

30 October 2023

Autism Policy Team  
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Department of Social Services

Dear Autism Policy Team at the Department of Social Services

**Subject: National Autism Strategy – Intersection between autism and family violence**

Safe and Equal welcomes the introduction of a National Autism Strategy to help guide key reform areas including access to services, healthcare, education, and employment. As part of developing this strategy we would like to direct your attention to the lack of evidence at the intersection of autism and family violence and encourage research investment on this topic as part of the strategy to fill these critical knowledge gaps.

**Prevalence of family violence for people with disabilities**

Family violence is a significant and complex form of violence that can have far reaching and life-long impacts for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, it is difficult to definitively determine the prevalence of family violence experienced by people with disabilities due to a lack of systematic data collection and the multiple and complex barriers people with disabilities face to reporting and disclosing violence they have experienced.

However, current research shows that people of all genders with disabilities are more likely to experience family violence than people without disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Further, women and girls with disabilities experience higher rates of violence (including family violence) than men with disabilities, and are more likely to experience family violence than women without disabilities, leading to the conclusion that the “intersection of gender and disability increases the risk of violence against women and girls with disabilities”.<sup>2</sup>

This data is even more limited or non-existent for people with autism, particular those who also experience other forms of structural oppression – for example victim survivors with disabilities from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTIQ+ communities. We recognise that even if any data was collected about the intersection between family violence and autism, this would also likely underrepresent the prevalence due to barriers to reporting family violence and the underdiagnosis of autism in women and girls. Family violence may also compound the challenge of getting access to a timely diagnosis of autism and subsequent supports.

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<sup>1</sup> AIHW (2019). Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story. Cat. No. FDV 3. Canberra. p8; State of Victoria (2014–16). Royal Commission into Family Violence: Summary and recommendations, Parl Paper No 132. Melbourne, VIC. p36.

<sup>2</sup> Family Safety Victoria (2019). MARAM Practice Guides: Foundation Knowledge Guide. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria. p51; Family Safety Victoria (2018). Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework: A Shared Responsibility for Assessing and Managing Family Violence Risk. Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria. p35: “people with disabilities, both adults and children, are at higher risk of experiencing family violence [and] women and girls with disabilities experience even high rates of abuse and violence than men with disabilities, who are at higher risk than men in the general population”; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017).

## **Lack of evidence at the intersection of autism and family violence**

As the peak body for specialist family violence services in Victoria, we have heard anecdotally from our member services with disability specialists that there has been an increase in referrals for clients with autism. However, there is currently no research about the prevalence of family violence for people with autism – as either victim survivors or the person using violence, or guidance about the most appropriate ways to support victim survivors with autism.

We would like to highlight the lack of evidence at the intersection of autism and experiences of family violence on the following topics:

- Prevention of family violence and gender-based violence for people with autism, particularly within the disability sector as a key setting for primary prevention work,
- Barriers to reporting and seeking help for experiences of family violence for people with autism,
- Appropriate family violence case management and therapeutic responses to victim survivors with autism, particularly those that also present with PTSD or cPTSD,
- Misidentification of the predominant aggressor and whether there is an overrepresentation of people with autism who are misidentified, and if so, ways to rectify this,
- Adolescents with autism using violence in the home and ways to respond and manage this that can navigate nuance between exerting power and control inherent to family violence in contrast to adolescents with autism responding to their environment by using violence, and particularly strategies that reduce criminalising young people, and;
- Experiences of family violence for people with autism within shared supported accommodation or institutional care settings.

We recognise this is not an all-encompassing list of areas that require research at the intersection of family violence and autism, however it addresses some of the key feedback we've received from member services.

## **Investment in research**

As part of the National Autism Strategy, we recommend investing in research that identifies way to respond to and improve outcomes for victim survivors with autism. In particular, we recommend research that is led by people with autism who have experienced family violence or used violence in the home and family violence experts.

We also recognise that research needs to translate into action and better inclusion of people with autism in family violence prevention and response activities. We recommend that the National Autism Strategy consider and link to all relevant plans that pertain to gender inequality and family violence, for example the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, and that the National Autism Strategy promotes activities listed under relevant current and subsequent Action Plans to be reviewed with people with autism. We also recommend that the National Autism Strategy links with other Actions Plans and any related activities to encourage co-design processes with people with autism to ensure that there are tangible actions to promote more inclusive service delivery and prevention activities.

We hope to see more investment to fill these critical knowledge gaps and are happy to discuss this further at any point.

Yours sincerely



Tania Farha  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
Safe and Equal

## About Safe and Equal

[Safe and Equal](https://safeandequal.org.au) is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and all people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving and respected.

We represent more than 80 organisations and individuals in Victoria, and our work is supported and informed by survivor advocates with diverse lived experiences of family and gender-based violence, who make up our Expert Advisory Panel.