

Expert Domestic Violence Risk Assessments in the Family Courts

Recommendations

The report is informed by the views of wide range of professionals working in the family courts and considers:

- **what an expert domestic violence risk assessment should cover;**
- **how assessments should be conducted;**
- **the knowledge, skills and training required by experts;**
- **recommendations on how improve the consistency of expert assessments in the area of domestic violence**

Commissioned by Respect; with support from the Domestic Violence Intervention Project and Ahimsa, Safer Families

Author: Chris Newman

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Recommendations

1. Domestic violence risk assessments should follow best practice in the field of violence risk assessment; which means they should include information from the victim, draw on multiple sources of information about the subject's background to establish the presence of risk indicators that have a demonstrated relationship to violent behaviour, and should use a principled method for arriving at risk ratings based on these factors. Risk ratings need to be contextualised and fitted alongside assessments of victim impact and risk of harm to children.
2. Domestic violence risk assessments should not restrict their focus to predicting the likelihood of discrete incidents of physical violence or abuse. Assessments need to take into account the full range of behaviours which fit within current definitions of domestic abuse, (e.g. physical, psychological, emotional abuse) to identify whether these form a pattern of abuse and domination.
3. Assessors should be aware of the impact on children of exposure to domestic violence in all its forms, and the potential for future harm.
4. Assessments should help those managing the case to identify strategies for risk management. These should be realistic, take into account local resources, and matched to the level of risk identified.
5. Those commissioning domestic violence risk assessments should seek out practitioners who have applied knowledge of risk assessment methodology, and the capacity to apply findings from the research literature to the specifics of the case, as well as experience of direct work with domestic violence perpetrators and victims, preferably in treatment settings (it cannot be automatically assumed that mental health professionals, or those with experience in other areas of child protection work, have the experience and expertise to assess the dynamics of domestic violence).
6. Given the high level of risk in some domestic violence cases, it is recommended that assessors should be able to demonstrate that they have access to guaranteed, high-quality supervision/consultation time, focused on case planning, constructive challenge, detailed proofreading of reports and professional development.
7. These proposals give rise to questions about quality assurance for professionals looking to appoint an expert to carry out a domestic violence risk assessment. We propose a set of core competences for assessors, coupled with a system of peer review. We also include proposals for a modular training programme to address the need for increased capacity in the field.
8. Respondents to this review were in general positive about the idea of developing a register of assessors who meet defined criteria, to provide a resource for those seeking to commission an assessment.