



Case study for primary and secondary schools (assume the 'you' role specific to your school)

Bob and Pamela have three children and have lived in the area for many years. They are well known in the community.

Pamela, a quiet woman, is rumoured to have “bad nerves”. Pamela does not work outside the family home. Over the years she has volunteered at the primary school canteen and has helped with reading. When the couple attend Parent –Teacher evenings Bob does most of the talking and Pamela defers most decisions to him.

Robert 15, has made a good transition into high school, however he has recently been involved in a number of incidents both in the classroom and outside. His generally good behaviour has deteriorated, and yesterday there was a scuffle in the playground and Robert lashed out at another boy causing minor bruising.

Contact was made with his parents to arrange a meeting today and, unusually, Pamela attends alone. She is not making a lot of eye contact and despite it being a warm day she is wearing long sleeves. You notice a bruise on her face and you ask her what happened. Robert becomes very protective of her, but she says that she tripped and fell on some furniture, as the house is being re-decorated and things are not in their usual place.

Robert becomes more agitated with this and says “It’s not fair, dad is so mean”. Pamela says that her husband, Bob, has had a lot on at work so can be a bit stressed at home, and that the meeting was not to talk about his father but Robert’s behaviour at school. Robert sits sullenly throughout the meeting. He agrees to apologise to the other boy and behave better.

Mary 10 and Jess 5 attend the local primary school. Mary is an average student, who blends into the class, has a couple of friends, and no particular behavioural problems although at times she seems to be in another world. She loves to draw and doodle. Mary seems to have become even quieter over the last few months.

Jess is also usually very quiet however she can have temper tantrums, especially in the playground if games aren’t going her way. This seems to be happening more often lately. Jess is also behind her peers in classwork and she struggles to keep up.

Later that day Pamela is at the primary school gate picking up the girls. You notice how covered up she is in the hot weather and that she seems more anxious than usual. You have known her for many years as all the children have attended this primary school and you are on first name terms with her. Your sense is that the family is struggling at the moment, based on the girl’s behaviour and Pamela’s presentation.

You are able to draw her aside and you ask her how things are at home. She looks upset and says that things have been a bit difficult lately. Bob has had a promotion at work which has meant he is away from home more often and when he is home he is pretty stressed. Pamela says she is not a lot of help to him, and he gets frustrated with her and there have been a few arguments. The children have also been a bit of a handful, especially Robert and Jess.

Pamela says she is going back to her doctor, to get some more medication for her nerves and this should make things better at home.

Questions:

1. What could the behaviour of Robert, Mary and Tess indicate about their home situation?
2. Does Pamela's presentation raise any concerns for you? If so what kind of concerns?
3. What action would you take based on the current information you have?

Part 2

A week later Robert is at your school, seeks you out and tells you he is really worried about going home.

He says his father has always been mean to him and his mother but lately it has gotten worse and he hits her. Last night Robert tried to stop him but his father pinned him up against the wall and threatened to hit him too if he didn't keep out of the way.

He is also really worried about his little sisters Mary and Jess. Jess is wetting the bed again and Mary hides in her room all the time.

Question:

4. Based on the new information what action would you now take?

For the facilitator: possible responses

Part 1

1. What could the behaviour of Robert, Mary and Tess indicate about their home situation?

- The children could be affected by being exposed to domestic violence. Robert has recently become aggressive. He is protective of his mother when the bruise on her face is noticed by the staff member. He talks about his father as being 'mean'.
- Both Mary and Jess's presentation at school has changed, with Mary becoming increasingly withdrawn. Jess has temper tantrums and is getting more behind in her learning. The behaviour of both girls indicates that they are distressed however the cause is unclear at this stage.

2. Does Pamela's presentation raise any concerns for you?

- Yes. Pamela could be demonstrating indicators of domestic violence, in covering possible injuries, her anxiety and her admission that her husband is stressed, getting frustrated with her and having arguments. Due to the primary school's long standing relationship with Pamela, staff may be in a unique position to discuss concerns with her.
- Even though Pamela feels safe enough to say things are 'a bit difficult', like many women living in domestic violence, she may feel embarrassed or scared to talk about the full extent of the violence. She may also believe that she is responsible for the violence, this belief could be reinforced by the things her husband tells her.
- However Pamela blames herself for these problems and minimises the issue – disclosing only 'a few arguments' and does not acknowledging the injuries she appears to have received.

3. What action would you take based on the current information?

- Teachers should inform the principal about the situation – both in the high school (if the principal was not present at the meeting with Pamela) and in the primary school.
- The principal of the primary school should phone the principal of the high school, because the information about the home situation and Pamela's presentation could be significant and the high school may have further information.
- Both schools could run the MRG using the information currently available however, based on the definitions, there is not enough information to confirm an incidence of domestic violence has occurred. The principal at either school could contact the Child Wellbeing Unit to see if they have any more information.
- Teachers of the children could be encouraged to talk with them, monitor their wellbeing, ask them 'how are things going at home' and possibly get more information.
- The principal could ring the Family Referral Service (FRS) to see if there is a local service that could provide support to Pamela. Alternatively, contact could be made with a local family support service, or domestic violence service. Ideally the principal would discuss these referrals with Pamela.

Part 2

4. Based on the new information what action would you now take?
- The principal should be informed and a decision made about action to be taken. The MRG decision tree for *Carer concern: domestic violence* could assist.
 - Although you are not aware of a **serious incident** or **persistent domestic violence**, Robert has described a **significant increase in the pattern and level of violence**.
 - The outcome is *Immediate report to Family and Community Services*, using the most direct means possible. This would exclude eReporting.
 - For primary schools: If Robert discloses to a primary school staff member, the principal should liaise with the secondary school principal to decide who should make the report as the secondary school will have more information about Robert. This should be done as soon as possible, so the report can be made.
 - For secondary schools: the principal could liaise with the principal of the primary school to inform them of the pending report and to see if there is any additional relevant information to pass on to Family and Community Services (FACS) about the girls or their mother. This should be done as soon as possible, so the report can be made.
 - It is important that FACS is informed of the impact of the domestic violence on each child. This means including any behavioural information you have for each child.
 - It can be good practice to talk with older students about your follow up with FACS, but in this situation it may put Robert at more risk of harm if he revealed this information at home, so it is not recommended.
 - In case there is no FACS intervention before Robert goes home, he should be reminded about safety planning and of strategies to keep himself safe and to seek help.
 - As the children are in need of support and Pamela seems to be struggling at this time, if the school has information about family contact people and extended family members, this would be helpful to FACS. Also, if there are services working with the family, this would be helpful.
 - Talk to Robert about how he can be supported at school.
 - Take advice from FACS regarding steps to keep all the children safe.
 - Do not make contact with Bob.
 - Although a report has been made to the Helpline it is quite likely there will be ongoing contact by the school with the children and their mother Pamela, and the school has a role to support Pamela and encourage her to engage with services that are recommended for her.
 - Share any information you have with other services involved to help provide a coordinated response to the family.
 - If the Helpline screens out the report, contact must be made with the Child Wellbeing Unit who will advise on the school's role in following up.