

Children's and young people's experiences of domestic violence involving adults in a parenting role

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Key messages

- Professional understanding of, and responses to domestic violence should be informed by the perspectives of children and young people.
- Practitioners need to recognise that domestic violence may be a cause of a range of physical, emotional and behavioural difficulties for children and young people.
- The complex relationship between domestic violence and safeguarding children requires respectful and sensitive handling.
- Children and young people aware of domestic violence have the right to be listened to and need help to understand what is happening.
- Some children and young people cope well despite their experiences of domestic violence.
- Work with perpetrators, though controversial, is an important aspect of reducing domestic violence and its impact on children and young people.

Introduction

This briefing focuses on the experiences of children and young people (under the age of 18 years) of domestic violence between those adults who have, or previously held a parental role towards them. It includes both biological parents and non-related adults significant to the young people, but does not include the perpetration of violence by children and young people towards those in a parental role. While recognising the existence of a variety of models of the family, this briefing generally refers to currently or previously married or cohabiting adults, including lone, two-parent and step families.

The effectiveness of interventions is beyond the scope of this briefing which is concerned with the experiences of children and young people in the context of this type of inter-partner violence. In examining experiences and coping strategies, however, it also considers how the voices of children and young people are heard in research and practice, advocacy on their behalf, and evidence-based practice relating to work with children and young people affected by domestic violence. The briefing draws predominantly on British research, but refers to North American and Australasian research where relevant.

What is the issue?

The term 'domestic violence' covers a wide range of threatening, violent or otherwise abusive behaviour.¹ It involves the abuse of power and is perpetrated mainly (but not only) by men against women with whom they are, or have been, in an intimate relationship.² Definitions and terminologies in this area continue to be debated,³ with the term 'family violence' being preferred in some minority ethnic communities where the westernised nuclear family model is less relevant, and where women and children may be subjected to culturally specific forms of harm.^{4,5,6,7,8}

Children using the ChildLine telephone service have also been found to be less likely to use the term domestic violence, describing violent events that they had witnessed instead.⁹ Children and young people may, for example, become involved in the violence when trying to intervene during attacks, while others may be forced to witness the sexual abuse of their mother.¹⁰ There is also debate about how to refer to children who are affected by domestic violence² and there has been a move away from viewing such children as 'passive victims' or 'silent witnesses' towards recognising their capacity to think, engage and respond. Acknowledging this includes recognition that children and young people need to understand what is happening to them, to be listened to and helped to develop coping strategies,¹¹ as well as have their accounts inform the planning and delivery of services.

The term 'children in special circumstances' is used by the National Service Framework¹² to refer to all children at risk of achieving poorer outcomes than their peers, and those living with domestic violence are identified as one such group.¹³ We do not know how many children and young people are affected by domestic violence, but we know that more children than women are accommodated in refuges³ and that at least half of those women interviewed for the British Crime

Survey 2004/05 had children living with them when they experienced domestic violence.^{1,14} Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that these figures represent only a small proportion of the total number of children affected.⁶

Why is it important?

Most children and young people who live with domestic violence are likely to be affected by it in some way, although some children develop apparently successful ways of coping.^{1,15} Many children experience fear and distress, as well as varying degrees of physical, psychological or emotional developmental problems, the causes of which may be misunderstood by a range of professionals, including doctors, teachers and social workers.^{1,3,16} Recognising this, the Children Act 1989 afforded greater opportunities to hear the voice of the child, and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 acknowledged the significance of domestic violence for children by amending the definition of 'harm' to include 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another'. Despite this, it is not always appropriate to assume that the child is at direct risk from the violence and, therefore, in need of child protection measures.^{2,11,17} The most recent focus on 'safeguarding' recognises the role of a range of professionals in promoting children's welfare. The relationship between domestic violence and safeguarding children is complex and requires respectful and sensitive handling.

The Every Child Matters agenda¹⁸ and the Children Act 2004 aim to ensure that every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, has the support they need to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic wellbeing.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 also changed many perceptions about the experiences of children and young people by situating them firmly within a human rights agenda and making clear that any actions or decisions concerning a child must be in the best interests of the child.¹⁹ Even though it does not specifically mention domestic violence, a number of its articles refer to rights that may be violated or undermined by domestic violence. These include the right to protection from abuse and neglect, the right to education, leisure and free association, and the right to express an opinion and have that opinion taken into account. Other articles of the convention raise more controversial and potentially contradictory issues, especially where it assumes that both parents are in agreement about parenting matters and both have the child's best interests at heart.²⁰ While current policy clearly indicates that domestic violence in children's lives is a human rights issue, anomalies still exist and the relationship between children's rights and domestic violence remains an under-researched area.^{20,21}

What does the research show?

Impact on children and young people

The potential impact of domestic violence on children's and young people's physical, mental and emotional health and development has been widely researched. In both the UK and Australia reports considering the available evidence² concluded that children witnessing domestic violence showed significantly poorer outcomes on a range of developmental and behavioural dimensions than those living without violence, and that the outcomes were similar to those of children who were directly physically abused.^{1,2} Living with domestic violence is also sometimes assumed to affect attitudes to violence in later life, especially among males, and some research

suggests that violence within the home makes a stronger contribution to later attitudes than violence experienced at school or in the community.²² There is also some evidence that families in which child abuse occurs are more likely to have a history of domestic violence.²³ In extreme cases where the violence escalates to the murder of one parent by the other, it has been suggested that, in an attempt to come to terms with their trauma, children may develop an over-forgiving attitude towards their own violence – and that of others.¹⁵

Some research indicates an overlap between domestic violence between adults and the sexual and physical abuse of children, with some studies putting the comorbidity rates as high as 40 per cent.^{24,25} An Equal Opportunities Commission report in 2007,²⁶ for example, estimates that at least 750,000 children in the UK witness domestic violence each year. It also cites a recent analysis of serious case reviews, following the deaths of children, which shows domestic violence as a commonly recurring feature. Children may also be subject to cumulative disadvantage where domestic violence is exacerbated by parental drug, alcohol or mental health problems.¹³ Children who experience the separation of their parents as a result of domestic violence may also have to contend with the disruption of temporary homelessness; change of physical location; loss of friends, pets and personal belongings; continued harassment by the perpetrator; and the stress of making new relationships.^{1,27,28} In rural areas, the abandonment of household and farm animals may also add to the distress and sense of loss.²⁹ All these factors are exacerbated by the experiences of discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality or disability.³⁰

Children and young people living with domestic violence say consistently that they are aware of it, and are often more anxious than is recognised

by either the adults involved in the violence, or those who are concerned with the health, education and general well-being of the children or family.^{1,31} The social and educational development of some children may be impaired by the support they give to the abused parent³¹ and girls, in particular, may be anxious to protect their mother and younger siblings, even where this involves placing themselves at physical risk.¹ Most children also have difficulty in understanding why the violence occurs and many are discouraged from talking about it by those involved.^{1,32} In addition, children and young people may be forced to witness the violence or used to monitor their mother's behaviour as part of the perpetrator's pattern of control and authority within the home.^{1,32} There is little research on the relationship between abusive fathers and their children but there is some evidence that boys, in particular, may be damaged by negative early relationships with their fathers, blaming their mother for loss of contact and identifying with their father's abusive behaviour.^{2,33} Importantly, it is now recognised that violent men may continue to abuse women and children after they are separated. If there is ongoing contact with the child this can lead to the further abuse or even death of women and children.^{10,34,35,36}

Protective factors and coping strategies

Between a third and half of all children living with domestic violence may not display problems of behaviour, low self-esteem or anxiety, and care should be taken not to pathologise children in this situation.² Research is increasingly recognising the importance of protective factors and coping strategies among children and young people living with domestic violence. Mothers who are able to maintain their parenting capacities and to model assertive, non-violent responses to abuse, for example, are perceived by their children to be positively supportive of

them and are important moderators of the impact of abuse.² Children's resilience also seems to be enhanced by mothers with positive mental health^{37,38} and high levels of extended family and community support.^{2,39,40} Women who are able to curtail the violence by leaving, instigating criminal charges or seeking court orders, are viewed positively by their children,² and research also suggests that children's health improves once they are in a safer and more secure environment.²

'Culpable women, invisible men'²

While research emphasises the importance of supporting the non-abusive parent (usually the mother) in maintaining their parenting competence, the corollary of this is the tendency for social care agencies to ignore the perpetrator and/or blame the victim/mother for failure to protect her children.^{2,17} Holding the mother responsible for harm that she has not caused risks replicating the process whereby the father exercises control and power by making the mother feel guilty about her children and making her feel bad about herself.⁴¹ Moreover, there is little evidence that removing a child from the care of a non-abusive parent benefits the child.¹⁷

Providing treatment intervention for perpetrators of domestic violence has become a feature of criminal justice, rather than social care agencies in the past decade. There is widespread agreement that the best approach consists of a combination of cognitive-behavioural and gender analysis work,^{30,42,43} though a more radical psychosocial approach is advocated by some writers⁴¹. Work with perpetrators needs to be specific to domestic violence (for example, the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme, accredited for use by probation officers), rather than more general work on cognitive skills or anger management, which are not thought to be appropriate. Programmes for perpetrators are

contentious because the evidence of their success is inconclusive and there is a fear that, where they fail, women and children may be placed in greater danger.^{3,42} There is also some concern that such programmes divert resources away from other services for victims and that perpetrators may participate in order to avoid harsher criminal justice responses.⁴² Nevertheless, a recent report by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) indicates some success in changing offenders' attitudes.⁴³

Provision of services

Local authorities have a statutory duty to become involved in domestic violence cases if children are in need of protection or support, and are responsible for delivering services to children and families affected by domestic violence. However, the provision of domestic violence services in both the statutory and voluntary sectors continues to be patchy and uneven, particularly in rural areas.^{3,29} The main sources of services are Women's Aid and other women's refuges; NSPCC and other voluntary children's organisations; statutory children's services (including education and healthcare); and, for perpetrators, NOMS, which also commissions such services from voluntary organisations. The key to effective provision is usually cited as being holistic, inter-agency collaboration,^{13,44,45} although some writers sound a note of caution about addressing the tensions between protecting children and helping mothers.⁴⁶ There is now a general recognition that child protection procedures should not be narrowly or mechanistically applied but that partnership work centred on individual needs is required.^{1,2,46}

In an attempt to safeguard and ensure the wellbeing of children (through integrated service provision), the Children Act 2004 places a duty of cooperation on authorities. The Government has also introduced specialist domestic violence

courts and independent domestic violence advisers. The Domestic Violence Crime and Victims Act 2004 closes a legal loophole by creating a new imprisonable offence of allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult, though, at the time of writing, commencement dates for this and other measures in the Act are not available. The Home Office has also developed a National Domestic Violence Plan 2005 which states that, in relation to children, the issue of domestic violence should be mainstreamed and integrated throughout the children's agenda.⁴⁷

The recent Cabinet Office publication *Think Family: improving the life chances of families at risk*,⁴⁸ sees both children's services and adults' services as having a key role in promoting children's wellbeing, through a 'whole family' approach. This extends the model of service delivery set out in Every Child Matters to include adult services. It is envisaged that family members will contribute to the nature and scope of services they receive.

Research indicates overwhelmingly that children and young people want and need to talk about the domestic violence they experience.^{1,3,6,11,31} In order to do this, however, they need to feel safe, be respected, listened to and helped to understand what is happening in their families. Direct work with children and young people individually or in groups is designed to facilitate the expression of feelings, to reassure children that they are not at fault, to help rebuild self-esteem and to develop safety plans for the future.^{1,30} This points to the need for ongoing investment in preventive and therapeutic services. There is also an increasing awareness of the need for refuges and other crisis services to be appropriately resourced to meet the needs of children. Historically, insecure funding arrangements have restricted these developments, resulting in some refuges lacking facilities for children which adequately address their diverse needs.⁴⁹ Some research indicates

children's experiences of refuges are generally positive⁵⁰ although some children have difficulties in adjusting to refuge life. Refuges may, for example, be overcrowded or located in unfamiliar localities away from their wider family and friends. Particular problems have also been identified for teenage boys who may not be allowed to stay at some refuges.^{29,47,51}

For children and young people from minority ethnic families whose mothers leave an abusive relationship, the disruption caused by separation from family and friends can be intensified by the ostracism of both mother and children from their community.⁵² Such women and children also report experiencing widespread stereotyping and discrimination when accessing services. Professionals may, for example, appear to find it easier to attribute problems to 'oppressive' cultural backgrounds than attempt to understand and seek appropriate responses to complex needs,⁴ highlighting the need for culturally specific services.¹ Some research also identifies the potential difficulties for children when acting as translators between their mother and professionals,⁴ identifying the need for trained, supervised and supported interpreters.⁵¹ There is less research in the UK specifically on the domestic violence experiences of children from black and minority ethnic communities, but the interconnection between racism, ethnicity and culture appears to be significant in creating barriers to understanding and providing appropriate services for children.^{11,30}

Implications from the research

For organisations

Organisations involved in providing services in the area of domestic violence need to be guided by the three interrelated principles of promoting:

- the safety and protection of children

- the empowerment and safety of those who experience domestic violence, primarily women
- the responsibility and accountability of perpetrators of violence.²

Recognising the tensions inherent in balancing these principles,⁴⁶ research indicates that holistic, multi-agency provision is essential if children and young people affected by domestic violence are to have their differing needs attended to.^{1,3,13,47} Housing, health and education responses should be as much a priority as child protection and criminal justice responses. Training to raise awareness, explore values and develop skills and knowledge in recognising, assessing and dealing with domestic violence should be compulsory in initial and continuing education for teachers, health workers, social workers and offender managers.^{1,3}

Research has also highlighted the importance of a wide range of services and providers.^{1,2} In particular, the non-statutory sector is of paramount significance in the provision of both housing and support for women and children.

For policy-makers

The Government has made clear its commitment to reducing domestic violence through its crime reduction policies and recent legislation, both of which are demonstrating an increasing awareness of the needs of children and young people. Similarly, promoting the rights of children to be valued, respected, protected from harm and helped to fulfil their potential, is an aspiration reflected in the title of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda.¹³ Despite this, research suggests that children living with domestic violence continue to have unmet needs or are subjected to intrusive, and sometimes inappropriate, child protection measures.^{1,2} Policies and guidelines that assist inter-agency

communication (while recognising the boundaries of confidentiality) and clarify responsibilities continue to be needed.⁴⁷ Policies relating to the specific needs of children in rural areas, minority ethnic communities and children with disabilities, must not be overlooked.²⁹

The five aims of Every Child Matters also provide a useful benchmark against which services are being developed and evaluated. This indicates a real need for policy and service development to be shaped, informed and evaluated by children and young people as service users. In addition, domestic violence services not only share the common difficulties of access to public funds for their survival and development but are also hampered by the lack of well-designed evaluations that would help to demonstrate their effectiveness.^{3,13} The integral funding of independent evaluations recognising the voice of survivors, providing feedback on what works, and highlighting good practice would therefore help avoid the premature implementation of untested projects, the continuation of ineffective projects or the loss of short-lived but effective interventions.³

For practitioners

Children, young people and women experiencing domestic violence value the support of health and social care professionals, although there is often a fear that such professionals may play a role in the removal of children and this may act as a barrier to their seeking support.⁵³ In their professional assessments, practitioners should be aware that domestic violence may feature in the lives of children and young people in their care. They need to develop systematic screening using an appropriate and sensitive protocol of questions that will draw out domestic violence as a possible cause of physical, emotional or behavioural problems.^{3,16} The Home Office Crime Reduction website may be useful (see the Useful Links section of this briefing) and Save the Children has produced helpful guidance for school teachers.⁴⁷

In their work with victims of domestic violence, practitioners should be ready to work directly with children and, at the least, enable them to talk and ask questions about what is happening in their family.¹ Practitioners should respect and believe what children are saying about their situation, but they should also recognise the coping strategies that may be helping children to survive and be willing to affirm their resilience rather than undermine it by emphasising risks and danger. Acknowledging the rights and capacities of children and young people as experts in their own lives, who have a contribution to make in any assessment of strengths, risks and need, is work that requires skill, sensitivity and confidence. For example, research indicates that communication and engagement with children and young people should be underpinned by an awareness of the impact of domestic violence.⁵³

Some work with mothers and children in post-abuse settings is aimed at helping them to regenerate family relationships by replacing previously destructive patterns of interaction with predictable, supportive ways of living together. This will be particularly important if the child has continuing contact with the abusing parent.^{30,54} Working with perpetrators, normally within a criminal justice framework, also has a contribution to make to the well-being of children. Research indicates that it is particularly important for boys to see that it is possible for their fathers to accept responsibility for and change their behaviour, so that they do not identify with domestic violence as an acceptable expression of masculinity.¹⁵

For users and carers

The UNCRC sets out obligations for listening to children and young people and promoting protective and participatory rights. There is now

an awareness of the importance of listening to children's perspectives in order to understand fully the complexity of their lives with resulting developments in law, policy and practice which seek to raise the profile of children's voices.^{55,56} For children and young people involved in the child protection system, independent advocates can play an important role in supporting their attendance at child protection case conferences or in accessing a range of services. Advocates can ensure that young people understand what is happening and will explore their wishes and feelings. They will work with young people to identify ways in which their views may be presented to the conference, or may speak on the child's behalf. Self-advocacy may also be supported through the production of a 'wish-list' or helping children to produce their own report for the conference.^{57,58} Criticisms have been levelled at researchers for failing to speak directly to children and young people, and an increasing amount of research with children's perspectives at centre stage is now emerging.⁹ Alongside this has been recognition of the value of involving children and young people in the planning, delivery and evaluation of service provision.⁵⁷

Children have the right to protection from harm and the right to talk about their concerns when they are living with domestic violence. Children and young people can make important contributions to assessments of need and risk and have the right to be made aware of violence prevention strategies or sources of support that may help them to cope with violence at home.⁵⁹ They should be encouraged to seek informal support from their extended family, their friends and their community networks, if appropriate, as well as from adults in authority such as teachers, doctors, social workers¹¹ and advocates. Children have the right to be confident that responses will be sensitive, safe and child-centred.

There are barriers, however, that may prevent children and young people seeking support. These include:

- fear of the consequences of telling for themselves, their family and their community
- fear that their views will not be valued and respected.

Research has, for example, highlighted that children and young people with disabilities may be further marginalised by not having their views heard.⁶⁰ Importantly, children and young people should be encouraged to listen to each other and draw on the experiences of other children. One young person in recent research on children's perspectives on domestic violence urged others to:

'Tell someone. Doesn't matter what's happening. Tell someone. The adults should deal with it, not you. Get it sorted out and get out if you can. That's really important.'
(Mullender et al. 2002:240)¹¹

About these findings

SCIE research briefings provide a concise summary of research knowledge on a particular topic. They summarise research evidence in an accessible form to a varied audience, including carers and service users, students, policy-makers, social care workers and service managers. Unlike a systematic review (such as a SCIE research review), a research briefing is not a definitive synthesis of all research knowledge on a topic. Instead it is intended as an introductory summary of the main findings in a field. The research for this briefing has been undertaken using the Keele/SCIE Critical Evaluation Framework for Social Care Research, available at www.scie.org.uk The information on which it is based is drawn from relevant electronic databases, journals and texts, and where appropriate, from alternative sources such as inspection reports and annual reviews.

Useful links

Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, University of New South Wales

– The Clearinghouse is a national organisation, providing high quality information about domestic and family violence issues and practice. It supports specialist and generalist service providers, government agencies, researchers, advocates and activists in their efforts, through the dissemination of information and research, and through facilitating discussion.

www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au

Barnardo's – Founded in 1867, Barnardo's is a charity which originally ran residential homes and orphanages but now uses the knowledge gained from direct work with children to campaign for better childcare policy and to champion the rights of every child.

www.barnardos.org.uk

ChildLine – ChildLine is the UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn. Almost 2,000 children a year contact ChildLine due to domestic violence problems.

www.childline.org.uk

Children's Legal Centre – The Children's Legal Centre, funded by grants from central government and by charitable trusts, is a unique, independent, national charity concerned with law and policy affecting children and young people. It opened in 1981 and is staffed by lawyers and professionals with experience in child law.

www.childrenslegalcentre.com

Children's Rights Alliance for England – CRAE is an alliance of over 180 organisations committed to children's human rights. It is a registered charity, which supports and works in partnership with children and young people so that they can learn about and use their rights.

www.crae.org.uk

Community Care – Short articles of relevance to practitioners.

www.communitycare.co.uk

Department for Children, Schools and Families

www.dfes.gov.uk

Department of Health – www.dh.gov.uk

Disabled Parents Network – DPN is a national organisation of and for disabled people who are parents or who hope to become parents, and their families, friends and supporters. DPN is run by volunteers, with a small number of paid employees.

www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk

Every Child Matters – This website is mainly for people who work with children and young people, and the people who make decisions that affect children and young people. One of the main aims is to make sure that people such as teachers, doctors, social workers and the police are able to work better together to help children and young people.

www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

Home Office – Research reports:

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds

Policy on domestic violence:

www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – The JRF is one of the largest social policy research and development charities in the UK. The JRF's purpose is to search, demonstrate and influence, providing evidence, solutions and ideas that will help to overcome the causes of poverty, disadvantage and social ills.
www.jrf.org.uk

NSPCC – The NSPCC is a charity which lobbies and campaigns for better laws and policies to protect children. Of particular interest to readers of this briefing is the link to domestic violence information and helpline details in both English and minority languages.
www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

Refuge – Refuge's network of safe houses provides emergency accommodation for women and children when they are most in need. Some are for women from particular ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The charity also provides outreach services to women in their

own homes and a 24-hour helpline run in conjunction with Women's Aid. They also produce responses to legislation and policy where this relates to violence toward women and children.
www.refuge.org.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists – The Royal College of Psychiatrists is the professional and educational body for psychiatrists in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The College makes available online fact sheets, including one on domestic violence and its effects on children (Mental Health and Growing Up series).
www.rcpsych.ac.uk

Women's Aid – Women's Aid is a key national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children. It supports a network of over 500 domestic and sexual violence services across the UK. Its helpline is run in conjunction with Refuge (see above).
www.womensaid.org.uk

Related SCIE briefings

06: Parenting capacity and substance misuse (2004)

09: Preventing teenage pregnancy in looked-after children (2004)

11: The health and well-being of young carers (2005)

16: Deliberate self-harm (DSH) among children and adolescents: who is at risk and how is it recognised? (2005)

19: What is the impact of environmental housing conditions on the health and well-being of children? (2005)

22: Obstacles to using and providing rural social care (2007)

23: Stress and resilience factors in parents with mental health problems and their children (2008)

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