

Working With Children Who Have Experienced Domestic Abuse

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In Scotland the nationally agreed definition of domestic abuse is: any form of physical, sexual or mental and emotional abuse which might amount to criminal conduct and which takes place within the context of a relationship. The relationship will be between partners (married, cohabiting, civil partnership or otherwise) or ex-partners. The abuse can be committed in the home or elsewhere.

However, children are often described as the ‘forgotten victims’ of domestic abuse. As well as the physical violence often found in abusive relationships, children can witness the emotional abuse of a parent. There is also a significant correlation between domestic abuse and the mental, physical and sexual abuse of children (Scottish Government, 2008). A national study of children’s mental health indicates that exposure to severe abuse is the most frequently reported type of childhood trauma (Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman, 2009). As domestic violence is often closely linked with pregnancy there can be an impact on the child even pre-birth by affecting the development of stress-response networks (Perry, 2002). With much of the major structural changes in the brain taking place in the first four years of life, negative early years experiences can have a much greater potential to influence brain organisation and brain functioning.

How many children are affected?

From a consultation carried out with a sample of 11-17 year olds in England, 17.5% reported being exposed to domestic abuse in their home (Radford et al., 2011). However, the concern is that the numbers may be even higher across the UK due to a reluctance to disclose. In Scotland, the Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 introduced a new specific ground of referral to the Reporter of domestic abuse which provides a clearer picture about the extent to which children and young people are affected by domestic abuse. From the date the Act came into force on June 23, 2013 to March 31, 2015 the number of children were referred on the ground that they had a close connection with someone who had carried out domestic abuse was 3,275. More than a fifth of these children were younger than two years (SCRA, 2015). This is important, because domestic violence is recognised as affecting future health and wellbeing and practitioners should be aware of long term impact that this can have on children and young people. For example, research in Polmont Young Offenders Institution found that many young men had experienced domestic violence at home and this was described as ‘significant trauma’ (Smith, Dyer, & Connelly, 2014). For children referred to IVY, a Scottish based service for children who pose the most serious risk to others, 84% of those who had a full risk analysis completed had witnessed domestic violence.

What can practitioners do?

Practitioners working with children they suspect have or are currently experiencing

domestic abuse should forge open and sharing links with other professionals around the child and family, such as within schools and nurseries, to ensure there is broad understanding of the situation and awareness of any physical, social, emotional or behavioural changes within the child.

However positive parenting and support from one parent alone can be a valuable protective factor, as can a close bond with wider family or community support. These protective factors can build children's resilience, help overcome the negative effects of an adversity and result in good outcomes for some children. It is therefore important to be aware that not all children exposed to domestic abuse will react in a predictable way, how the issue is approached should be individualised to each young person, but the relationship between child and practitioner should be consistent and safe.

Provision has tended to focus on children and young people who are showing significant behavioural and emotional difficulties. However, best practice suggests that both the child and the abused parent each needs services in their own right, as well as linked services which focus on strengthening the relationship between them (Hester et al., 2007; Humphreys et al., 2006a as cited in Humphreys, Houghton, & Ellis, 2008).

Abuse recovery services such as that offered by [Children 1st](#) can provide the skilled support that children need to help them recover from the trauma of abuse. The abuse recovery support is shaped to suit the individual child and can include: play therapy, educational support and group work. The [Cedar](#) programme is a concurrent programme model for both children and their mothers from a background of domestic abuse. This group aims to help children identify and express emotions surrounding hurting, separation, shame, guilt and loss. In addition, Women's Aid have also created a safe online space, known as [the hideout](#), for both younger children and young people to access information.

Practitioners should also familiarise themselves with the [Joint protocol between Police Scotland and Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service](#) with regard to domestic abuse and how child witnesses will be protected.

References

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