

“If you ask, clients will tell you”

The case for universal and holistic screening in family relationships services

Jamie Lee, Principal Researcher, Relationships Australia South Australia

Claire Ralfs, Deputy CEO, Relationships Australia South Australia



Introduction

- Women seek help from family relationships services when they really need it. According to previous Australian research, 67.3% of those who experienced physical harms before or during relationship separation said they had used a family relationships service¹.
- This means service providers can potentially intervene to prevent or minimise violence-related harms for women and children. However clients are far less likely to name FV as an issue unless service providers specifically and sensitively ask them.
- Yet in routine practice, service providers may not do this – against many peak body recommendations. Many barriers are preventing service providers from implementing universal holistic screening in practice, namely screen all clients for risks in families².
- Unless we ask, clients may not tell us about FV or any other potential harms facing women and children. Is there a case for universal and holistic screening in family relationships services?

Objectives

To test two barriers to implementation of screening:

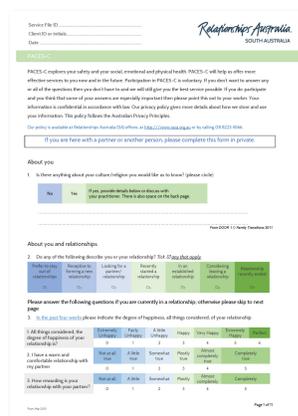
- 1) the belief that ‘FV is not an issue for my clients’ in routine practice; and
- 2) that clients will be offended by being asked about risks such as FV.

Context and Aims

- Setting was Relationships Australia South Australia (RASA), a health and family relationships services
- This analysis focused on clients using the ‘Family And Relationships Service’ (‘FARS’), a counselling service funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services
- All adult FARS clients complete universal screening with ‘PACES’ on entry. PACES draws upon many widely used screening tools including DOOR³



Relationships Australia South Australia offices in Adelaide CBD



PACES-C Screening Tool

Methods

- 1) After completing PACES screening at intake, a subset of 94 FARS clients were surveyed anonymously by questionnaire about their experience of ‘being screened’.
- 2) All FARS files from 2014 clients were reviewed for those who completed PACES screening, generating a sample of 1,413 client responses. Screening forms were reviewed for client disclosure of family violence risk providing a clinical audit of risk.

Findings – Anonymous Survey

N=94

% clients agree or strongly agree that...

99.0%

“I was completely honest when I filled out the forms.”

TRUTHFUL

89.3%

“I see it as a benefit to me to fill out these forms”

BENEFICIAL

5.4%

“Some of the forms made me feel suspicious”

RESPECTFUL

Other items not reported here: 8 other attitude items; free comment recall of ‘form filling’; service quality indicator items; free comment on service

Findings – Clinical Audit

N=1413

FV victimisation risk:

- 20.9% of clients identified a significant violence safety risk on their screening form that needed immediate attention.

FV perpetration risk:

- 13.1% of clients said they themselves were a significant safety risk to others.

Discussion

- When clients attend family relationships services and complete screening forms, they report significant risks from FV both as potential victims and perpetrators. FV is a daily issue that practitioners cannot discount. Clients’ experience of being asked about FV, among many other risks, they are not offended by being asked questions about risks.
- Clients overwhelmingly agreed with statements that either 1) endorsed the use of universal screening or 2) rejected statements against the use universal screening
- The client experience of doing ‘form filling’ and universal screening was
 - Truthful – clients were honest in their responses to screening questions and many thought it was actually easier to use a form for difficult disclosures form
 - Beneficial – clients saw ‘form filling’ as helpful to their practitioner, themselves or both; also clients accepted it as ‘part of procedure’
 - Respectful – clients said they didn’t mind ‘form filling’ because it was easy, unpressured and didn’t feel suspicious

Conclusions

- We found no evidence for clients reacting adversely to universal screening from a large sample of clients in routine practice
- Families – not just adult victims of FDV – will benefit from pro-active inquiry about safety risks either in paper or interview formats (but ideally both)
- These findings extend support for peak body recommendations to practitioners to screen universally for victimization and perpetration
- Screening has been implemented with virtually no extra administrative load for workers.
- We conclude that as service providers with a responsibility to responding to family violence promote safety for women and families, we really ought to know. And if you ask then clients will tell you.
- There is a clear case for universal holistic screening.

References

- ¹ Kaspiw, R., et al. (2015). Experiences of Separated Parents Study (*Evaluation of the 2012 Family Violence Amendments*). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
 - ² Todahl, J., & Walters, E. (2011). Universal screening for intimate partner violence: A structured review. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 37(3), 355-369.
 - ³ McIntosh, J.E. (2011). DOOR 1: Parent Self-Report Form. In: *The Family Law DOORS Handbook*. McIntosh, J.E. and Ralfs, C. (2012). Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department.
- Further details: Claire Ralfs c.Ralfs@rasa.org.au