

Briefing paper: Domestic Violence and Abuse, Family Life, and the Implications for Children

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for Andrea Leadsom, MP

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children, for adult victims, for adult perpetrators and for society at large. Families that experience domestic violence are vulnerable to psychosocial and economic hardship, which can have negative consequences for all family members, and in particular long term implications for children. Despite this, domestic violence services for children are generally poorly resourced and poorly articulated, both within the county and nationwide.

The impact of domestic violence and abuse

It is important to remember that domestic violence and abuse impacts whole families – it is a family systemic problem that impacts all family members, and the quality of relating within the family as a whole, and that all members of a household can experience negative outcomes as a consequence of domestic violence and abuse. Being an adult victim of domestic violence is associated with a range of psychosocial difficulties, including

- **Mental health difficulties:** the most common mental health difficulties include post traumatic and complex traumatic stress reactions, depression, anxiety, and elevated risk of suicide (Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbrown, 2012; Devries et al., 2011).
- **Particular vulnerability to postnatal difficulties,** including postnatal depression (Beydoun, Beydoun, Kaufman, Lo, & Zonderman, 2012). Beydoun et al (2012) estimate that 9-28% of all experiences of major

depression and postnatal depression is attributable to interpersonal violence.

- Social isolation and loss of connectedness or a sense of belonging (Maume, Lanier, Hosfield, & Wehman, 2014).
- Economic hardship, loss of income, homelessness and housing difficulties (Abramsky et al., 2011).

Perpetrators also experience negative impacts, including criminalisation, negative mental health outcomes and homelessness (Brown & Hampson, 2009).

Children are often overlooked as victims of domestic violence and abuse, but the impact of DVA on children is considerable. A third of all domestic violence either begins or escalates during pregnancy (DoH, 2004) and risks to babies include a raised incidence of miscarriage, low birth weight, prematurity, and foetal injury and death (Aizer, 2011). Children who grow up in circumstances of DVA are at risk a range of psychosocial difficulties, including

- Risk of mental health difficulties across the lifespan (Meltzer et al., 2009; Mezey et al., 2005)
- educational challenges, and early withdrawal or exclusion from education (Byrne & Taylor, 2007).
- Risk of both bullying and being bullied (Baldry, 2003; Lepistö et al., 2011).
- Interpersonal difficulties in their own future intimate relationships and friendships (Black et al., 2010; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Siegel, 2013).
- Vulnerability to a range of other possible abuses across their lifespan (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2010).
- Recent research suggests that the lasting traumatic impact of witnessing violence can raise children's risk of neurological difficulties as a consequence of the severe stress associated with these incidents (Anda et al., 2006; Choi et al., 2012; Koenen et al., 2003).

The importance of supporting parents who experience domestic violence and abuse

Parenting is a form of emotional labour, and as such is vulnerable to psychosocial stressors. It is therefore unsurprising that domestic violence and abuse presents specific challenges to parenting. The quality of the couple relationship and co-parental functioning impacts children's overall development and mental health (Favez et al., 2012; Gordon & Feldman, 2008; Feinberg et al., 2010; Cooper & Vetere, 2008). Attachment relationships are vulnerable to parental stress (Barrows, 2009), with both dyadic (e.g. mother-infant or father-infant) and triadic (mother-infant-father) relationships being particularly vulnerable to DVA (Rodrigues, 2012) and often become strained as a consequence of violence in the home (Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006).

Maternal coping is a powerful protective factor for children, facilitating greater resilience (Johnson & Lieberman, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006). Antenatal interventions to help mothers cope better and to support them in the transition to parenting are effective in reducing impact on infants and children (Flach et al., 2011). Interventions to improve attachment, facilitating parental responsiveness and synchrony have been shown to be particularly effective in helping families recover from DVA (Dollberg et al. 2013), as have supportive parenting skills interventions in the first two years (Macmillan et al., 2009; Olds, 2006).

In addition to the positive impact of such intervention on infants' and young children's mental health, enhancing the quality of parenting interaction and supporting satisfying and positive family relationships also has a positive impact on adults' wellbeing (Cooper & Vetere, 2008; Stover et al., 2009; Stover, 2005). Family assessment and support during pregnancy and early infancy reduces the 'spill over' of abusive interactions in later family life (Favez et al., 2013).

What have Northamptonshire children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse told us?

As part of the European Commission funded project 'Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies', the authors of this briefing have conducted interviews with twenty young people from Northamptonshire (as well as a further 80 young people from Greece, Italy and Spain) about their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. We also conducted focus groups with carers about their perceptions of their children's needs. We have extracted from these interviews some quotes that illustrate what young people and their carers have suggested is important in planning services for young people.

The importance of feeling heard

Children and their carers frequently told us that services focused on the adult victim of domestic violence and abuse (typically the mother), but that children were not the focus of concern or intervention.

"They didn't ask me anything, nor reassure me...only my mum" (a child, talking about her interactions with police)

"They forget about the others ((i.e. the children)) and that is a mistake" (a child talking about her general experiences of professionals, suggesting that they focus on the adult victim and forget about other possible victims)

"I felt, I felt alone, I have always felt alone, I always felt alone even by being here I felt alone"

It is crucial that professionals recognise the impact of domestic violence and abuse on all members of the family. Too often domestic violence appears to be framed as a housing and policing issue, with insufficient attention being paid to its emotional and relational impact on the whole family.

Sensitive responses to disclosure

Several young people noted that professional responses to disclosures about domestic violence could produce more difficulties than they resolved.

Paul: Yeah, cause we stopped talking to ((social worker)) because she told our dad stuff we'd said. And he got very mad.

Int: why is it important to you to keep things private?

George: Well, cause then other people won't know and they won't get angry about things that you said about them.

Appropriate management of disclosure by professionals must take into account how challenging children's family life is, and that passing on information from children to families can be endangering. Children who live with domestic violence are often wary about talking about their family circumstances, and when they feel their disclosures are inappropriately handled, this undermines trust and further militates against young people asking for help and support they need.

In some cases professionals might benefit from further training in managing disclosures around domestic violence.

I talked to a teacher thinking I'd be able to trust her and she went straight to the headmaster and all the stuff started going on where the headmaster like threatened my mum saying, "If you don't sort this out, we'll ring child services," and all that stuff, my mum could have had us taken off her 'cause of that.

Ultimately, this response undermined the child's faith in professional adults, making future disclosures less likely.

These issues highlight the importance of training for staff in universal and specialist services to ensure sensitive and appropriate responses to young people who experience domestic violence and abuse.

The importance of places of safety

Children and carers were often ambivalent about refuge, expressing concern about the conditions, and especially about overcrowding. But, particularly retrospectively, most felt it was an important space for them, and one in which they were offered integrated and holistic support:

I'm gonna admit to you, I did not wanna come to refuge, but coming to refuge was the best thing I've ever done, because now I'm getting help, my kids are getting help, I'm feeling settled and I know there's gonna be help put in place for Ben that should have been put in place before, so everything for me seems to be coming together... (Carer)

Looking back, I'd say the best time of my life was when I was in refuge. Sharing with people who understand what you've been through. (Young person)

Children need safe, secure places in which they can regroup and recover, after domestic violence. These spaces need to be secure and safe, well resourced, and not overcrowded:

"We went into a really nice refuge and then, because other people needed to go in there, because it was originally a druggies and alcoholics refuge and obviously no other refuges had enough room for me and my brothers and my mum to go into, so we had to go into that one and we'd have all these people coming in, wasted and just out of their heads, there was even a, ((erm)) this lady that was there, who was on heroin that got, had her kids taken off her and you see the kids being dragged off crying, it was

horrible... mum's still putting all her bids in the houses and stuff like that, and it took a little while..." (12 year old girl)

Children who have lived with domestic violence have already experienced significant life stressors. With cuts to domestic violence services in the area, children find themselves in inappropriate environments where their ability to recover is further challenged.

The importance of appropriate support for families

Domestic violence impacts whole families, and often results in significant loss of support networks. The impact of this is immense. This carer notes how the disintegration of her family life destabilised her, and broke her sense of family apart. She reports with frustration that, instead of supporting her, professionals used her circumstances to further shame her into action, by threatening the removal of her children.

it felt like my family were being pulled apart all the time, and instead of having like respect, "oh your kids are gonna get taken off you, if you don't do this, your kids are gonna get taken off you, if you don't do this" do y'know what I mean? For me personally, I wanted to know what it was like to be a family again, so that support should have been about how to be a family. When you've been torn apart like that, and you've got your dad, your mum, everyone is gone, I don't know what, and I'll be honest with you, I'm like 36 and sometimes I feel so embarrassed or I feel a bit ashamed because I sometimes struggle with how to cope with things and how to be that family unit...

Carers and children emphasised the importance of supportive services that heard families' distress and provided support in 'how to be a family unit'.

The impact of Domestic Violence and Abuse: Summary of key points

- Children who experience domestic violence can be very negatively impacted by these experiences, which can have consequences for their emotional functioning, their social relationships, their attachments and their mid to long term developmental outcomes.
- As emotional labour, parenting is vulnerable to stress, and parents who experience domestic violence have greater difficulty responding sensitively to their young children's attachment needs
- Support for families, that enhances parenting, builds attachments, and supports children and young people, is essential for good outcomes for children who live with domestic violence.
- Children need services to support their recovery, and need to feel validated and listened to by professionals who work with them.
- Children and families need stability in the aftermath of domestic violence, to enable them to regroup. Good quality services cannot be provided without good quality shelter and safe and secure housing. These offer a safe base from which family life can be rebuilt.

What do children who experience domestic violence and abuse need?

A considered and integrated response

Service delivery for children in Northamptonshire is patchy, and lacks overarching integration. Better communication is needed on what services are available and how they can be accessed.

Responsibility

Children who experience domestic violence are amongst the most vulnerable in our society, and the impact of domestic violence can be severe for their long term outcomes. They have complex health and social care needs. It is important that both sets of needs are met appropriately by professional services.

Early intervention

Services for children in Northamptonshire are quite limited generally, but there is particularly little specialist support for very young children and families. Systemic interventions that support parenting and other family relationships in the early years are key to reducing long term negative health, educational and social outcomes for children who experience domestic violence and abuse.

Services for primary age and older children

Young people who have experienced domestic violence and abuse need support to process the difficult experiences they have had, and to enable them to make positive life choices for themselves. This includes services that support communication with carers, therapeutic services that help young people to articulate and understand their experiences of violence and abuse, and services that facilitate young people's construction of positive and healthy future relationships.

Services for children who experience domestic violence in Northamptonshire

We do have some excellent services for children in the county, but they are somewhat fragmented, limited in terms of available funding and resource, and do not necessarily target the range of infants, children and young people who experience violence at home, across the county. (See Table for a list of services as mapped by the NCC.) The following are services we are aware of in the county – these are unlikely to be exhaustive. Particularly missing are specialist DVA services in the early years of children’s life, and more sustained therapeutic work for school age children and young people. (This is a pattern typical not just of Northamptonshire, but is a national pattern.)

Family Nurse Partnership: This service targets young parents, providing early parenting support. It is not domestic violence specific, but the FNP remit will include some support for young families where DVA is an issue.

NORPIP offers parent-infant psychotherapy for families experiencing challenges with early attachment. The service is not domestic violence specific, but the remit includes support for families affected by domestic violence and abuse. The service targets families with infants and toddlers under 2 years.

Nene Valley Christian Refuge offer three programmes. The ‘Help Me To Stay Safe’ is for children aged 7-11 years who have witnessed Domestic Abuse focuses on helping children to understand their experience of domestic abuse and its impact on them and others, and to articulate their experiences. The programme facilitates mother-child communication. DAY is for young people aged 14-18 years (but can be adapted for use with 11-14 year olds) builds an understanding of domestic abuse, its causes and its effect. Its focus is to facilitate the development of non-abusive patterns of relating. The DART group is a 10-week programme helping mothers and children aged seven to 11 strengthen their relationship following domestic abuse.

Northampton Women's Aid offer 'Choose to Change', a programme aimed at helping young people not use violence and abuse in their relationships. WENWA offer the CRUSH programme for 13-19 year olds.

Educational Psychology and Briar Hill offer Theraplay for primary age children affected by DVA in the county. The 'Moving on Through Play' programme is offered to preschool children in Kettering.

IPV Group work – children and young people (June 2014) – Northampton County Council Service Mapping

AGE	Northampton	Wellingborough	East Northants	South Northants	Daventry	Corby	Kettering
Pre-school							MOVING ON THROUGH PLAY
7-11	DART (NVCFR)	HELP ME STAY SAFE (WENWA)				HELP ME STAY SAFE (WENWA)	
11-14						DAY (NWA)	DAY (WENWA)
11-16	UNARS (UON) **accepts referrals countywide** Starting 4 th November 2014						
13-18	CHOOSE TO CHANGE (NWA)			CHOOSE TO CHANGE (NWA)	CHOOSE TO CHANGE (NWA)		
13-19		CRUSH (WENWA)				CRUSH (WENWA)	

14-19						SEXUAL VIOLENCE GROUP (NRICC)	

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