



Let's see domestic violence from a child's point of view

NSPCC DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CAMPAIGN BRIEFING 1

1. Domestic violence: A child's point of view

Summary

The NSPCC is calling on the UK Government and devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland to see domestic violence from a child's point of view.

We want to see:

- Adequate **support services for children and families affected**, so that when they are brave enough to speak out, they know they'll be safe and supported. Current government funded provision is not enough. Every area needs programmes and information on safe and healthy parenting, a refuge which includes a child support worker, therapeutic groups for children, counselling availability, specialist services which can be accessed for black and minority ethnic children, a perpetrator programme which meets minimum standards and a supervised contact centre. Planning for these services should be co-ordinated through multi agency fora. All children should also have access to helplines.
- **Training for professionals** to identify children living with domestic violence so that whenever adults are working with domestic violence, they think about the children affected too.
- **Education about domestic violence in schools and other youth settings** so all children learn that the violence is not their fault and how to stay safe. This can be achieved by teaching about healthy relationships as compulsory element of the Sex and Relationships Education curriculum within schools.

Furthermore the Government in England must **extend the current definition of domestic violence** to include the impact of abusive behaviours, and to ensure that greater attention is given to the impact of such behaviours on children and young people when developing policy. The current definition that applies in England does not include its impact on children, referring only to abuse 'between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality.'

How do children experience domestic violence?

*'He could have stuck a knife in her for all I know, with the door shut. And the worst thing for me was not actually knowing what was going to happen next.....not knowing what was happening then, not knowing what was going to happen next. That was the most frightening thing for me.'*¹

¹ McGee, C (2000) *Childhood experiences of domestic violence* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

*'He tried to get her to drink bleach, to pour it in her mouth whilst he had her held there and when he couldn't make her, he poured the bleach all over her face and hair. He was trying to kill her.'*²

Children can experience domestic violence in many ways:

- seeing the violence or hearing shouts, screams and crying from another room;
- witnessing the outcome of violence, such as cuts or bruises and the emotional impact on the abused parent;
- intervening between the abuser and other person, sometimes getting physically hurt in the process;
- being deliberately injured in order to terrorise the non-abusive parent.

Children calling ChildLine frequently describe violent incidents they have witnessed at home:

*'My mum and dad argue all the time and my dad hits my mum. When I ask him to stop he threatens me, pushes me and calls me names.'*³

*'I see dad hitting mum all the time. He blames her for anything, like if he can't find his watch, or if the food is a bit cold. Yesterday he kicked her down the stairs and then made her hide in the bedroom when someone came over. I dread to wake up every morning – I don't know what will happen next.'*⁴

How many children are affected by domestic violence?

The Department of Health estimates that, every year, 750,000 children experience domestic violence.⁵ But estimating the numbers is difficult, given that many women do not report domestic violence or take many years to do so⁶; thus the true figures are likely to be higher. One study found that women had experienced an average of 35 incidents of domestic abuse before contacting the police.⁷ When women do not report domestic violence their children's experience is also unlikely to be reported.

The NSPCC prevalence study showed that 26% of 18 to 24 years olds had lived with violence between their parents/carers and for 5% this was frequent and on-going⁸. Recent studies, with samples in schools where children were directly asked about domestic violence, suggest approximately a third of children live with some form of domestic violence. In one study 30% of the children surveyed said they knew someone who had experienced domestic violence⁹, while 32% of young people in a small Scottish study said they were currently living with domestic abuse¹⁰.

Even more worrying, in families where there is domestic violence, children may also be physically and sexually abused. Research studies estimate that in 30 to 60% of domestic violence cases, the abusive partner is also abusing children in the family¹¹. Domestic

² Mullender A. et al (2002) *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*. London: Sage

³ Caller to Childline

⁴ ibid

⁵ Department of Health, (2002), *Women's Mental Health: Into the mainstream*, London, DH

⁶ NSPCC recognise that whilst both men and women may experience incidents of inter-personal violence, women are considerably more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of violence, including sexual violence

⁷ Yearshaw (1997)

⁸ Cawson, P (2002) *Child Maltreatment in the Family: The Experience of a National Sample of Young People*, London: NSPCC

⁹ Mullender, A., Hague, G., Imam, U., Kelly, L., Malos, E. and Regan, L. (2002) *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*, London: Sage

¹⁰ Alexander, H., Macdonald, E. and Paton, S. (2005) 'Raising the issue of domestic abuse in school' in *Children and Society*, 19(3): 187-198

¹¹ Edelson J.L., (1999) *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 5 No.2.

violence is frequently a factor in cases where children have been killed or seriously injured.¹² Evidence shows that domestic violence is present in two thirds of cases of child deaths and serious injury.

Overall, the statistics above demonstrate that high numbers of children witness domestic violence and official statistics are likely to underplay the prevalence¹³. Domestic violence is also an indicator of further forms of child abuse.

What is the impact of domestic violence on children?

Kate is an NSPCC campaign supporter who wrote to us recently about her own experiences of domestic violence in childhood. In her letter Kate described domestic violence between their parents.

“It started off as just shouting and arguing...until one night my mother ended up unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. I would tend to Mum’s cuts while my brother curled up in my bed.”

Kate described the terrible emotional impact a child suffers as a result.

“My brother has been utterly affected by what he saw. He doesn’t trust anybody, he lacks self-confidence and is unable to form relationships.”

Kate believes that some form of support could have made all the difference for her brother.

“For a long time I felt confused...Was I just as bad as [my dad]? How could I love someone who hits my mum?”

NSPCC is concerned about the adverse effects and the potential negative outcomes of domestic violence for children. Children can be affected physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically, developmentally, economically, educationally and sexually in ways that are complex and interwoven.¹⁴ This could take the form of direct physical or sexual harm, poor health, being under or overweight due to stress induced eating difficulties or neglect, missing school, inattention at school, truanting or running away, fear, insecurity, anxiety, social isolation, or being violent or aggressive. Children living with domestic violence have higher rates of depression, trauma and behavioural problems than other children and they often feel they are to blame for the violence in their families which can affect their self-esteem. The impact later in life might include resentment at loss of an idealised childhood and ambivalence about intimate relationships and relationships in general¹⁵.

The violence can also sometimes reduce the non-abusive parent’s ability to look after their children, and so the relationship between them and their children can suffer.

It is vital to recognise that children’s responses vary enormously, with some children being affected far more than others. Even children within the same family can be affected differently. Short and long term outcomes are influenced by many factors including: gender; sexuality; age; disability; position in family order; the presence of supportive friends and relatives outside the immediate family; ethnicity; religion; socio-economic status; whether there is also direct abuse; the extent of maternal stress and distress; the

¹² Brandon, M., Belderson, P., Warren, C., Howe, D., Gardner, R., Dodsworth J., and Black J. (2008) *Analysing Child Deaths and Serious Injury through Abuse: What can we Learn? A Biennial Analysis of Serious Case Reviews 2003 – 2005* London: DCSF

¹³ Humphreys, C. and Houghton, C. (2008) ‘The research evidence on children and young people experiencing domestic abuse’ in Humphreys, C., Houghton, C. and Ellis, J. (2008) *Literature Review: Better Outcomes for Children and Young People affected by Domestic Abuse – Directions for Good Practice*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government. p

¹⁴ Mullender *et al.* *ibid.*

¹⁵ Mullender *et al.* *ibid.*

frequency and form of violence and the length of time it was experienced. However **all children have the right to protection from violence and abuse and should have access to support.**

Government recognition of the impact of domestic violence on children and young people

The official Home Office definition of domestic violence that applies in England is as follows:

Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality¹⁶

This definition fails to capture the impact of the abuse on children and the overlap between the abuse of the non-abusing parent and the abuse of children. Widening the definition to cover the violence witnessed by children and the correlation between domestic abuse and the mental, physical and sexual abuse of children would ensure that greater attention is given to the impact on children and young people when developing policy.

The Government has committed to reviewing this definition in 2009/10 and we are calling on them include children in the definition. The definitions currently used in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland cover a number of these points and could act as a useful starting point for reviewing the Home Office definition.

What do children want?

To talk and to be listened to

*'Tell someone. Doesn't matter what's happening. Tell someone. The adults should deal with it, not you. Get it sorted and get out of it if you can'*¹⁷

Children want someone to talk to about what is happening at home. In the first instance, it is most likely to be informal support from parents, friends or relatives. They want to be given reassurance to talk openly with someone they can trust and adults need to be clear about confidentiality. They want their experiences to be listened to, taken seriously, understood and acted on.

Children also find peer and friendship groups and sibling relationships an important source of support. In a more formal context, this kind of peer support can be provided through specialist services and support programmes. When asked what advice children would give to others experiencing domestic violence, one child said, *'Let it out and tell someone else, you're not alone'*.¹⁸

Yet children are also conscious of the social stigma associated with domestic violence and are aware that it is something not to be talked about. Further, they can also be deterred from disclosing events at home by not expecting to be believed, not wanting to worry other

¹⁶ Home Office, *Domestic Violence: a national report*, London:Home Office

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ NSPCC internal consultation

people, fearing repercussions for themselves and their non-abusing parent and fearing unwanted interventions. Boys in particular can be reluctant to talk about it.¹⁹

*'My teacher tried to find out, but I just didn't let anything slip. I just said, 'No, everything's' okay.' You just smile don't you and try to cover it.'*²⁰

To know and understand what is happening

*'Grown-ups think they should hide and shouldn't tell us, but we want to know, we want to be involved and we want our mums to talk to us about what they are going to do; we could help them make decisions'*²¹

Children often recognise the violence and problems but don't understand what is happening to them and their families. Frequently, they will be in the next room and more aware of problems than parents realise. They also feel complex emotions, toward both the abusing and the non-abusing parent. Although children want to understand what is going on in their homes, parents often find it hard to know how to talk to them. Yet, not talking to children can add to their feelings of isolation and confusion and lead to misunderstandings. The culture of secrecy and shame that surrounds domestic violence can compound this problem: *'I don't think my parents know how upset I am'*²²

Children and young people also want professionals to be clear with them about what is happening when they disclose or intervene with them or their parents. They want to be spoken to directly in a way they understand, informed about what will happen, involved in decision making, made fully aware of processes and procedures and guaranteed confidentiality. One young person attending an NSPCC domestic violence service developed a set of rules for police workers to follow when working with children following an incident of domestic violence:

- *Ask children how it happened*
- *Tell them how bad the injury is*
- *Tell children what is happening*
- *Ask why they think is happening to their parents*
- *Tell them what will happen to us'*²³

Empowering children can be an important means of helping them to cope. The need to be kept informed, trusted and provided with honest information is central to children understanding the situation they are in.

Safety for themselves and their families

*'I think feeling safe is being able to be relaxed at all times. You shouldn't have these things running through your mind like am I moving soon, should I expect to be treated aggressively today. Also I would feel safe if there was someone for me to talk to if I have a concern about something.'*²⁴

Children often talk about wanting to be safe. They want the violence to stop and they want to stop being afraid of their violent parent. They experience fear, unpredictability and confusion due to parents' changing moods. Children in domestic violence situations most

¹⁹ Scottish Government (2007), *Literature review: Better outcomes for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse – Directions in good practice*. Scottish Government Publications

²⁰ Abrahams, C. (1994) *The Hidden Victims of Domestic Violence*, London: NCH Action for Children

²¹ Mullender A. et al (2002) *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*. London: Sage

²² NSPCC internal consultation

²³ NSPCC internal consultation

²⁴ Barron, J. (2007) *Kidspeak: Giving children and young people a voice on domestic violence*. Women's Aid

frequently mention 'safe' when talking about a secure refuge where they can't be found, and rarely associate it with their own home.

Children worry about their parents more than is recognised, in particular for their safety and often they end up taking on significant emotional responsibility for family members and practical responsibility for tasks around the home.

More services, trained professionals and information to help them

'You're here to protect people, what are you doing just stood there saying 'Oh we can't do this and we can't do that'. So I just thought, well you can't do anything'²⁵

Children want a range of support services to meet their specific needs: more refuges with children's workers, support for the abused parents, positive parenting, counselling and perpetrator programmes. (For more detail see campaign briefing on support services for children and families).

Children also want services where they can talk about and overcome their experience of domestic violence. Therapeutic work individually or in groups allows children to discuss their feelings, reassures them that the violence is not their fault, builds their self-esteem and helps them develop safety plans for the future. Children also appreciate helpline services, such as ChildLine, and safe online spaces, such as The HideOut²⁶, which provide confidential help and advice.

Children express limited faith in professionals' ability to help them – particularly those they are in regular contact with²⁷ and suggest that professionals should know and be trained in the effects of domestic violence on children. Where professionals have been trained, routine procedure is in place to ask children and young people about direct and indirect abuse, in confidence.

Access to support in schools is uncommon but would make a huge difference to children experiencing domestic violence.²⁸ Although children express concerns about confidentiality, they perceive schools and youth settings as key locations for children to access information and learn about domestic violence and safe relationships and begin accessing help. They encourage better promotion and access to information for all services. (For more detail see campaign briefing on the role of schools in tackling domestic violence).

²⁵ McGee, C (2000) *Childhood experiences of domestic violence* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

²⁶ www.thehideout.org.uk

²⁷ Scottish Government (2007), *Literature review: Better outcomes for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse – Directions in good practice*. Scottish Government Publications

²⁸ *ibid*

NSPCC PETITION

The NSPCC is calling for the UK Government and devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland to tackle domestic violence from a child's point of view.

We want to see:

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- Training for professionals to identify children living with domestic violence so that whenever adults are working with domestic violence, they think about the children affected.
- Education about domestic violence in schools and other youth settings so all children learn that the violence is not their fault, and how to stay safe.

To support this campaign, please visit www.nspcc.org.uk/dvcampaign

HELPLINE NUMBERS

- **ChildLine:** If you are a child or young person, for confidential advice and support from someone you can trust, call 0800 1111 or go to childline.org.uk
- **NSPCC helpline:** If you have concerns about the safety of a child please call the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000. It is free, confidential, and our advisors are there to help 24 hours a day.
- **National domestic violence helpline:** Domestic violence can happen to anyone. If you or someone you know is affected you can contact: 0808 2000 247 – this is the Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline, run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.

Contact information

For further information about this campaign please contact :

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