

# **Advocating for Children**

## **Children and Domestic Violence**

**David Kenkel**

# The new social studies of childhood

- We are somewhat trained to see children not as active players in their own lives but as the stage bound demonstration of capacities in training for the future (Qvortrop, 1994).
- Consequentially, the ability of children to think, hold opinions and act on those opinions can easily be understood not as the behaviour of a subject active in their own life, but rather as evidence of their fit, or failure to fit, with age appropriate stages of development. (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Jenks and Prout, 1998).

Critical perspectives on how society has conceptualised childhood (such as the above from the new social studies of childhood) are beginning to influence how children are interacted with and thought about by researchers and child advocates. Increasingly it is being recognised that children are active participants in society and that their opinions are worth canvassing

# Don't imagine children always get a fair slice of societies resources

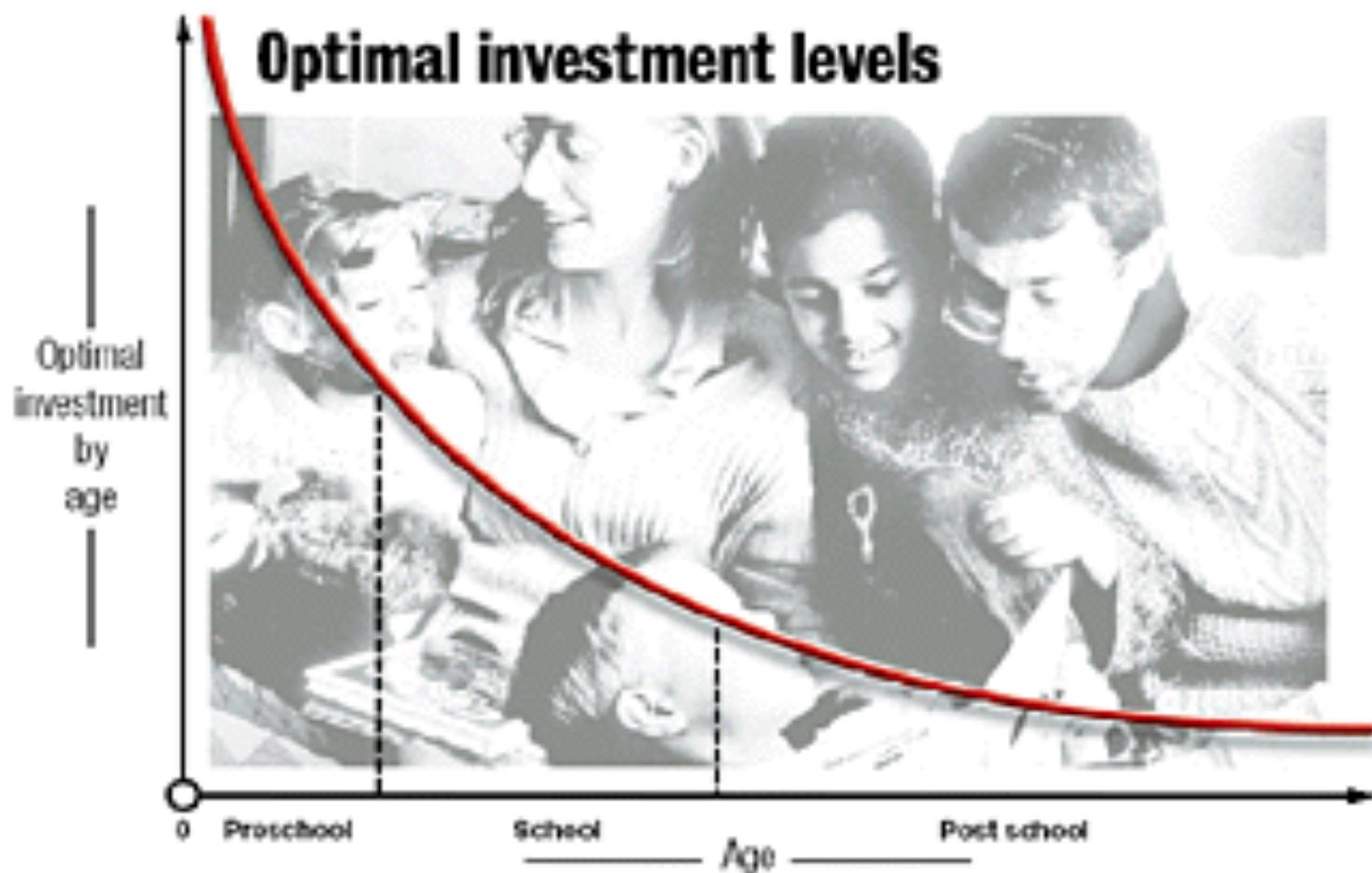


For instance children are the poorest of the poor

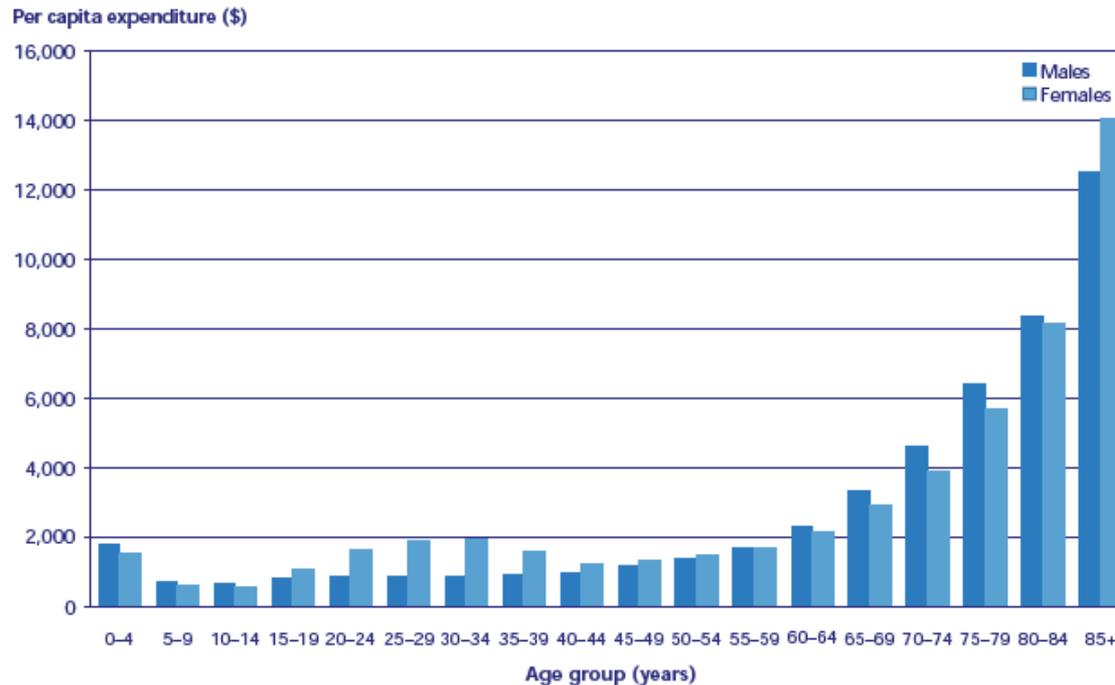
In 2006/7:

- 22% of NZ children lived poverty (60% median income after housing costs).
- Only 4 % of people over 65 lived in severe or significant hardship (2004).
- In 2016 – The numbers have crept up – now a 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of NZ's children live in poverty.

## Optimal investment levels



# Estimated annual per capita Vote: Health expenditure on health and disability support services, 2001/02



# So What's DV in this context?

The New Zealand 1995 Domestic Violence Act says:

Causing a child to witness domestic violence is an offence.

The Act says that violence is not just physical, it is also:

Threats  
Damage to Property  
Harassment  
Intimidation  
Psychological Abuse  
Sexual Abuse

# Mal-attribution of meaning



- Sometimes its talked about as childish magical thinking.
- Or the attribution of causal factors in a child like self centred way.

# But its not just children - sometimes mothers too



- Its not just children that make mistakes about causes, meanings and events

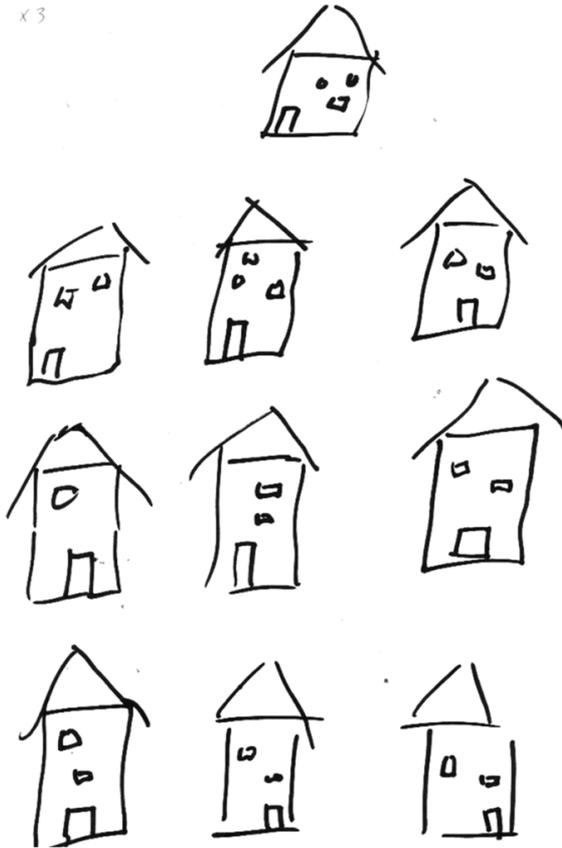
# And sometimes perpetrators of violence too



- Its not just children that Mal-attribute blame in self-centred ways

# So how many kids in how many homes witness Domestic Violence in New Zealand?

x3



## You do the maths:

- 1 out 3 women hit
- 1 out of 3 men have hit
- 1 in 20 women hit in previous 12 months
- Half a million NZ mums (ish) and one million (ish) children
- Police attend only 5 to 20 % DV incidents
- 55.000 children present during 38.000 police DV callouts (2004).- similar in 2015.
- Actual number?..conservatively between 50.000 and 150.000.

# So to get by in a home where you see people you love hurting each other and being hurt what do you learn?

You learn:

- To be (*physiologically too*) very alert and sensitive to danger signals
- To be a very effective and strategic crisis manager
- To manage fear and responsibility alone
- To expect to be hurt or be hurt by those you love
- To guard your younger siblings and sometimes even the adults
- To protect those you love by keeping quiet about your own sadness and fear
- To juggle hope, blame and love. Self / mum / dad.
- To prioritise managing today's problems over tomorrows stuff like schoolwork
- To ignore, (or get dulled to): (*physiologically too*) the messages your body, heart, mind and spirit send you about how awful things are

# So what do kids sacrifice?

- Trust that their environment is safe – (like home)
- The knack of contentment
- A sense of trust in others – a sense of belonging
- The expectation that it is easy, safe, effective or appropriate to talk about difficult things
- Real world ideals of gender equity
- Health – physical – mental – relational
- Staying in one place or school or community
- Friends that last
- Enough Money

# So what other effects? And maybe this is the big one?



- Cuts at the heart of what makes it a joy to be a parent. Fear and joy don't mix well
- Doesn't do much for Dads either
- Creates a two way unspeakable gulf between caregiver and child
- Mucks up discipline: How do you hear 'no'! from mum when you know mum can't safely say no to dad
- Can also make violence seem an ordinary thing to do

## **AND: 0 – 3**

# **Long lives harmed in short periods of time**

— Stealth mode damage and the theft of love —

0-3 — Least voiced – most need a voice

0-3 — Least noticeable – harmed most – harmed fast

0-3 — By the time we notice – they have become the children we despair of - the adolescents we fear - the adults we despise and imprison

# **So why is the experience of children so often overlooked?**

- Sometimes it simply because there is a time lag between witnessing DV and when the behavioral effects show up
- Sometimes adults are too busy or miserable to notice
- Sometimes its just too unbearable to think about that as well

# The 'If mums ok the kids are ok myth'



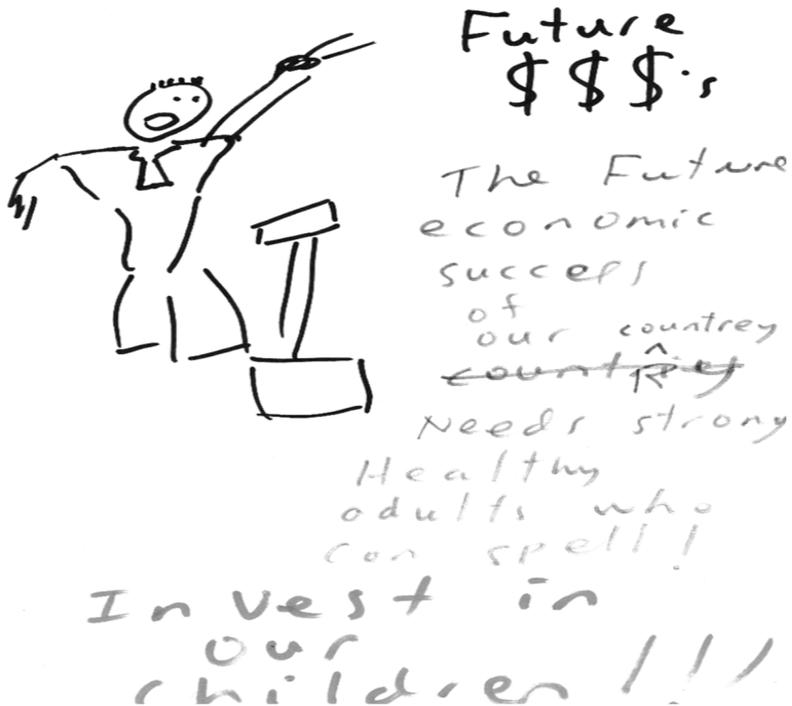
- Kids in families have a separate life to the adults with their own thoughts, feelings and perspectives.
- The mother's story is not the same as the children's story. Their needs are not always her needs. Helping her is not always the same as helping them.

# The developmental perspective can also close our ears to children's reality



- If we are measuring what we hear and see only according to fit with milestones - or damage to development - we can easily forget that in the main children are just like us only shorter and with less years
- **Measuring is not the same as listening**

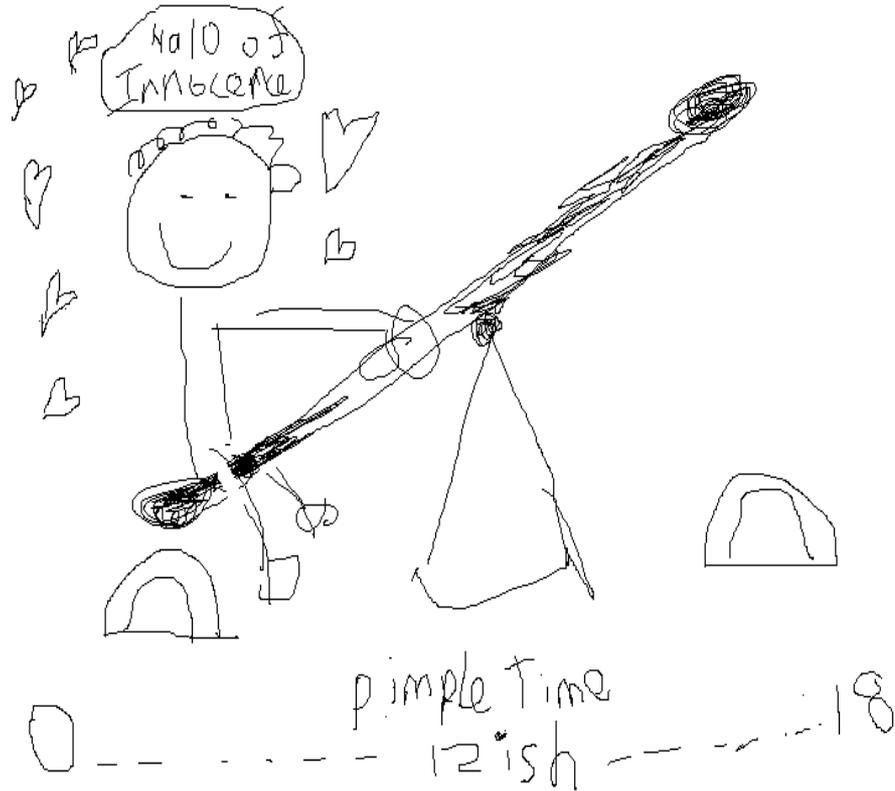
**Also our preconceptions of childhood can get in the way of noticing that here is a person doing their best to manage a tough situation**



### ***For Instance***

- Investment in childhood ideas can blind us to the simple humanity of kids.
- It can end up about future gain not current pain

# Ideologies of Childhood and The Kiwi Compassion Switch



- An abrupt jump from

Passive Innocent

- To -

- Fully Responsible Agent ? –  
Same kid – same history – But -



He's the guy who's  
childish irresponsibility  
we now get outraged by

Who now gets held fully  
responsible for his own  
behaviour!

# So what are Human rights?

An expression of fairness, dignified treatment, equality and justice.

Universal

Inalienable

Indivisible and interdependent

(Ask a child)

# Criteria for assessing rights claims

It is necessary to achieve full humanity

Applies to all people or at least those most disadvantaged

There is widespread support. (it sounds fair)

The right can be realised by claimants

The claimed right does not violate or contradict other human rights.

# What UNCROC says kids who witness violence have a right to:

- Article 6: The right to life and survival
- Article 12: **The right to form and express a view on matters that affect ones life**
- Article 13: **The right to free expression and to receive and impart information**
- Article 19: The right to protection from abuse and neglect and the right to receive treatment if abuse or neglect has occurred.
- Article 24: The right of access to health care services that allow the highest attainable standard of health
- Article 29: The right to an education that encourages the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential
- Article 39: **The right to live in a state (country)that takes all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts.**

**So what can you do?  
What does it mean to apply this child  
rights stuff?**



# Rights and some DV do's

## Do

- Think safety first - get advice
- Remember children have human rights
- Plan for safety WITH children not just for them
- Ask how children are directly
- Presume children have an opinion and perspective that is worth listening too and is often honourable and brave
- Acknowledge their responsibilities for siblings. (so if not them then who else will do it!)
- Tell them its not their fault, and that just like kids cant make adults fight they cant stop them either
- Tell them this happens to other kids too
- Support the mother and tell her that it is not her fault either

# Rights and some DV don'ts

## Don't

- Pretend that children's rights take away from adults rights
- Assume someone else has attended to the kids
- Presume they are safe, don't presume their mother can protect them.
- Don't ask them how they feel. (wadda-ya-think they feel!)
- Don't make promises about being able to make the violence stop
- Bad mouth any adult in their lives, just like us children can profoundly love people that do bad things
- Go mushy, or act shocked. if they can handle living it - you can handle hearing about it
- Blame the mother

# Some general pointers for relating respectfully with children who may have experienced trauma

Putting kids on the spot can be disrespectful, silences can hurt. I prefer A.B.C choices when questioning. Speculation is very useful. I.e let me know if I've got this right?

Stories normalise, use lavishly

It's very unfair to ask a child to change first when the adults around them are unwilling to change.

How do you tell the difference between a mountain and molehill when both are new to you? Comparative ability depends on information gathered over time. Kids have not yet had the time.

Acuity is pro-survival. Children can usually spot people who are genuinely interested and on their side. Vice-versa too

Sometimes the best answer a child can give is “I don’t know”.

It’s very important to remember to consult children about their position on what is happening.

At six a Child often understands social status in this culture as well as you do.

Children often do not think more slowly than you, they often think faster than you. Keep up.

If you are able to be outside expected behavioural norms it lends you power and freedom with kids. Demands that you be able to think fast / talk fast / think laterally. Movement is good. Laughter and an expressive face are good. Long silences not good. Generally adults are disturbingly predictable in what they say, how they behave and how they say it. Be different from this.

Fairness is an essential thing to talk about, if you have not raised the issue of fairness with a child, you are probably missing an important aspect of any situation. Children are treated very unfairly a lot of the time. Mostly they are too gracious to let adults know about this unless they are asked.

It's very easy to make children (and adults for that matter) cry. Inducing affect is like shooting sitting ducks, tempting but essentially unfair and in my opinion a bad use of power. Children have enough power and dignity stolen. Why steal more by making them cry. Tears can also be a gift of trust. But I always try and make clear to kids that I have no NEED of that particular gift.

When dealing with emotional / difficult issues its best to be blunt and to the point. Mostly I find kids appreciate matter-of-factness.

Some children live in very dark worlds which are very ordinary to them and which they manage in very matter-of-fact ordinary ways. Your responses to their managing can either affirm their management skills and build on them, or damage their 'management' abilities. Who says you know best?

Sometimes children are smarter than the grown ups in their lives.

# I CAN FIX IT!



# No you can't BOB -

Say the DV workers and the Psychs and the Doctors  
and the Child Protection Specialists and the therapists and the NGO  
Community agency and the education specialists and the police and the

.....

# Not on your own

- The Challenge -  
What We know - What We  
Do

Resisting the Dis-Connect

Together

## **AND: 0 – 3**

# **Long lives harmed in short periods of time**

— Stealth mode damage and the theft of love —

0-3 — Least voiced – most need a voice

0-3 — Least noticeable – harmed most – harmed fast

0-3 — By the time we notice – they have become the  
children we despair of - the adolescents we fear -  
the adults we despise and imprison

# The Empowerment Conundrum

Getting it right for both?

A Challenge for us all

Thinking systems

# References

- [1] Fanslow JL, Robinson E. (2004) Violence Against Women in New Zealand; prevalence and health consequences. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 117-1206.
- 
- [1] Martin J, Langley J, Millichamp J (2006). Domestic Violence as Witnessed by New Zealand Children. *New Zealand Medical Journal* Vol 119 No 1228.
- [1] Quoted in Fanslow J (2005) *Beyond Zero Tolerance: Key issues and future directions for family violence work in New Zealand*. Families Commission, Wellington.
- 
- [1] Martin J, Langley J, Millichamp J (2006). Domestic Violence as Witnessed by New Zealand Children. *New Zealand Medical Journal* Vol 119 No 1228.
- [1] Quoted in Fanslow J (2005) *Beyond Zero Tolerance: Key issues and future directions for family violence work in New Zealand*. Families Commission, Wellington.
- 
- Holloway, S & Valentine, G. (2000). Spatiality and the new social studies of childhood. *Sociology*, 34 (4) 763 – 783.
- James, A, Jenks, C, and Prout, A. (1998), *Theorizing childhood*. Cambridge, Polity Press