

Family violence: an illustrated guide to the terminology

TO THE EDITOR: Recent reports from the World Health Organization¹ and from Australian agencies^{2,3} emphasise the urgency of improving health service response to family violence. Understanding the victim and survivor experience and perpetrator patterns is essential to improving health practitioners' capacities for recognising and responding appropriately to family violence.^{1,3}

Although there is an increasing awareness of the severity of health consequences of family violence,^{1,4} there is little standardisation of terminology within the national and international literature. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners recognises physical, emotional, economic, social, sexual, psychological, verbal and spiritual abuse as forms of family violence.⁴ Family violence includes any violence or abuse that occurs within a family,⁴ including between partners, parents, children, siblings, uncles or aunts, cousins, grandparents and in-laws. Complexities arise because of the pervasive nature of violence when trying to differentiate the types of violence and individual victims. For example, studies show that 50% of children who experienced physical abuse and 40% of children who experienced sexual abuse have a mother who experienced intimate partner violence.⁵

"Domestic violence" emphasises the place of the violence, whereas "family violence" emphasises the relationships between the victim and the perpetrator. "Intimate

partner violence" refers to the "behaviour within an intimate relationship" of current or former partners (including same-sex relationships) causing "physical, emotional, sexual, economic and social harm to those in the relationship".⁴

Family violence (Box) encompasses domestic violence, intimate partner violence and sibling violence. Cases of child neglect, child abuse, child sexual abuse, sexual assault and rape may occur in the context of family violence; however, these forms of violence may also occur outside the context of the family, such as institutional abuse or stranger violence. Likewise, older people abuse, which can include sexual abuse and rape, may occur in the context of family violence and also in institutional contexts, in the context of service provision or between people who have no familial or institutional relationships.

An increased understanding of the terminology used in the research literature enhances the capacity for delivering high quality care to women, children and men experiencing the health impacts of family violence.

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Terminology for family violence

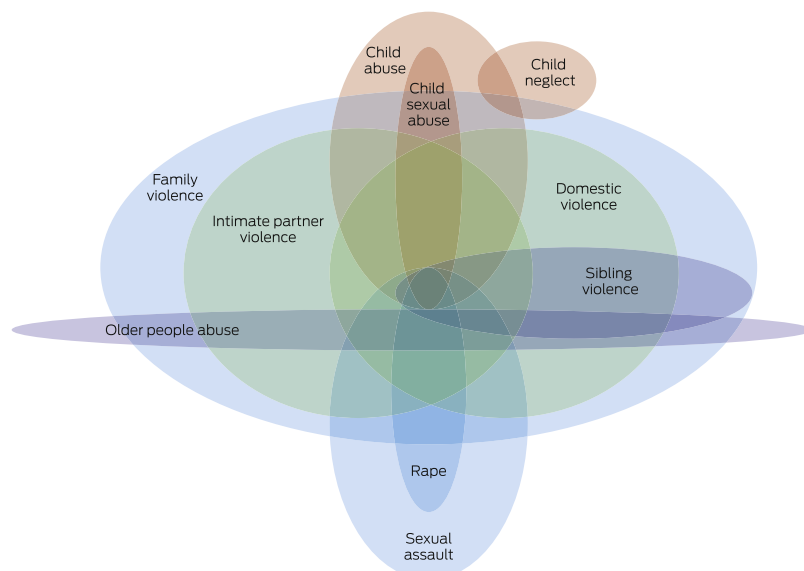


Figure by Debbi Long and Serena Lee. ♦

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- 5 Bedi G, Goddard C. Intimate partner violence: what are the impacts on children? *Aust Psychol* 2007; 42: 66–77. ■