

- Child development

Domestic violence has huge impact on child development

Hawke's Bay Today · 4 Jan 2023 · 8 · Victoria Carter Victoria Carter, ONZM, is a former Auckland city councillor and businesswoman.

Ram raids make grim reading and grim times for shopkeepers. If we agree “it takes a village” there are things we can all do. The first thing to understand is what’s driving it.

A Christmas Eve story in the Herald reported a police analysis of 63 young ram-raiders and found more than half had come to police attention through family violence callouts before they were 3 years old. More than half had been reported as a missing person — so they had chosen to leave their home — and more than half had been picked up as an unaccompanied minor in a risky situation. These kids must think they have no future and maybe no one who cares about them?

Further on in the newspaper was a letter to the editor that suggested education was the key to “fixing” them — which of course it can be — and that truancy should be a bigger priority. Then I thought, hang on, if you’ve witnessed all this horror before you even start school what does it do to your brain, nervous system and neuro pathways? Have these children in the data ever had anyone read them a bedtime story regularly to help their literacy? Has anyone counted the pegs with them as the washing was hung out, counted the cracks in the pavement as they’ve gone for walks?

There’s no shortage of research, articles and material on domestic violence and its impact on child development. New Zealand is right up there on the family violence charts in OECD countries and 70 per cent of family violence occurs in households where there are children. The police spend more time on family harm incidents than anything else. Every three minutes, on average, the police are called to one. And don’t forget it’s widely believed most of it is not reported.

The more reading I did the more I thought how bloody obvious it is: that if a small child is exposed to violence — either being hit themselves or seeing family members being hurt — moves house regularly, doesn’t get enough food, has no routine, their development is impacted. What was really disturbing was the new research on brain development or lack thereof from the home environment.

Keryn O’Neill is knowledge manager at Brainwave, a charitable trust focused on research and programmes to support parents — encouraging consistent, loving care to grow great brains. She says children exposed to family violence often experience other forms of maltreatment as well. There is more knowledge about how the impact of stress hormones on pregnant mothers, higher levels of cortisol, maternal stress affecting the development of babies’ nervous systems and altering genes involved in brain development can have lasting impacts on psychological wellbeing, behaviour and mental illness.

If you've grown up blocking sounds, experiences, tuning out noise to cope with your home environment, imagine how that might get in the way of learning at school. If you've not had enough sleep the night before or, worse, had your sleep interrupted, not had enough food, moved from school to school — what might that disruption do to your learning?

Dame Lesley Max has always inspired me with her wonderful work strengthening the bond between parents and their children with the Hippy (Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters) programme provided by the Great Potentials Foundation.

Max suggests: "We need to restore the mana of parenting. We need a social movement for this purpose, it's not a moral judgment but based purely on what we know from research and science. Emotionally responsive nurturing, especially from birth to around 3 is vital for the healthy development of the brain."

She added: "Nearly 30 years ago the British Medical Journal identified parenting as the most important public health issue facing society . . . not much has changed in the intervening years." If we know this, when are government agencies going to develop strategies to better support good parenting? When are we as a community going to say stop the hitting, any kind of violence? When are we going to agree the most important job is bringing up healthy children and put in steps to make sure that the right support structures are there? If it takes a village, how are we going to get that social movement on the mana of parenting?

I want to see political party manifestos that tackle this issue and offer genuine solutions for children and young people to thrive. Instead of the criminal focus this might do more to nurture good citizens.

Which political party is going to focus on the beginning — the parenting — rather than focusing on the crime?

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