work together with clients to assist them to overcome their personal issues and barriers to social, emotional and financial independence.

"I used to live in a house. It was scary because my step-dad kept on hurting me, lashing out on me, blaming me for everything. He used to hit me with the potato-masher, meat tenderizer, a pot on the head. It was hurting and everything. I wished I could have stopped things. I tried to stop him hurting my sisters but he told me to go away/ shut up or he'd hurt me again" ██████, 10 yearsⁱ

For many years it was believed that children could just bounce back from adversity. We know that this is not the case. Children have a unique experience of family violence and this experience is very different from that of adults. Family violence has harmful, immediate and long term effects on children. Children who experience violence have significant trauma responses. In fact the severity of the impact of family violence on children is similar regardless of whether they witness the violence or experience the violence directlyⁱⁱ. Children always experience the violence whether they saw the physical violence or not; they experience the controlling behaviours, the aggression, the anger, the fear and the loss of their mother's emotional availability.

Family violence is inextricably linked to homelessness, and for the most part children who experience homelessness will experience it due to fleeing family violence. For children homelessness is not just about having a home to live in, it is about feeling unsafe, about being disconnected from supports and not having a sense of security.

Children aged 0-17 are heavily overrepresented in the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) sector, with 29 percent of those accessing support aged 0-17 and 17 percent aged 0-10. Over 70 000 children aged 0-17 were supported by SHS sector in 2011-2012.ⁱⁱⁱ Of the children accessing SHS, it is estimated that up to 60 percent have experienced family violence^{iv}. This is reflected in a snapshot of MOSS clients which showed that children make up 60% of those accessing MOSS and 64% of these children have experienced family violence. This data identifies a significant issue, as the current estimated cost of not assisting children in homelessness services each year is approximately \$1billion^v.

The homelessness and family violence sectors have historically focused on the needs of parents. Consequently children have not been seen as clients in their own right, rather an addition. This is reflected in the level of service provision given to children. The needs of children have been perceived as secondary and assumed to have been resolved when the crisis issues for adults were addressed. The trickledown effect of this response has permeated the homelessness and family violence sector. Children are often referred to as 'accompanying children', and this implies that children's needs are less important to those of the adult and homogenous with theirs. A cultural shift to considering the needs of children and their best interests is vital to change the practice of working with children within the homelessness and family violence sectors. We need to provide individualised trauma recovery interventions in an attempt to reduce cumulative harm and trans-generational homelessness^{vi}.

There is irrefutable evidence demonstrating the impact of homelessness and family violence on the wellbeing of children. If children's early life experiences are characterised by chaos, persistent fear and stress, they learn coping mechanisms such as defiance, withdrawal and avoidance. This can in turn impair young children's ability to regulate emotions and form healthy relationships^{vii}.

MOSS is similar to other homelessness agencies in the way that support is provided, but we have always acknowledged the importance of working with children.



The North West Children's Resource Program (NWCRP), managed by MOSS has been instrumental in advocating for the needs of children across the service sector. Identifying and addressing the systemic and structural limitations that impact on effective service responses on children experiencing homelessness and family violence in Victoria.

Bright Futures is a Homeless Children's Specialist Support Program managed by MOSS funded under NPAH. It is one of four programs across the state. In addition to the case management support, therapeutic support is provided which supports children to feel empowered and gain back control of their lives by drawing upon a child-centred approach.

Bright Futures conducts comprehensive assessments and develops goal-oriented case plans with both the carer and child that include typical case management support in areas such as advocacy, education/learning, sport and recreation, health and social needs. In this way MOSS helps children to repair broken attachments and build resilience. In doing this early intervention work directly with children we help to ensure that they are well linked to education and the community to prevent them being adult users of the service system. Early intervention work with children can help to reduce the likelihood of them becoming perpetrators of violence in the future.

By working with children directly it gives parents a space to be able to work through their own issues and rebuild their own lives. We work at holding the family together through crisis and help rebuild the family unit and repair relationships.

To be able to effectively work with children, professionals should all have regular training on the dynamics and impact of family violence, in particular in relation to the impact on children.

It is a fundamental right of all children to be seen as clients in their own right. To equally participate and be included in their individual assessment and case plans. Successful participation and inclusion of children allows equal access, opportunities, values, policies, attitudes, practices and resources that support every child. It explores a child's sense of belonging, and helps children to contextualise what's happening to them, and explore their journey.

To break the intergenerational cycle of homelessness and family violence, there must be a continuation of care on a longer term basis to effectively respond and support children.

There is increasing recognition that large-scale social change comes from better cross- sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organisations. NWCRP and Bright Futures work in collaboration with agencies across the sector to ensure the best interests of children experiencing family violence. This ensures that the child is a client of the service system rather than the organisation and ensures continuity of care.

CASE STUDY

■■■■ is a ■■■■ year old single mum with two boys ■■■■ and ■■■■. ■■■■ was referred to MOSS after fleeing years of family violence. At the point of referral she was living in her car with ■■■■ and ■■■■. At night she would park at a populated car park as it felt safer. The family would eat take-away and ■■■■ would help the children with their homework. ■■■■ and ■■■■ would go to sleep but ■■■■ would stay awake all night, the police told her that as long as she was awake she wouldn't be moved on. Once the kids were at school she would find a place to park and sleep, knowing that the next night she would have to do it all again.

■■■■ had contemplated leaving her husband many times, she sought advice from her religious advisor, who told her that she was married for better or worse and by leaving she would be going against god and bring shame to her family, so she stayed. ■■■■ endured many more years of abuse with the attacks escalating in



their severity. Her husband became paranoid and was using ice; he started sleeping with a gun under his pillow. ■■■■ knew she had to leave to protect her children, but where would she go?

She turned to her family for support but they told her if she left she would bring shame to their family and that they would not support her. So ■■■■ left her husband and entered the homelessness service system. She had a few friends that allowed her and the boys to shower after school, but they had to make sure that they were gone before their husbands got home. ■■■■ was on her own.

When the MOSS outreach team started working with ■■■■ it was clear that living in the car was having an extremely negative impact on ■■■■, ■■■■ and ■■■■. They were overweight and eating take-away food every night was contributing to their health concerns. The boys were engaged with school but it was getting harder and harder for them to concentrate after sleeping in the car, emotionally it was also taking its toll. The Outreach Team completed a children's wellbeing assessment for each child and this highlighted a number of complex needs that needed to be addressed to assist ■■■■ and ■■■■. The Outreach Team, whilst immediately focusing on the families housing issues, also referred the boys to the Bright Futures Program who worked with them for 6 months. During this time Bright Futures worked with ■■■■ and ■■■■ to explore the emotional impact of their experiences. It was hard at first for the boys to trust workers, but the consistent visits to home and school helped the boys to open up. Bright Futures also worked with the school to ensure that the boys were being supported and extra help was provided to help them with their school work. ■■■■ and ■■■■ also joined the Bright Futures Therapeutic Group in which they were able to further explore their experiences through the group setting. This helped them to understand that there were other kids just like them. The Brokerage Program managed by the North West Children's Resource Program was able to provide funding for the boys to engage in swimming lessons which helped to address their weight issues.

The Outreach Team worked hard to secure ■■■■ a property through 'A Place to Call Home' and once the family was settled ■■■■ was able to attend a training course. ■■■■ was able to secure a job following the course and the family was doing well with the boys still engaging with regular counseling. ■■■■ still checks in with MOSS from time to time to let us know how well she is going.

ⁱ Victorian Statewide Children's Resource Program (2013) Through a Child's Eyes" Children's Experience of Homelessness and Family Violence

ⁱⁱ Kitzmann, KM, Gaylord, NK, Holt, AR & Kenny, ED (2003), 'Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence: a Meta-analytic Review', Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, vol. 71, issue 2, pp. 339- 352

ⁱⁱⁱ Homelessness Australia (2013) Homelessness and Children Factsheet accessed at http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/images/publications/Fact_Sheets/Homelessness_and_Children.pdf

^{iv} AIHW. (2013). *Specialist Homelessness Services 2012-13*. Canberra: AIHW.

^v Commonwealth of Australia. (2008). *The Road Home: A national approach to reducing homelessness*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

^{vi} Keys, D. (2009). *Children and Homelessness: Literature Review*. Melbourne: The Salvation Army Australia Southern territory.

^{vii} Perry, BD (2005). 'Maltreatment and the Developing Child: How Early Childhood Experience Shapes Child and Culture', paper presented to The Margaret McCain Lecture Series, London, Ontario, Canada