



Impacts: Children and Young People

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Abusers may involve children in the abuse in a range of ways -

- Abuse can start or escalate in pregnancy (Mezey and Bewley), is a possible cause of injury or disability before birth (RCOG, 1997) and risk can still be high after birth (Gielen et al)

“My midwife had asked me and I actually admitted to it. A few of the midwives (asked), I’d been to the hospital a few times to be monitored because the baby had stopped moving, but I just kept denying it all the time.”



Further...

- Making them watch or encouraging them to be abusive towards their mothers. (Mullender 2000)
- Harsh or inappropriate punishment
- Making them feel weak or culpable
- Modelling of abusive behaviour
- Unable to protect themselves – labelled as 'bad' and 'naughty'
- Called names and belittled
- Impact on mental health – emotionally unavailable
- Violence or threats, e.g. or abduction



Child protection

- There are strong links between domestic violence and the physical and sexual abuse of children by the perpetrator of the violence: the research suggests that domestic violence is present in 30% - 66% of child abuse cases

(see in particular, Gibbons et al, Epstein and Keep, Abrahams, Hester and Pearson, Farmer and Pollock, Humphreys and Thiara)




Child Contact

- 29 homicides – dangerous time
- In 2003, only 601 out of 67,184 contact applications (less than 1%) were refused. (Lord Chancellor's Department, 2003)
- When they have contact with fathers after separation, children may take on even greater responsibility to protect their mothers or siblings from violence or neglect (Hester and Radford, 1996).



How are children & young people involved?

- For half those experiencing domestic violence, there are children aged under 16 in the household. Mirrlees-Black, 1999 (60,000 in Lancashire)
- Every year 23,500 children stay in refuges in England (WAFE)
- The presence of children in the household is associated with nearly double the risk of domestic violence for women (Walby and Allen, 2004).
- In 75-90% of incidents, children were in the same or next room. (NCH 1994)

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- Children typically know far more of what is going on than their parents think. They may be in the next room listening or lying awake in bed. Or they may pick up on the atmosphere.
 - What children see or hear when their mothers are being abused can not only include physical violence but also emotional abuse and put downs, threats and intimidation, sexual jealousy and abuse.
 - The National Children's Home (NCH) Action for Children study (2002) found that 10% of children living with domestic violence had witnessed their mother being sexually assaulted.




Impacts

- Studies find that children witnessing their mother being assaulted showed effects as if they had been regularly & severely hit. (Waterhouse et al 1993)
- Children frequently said that hearing the violence was worse than seeing the actual assaults, (as they believed that their mother was being killed). (McGee, 2000)
- Research shows that girls, in particular seek to protect younger siblings during violent episodes and offer support or reassurance in the aftermath of violent behaviour (Jaffe *et al*, 1990).



Children and young people may:

- Risk injury by being caught in between parents
- Have their lives disrupted when escaping violence
- Run away from home
- Believe that the violence is their fault
- Feel confused, anxious, angry, afraid, isolated, ashamed, guilty
- Become anxious or depressed
- Have difficulty sleeping
- Have nightmares or flashbacks
- Be easily startled
- Complain of physical symptoms e.g. tummy aches



"My son says that, he wishes he was dead, he wishes he weren't here, he wishes he weren't born. He shouldn't be like that..."

"They (children) turn into adults, don't they? They need to go back to being a child, sometimes they seem to want to protect you but they don't know how to protect you, do they?"



Children and young people may:

- Start to wet their bed or have temper tantrums
- Behave as though they are much younger
- Have problems with school or overachieve
- Become aggressive or they may internalise their distress and withdraw from other people
- Have a lowered sense of self-worth
- Begin to play truant or start to use alcohol or drugs
- Have an eating disorder
- Begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves




*"I used to feel I was
bleeding inside." S age 15*

*"I used to wet the bed. I
think this was to do with
their fighting." S age 9*



Are the effects the same for every child?

- Children can be affected in many different ways by living with domestic violence.
- There is no set pattern of signs or symptoms.
- Some children come through relatively unscathed, for example if they have good ways of coping, or people to turn to for support, or if they are less aware of what is going on.
- Others recover well once they feel safe. However, children are likely to be affected by the fear, disruption and distress in their lives. Children show distress in their own ways, depending on their age and developmental stage. (Wolfe *et al.*, 1986; Mullender *et al.*, 2002)




"I feel really different. I can sleep without fear. I can really live like any other young person in the community. Now he's not around to terrorise me, I can get on with my studies."

Y age 16.



Leaving...

- Sometimes children have to leave home, leaving everything behind (clothes, toys, pets, family and friends), without understanding why. This may be to go to a refuge that is totally unlike anywhere they have ever lived before (Mullender et al)
- Minority ethnic children may be forced by the violence to leave a supportive community and may face discriminatory attitudes from relevant agencies (Mullender, 2000).




"I was pleased for my mum to get away from him. She was upset because of him. But I was upset because I had to leave everything. Leave all my stuff. We just had the clothes we stood up in and we didn't come home for fifteen months. I was really upset because I had to leave Thumper behind.. we had to leave him in a shed in the garden, I cried and cried... because they don't have pets in the refuge..." N age 12



Leaving...

- Because so many refuges are full, it may include spells in temporary accommodation, such as bed and breakfast or a hostel where there are no special security arrangements.
- The process of leaving may take many months , or even years, and it may involve leaving and returning several times.
- Leaving home is not enough to guarantee safety; women and children may be assaulted by their partner/ex partner, (Walby and Allen, 2004) after moving away.




“he still tries to do the control thing, even though he's outside the relationship, because he has two children”

“when I got the Council flat he actually spotted us in Asda and tried strangling me & tried to snatch my son off me”



Cycle of Abuse?

- No study shows conclusive link between children who live with DV repeating the violent behaviour in adult years or being targeted.
- Childhood experience is no excuse for adult behaviour
- Depends how children make sense of experiences (some pacifists but are unlikely to be “studied” and are therefore less visible).
- Some evidence to suggest that the key factor is **RESPONSE** to the violence, **NOT** only the violence itself.



"We have been through a lot. We can feel for others and are better human beings." S, 14