

“If you ask, clients will tell you”

The case for universal and holistic screening in family relationships services

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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 families ².
- 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:

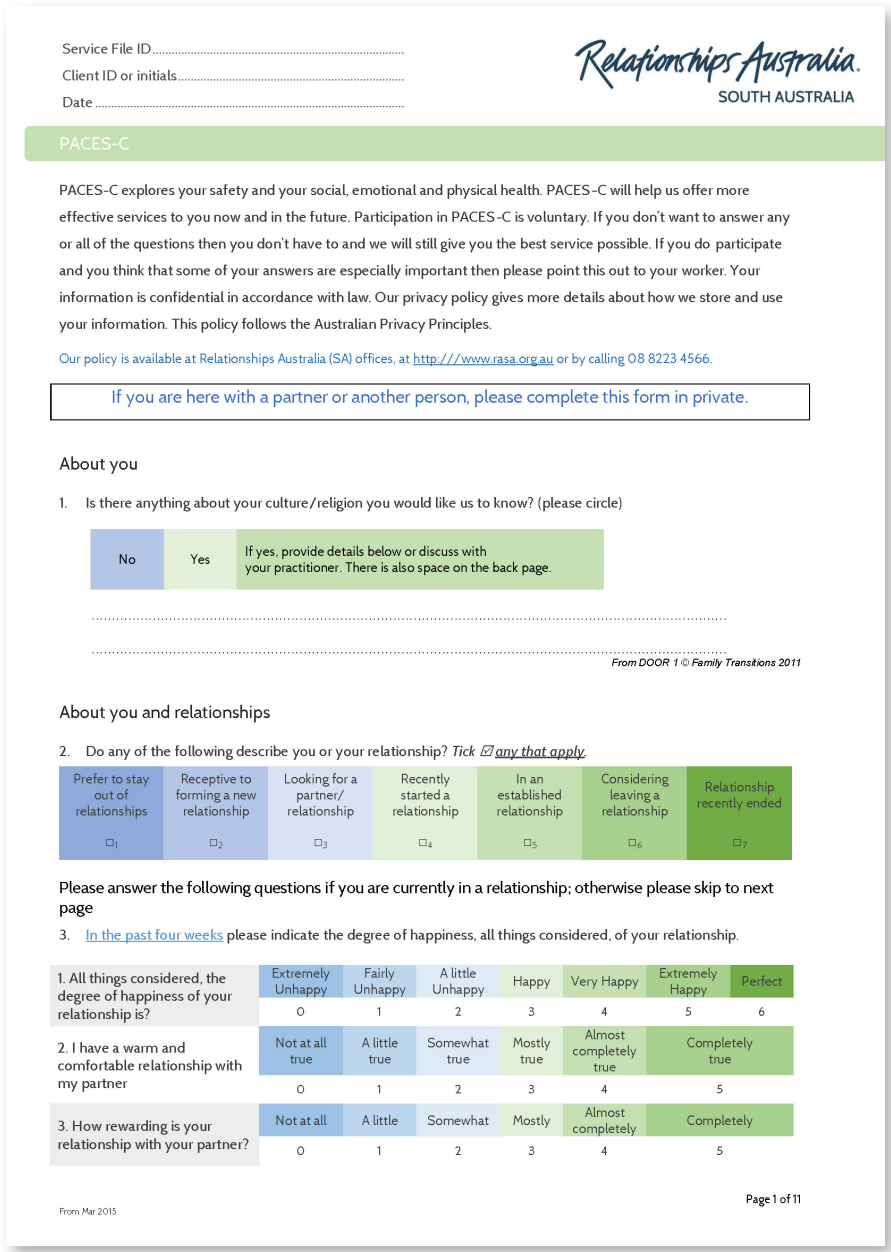
- 1) the belief that ‘FV is not an issue for my clients’ in routine practice; and
- 2) that clients will be offended by being asked about risks such as FV.

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 DOOR 1³



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.

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