

Caught in the middle

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When a partner beats their spouse it causes great and sometimes unacknowledged harm to their children.

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Commissioner of the Royal Commission into Family Violence Marcia Neave. Photo: Eddie Jim

Franky's story begins many years before he was born. On a boat from the old country and sailing to this one, his grandparents (to be, they were young then, and still unbowed by life), met another couple. These four young people – homesick, uncertain of the future – bonded and became firm friends.

In Australia they raised their broods together; drove the women to the hospital in labour, changed baby nappies, fed all the kids at the table. It was like family.

So when two of the children – a boy and a girl in their early 20s – announced they were no longer just best friends, but engaged, no one was more overjoyed than their parents.



Savannah, 4, and Indianna Mihayo, 4, who were killed by their father, Charles Mihayo, at their home in Watsonia. Photo: Leigh Henningham

But, like that other old story about first love, and two families, this one is riven with tragedy. First though, let's meet Franky. A lanky 12-year-old Australian boy with a floppy, dark fringe. He sits in the garage of a townhouse in Melbourne's western suburbs, where he is talking to a stranger, a counsellor, about how he wanted to kill himself.

In the living room his younger sister talks with another counsellor. She often feels worried, on edge. Both her and her brother have anxiety and

depression, and take medication. Their mother, Maria, hovers nearby, preparing dinner.

It took Maria more than a decade to escape the man who cajoled and cadged and finally convinced her he would make a good husband. He was wrong.



Rosie Batty with her son Luke at her birthday party.

She is grateful to these two counsellors, who come to her home from a local support service once a week.

They give her kids a chance to talk about the violence their dad wrought on the family. Years of viciousness, of alcohol-fuelled rage.

Without these strangers, Maria would not have known her son had longed for death. Protecting their mother was second nature to these children, disclosure far more difficult.



Illustration: Matt Davidson. Family violence, domestic violence, children, generic

Inquiry will take systemic approach

The Royal Commission into Family Violence will on Monday begin its public hearings into one of society's intractable problems.

For the past six months, Commissioner Marcia Neave and part-time Deputy Commissioners Patricia Faulkner and Tony Nicholson, have been consulting with victims, support groups and agencies about what many describe as an "epidemic" of family violence in Australian homes.



Luke Batty. Photo: supplied

Rather than focusing on individual stories, the commission will take a systemic approach to pinpoint the failures and gaps in services, as well as any successes.

When the public sittings begin, the commission will conduct its hearings around a series of "modules", including topics like children and young people, and early intervention.

The seeds of this royal commission – a Labor Party election promise – were sown last year following several high-profile deaths of children and women in family violence settings.

The public grief was palpable after the murder of 11-year-old Luke Batty at the hands of his father, Greg Anderson, on a cricket pitch in Tyabb, in February last year.

Rosie Batty's eloquent and heart-wrenching advocacy for family violence victims – which began the day after her son was killed – saw her appointed Australian of the Year for 2015 and increased the momentum for political action.

And just two months after Luke's murder, Savannah Mihayo, 4, and her sister Indianna, 3, were murdered by their father, Charles Mihayo, who a judge later found was strongly motivated by his hostility to his ex-wife.

In December last year newly elected Premier Daniel Andrews announced the establishment of the commission, saying: "The whole system is broken. It doesn't protect the vulnerable, it doesn't punish the guilty and more of the same policies will only mean more of the same tragedies."

The unspeakable horror of the murder of a child is enough to make people shake their heads and weep in disbelief.

But while homicide sits at one end of the dark spectrum of dysfunctional family relationships, there are many other ways that family violence can affect children.

For a long time we have known that violence in families is bad for children. But how early they are affected, and how long that damage lasts, is now better understood.

Even a baby in-utero is vulnerable to family upheaval, says clinical psychologist and infant mental health specialist, Dr Nicole Milburn.

Studies have shown genetic changes in babies in the womb in family violence settings, changes that are not present in their parents or siblings.

The cause? A womb flooded with stress hormones like cortisol during pregnancy can become toxic to the baby, and cause changes in the way their stress response system develops, Milburn says.

"You have babies who are really hyper-alert to stress; they get upset, are harder to soothe, and often get diagnosed as colicky or irritable. And it's very hard on mothers. They have already got a lot of emotional resources taken up with managing a stressful situation."

The impact of family violence on children varies, according to their age and stage of development, she says.



Luke Batty, 11, was killed by his father, Greg Anderson, at cricket training at an oval in Tyabb. Photo: Wayne Taylor



Rosie Batty mother of murdered 11-year-old schoolboy, Luke, talking about her son and his troubled father who killed him. Photo: Michael Clayton-Jones MCJ

Young children rely on their parents to keep them safe and meet their needs, but in an atmosphere of family violence their carers are either frightening, or frightened.

And young children in highly dysfunctional families learn a cruel lesson: they can only episodically rely on adults.

This is "diabolical" because it leads to children finding it hard to relate to other people or settle into the world of school, Milburn says.

A lot of behavioural problems in school can be traced to family violence, she says.

But genetics are not destiny, and good support can help children recover, Milburn wants to stress.

Because of the rapid pace of development in infancy, young children can recover quickly, which is why it is important to act as early as possible. Six sessions of therapy with a baby might equate to a whole year of work with a 10-year-old, Milburn says.

Victorian Police statistics show that children were present at more than a third of family violence incidents over the past three years.

This means that in the past year (April 2014 - April 2015), 44,400 children were at a family violence incident, up from 36,300 three years ago. Yet in Victoria, we do little to address the trauma caused by violence, according to a submission to the royal commission from the Australian Childhood Foundation.

The foundation is a national organisation which provides specialist programs for children and young people who have been affected by trauma arising from abuse and family violence.

The foundation's chief executive, Dr Joe Tucci says: "It is our experience that responses aimed at protecting children and then addressing the traumatic impact of such violence have been inconsistent, and often left children more exposed to higher degrees of risk of continuing to be emotionally, psychologically and physically hurt."

The impact of violence and abuse of children and young people, in particular by adult members of their family, needs to be recognised as "traumatic and toxic" to their development, he says.

Similarly, in his submission to the royal commission, the Commissioner for Children, Bernie Geary, notes that his organisation conducts an inquiry where children have died and were child protection clients at the time, or recently.

Of the 54 inquiries conducted in 2013-2014, family violence was noted as a theme in 32 inquiries, highlighting the nexus between family violence and child abuse and neglect, he says.

Abuser was a fall-down drunk

Jon first assaulted Maria on their Bali honeymoon, and he continued for more than a decade.

He was an alcoholic, a mean drunk, a fall-down drunk.

Jon would drink so much that he would be lying on the living room floor, would urinate inside the sinks in the kid's toy kitchens.

He confiscated Maria's mobile phone and refused to let her work. They fought constantly, throughout her first pregnancy and after the birth of their son. She got pregnant again but miscarried.

Indeed, throughout the 11-year marriage Maria had six miscarriages, which she believes was due to stress.

As his kids grew, Jon was sometimes aggressive towards them. He grabbed Franky's head and threw him at the wall. Maria was worried about the little boy – he would run in a lopsided way and get dizzy.

She took him to hospital, asked for a scan but the doctor refused. No one ever asked how things were at home.

Before she was married, Maria had never heard of family violence. Her parents never touched her and they were not alcoholics.

She had never talked to social workers. Everything was new to her. She tried to protect her children but she had no friends and no time to think. And she didn't dare go to the police.

Jon told her that if she destroyed his life, he would destroy her. He would twist one of his guns – all licensed – to her temple and threaten to kill her or disable her.

In the end, Maria left to protect her children. She believed it was either get out, or be killed.

Far too often, children are overlooked when we talk about family violence. The philosophy in support services used to be that if you fixed things for the mother, you helped the child.

But this approach is not enough, Luisa Pisano says.

Pisano is the co-ordinator at the North West Regional Children's Resource Program, a service that exclusively focuses on children as victims of family violence.

Pisano's organisation works directly with social workers, encouraging them to think about how they are supporting children and talking to them about violence.

She says there is an assumption that if the child wasn't there, or didn't see the violence, they are not being affected.

But she sees common responses from traumatised children, including those who have "only" witnessed violence.

They try to act like adults, to protect mum, or they become bullies, acting out the behaviour they have experienced. Pisano and her staff see children with severe anxiety, those who have been suicidal at a very young age.

"Kids could be at school when the violence happens, but the minute they walk in and see mum's black eye or mum crying, they know."

Maria has told her and Franky's stories because she wants it to be a source of strength for others in her situation. She is a survivor.

"If I can leave, trust me, they can too. I had a job, a busy life and then when I got married to him I was locked away. I didn't read, I didn't write, I was just a wife, a slave, at home. I don't want my kids seeing any more violence. If there's violence in the house, go and get help. If I can do this, anyone can."

Miki Perkins is Social Affairs reporter.

Names and some details have been changed to protect people's identities.

For help or information on domestic violence, call the Sexual Assault Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service on 1800 737 732 or go to 1800respect.org.au

To visit the Luke Batty Foundation at neveralone.com.au

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