

“Your behaviour has consequences”: Children and young people's perspectives on reparation with their fathers after domestic violence[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from qualitative research undertaken in Australia with children and young people who have experienced domestic violence aged 9 to 19 years. The aim was to explore children and young people's perspectives on fathering in the context of domestic violence as well as the key messages they believe fathers who attend a program to address their violence need to know. This paper will focus on some of the findings of the study, with a particular focus on the issue of reparation which was identified as a strong theme in children and young people's accounts.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is a serious social issue impacting many families both internationally and in Australia. This violence has significant effects on the lives of many children and young people (Donovan, Spracklen, Schweizer, Ryckman, & Saftlas, 2016; Gustafsson et al., 2013; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). While historically children have been considered merely witnesses of domestic violence, they are now acknowledged as experiencing the violence (McCarry, 2012; Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010). While recognising that violence occurs within families in a range of contexts, evidence suggests that females are victims of domestic violence perpetrated by their current or former male partners at much higher rates, experience more fear, significant injuries and are particularly over-represented in homicides (Cox, 2015). It is for this reason that a gendered definition of domestic violence was used in this study, with the relationship between fathers who use violence and their children the focus.

The introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in the 1990s, and the associated child rights movement saw a significant shift to ‘the new sociology of childhood’ (James & Prout, 1997). Through this lens, children are considered experts in their own lives and their perspectives increasingly sought in research (Barker & Weller, 2003). Research with children who have experienced domestic violence has disproved a number of myths and as a result, we now know

that most children are aware domestic violence is occurring even when parents believe it is hidden from them (Harne, 2011; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; McGee, 2000). It has also been suggested that giving children who have lived with domestic violence an opportunity to be heard, can have important therapeutic benefits (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Mudaly & Goddard, 2006). However, while some research has focused on children's relationships with their fathers after violence (Holt, 2015), our knowledge remains limited (Cater & Forssell, 2014; McGee, 2000). In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that the perspectives of children are not often being heard within programs for fathers who use violence (Lucas, Winter, Hughes, & Walsh, 2016; Rayns, 2010).

The current research was designed to fill these gaps by speaking to children and young people about their perspectives on fathers who use violence as well as the key messages they believe fathers who attend a program to address their violence need to know. The research also facilitated the development of digital stories by children and young people as a tool with which to transmit messages to fathers when they attend a program to address their violence. The study was guided by three research questions and this paper will present results relating to one of these questions: *What are the key messages children and young people who have experienced domestic violence have for fathers who attend a program to address his violence?*

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2. Methods

The research design of the current study is underpinned by multiple, yet consistent theoretical approaches which have helped shape the direction of the research. The research method was heavily influenced by the new sociology of childhood where the realignment of power ensured that children determined how their message was delivered, assisted by the use of multiple methods and new technologies (Franks, 2011; Hill, 2006; Hunleth, 2011; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Punch, 2002; Spyrou, 2011). A feminist analysis of domestic violence underpins the research and ensures that a gendered perspective is sought to understanding this social issue (Nixon & Humphreys, 2010, p. 145).

2.1. Participants

The research was conducted with participants who had experienced domestic violence and were aged between 9 and 19 years (average 13 years). Given the broad age range of the participants in the study (from children through to young adults) they are referred to throughout this paper as ‘children and young people’. The children and young people who participated in the study were recruited from community organisations who provide therapeutic support for children who have experienced domestic violence in the state of Victoria, Australia. A Steering Committee comprising community organisations and the researchers was established to discuss the development of the research method and ethics application. This Steering Committee also assisted in the recruitment of young people for the study. A total of 16 children and young people participated in the research, including three boys and 13 girls who came from both rural ($n = 7$) and metropolitan ($n = 9$) areas.

2.2. Research design

The research comprised three stages, each guided by a research question which was developed iteratively and involved different methods of data collection. The first stage of the research included interviews with 12 children and young people, and one focus group with four children. Considerable work was undertaken to ensure that power imbalances between researcher and children were addressed in the interview process. This included allowing the young person to bring a support worker with them, conducting interviews in a location familiar to the young person, and using an age appropriate format (Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012).

Following the interviews and focus group, the second stage of the research involved inviting children and young people who participated in the first stage of the research to attend a digital storytelling workshop at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne. Eight young people accepted the invitation and created their own 3-minute digital story outlining what they believed fathers who attend a program to address their violence need to know about the impact of their behaviour on their children. Some of the stories created can be found at <https://violenceagainstwomenandchildren.com/>.

The third research stage involved focus groups with men's behaviour change facilitators about the feasibility of using the digital stories in their groups and is the subject of a further paper. This article draws on results from the first two stages of the research.

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Melbourne. Consistent with other research in this area, young people aged over 16 years were considered competent or mature minors and able to give informed consent to participate in the research themselves (Morris et al., 2012). The consent of the non-offending parent was required in addition to assent from young people aged 15 years or younger. In recognition of the feminist underpinnings of this study which consider payments to participants a principle of ethically sound research (Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009), an honorarium was paid to each participant in the form of a gift voucher

(\$40 AUD).

2.3. Data analysis

Data obtained from the interviews, focus groups and digital storytelling workshop were transcribed and entered into NVivo software. The data was then subject to thematic analysis following the method outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001). The initial line by line coding indicated that the emerging themes from the first two stages of the research were similar and therefore the thematic analysis of both stages occurred across both data sets to interrogate the data for secondary themes, and emerging concepts (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Author 1 provided the lead on the data analysis, while authors 2 and 3 undertook the inter-rater reliability checking with a sample of transcripts and coding (Armstrong, Gosling, & Weinman, 1997).

3. Results

When the children and young people in the current study were asked about their key messages for fathers who use violence, they described wanting their fathers to understand the significant impact of the violence on their lives. Expanding on this discussion, children and young people often described a desire for fathers who attend programs to address their violence to be told that they need to ‘make amends’ with their children. The researchers subsequently grouped these comments under the organizing theme of ‘reparation’ and this paper will focus on this element of the research findings.

While a small number of young people said that they did not want to have any further contact with their father, the majority of children and young people said they would consider having some contact if their father made substantial changes to both his behaviour and attitudes. It should be acknowledged that all participants in the study, (even those young people who stated that they did not want to have an ongoing relationship with their father) still expressed a desire to receive reparation from their fathers so that they could move on with their lives and achieve closure. Children and young people's comments about the type of reparative action they would like fathers to take can be grouped into three areas: addressing the past; demonstration of a commitment to change and then (in some cases) conditions for rebuilding trust and moving forward (see Fig. 1).

3.1. Addressing the past

When children and young people talked about wanting their fathers to ‘address the past’ they focussed on the need for fathers to acknowledge that they had done something wrong, recognise the harm they had caused and apologise for this. A number of the young people saw the need for fathers to admit they had done something wrong as a significant challenge. They described their fathers as being ‘deluded’ and in ‘denial’ about their behaviour. One young person described her father as being certain that the reason his children did not want to see him was because their mother had encouraged them to feel negatively towards him. This was a source of frustration for the young person who felt her mother had been unfairly demonised within their family's social networks:

‘Yeah, [our father] like, completely brainwashed himself into thinking that he is the good parent and that mum's brainwashed us. He never hit us. He never yelled at us. He was always the perfect father’.

(Young Person 6)

Young people were also very clear that they did not want to hear excuses from their father about why the violence had occurred. One young person said that their father often stated that he was only violent ‘when they deserved it’. It took some years before she realised this was not an acceptable justification. Another young person said that her father used his history of growing up around violence as an excuse for

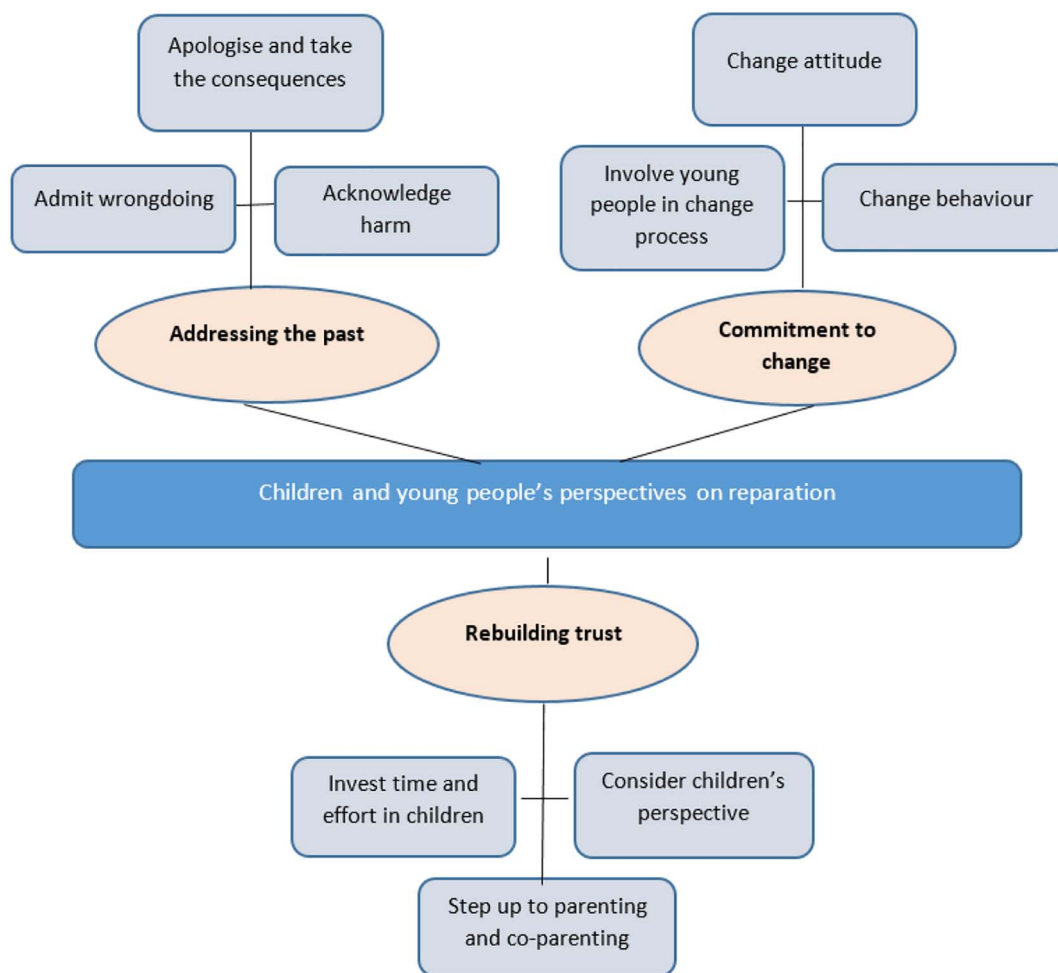


Fig. 1. Children and young people's perspectives on reparation after domestic violence.

why he was abusive. While she had some sympathy for the negative environment he had grown up in, she objected to him trying to justify his behaviour.

The young people in the study were in universal agreement about how valuable a genuine apology from their father would be. However when questioned further, each had a different view on the necessary content and context of an apology that would be needed to be truly effective. Several young people said that their father never apologised and this was a significant issue for them:

'I'm still angry because you never even apologised, admitted the least bit of guilt and that makes me angrier still and unable to move on.'
(Young Person 6)

Several young people felt that an apology on its own could be important:

'Like it would be amazing for them to apologise and actually mean it, like they could apologise and like not mean it, but like they've got to mean it and then it'll just - an apology can like do a lot.'
(Young Person 15)

Other young people had opposing views where their father apologised all the time, but kept repeating the behaviour and therefore the apology became meaningless:

'I've seen apologies all the time and he always - he does apologise but it just always comes back to the same case, so yeah I feel a bit more relieved when he apologised but it just, it repeats itself.'
(Young Person 7)

These young people were very clear that an apology needed to be real and genuine and backed up with evidence of change. An apology would become meaningless if the violence or abusive behaviour occurred again. One young person also said that they wanted to be clear that just because a father apologises to his child for his behaviour did not mean that their mother automatically had to forgive him as well.

Some young people had strong feelings about the need for an apology to be followed by their father taking the consequences of his behaviour or paying 'penance'. Just what this meant varied according to different young people. One set of siblings felt strongly that their father should have had consequences from the legal system and that he should have served prison time:

'He denied all the abuse and stuff. If he had of - I mean, that's what happened. And maybe if he'd done some time in prison and apologised for what he did, I'd probably - you know, I might think about seeing him. But he just denies that everything happened and he refuses to apologise for anything or own up to his behaviour. He's like a child.'
(Young Person 6)

In the absence of criminal justice intervention they felt that fathers should still experience the consequences of their actions:

'And sometimes the consequences don't end up being legal time. They end up - your kids are going to be weird around you for a while.'
(Young Person 5)

3.2. Commitment to change

The concept of 'Commitment to change' was described by children and young people as a father engaging in a process of change that included his children. Once the violence and its harm has been acknowledged, an apology made and consequences follow, the next priority identified was a need to see evidence of willingness to change. This sentiment is expressed by one young person:

'Once I thought an apology was all you needed. But I don't think that would even be enough. I need to see your actions have changed. Because saying sorry... well they are just words. I need actions. Actions to prove to me you are truly sorry. I don't care about the money or the bribes to win me back. I just want a father that I am not scared to see.' (Young Person 15)

Some of the young people were optimistic that their fathers could change if he was motivated enough:

'He can change - a dad can change. But you can also tell that he's also - if he goes there and just listens then he probably doesn't even care and then comes back and then he doesn't change - he doesn't change a bit. It's like he doesn't care.'

(Young Person 3)

Several young people suggested that one way that their father could show a commitment to change would be if he attended therapy or a program to address his violence. When asked whether they believed that young people should be told when their father is attending a program, the majority of the young people answered that they believe they should be, as outlined in the quotation below:

'They should, to know they're [fathers] trying to get help...like they're trying to fix what they done.'

(Young Person 11)

When the children and young people in the study were asked whether they knew whether their father had attended a program, only one young person was able to affirm that her father had attended a program, the remaining participants were unsure. Young people were then asked about the type of changes they would like to see if their father attended a program for his violence. The changes they valued as important indicators of the program's effectiveness included changes to both attitudes and behaviours with many outcomes directly relating to their fathers' interactions and communication with their children as well as with their mothers:

'One of our father's favourite mottos was children should be seen and not heard, especially when it came to women, and his wife shouldn't be seen OR heard.'

(Young People 5 and 6 in conversation)

Another suggested that she would determine whether change had occurred by the way her father made her feel:

'Like be there when we do drop off and pick up for him to actually be there and for him to not get angry at me and say bad things, not to make me feel uncomfortable when I'm there, to make me feel safe, to make me feel wanted, to make me feel loved, like yeah.'

(Young Person 15)

In addition, several young people also spoke about wanting their father to stop their violence not only for their children and their relationships but also for themselves. They believed their fathers were having unhappy lives as a result of their violence. They also suggested that an important outcome of attending a program would be that fathers come to terms with the abuse they experienced as children:

'Because men - people like these need to change not just for their children, but for themselves emotionally as well.'

(Young Person 6)

3.3. Rebuilding trust

The third element of reparation described by children and young people in this study was categorized by the researchers as 'Rebuilding Trust'. This was the stage that young people who wanted to have an ongoing relationship with their father saw as extremely important. However, they also saw it as one that was difficult to achieve. It included their fathers investing time in them, stepping up to parenting and being a reliable co-parent.

One of the areas of significant agreement was that it would take some time for children to be able to trust their fathers. One young person suggested fathers need to:

'Tell them it's going to be alright and work on it. Like they're not going to trust him straight away, but he's gotta like work on it and let the kids know that nothing like that is going to ever happen again.'

(Young Person 15)

When children and young people were asked about what their fathers could do to make it up to them, one young person was very clear that the emphasis should be on fathers to think of ways to make it up to their children:

'I don't really know what you could do, so that I would want to see you again. How do you think you are going to change this? It's up to you.'

(Young Person 12)

Other young people were more willing to offer suggestions for how their father could make it up to them. This included ensuring that time with children was spent well and was quality time and not uncomfortable. Some of the suggestions for fathers included being generous, giving your child things, making them feel special and taking them places.

Another concept discussed by young people was the need for fathers who have been violent to step up to parenting and co-parenting. In fact one young person called their digital story *Step Up Your Game*. The young people discussed this issue when talking about what makes a good father and then again when reflecting on how a father who has been violent might go about making amends, and rebuilding trust with his children. Another young person suggested that this would differ according to the child and their interests and fathers should make the time to find out about what interested their children.

Young people believed that fathers too often (in their experience) play the role of 'good time guy' and do not help out or get involved with parenting. Young people wanted their fathers to 'step up' and do a better job of co-parenting with their mothers. In the current study, young people expressed considerable anger about how after the physical violence had ended and their parents had separated, their fathers often continued with the verbal and emotional abuse of their mothers, and how damaging this was for them. One of the youngest children in study was adamant that the key message she wanted to give to fathers who use violence was 'don't be so hard on mum[s]' when asked why she thought this was an important message she said 'so [his] kids can have a good life' (Young Person 14).

Children and young people described being a reliable co-parent as respecting a child's mother and listening to what their children want from them, even if what they wanted was no ongoing contact for a period of time. This was a key element of reparation for some young people who felt that even if their fathers had admitted the harm they caused, apologised and shown a commitment to change there was still the opportunity for children to say, they were not ready to spend time with their fathers. As one young person explained:

'Like I never used to do school work and I was always sad at school and I never talked to anyone about anything and once I got over that it was better because I didn't see my dad and it was better for me not to see him'

(Young Person 10)

4. Discussion

The results of this study broaden our understanding of children's experiences of domestic violence and their relationships with their fathers. Children and young people described elements of reparation as important in supporting them repair from the harm that their fathers had caused, regardless of whether they intended to have a relationship with him into the future or not.

One of the central tenets of reparation described, was the need for the process to be controlled by children and young people themselves, with the view that it was up to children and young people to determine the degree of involvement that fathers should have in their lives after domestic violence.

The first component of reparation described by children and young people in this study was the need for fathers to address the past and admit and apologise for the harm he had caused. The impacts of a public statement or admission of responsibility by men who use domestic violence has been identified in the literature as having benefits for victim recovery (Hopkins, 2012).

However it also has been suggested that practices of apology and forgiveness can be dangerous in the context of domestic violence and can be used as a powerful tool for continuing oppression and control in the family:

Apology and forgiveness, the primary method of restorative repair, can often be anything but healing. They can be essential weapons for placing an offender in a position to inflict new wounds and reopen old ones

(Acorn, 2004, p. 74)

This is a relevant point in relation to some of the young people in this study who described fathers who constantly apologised but continued their violence and may explain why some children and young people described the need for fathers to 'Address the past' as being supported by a 'Commitment to change'.

Children and young people in the study described wanting to see their father make a commitment to change by attending a program or treatment to address his behaviour. While not all children wanted to be involved in their father's change process, some clearly did. This research adds to the evidence base that suggests that children are mostly not told when their father is attending a program, nor do they have any involvement in the program, or know what their father has learnt (Alderson, Westmarland, & Kelly, 2013; Rayns, 2010).

The cessation of abusive behaviour is considered an essential element of any reparation between children and their fathers (Areal & Davis, 2007). In the current study, children and young people wanted violence to cease as part of their father's process of committing to change. They also wanted to see a change in their father's attitudes and behaviour towards themselves and their mother. These findings fit well with other recent work which found that cessation of violence alone may not make women and children safer, as once the physical violence stops it is possible women and children may continue 'to live in unhealthy atmospheres laden with tension and threat' (Westmarland & Kelly, 2013).

The third element of reparation described by children and young people who did want to have an ongoing relationship with their father focussed on ways in which fathers could rebuild trust. Children and young people saw a need for fathers to make more of an effort to positively co-parent with their mothers as a crucial element of this process. The literature suggests that 'maternal alienation' is one of the tactics deployed by fathers who use violence, with the aim to undermine the relationship between mothers and their children (Morris, 2009). The current study supports earlier work in finding that children and young people were very much aware of the negative way in which their father treated their mother (even post separation). In fact children and young people suggested that the way in which their fathers spoke about their mothers was one of the most significant factors that

determined whether young people wanted to spend time with their fathers.

While the study provides us with considerable insight into children and young people's perspectives, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. This study was based on a small sample size of participants drawn from a population of children and young people who have already received counselling and support for issues of domestic violence. A significant limitation of the current study was the gender imbalance of participants with more females than males engaging in the research despite the researchers' best efforts. When asked why more males were not recruited for the study, referral organisations suggested that they believed that young males can be more cautious about speaking about sensitive issues, can be more conflicted about their feelings about their father and sometimes express a desire to 'save face' and protect their family as an additional barrier to participation. Further studies might also tackle the diversity of children's experiences of abusive fathering, and the history of abuse noting that this may impact on their expectations of reparation and future contact. It was not an issue able to be addressed through children's qualitative interviews in this study.

5. Implications for practice

The literature suggests that when children and young people are asked about their perspectives on an issue their views should be given due consideration and where possible, have an impact on policy and programs that impact their lives (Shier, 2001). There is a considerable body of literature that guides consultation and research with children and young people (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Crowley, 2015; Pascal & Bertram, 2009). However less is known about how young people's perspectives impact policy change and development (Crowley, 2015). Research undertaken in Wales looked at the impact of children's views on policy and public services and found that while participation had benefits for the children involved in terms of empowerment, skill development and increased confidence, 'it was hard to discern any resultant changes in policy or practice' (Crowley, 2015, p. 608). These findings echo the work of Archard and Skivenes (2009). It is suggested that supporting children to have their voices heard 'has the potential to lead to social policy which more accurately and compassionately reflects the concerns of children' (Grover, 2004, p. 83). An exception lies with work undertaken with children and young people in Scotland where direct access was created to politicians who took on young people's views about the design of refuge accommodation and services for young people (Houghton, 2006).

For these reasons it is important for the perspectives of children and young people to influence programs for both children and fathers who use violence. Emerging evidence suggests that while the impacts of violence on children is raised in some programs for fathers who use violence, the degree of attention given to children's experiences, varies dramatically from program to program (Stover, 2013). The issue of accountability for men who use violence is increasingly becoming a policy and practice focus (Devaney, 2014). Less attention has focussed on whether and how fathers who use violence should be held accountable to their children.

One way of ensuring fathers who use violence are accountable to their children is by bringing their needs and issues into programs. Children and young people in the current study have contributed to our understanding of the role they would like to play in programs. Consistent with other studies in this area which have found that children are seldom told when their father attends a program to address violence, (Alderson, 2015; Rayns, 2010), the findings of this study suggest that there could be benefits from encouraging fathers to be open and honest with their children about their participation in a program to address their violence:

Such conversations also offer opportunities for fathers to show that they are aware of the costs of their actions for children and provide a

space for children's hurt and distress to be heard. This is fundamental if the principle of accountability for violence is to be extended to children.

(Alderson, 2015, p. 158)

An additional area where the inclusion of children's perspectives are needed within programs for fathers who use violence, is in the evaluation of program effectiveness. At present, children's perspective on program success or the impact of their father's attendance on a program are absent from the literature with one exception (Alderson, 2015). Based on a theory that evaluations of programs for men who use violence focus too narrowly on cessation of violence as the key measure of program success, research in the United Kingdom Westmarland and Kelly (2013) asked men, their partners and program funders to elaborate on what program success might look like. The current study adds children and young people's voices to this earlier work and finds that they have strong ideas about what they would like their fathers to achieve in a program to address his violence. As one of the managers of a program for men who use violence who participated in the feasibility component of the current research suggested, if programs for fathers who use violence do not improve outcomes for children then, 'what is the point?'

One of the significant conclusions that can be drawn from this research is that children as young as 9 years of age are often very interested in being consulted about their perspectives on domestic violence and can give us a greater understanding of fathering in the context of family violence. Children and young people's description of the type of reparation that they would like from their fathers gives us valuable insights into an area not addressed previously in research. Their message that it should be up to children to determine whether they wish to have an ongoing relationship with their father after domestic violence is an important one. A final point to consider is that the model of reparation described by children and young people is currently outside their experience. It is one they believe would give them closure and repair. It would be useful for future work to explore how children and young people actually feel if this process is followed.

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