Truthful, beneficial and respectful: A survey of client attitudes to universal screening for safety risks in families

Jamie Lee, Principal Researcher, Relationships Australia South Australia
Claire Ralfs, Deputy CEO, Relationships Australia South Australia

Relationships Australia SOUTH AUSTRALIA

the family law DOORS

Introduction

- Men and women frequently use family relationships services after suffering the effects of family and domestic violence (FDV)[1]
- Evidence shows that many clients disclose FDV or other safety risks only if asked by practitioners[2]
- Some peak bodies recommend universal risk screening (pro-actively asking all clients about possible risks) or indicated screening (asking only clients who show symptoms possibly caused by risks)[3 4]
- Recommendations only cover risk of FDV victimisation, not perpetration
- FDV risks may co-occur with other risks to self and others (eg suicide or child abuse) but not always
- However, practitioners are often concerned that clients may react badly to screening questions, especially perpetration or wider safety risks

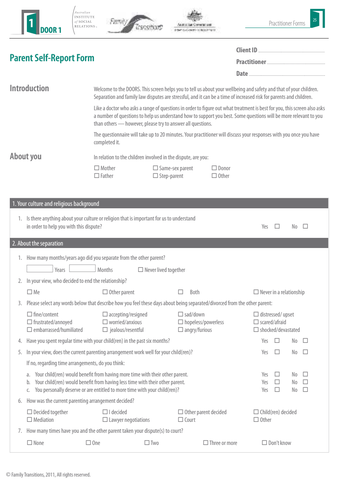
Objectives

- To explore client attitude to 'form filling' (including universal screening for safety risks in families in routine practice)
- To find evidence for practitioner concerns over adverse client reactions

Adelaide Family Relationship Centre

Context

- Setting was Relationships Australia South Australia (RASA), a health and family relationships service with universal screening in routine practice
- At RASA, post-separation services use Family Law DOORS universal screening[5], usually client self-report (DOOR 1) version[6]



DOOR 1 Practitioner Form

Parent Self-Report Form

Client ID
Practitioner
Date

Introduction

Welcome to the DOORS. This screen helps you to tell us about your wellbeing and safety and that of your children. Separation and family law disputes are stressful, and it can be a time of increased risk for parents and children.

Like a doctor who asks a range of questions in order to figure out what treatment is best for you, this screen also asks a number of questions to help us understand how to support you best. Some questions will be more relevant to you than others — however, please try to answer all questions.

The questionnaire will take up to 20 minutes. Your practitioner will discuss your responses with you once you have completed it.

About you

In relation to the children involved in the dispute, are you:

☐ Mother ☐ Father ☐ Same-sex parent ☐ Step-parent ☐ Donor ☐ Other

1. Your culture and religious background

1. Is there anything about your culture or religion that is important for us to understand in order to help you with this dispute? Yes ☐ No ☐

2. About the separation

1. How many months/years ago did you separate from the other parent?
   Years ____ Months ____ ☐ Never lived together
2. In your view, who decided to end the relationship?
   ☐ Me ☐ Other parent ☐ Both ☐ Never in a relationship
3. Please select any words below that describe how you feel these days about being separated/divorced from the other parent.
   ☐ flexi/content ☐ accepting/resigned ☐ sad/down ☐ distressed/ upset
   ☐ frustrated/annoyed ☐ worried/anxious ☐ hopeless/powerless ☐ scared/afraid
   ☐ embarrassed/humiliated ☐ jealous/resentful ☐ angry/furious ☐ shocked/devastated
4. Have you spent regular time with your child(ren) in the past six months? Yes ☐ No ☐
5. In your view, does the current parenting arrangement work well for your child(ren)? Yes ☐ No ☐
   If no, regarding time arrangements, do you think:
   a. Your child(ren) would benefit from having more time with their other parent. Yes ☐ No ☐
   b. Your child(ren) would benefit from having less time with their other parent. Yes ☐ No ☐
   c. You personally deserve or are entitled to more time with your child(ren)? Yes ☐ No ☐
6. How was the current parenting arrangement decided?
   ☐ Decided together ☐ I decided ☐ Other parent decided ☐ Child(ren) decided
   ☐ Mediation ☐ Lawyer negotiations ☐ Court ☐ Other
7. How many times have you and the other parent taken your dispute(s) to court?
   ☐ None ☐ One ☐ Two ☐ Three or more ☐ Don't know

DOOR 1 screening tool (McIntosh, 2011)

Universal Screening

Our review of the research and our service experience reveal that the common risks include family violence, parenting stress, problem gambling, financial stress, substance abuse, and mental health concerns. These often occur together and each is linked with relationship problems.

Therefore, RASA has a holistic universal approach to wellbeing and safety screening. This means that all clients are screened, not just some. Universal screening helps clients understand that exploring risk is routine and contributes to establishing trust with the practitioner.

RASA regards screening for both victimisation and perpetration as a central process underpinning all stages of relationship service delivery. RASA staff - including non-clinical staff – are supported to notice client risks through ongoing professional development about screening and risk assessment.

Sample

- All clients were asked to complete an anonymous survey over four weeks in April-May 2015, with 1,153 (72.6%) agreeing
- To ensure robustness, this analysis includes only first session clients who should have received DOORS post-separation universal screening AND who said they recalled filling out forms immediately beforehand
- Sample was 134 to 141 clients (depending on the question) and mostly from mediation (85.9% of sample)

Findings

95.8% "I was completely honest when I filled out the forms."

TRUTHFUL

68.3% "It's easier to disclose personal or sensitive information on a form than face-to-face"

92.6% "Filling out these forms will help my practitioner to help me"

BENEFICIAL

94.3% "I see it as a benefit to me to fill out these forms"

7.1% "I felt pressured to fill out the forms"

RESPECTFUL

8.6% "Some of the forms made me feel suspicious"

Other items not reported here: 5 attitude items; free comment recall of 'form filling'; service quality indicator items; free comment on service

Discussion

- 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
- 92.7% of first session clients recalled filling out at least one form (median 2, range 1-10)

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 victimisation and perpetration

References

[1] Kaspiew, R., Gray, M., Weston, R., Moloney, L., Hand, K., Qu, L., & the Family Law Evaluation Team. (2009). *Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

[2] Morse, D. S., Lafleur, R., Fogarty, C. T., Mittal, M., & Cerulli, C. (2012). "They told me to leave": How health care providers address intimate partner violence. *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine, 25(3)*, 333–342.

[3] APS (2015, June). Invited submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission National Children's Commissioner's Examination of children affected by family and domestic violence. Retrieved December 2nd, 2015 from http://www.psychology.org.au

[4] The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (2014). *Abuse and violence: Working with our patients in general practice, 4th edition*. Melbourne: The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

[5] McIntosh, J.E. and Ralfs, C. (2012). *The DOORS Detection Of Overall Risk Screen Framework*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Attorney-General's Department.

[6] 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.

The authors of this poster acknowledge the contribution of Prof J. McIntosh in the implementation of Family Law DOORS and other universal screening tools at RASA | Further details: Jamie Lee j.lee@rasa.org.au or Claire Ralfs C.Ralfs@rasa.org.au