

Office of the Senior Practitioner

Challenging attitudes in the assessment of safety for children who experience domestic violence

Presentation by Kate Alexander, Senior Practitioner,
Department of Communities and Justice



How we will use our time:

- Why this research?
 - How did we do it?
 - What did it find?
-





**A knowing in the
bones that the
work matters**



CONTENT WARNING

This presentation contains information that may be distressing to individuals who have been impacted by child protection themes. The content of this presentation may discuss topics such as child abuse, neglect, Stolen Generations, and other related issues that could potentially evoke strong emotional responses.

Please seek support from a trusted individual or professional if you need it.



Jennifer, Olga and Jack Edwards

A story of attitudes

The media said:

Shocking; the father kills the boy and daughter after being divorced by his wife

Sydney mother's death following domestic violence tragedy leaves community reeling

The police said:

the POI has only made 3 separate attempts to contact the victim ... an AVO will be sufficient

The prosecutor said:

'he is your father, can't you just sort this out amongst yourselves?'

A story of not listening to children

The court appointed Family Consultant said:

Despite Jack saying he does not want to spend time with his father because of this violence toward him ... such information may suggest that Jack's views have been influenced by his mother

Jenny's complete rejection of a relationship with him and denial of any positive aspects of their relationship seems somewhat out of proportion to her father's behaviour

A story of placing responsibility with mothers



The Independent Children's lawyer said:

The mother is not thinking of impact on children and their adult relationships

For the situation to work the mother has to participate. She has got to actively participate in that and encourage the children to participate in that because otherwise we're running the risk that the children will lose a relationship with their father forever

It is the mother's obligation to both encourage and facilitate the time between the children and their father



**Be curious about social responses
and children's perspectives**



Uphold the expertise of mothers



**Failure to protect’ or ‘Failure
to respect?’**

BEWARE OF WORDS THAT:

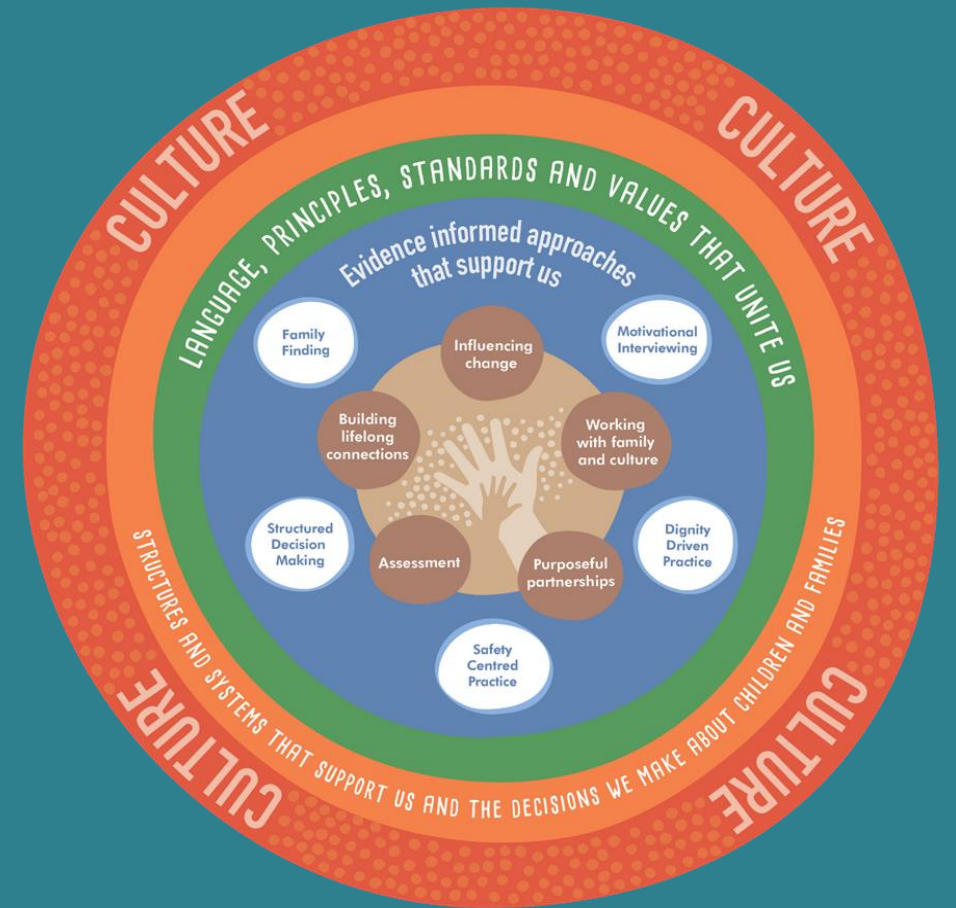
- Minimise
- Mutualise
- Pathologise
- Sanitise
- Bureacratise

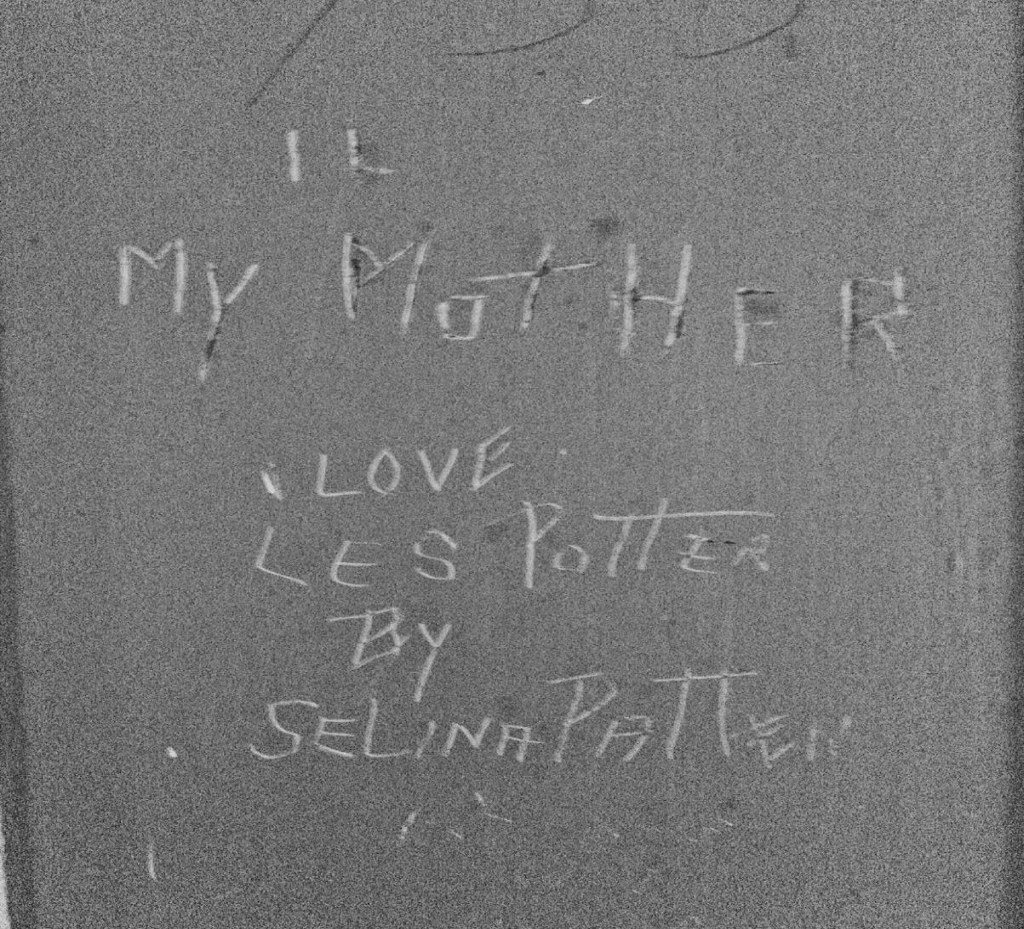


Why this research?

Interest in:

- understanding the impact of attitudes on decisions
- testing a pragmatic and socially-just approach to compliment standard child protection safety assessments





ROOFTOP RIOT BY GIRLS

New outbreak at Parramatta

Girls at Parramatta Training School rioted again yesterday afternoon, smashing glass and shouting abuse.

Six girls climbed to the steep galvanised iron roof of the school and scuffled with two uniformed policemen who were trying to force them down.

The policemen chased the girls around the roof for half an hour before they caught them.

One girl pulled her friends through the roof with a long piece of wood, which she later waved defiantly at the police.

The girls were bare-footed and wore the school's grey uniform.

Yesterday's riot was the third in less than a month.

After two serious riots recently, when the girls smashed windows and screamed abuse, several alleged ringleaders were sent to Long Bay Gaol by Children's Court magistrate.

About 12 of the school's 170 girls were involved in the riot.

The trouble began when girls on the roof screamed abuse at members of a sporting club near the school.

Detectives went to the school in patrol cars and two uniformed police were sent to the roof to get the girls down.

No struggle

Bystanders soon gathered in the street outside the school, but the girls were kept from the barred windows where they staged their previous two riots.

The police talked with them and the girls turned

"Metro" to extend

PARIS, Sat. (A.A.P. Reuter).—Work will begin soon on extending the Paris Metro (underground railway), 10 miles in each direction at the western and eastern outskirts of the city.

The project is expected to cost 2,500 million new francs (about \$419 million) and will take at least five years.

On the extension the train will average 100 kilo

POLICEMAN SEIZES TWO

When police caught the last two girls on the roof they gave in without a struggle.

The police talked with them and the girls turned

A POLICEMAN grabs a wooden plank from one of two girls who climbed to the roof at Parramatta Girls' Home yesterday.

‘Where there is oppression, there will be resistance.’

– Assata Shakur



**Dignity is the state or quality of
being worthy of respect**

Child Protection Decision making 101

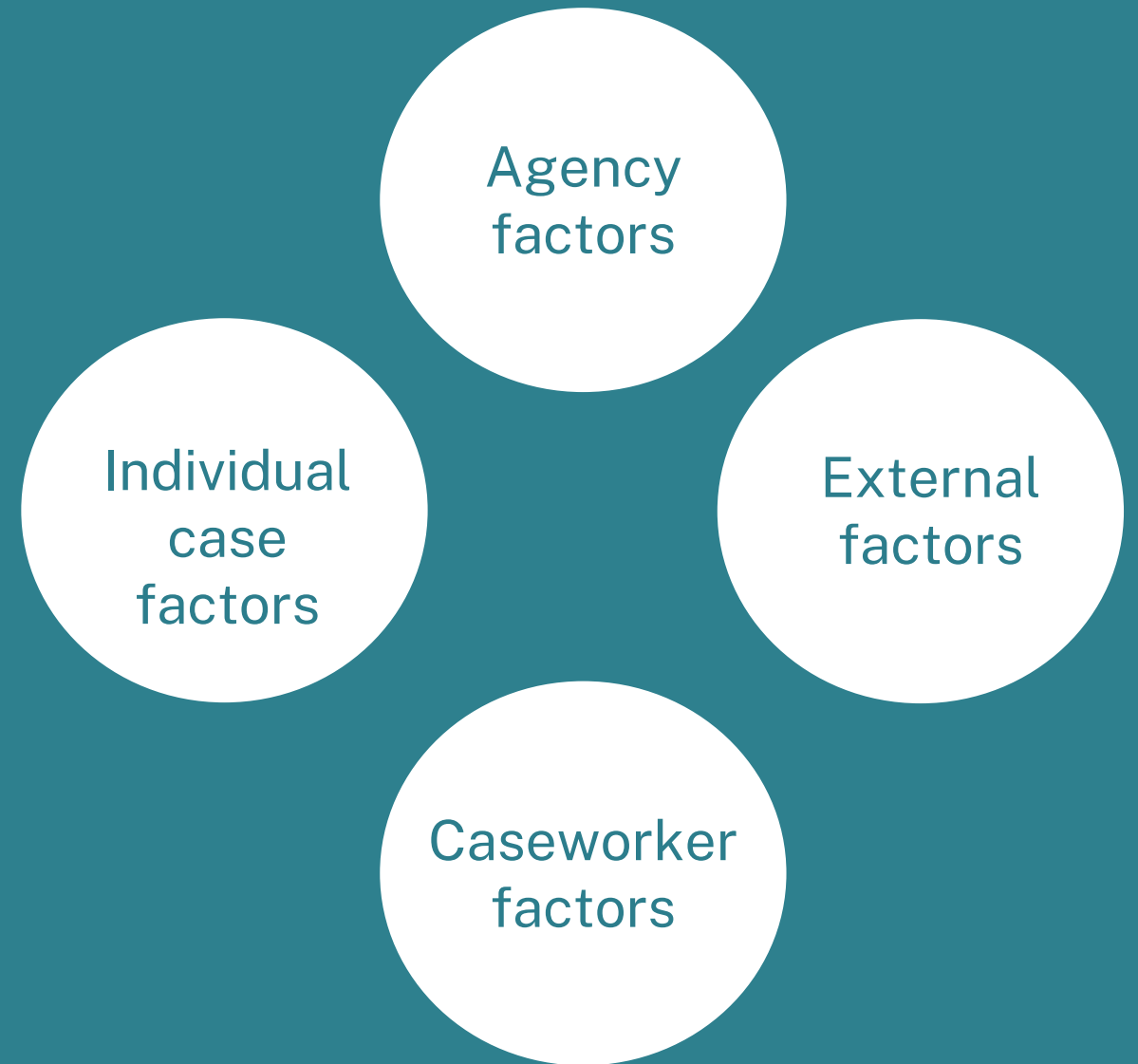
- **It's fallible and inconsistent** (Bosck and Peely, 2020)
- **It's subjective** (Gillingham and Humphreys 2010)
- **Decisions are often made in challenging, stressful and highly emotional situations** (Jansen, 2018)
- **Children's perspectives frequently do not influence outcomes** (Bastian 2022)
- **Yet worker bias does** (Regehr 2010)

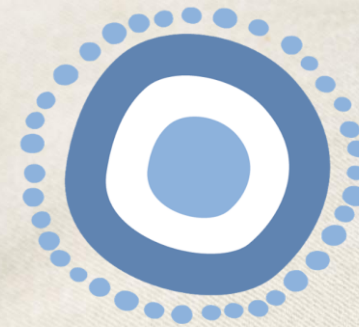




Why this research?

The Decision Making Ecology





The most striking lesson to be learned from inquiry reports, whether critical or not, is how resistant people are to altering their beliefs'

- Professor Eileen Munro, 2018

Attributes of caseworkers

- More experienced = less likely to remove children or require mothers to leave (Delgado et al., 2017)
 - Empathic social workers = less resistance (Forrester et al., 2008)
 - Younger workers more likely to remove children from domestic violence (Postmus and Merritt, 2010).
 - Women less likely to insist that women leave violent relationships (Postmus et al., 2011).
-



What we know:

- One woman killed every nine days.
- Takes on average 6 to 7 times for women to leave safely and risk of fatality increases upon leaving.
- Aboriginal women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised.
- Safety assessment focusing only on mother's ability to protect obscures perpetrator's use of violence (Heward – Belle *et al.*, 2019)



Impact on children

- Fastest growing category of risk with impacts on children every bit as harmful as other forms of abuse.
- Domestic violence was a reported issue for 42% of all reports where a parent is a teenager.
- Becomes more severe every time the man re-partners.
- Children frequently at risk of removal if their mothers do not follow practitioner defined solutions which do not build on strengths or insights (Laing, *et al.*, 2018)



ANROWS National Community Attitudes Survey

The majority of Australians do not think violence against woman occurs in all communities including their own.

Only

47%



agreed that it is a **problem in their own suburb or town.**

Even though

91%



of respondents **agreed that violence against women is a problem in Australia.**

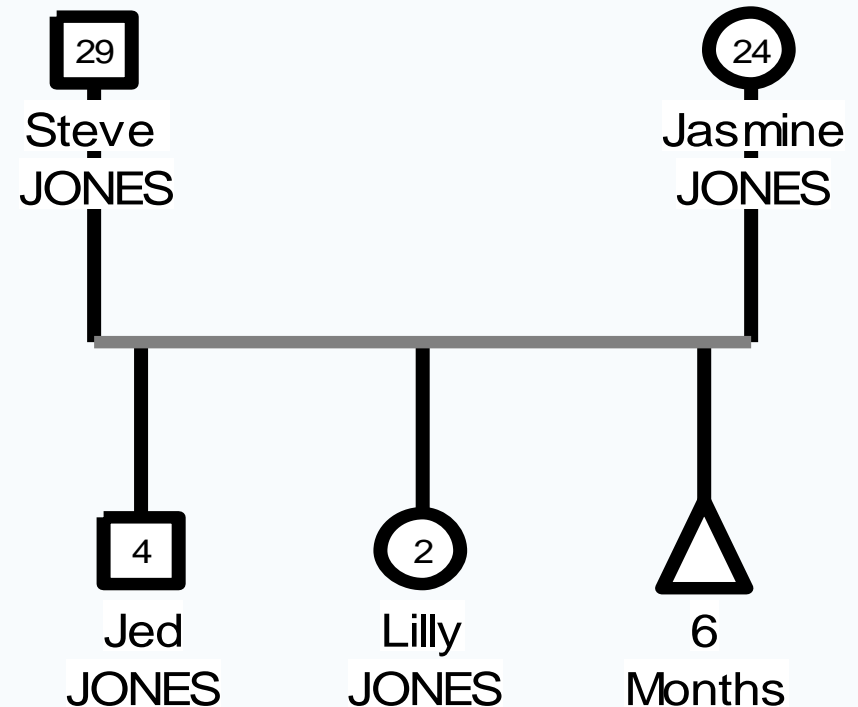
Three research questions

1. Does an integration of RBP with SDM shift caseworker assessment of children's safety?
2. What are the attitudes of the NSW workforce and do they differ from the Australian public?
3. Do caseworker attitudes and beliefs impact assessment decisions and, if so, does the integrated approach moderate that impact?



Research Design #1

- Getting ethics approval
- Developing the report and getting it 'screened in' at ROSH
- Writing the hypotheticals
- Getting the scripts right
- Briefing the actors



A quality safety assessment needs to:

- Establish safety to disclose
- Assess impact of violence on children
- Explore history of violence
- Consider safety of children, including supervision
- Assess other risk factors including parental AOD use





A quality RBP assessment attends to:

- Language is central
- There is power in each moment
- People respond to and resist acts of violence, adversity and oppression
- Social responses are critical



Filming



Research Design #2



Designing the survey:

- Four constructs to measure assessment (cooperation, protectives, safety and likelihood of removal – 17 items)
- Using the ANROWS National Community Attitudes Survey to benchmark
- Likert scale with five responses
- Random assignment of group A or B




DECISIONS FOR SAFETY

Understanding factors in the assessment of safety for children who have experienced domestic violence.

Kate Alexander
Melbourne University PhD Candidate
FACS Senior Practitioner



DECISIONS FOR SAFETY SURVEY

	<p>Participation in this research is completely voluntary and the information you provide is confidential.</p>	<p>The information you provide in this survey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will be kept confidential • will be reported at the group level and will be completely de-identified • will be only seen by the researcher • will be stored securely and destroyed after five years
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Your current position	<input type="checkbox"/> Caseworker <input type="checkbox"/> Manager Caseworker <input type="checkbox"/> Casework Support Officer	<input type="checkbox"/> Casework Specialist <input type="checkbox"/> Manager Client Services <input type="checkbox"/> Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/> Director Community Services <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify _____
What best describes your role:	<input type="checkbox"/> Child protection <input type="checkbox"/> OOHC <input type="checkbox"/> JCPRP <input type="checkbox"/> Helpline <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
Length of time employed at FACS	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than 1 year <input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 years <input type="checkbox"/> 3-4 years <input type="checkbox"/> 5 years or more		
Have you participated in any Practice Framework training?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Other		
Age	<input type="checkbox"/> <24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25-29 <input type="checkbox"/> 30-39 <input type="checkbox"/> 40-49 <input type="checkbox"/> 50+		
Qualification (Tick all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Social work <input type="checkbox"/> Education <input type="checkbox"/> Law <input type="checkbox"/> Psychology <input type="checkbox"/> Social Science <input type="checkbox"/> Health/welfare <input type="checkbox"/> Policing <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
Highest level of education	<input type="checkbox"/> High School <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor Degree <input type="checkbox"/> Certificate or diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Master's Degree <input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate Degree <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____		
Previous employment	<input type="checkbox"/> I have always worked in child protection <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching <input type="checkbox"/> Nursing <input type="checkbox"/> Counselling <input type="checkbox"/> Disability <input type="checkbox"/> Housing <input type="checkbox"/> Law <input type="checkbox"/> Police <input type="checkbox"/> Other		
Roughly what proportion of your work involves assessing risk of domestic violence or working with children or parents who have been affected by it?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0 - 25% <input type="checkbox"/> 51 - 75% <input type="checkbox"/> 26 - 50% <input type="checkbox"/> 76 - 100%		
Do you identify as:	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say Culturally and linguistically diverse <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say		

Practice Roadshows 2019



- Liverpool
- Queanbeyan
- Warilla
- Penrith
- Broken Hill
- Ballina
- Albury
- Wagga Wagga
- Ashfield
- Nyngan
- Orange
- Bathurst
- Liverpool Helpline
- Port Macquarie
- Sydney
- Ourimbah

ON THE ROAD



Limitations

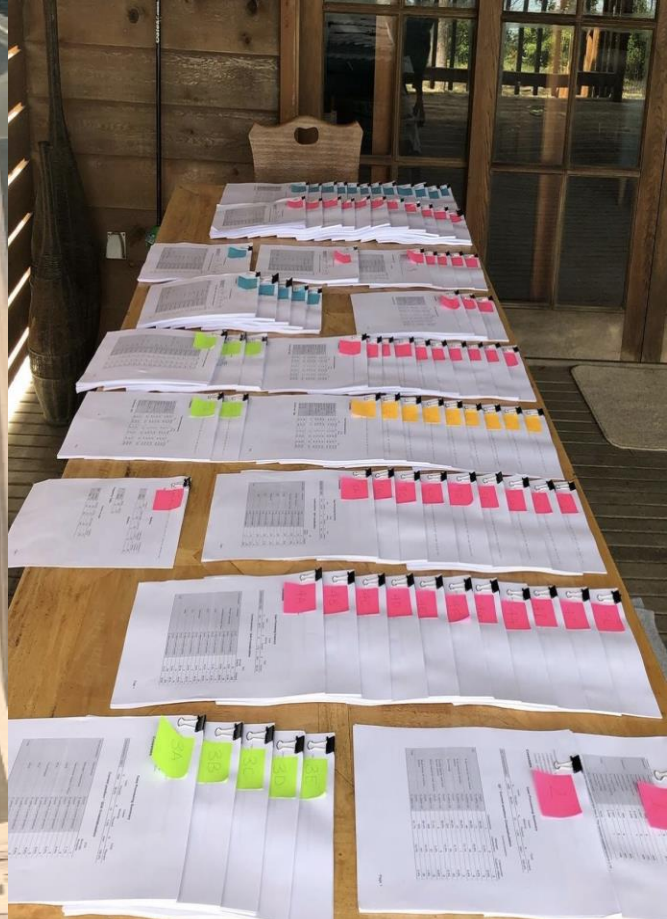
- Short time frame for assessment
 - Not all participant characteristics were captured
 - Comparison with NSW workforce and general public
 - Influence of ‘insider status’
-





Reassuring moments along the way





Data, data everywhere...

The sample group: A = 536 B = 505

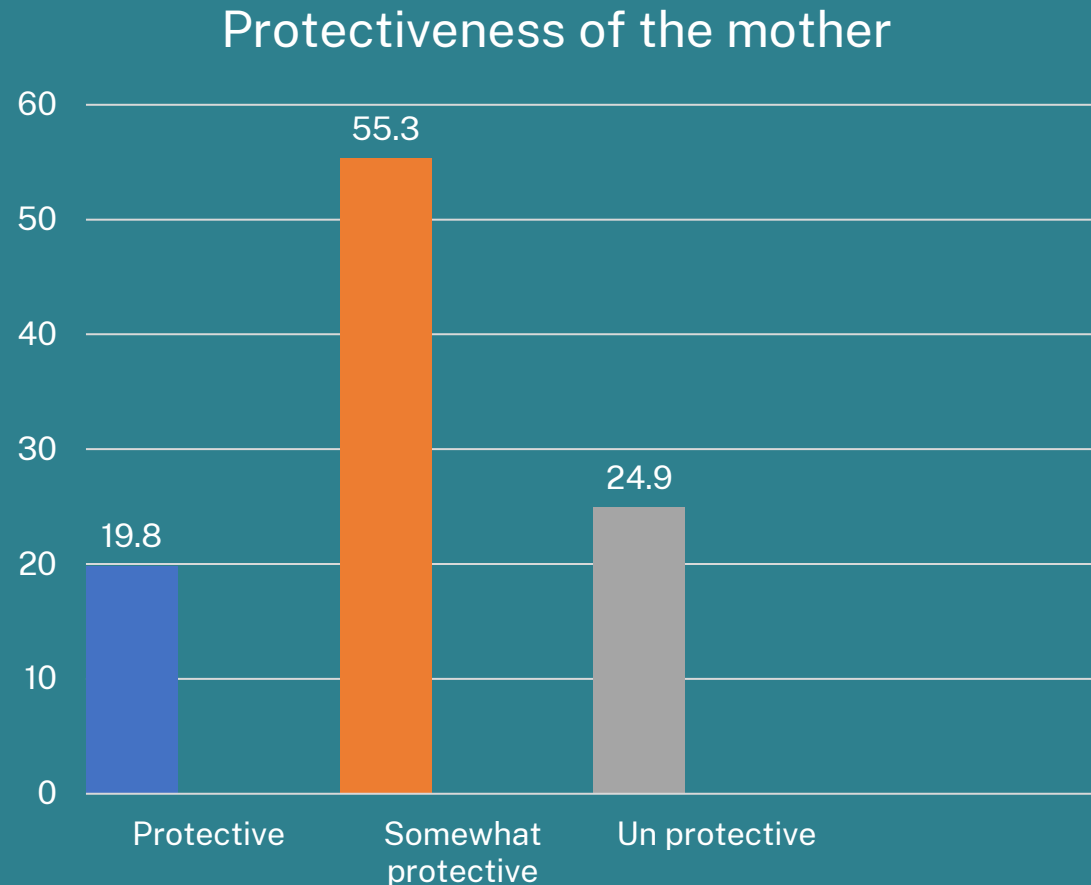
Qualifications:

social work (30.5%)
social science (23%)
psychology (13.5%)
education (12%);
law (0.9%);
policing (1.2%)
other (8.4%¹)

Diversity:

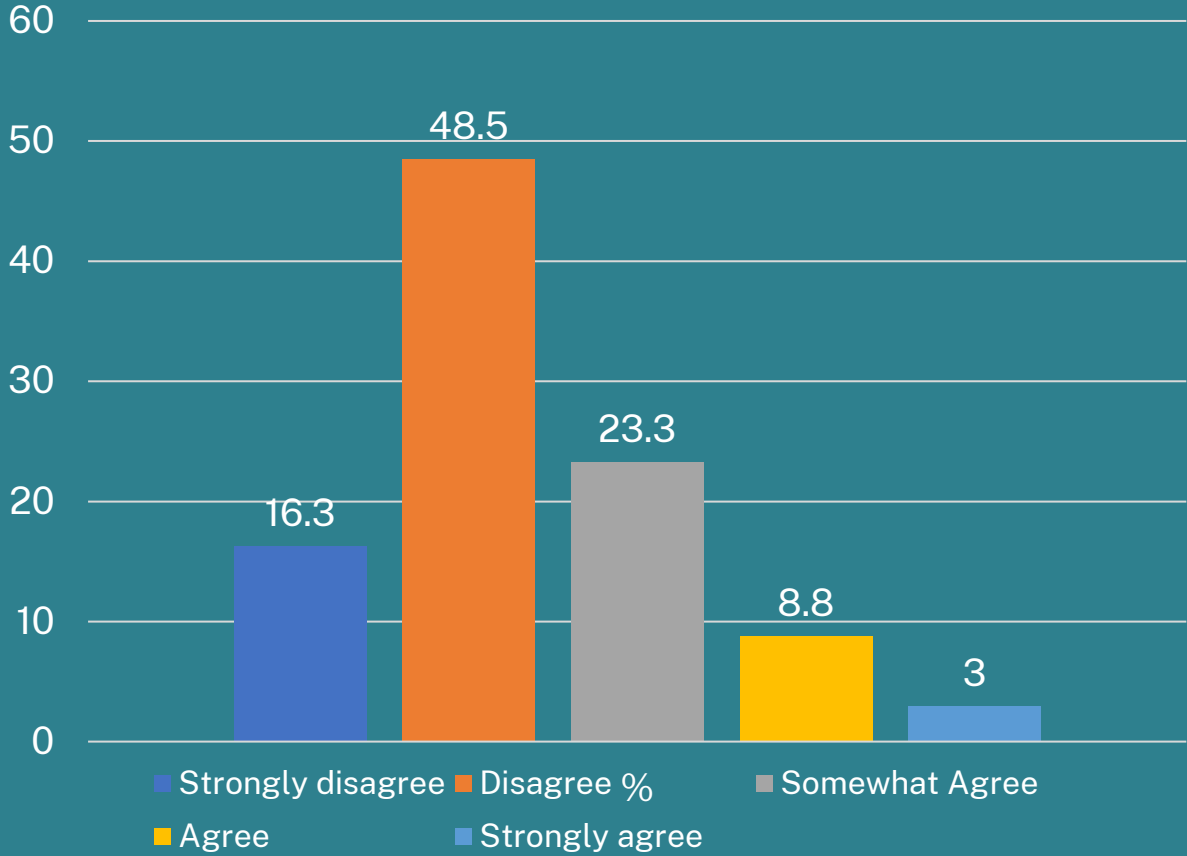
- Women 87.1% (907)
 - Men 11.6% (121)
 - ATSI 11.3% (118)
 - CALD 24.5% (225)

A few quick unpublished findings



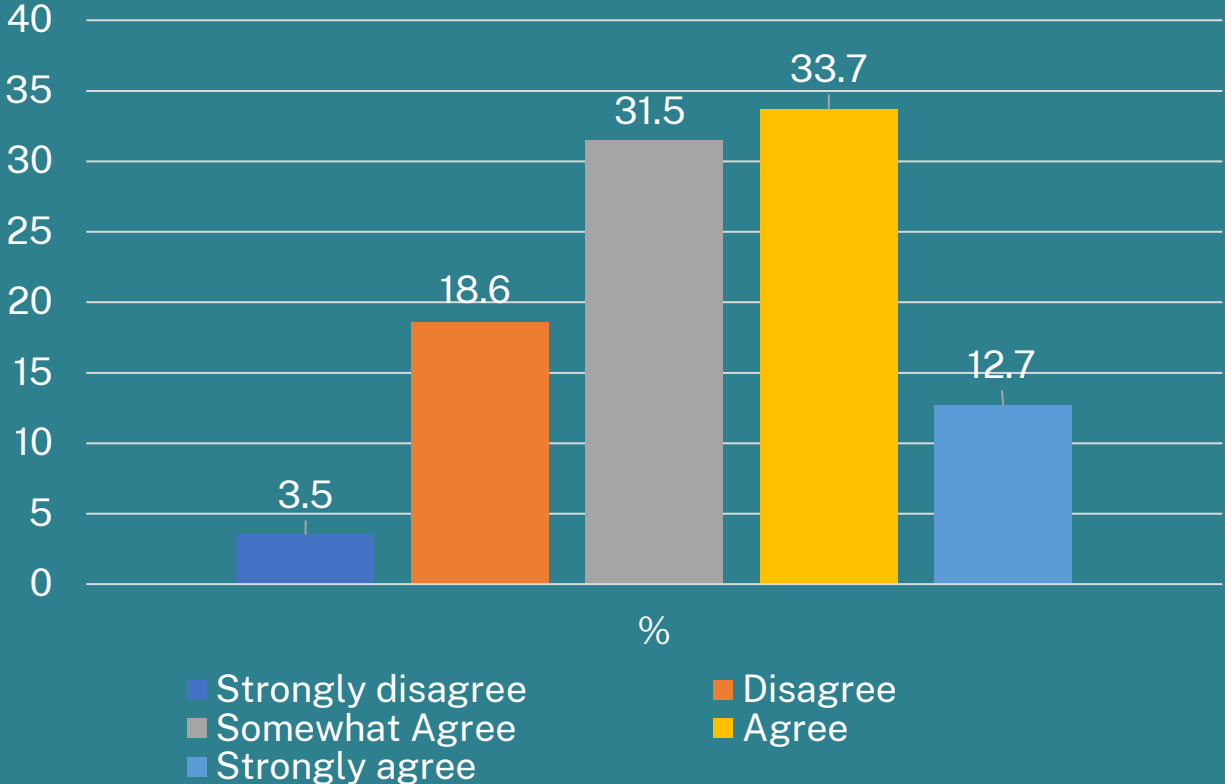
**Bread and butter
child protection –
SDM safety
assessment**

When working with mothers: I am unsure about how to undertake a assessment to increase the safety for her children



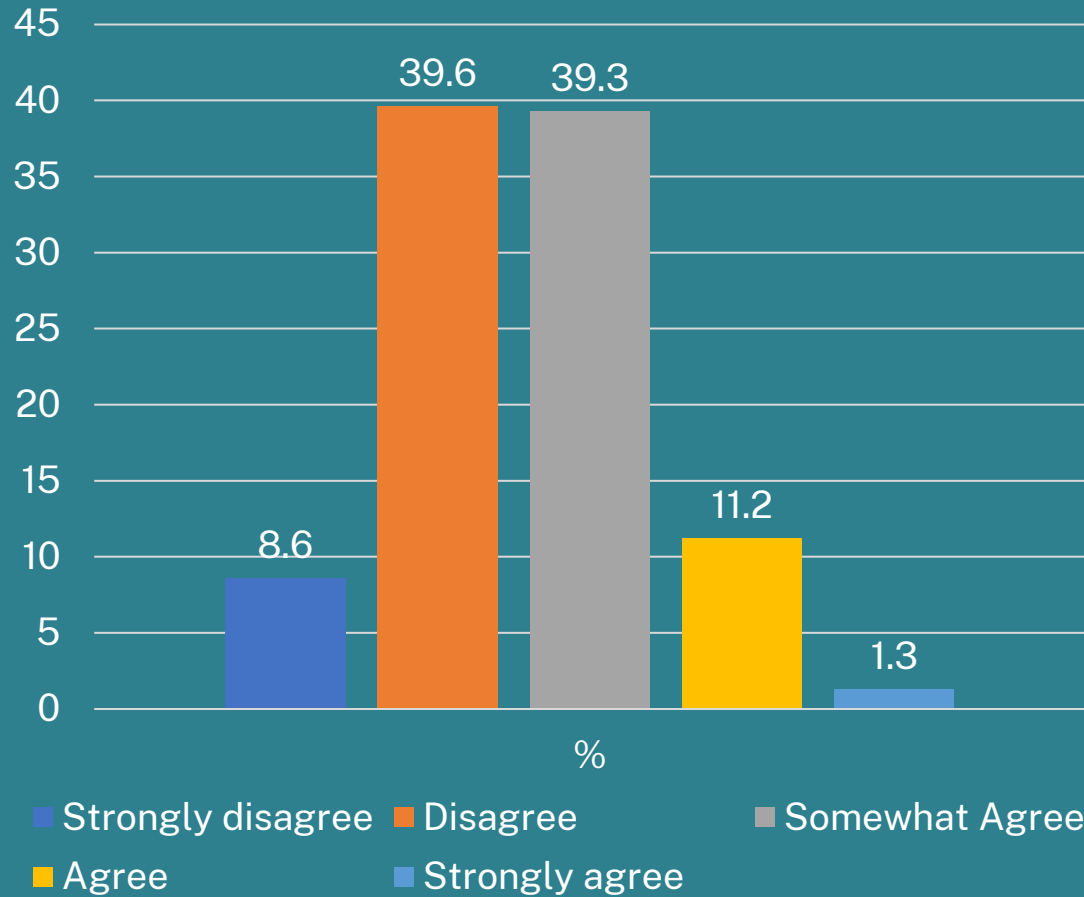
35.1%
of staff agreed to some extent

If I am unable to locate him or he does not turn up for a meeting with me, I am relieved



77.9%
of staff agreed to
some extent

When working with fathers: I am fearful for my own safety while I am talking to him



51.8%
of staff agreed to
some extent



THE DIFFERENCE OF 8 MINUTES

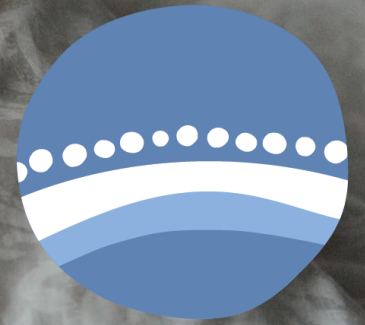
Differences of significance on:

Assessment decision	Video A (SDM)	Video B (SDM + RBP)
Safety of the children	40.6%	73%
Cooperation of the mother	73%	90.4%
Protectiveness of the mother	19.8% HP 55.3% SP	85.3% HP
Likelihood of the children entering care	56.4%	34%

Key facts

- Logistic model of safety – three factors ('group', age, length of time employed)
- Odds of participants watching the treatment video versus the control group:
 - 4 times more likely to assess the children as safe
 - 2.6 times less likely to assess the children would enter care
- Perception of 'openness'





Bringing dignity to the assessment of safety for children who live with violence'. British Journal of Social Work, 2022.
Alexander, Humphreys, Wise and Zhou



Attitudes

DCJ Child Protection Staff - attitudes:



21.6% AGREE

'IF SHE REALLY WANTED to leave him she could.'



63.4% AGREE

'I AM FRUSTRATED WHEN SHE does not stick to the AVO.'



53.6% AGREE

'THE BEST WAY TO KEEP HER CHILDREN safe is for her to leave the relationship.'



14.8% AGREE

'It is my job to understand the children's experience. If I focus on the mothers' experiences, it will impact my objectivity for the children.'

How do the attitudes of the general public compare with our attitudes?

Likelihood of agreement with the following statements	Australian Public	NSW Workforce
It is mainly men, or more often men, who commit acts of domestic violence?	64%	90.1%
Women going through custody disputes often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence	43%	29.9%
It is hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships	78%	27.6%
If she really wanted to leave the relationship, she could	51%	21.5%

Those with attitudes most likely to reflect the evidence:

- women
- senior and specialist staff
- social workers
- length of service





Attitudes and Beliefs of the Child Protection Workforce and why they matter to children'. Child and Family Social Work, 2023. Alexander, Humphreys, Wise and Zhou.



Do caseworker attitudes impact their assessment decisions?

Composite score using three measures to calculate informed versus misinformed attitudes:

1. Women going through custody disputes often make up or exaggerate claims of domestic violence.
2. It is hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships.
3. If she really wanted to leave the relationship, she could.



How do caseworkers
with informed v
misinformed attitudes
assess safety and
likelihood of removal?





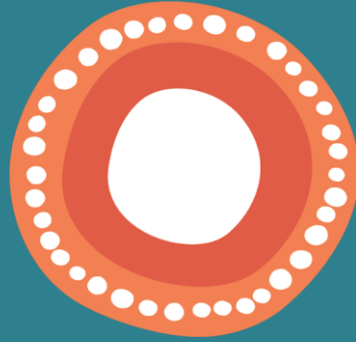
Two significant findings that at first glance are contradictory:

1. No association between attitudes and assessment of safety.
2. Significant association between attitudes and likelihood of removal.

Did RBP moderate the association between attitudes and assessment decisions?

1. To a certain extent on misinformed attitudes.
2. Amplified the impact on those with informed attitudes.
3. Moderation effect diminishes as the propensity for misinformed attitudes increases.





Those who agree that it is hard to understand why women stay in violent relationships were significantly more likely to indicate the children would end up in care, regardless of which video they watched.



Why do mothers stay? Challenging attitudes in decision-making about children at risk because of domestic violence’ International Journal of child Abuse and Neglect, 2023. Alexander, Zhou, Wise and Humphreys

‘Congratulations, this is one of the very few manuscripts with a unanimous recommendation of reviewers to publish’... ‘This is a fascinating study that aims to improve child protection decision making’.... ‘It is an excellent example of a partnership between child protection authorities and academics’ and ‘This research will be of great interest to other child protection services to enable more holistic and informed responses to decision making when children are experiencing domestic violence’.

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Outcomes:

1. Compulsory attitudinal testing at recruitment.
2. Changes to SDM safety assessment.
3. Confidence in the NSW Practice Framework.



Questions



‘ When we look at how women and children respond to and resist violence we immediately see their existing capacities, their knowledge, skills and their strength of spirit. We are drawn to the ways they assert their independence and resist violence. It helps us and others to see women and children as active and responding agents rather than being passive victims of abuse’

- Allan Wade