

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY
to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

MEDIA RELEASE

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“I’ve told this story so many times”: Research sheds new light on the context in which young people with disability use violence in the home

New ANROWS research strongly indicates widespread multi-sectoral failure in effectively responding to adolescent violence in the home (AVITH) and young people with disability.

Mothers and practitioners have shared their experiences with researchers who identified a need for change especially in building disability-literacy across the service sector – including in domestic and family violence (DFV), education, health and social services.

[*A socio-ecological exploration of adolescent violence in the home and young people with disability: The perceptions of mothers and practitioners*](#) is the first study in its field to move beyond merely documenting disability as an individual-level risk factor for AVITH to paying close attention to the context in which these behaviours arise. By taking this more nuanced approach, this study has found new information about better ways services can support families experiencing AVITH.

Associate Professor Georgina Sutherland from the University of Melbourne led the research team who spoke directly with mothers who had experienced AVITH and practitioners working with young people with disability and AVITH. Initial plans to speak with young people with disability themselves were reconsidered in response to Covid-19 lockdowns across Victoria. The research team acknowledges that the voices of young people remain missing from this field and will pursue avenues to centre their lived experiences in future research projects.

The study found that current responses to AVITH tend to rely on models designed to address domestic and family violence (DFV). These models often understand the use of violence as an attempt to have power and control over another person. However, this did not always reflect mothers' experiences. While many mothers and families had prior experiences of DFV and found the impacts of AVITH comparable, they perceived that young people with disability were using violence to control themselves rather than exert control over others. As one mother speaking about her daughter said, “she has so little control over so many things in her head, that she exerts control through her behaviour.”

This finding provides a critical juncture in understandings of AVITH and the use of power and control. While mothers and practitioners perceived the violence as gender-based, noting mothers were targeted

primarily because they represented safety, security and protection, they lamented a lack of appropriate service responses that were not punitive, ableist and harmful.

While mothers and practitioners noted “pockets of good practice,” one mother told the team, “I've told this story so many times ... I've been telling it because I've been asking for help for a long time ... because there's more me's, there's more [siblings], and there's more [son with disability] and we're all suffering terribly.”

Associate Professor Georgina Sutherland, a lead author of the report, said, “Current service systems, and ways of operating, are significantly failing to support young people with disability and families where AVITH occurs. When disability is treated as something that is different and devalued, then it's not surprising that exclusionary practices arise. Researchers and advocates have been calling for meaningful partnerships and collaboration between domestic and family violence and disability sectors for a long time. This research adds to those voices calling for urgent action.”

“Without change, young people with disability using violence and their families will continue to fall through the service gaps, particularly in times of crisis. One mum said ‘they told us that the only way he could get help would be to have him admitted to hospital and then you refuse to pick him up, or that if he entered the criminal justice system’.”

ANROWS CEO, Padma Raman PSM said, “The participants of the study shared stories about services not being available or not being appropriate, especially those that require victims and survivors to leave violence before support can be offered. That's not a solution for families who want to keep their children safe while also keeping themselves and their other family members safe too.”

Ms Raman noted that it will be essential for Australia to take a human rights approach to disability.

“People with disability have a right to be active members of society, and this is severely impacted if young people are experiencing violence or struggling with their own use of violence at home and cannot get the support they need.”

Journalists are invited to request an embargoed copy of this report.

For further information, contact Johanna Gleeson +61 426 529 959 or by email at johanna.gleeson@anrows.org.au.

About ANROWS

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited ([ANROWS](#)) is a not-for-profit independent national research organisation. ANROWS is an initiative of Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. ANROWS was established by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia to produce, disseminate and assist in applying evidence for policy and practice addressing violence against women and their children. ANROWS is the only such research organisation in Australia.