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Men Kill Children 'To Hit at Wives'

By Caroline Overington, Social Affairs Writer

Men kill their children to punish their wives for leaving the marriage, not because of custody problems, new research has shown.

Author Carolyn Harris Johnson said fathers often became killers because "they can't cope with the loss of control over their spouse".

"It's usually not about custody or access," said Harris Johnson, whose book about child murders, *Come With Daddy*, was launched yesterday by the Chief Judge of the Family Court of Western Australia, Michael Holden.

Harris Johnson told a conference on domestic violence in Sydney that "familicide" (the murder of children in family disputes) was an extremely rare event, "and when it does occur, it's extremely shocking, so it's worth finding out why it happens".

Harris Johnson examined the seven cases during the past 10 years in which children in Western Australia were murdered by a parent after separation and a custody dispute.

Most of the victims were under the age of eight, and most of the killings occurred either in the first six weeks after the couple separated or around the 12-month mark.

"Familicide doesn't have anything to do with custody disputes," she said.

"It happens after a couple separates, but it has much more to do with the attitude of the male toward the wife and children, and his inability to accept his loss of control over them.

"In almost all cases, there was a clear history of domestic violence and threats to kill."

An average of 25 children a year are murdered by a parent nationwide.

According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, fathers or stepfathers are responsible for 60 per cent of child homicides in families.

Harris Johnson presented her findings at the conference, *Refocusing Women's Experience of Violence*, which was held at Bankstown in Sydney's west.

Julie Stewart, a researcher with the federally funded Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, told the conference that on average there were 129 domestic murders a year, most of them committed by men.

She said two in every five murders in the 10 years to 2002 involved family members.

The conference heard domestic violence remains a serious problem, as acknowledged by the federal Government this year, when it relaunched television advertisements titled "Australia Says No".

The campaign, which encourages women to report domestic violence, prompted 24,000 calls to a special hotline in the first seven weeks, mostly from women who were victims.

In recent years, many high-profile cases have involved mothers, such as Kathleen Folbigg, who was convicted of killing four of her children.

But the conference heard that women who kill their children rarely do so in the context of a custody dispute.

The conference continues today with a presentation by Australian National University academic Michael Flood on the growing influence of men's rights groups.

"These groups claim domestic violence is gender-equal," Dr Flood said. "The research shows these claims are false. We need to reject myths pushed by fathers' rights groups as they try to change family law."

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