

Exercise

Sam's Story - Case Study

AVERT
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in
the Family Law System**



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Sam's Story - Case Study Exercise

Purpose:

- To increase knowledge of the dimensions and dynamics of family violence
- To increase knowledge of the impact of family violence on children
- To raise an understanding of child focused practice in relation to family violence
- To increase ability to conduct risk assessment in relation to children
- To explore the role of Children's Contact Service staff in identifying and responding to family violence.

Materials Required:

- Copy of *Sam's Story* for each participant

Process:

Explain that this section will explore child focused work through an analysis of *Sam's Story*.

1. Divide participants into four small groups
2. Hand out the case study of *Sam's Story* and allow participants 30 minutes to read and discuss the themes in their small groups. Ask them to consider:
 - What is going on for Sam?
 - What do you notice are the impacts on Sam, of living with family violence?
 - What does Sam need in this circumstance?
 - What does Danny need?
 - What does Jodi need?
 - What would be a child focused response?
 - What referral and collaboration options would you draw on to respond to this situation?
 - What are the ethical issues in this case study?



3. Invite groups to share their deliberations and draw out a discussion about the worker “breaching” the Contact Order due to a policy of not forcing children to do something they do not wish to do.

Key elements to draw out of the discussion:

- It is entirely appropriate not to force children to do something they do not wish to do, even with a contact order in place
- Collaboration and specialised input is important
- Consideration of the effects upon a child’s ‘circle of safety’ should shape the worker and system response
- Engaging *both* parents in order to support their parenting capacity and focus on the child is critical for safety.



Sam's Story

Background:

Samantha (Sam) is five and a half years old and has just started school. Her parents, Jodi and Danny, are a professional couple in their mid 30s. She is a midwife and he works at a senior level in a government department. Both are Aboriginal and have been raised in the city. During their relationship Danny had regular affairs with women he met through his job. He often demeaned Jodi, criticising her care of Sam and insulting her about her work. He became most abusive if she questioned his whereabouts or fidelity. At these times he would shout, kick the dog and several times pulled her hair and punched her.

Jodi first left Danny when Sam was less than 12 months old. It was an acrimonious separation and after Family Court proceedings, a parenting arrangement was ordered, using the Children's Contact Service (CCS) for handover. Jodi still loved Danny however and upon his request she returned to him twice in the following four year period, hoping he would have changed. On both occasions the pattern of violence resumed and Sam often heard or saw the violence. Once, she tried to intervene and Danny pushed her away and yelled at her. Finally, 6 months ago, Jodi left "for good".

The parenting arrangement has remained in place and this means that Sam comes to the CCS most Saturday mornings, where she moves between her conflicted and frustrated parents.

- What are the possible effects of this history upon Sam?

Current Situation:

Sam shows a lot of anxiety at handover going from Mum to Dad. She often wets her pants, says she feels sick and sometimes simply clings to Jodi, refusing to let go. She cannot be distracted by any of the toys or equipment in the centre or by a positive, encouraging approach from either her mother or the CCS workers. In spite of Jodi's attempts to reassure her, Sam doesn't appear to feel safe to stay with the CCS workers, knowing she is going to see her dad. She does the best she can to convey her distress.

After three weeks of this behaviour, on the most recent handover, the CCS worker once more tries to encourage Sam to spend time with her dad. However, she is concerned about forcing Sam to do something she plainly does not wish to do and thereby distressing her further. She watches Sam for signals about what she needs:



“I tried to engage her interest with a favourite book, and then I attempted to distract her while her mum left – I wanted to see if she could use me as a source of security to help the transition to her Dad. When none of these attempts worked, it became clear to me that Sam was trying to let us know that she was too anxious to go to her Dad.” (CCS worker).

- What does Sam need?
- What do Jodi and Danny need?
- What is the primary role of the CCS worker?
- What should the CCS worker do?

Children’s Contact Service Intervention:

The CCS worker supports Jodi to take Sam home instead of going with her Dad and also gains her permission to refer Sam to a child consultant.

Danny is immediately informed by the CCS worker that Sam was very anxious and not able to go with him. Danny feels disappointed and frustrated, blaming Jodi for “turning Sam against me”. He is encouraged to put his personal feelings about his relationship with Jodi aside and to think like “Sam’s Dad”, rather than “Jodi’s ex-partner” or “The other party”. He is informed of his legal rights, but the main emphasis is on introducing Danny to the idea of Child Consultation and focusing on Sam’s needs.

Immediately following this event the CCS worker arranges a planning meeting with a child consultant and a family dispute resolution practitioner to discuss a coordinated approach to the family’s issues. Their primary purpose is to enable Sam to regain a sense of security through supporting a focus on her needs, building on the parenting capacity of her mum and dad.

- What are the ethical dilemmas in this scenario?
- What coordinated plans could be put in place to respond to Sam’s needs?
- What individual support can be provided to Jodi and Danny to help them participate effectively in a parenting arrangement?
- What referral resources might be necessary?