

# HOW REFUGE PROVIDES 'REFUGE' TO INFANTS

EXPLORING THE WAYS IN WHICH 'REFUGE' IS PROVIDED TO, AND EXPERIENCED BY, INFANTS ENTERING CRISIS ACCOMMODATION WITH THEIR MOTHERS AFTER FLEEING FAMILY VIOLENCE (BUNSTON, 2016).

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## INTRODUCTION

Children, four years and under, make up the highest group of children entering Refuge with their mothers (AIHW, 2012a; Shinn, 2010). Most of these children enter Refuge with their mothers to escape family violence (AIHW, 2012a, 2012b). Apart from this we know little else about the infant or toddler's experience. Given that Women's Refuges emerged some 40 years ago, this gap in our knowledge is astounding.

## THE RESEARCH

The infant (12 months and under) was placed front and centre within this research. A non-intrusive, qualitative research approach was used. This focused on the observed behaviour of the infant and how they appeared to make meaning of their experience of being in Refuge. It also explored how this was supported by their mother, as well as by Refuge staff (Charmaz, 2014). The research involved:

- 8 Women's Refuges in Melbourne, Remote Western Australia, England and Scotland
- 15 Infant Observation Sessions
- 10 Interview with Mothers
- 13 Staff and Key Informant Interviews

## LINKS

For a *full copy* of this PhD thesis go to

[hdl.handle.net/1959.9/559171](http://hdl.handle.net/1959.9/559171)

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## WHAT THIS RESEARCH FOUND

1. The infant was largely not understood to have their own, separate experiences, resulting in them often being lost from view within the Refuge setting.
2. The mother, herself often traumatised, was expected to care primarily for her infant, rather than the Refuge.
3. Only when the infant was in obvious distress did they receive attention, and usually from specialist workers outside of the Refuge.
4. It was often too painful for the adults in Refuge to see, or think, about the infant's trauma and distress.
5. The infant's father was either not spoken about, or with criticism, leaving the infant unable to make sense of this important person and their relationship with him.
6. The infant was often the reason the mothers sought Refuge, and why they were hopeful of building a different future.

## CONCLUSION

The rapidly developing infant often becomes lost in Refuge. The mothers are frequently so traumatised themselves they are not always emotionally available to attend to their similarly distressed infant. Refuge staff are 'hamstrung' by bureaucratic procedures and a lack of confidence in feeling equipped to truly 'see' and 'emotionally connect' with the infants. However, Refuge staff have a unique opportunity to support the infant/mother relationship, as the infant holds the most hope for healing and future change for their mothers. Because of their developmental stage, the infant or young child is also the most open to, and ready for making a positive difference.

## REFERENCES

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4. Charmaz, K. (2014). Constructing Grounded Theory (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
5. Shinn, M. (2010). Homelessness, poverty, and social exclusion in the U.S. and Europe. *European Journal on Homelessness*, 4, 21-44.



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