At the heart of every court report concerning children's living and spending time arrangements should be the child’s experience. Understanding the complexity of proceedings involving domestic abuse helps practitioners focus on the impact it can have on children, who should be considered equally as the victim. When living with domestic abuse and the trauma it can cause, children will be affected in different ways.

**Impact on children of experiencing**

**domestic abuse**

**The child’s experience**



The Adoption and Children Act 2002 refers to the impairment suffered by children who are exposed to or witness domestic abuse when defining significant harm, but research from Callaghan (2015) indicates that children experience domestic abuse not just as witnesses but as victims. Domestic abuse creates a distressing, stressful and harmful environment, and the long-term consequences of this trauma can stretch into adulthood.

**General Principle re Domestic Abuse in Practice direction 12-J: child contact arrangements and contact orders: domestic abuse (Ministry of Justice, 2017)**

Domestic abuse is harmful to children, and/or puts children at risk of harm, whether they are subjected to domestic abuse, or witness one of their parents being violent or abusive to the

other parent or live in a home in which domestic abuse is perpetrated (even if the child is too young to be conscious of the behaviour). Children may suffer direct physical, psychological and/or emotional harm from living with domestic abuse and may also suffer harm indirectly

where the domestic abuse impairs the parenting capacity of either or both of their parents.

**Children’s responses to living with domestic abuse may vary according to age and stage of development.**

The ways in which children are affected may differ. For example, babies living with domestic violence appear to be subject to higher levels of ill health, poorer sleeping habits and excessive crying, along with disrupted attachment patterns.

Children of pre-school age tend to be the age group who show most behavioural disturbance such as bed wetting, sleep disturbances and eating difficulties and are particularly vulnerable to blaming themselves for the adult violence. Older children are more likely to show the effects of the disruption in their lives through under performance at school, poorly developed social networks, self-harm, running away and engagement in anti-social behaviour.

(Humphreys and Houghton, 2008).

Research has started to focus on the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children’s brain development. There is emerging evidence that young children who have experienced domestic

**The child’s experience**



abuse score lower on cognitive measures even when controlling for mother’s IQ, child’s weight at birth, birth complications, the quality of intellectual stimulation at home, and gender.

Exposure to domestic abuse particularly in the first two years of life appears to be especially harmful.

Whilst children are pre-programmed to respond to stressful situations, such as hunger, meeting new people or dealing with new experiences, it is clear that some stressors are more harmful than others. The strong and prolonged activation of the individual child’s stress management system results in *toxic* stress.

(Enlow *et al* 2012)

In situations where a child’s stress levels are high, such as in situations of domestic abuse, persistent elevations of stress hormones and altered levels of key brain chemicals produce an internal physiological state that disrupts the structure of the developing brain and can lead to

difficulties in learning, memory, and self-regulation. As a result, children who experience toxic

stress in early childhood may develop a lifetime of greater susceptibility to stress-related physical

illnesses (such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes) as well as mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse) (National Scientific

Council on the Developing Child, 2007). They also are more likely to exhibit health damaging behaviours, such as smoking, and adult lifestyles, such as drug taking, that undermine well-being, and subsequently lead to earlier death ( Brown *et al* 2009).

Children living with domestic abuse do not become ‘used to it’ or feel the impact less

acutely. It is the duration of the exposure to abuse that can cause the most harm.

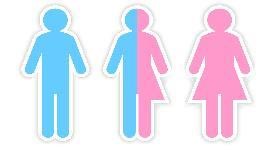


*(*

*English 2003 in Stanley*

*2011)*

Experiencing parental violence in the pre-school years predicted externalizing problems in boys at age 16; and for girls it predicted



Gender note

internalizing problems. Experiencing domestic abuse in early childhood leaves a legacy that appears during the adolescent years, especially in

boys’ and ‘In predicting behaviour problems, in contrast, it was found that the strongest predictor was a climate of violence, chaos and disruption in the home, perhaps especially in the early years. *(Stroufe et al 2005)*

It is important to understand how the child has perceived and internalised their experiences and not to attribute harm only to the nature of the abuse. For example, situational couple or separation instigated abuse may have occurred with minimum frequency but caused

significant trauma. Although the most pervasive and long lasting effects of domestic abuse are likely to be as living with coercive control, there may also be significant impact from witnessing an incident or several frightening incidents over time.

**Children’s experiences of coercive control**





**Assessing impact**

Children are impacted by the controlling circumstances in which they find themselves. The psychological abuse, and the sense of constant fear that is associated with coercive control, is a regular feature of their lives and they creatively and consciously take steps to manage their experiences and utilise strategies that work for them to minimise damage. Far from passive witnesses, they are not ‘exposed’ to violence and abuse, rather, they live with it and experience it directly, just as adults do. In addition, they respond to violence and coercive control as creative agents, able to adapt and change to meet their adverse experiences and manage them. Children who have experienced coercive control are likely to experience similar impacts as adult victims, they are likely to suffer from limited opportunities to choose, to feel free, and to develop a sense of independence and competence (Katz, 2016).

Callaghan et al (2015) presented the effects described by the children they interviewed which included constrained use of space within the home and constrained self-expression. Children constraining their own behaviour defined children’s experience of coercive control, learning to manage what

they said and done ‘to prevent themselves from being too visible, too loud, too

noticeable’ in order to protect themselves from the perpetrator. Constraining their behaviour is a clear coping strategy

employed by many children as a way of

creating a sense of safety. It is therefore

important that this hypervigilance is noted as a clear impact of coercive control at home, and professionals consider how this

increased vigilance and constraint may affect a child’s wellbeing.

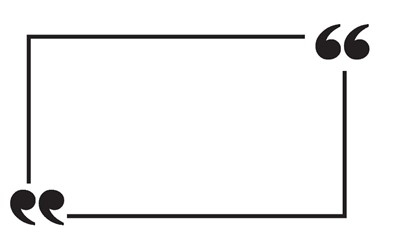
The effects of living with domestic abuse are often more complex than the issues practitioners are able to observe on the surface or children are able to express. When interviewing a child about their experiences it is important to support and encourage them through their responses rather than leading them. Technology such as smartphone or tablet apps can be useful to help build a rapport with the child, while worksheets and colouring can be used with children of all ages to help them relax.

**Direct work with**

**children**



Asking questions can only reveal so much, but the right questions can make children feel comfortable talking about their experiences and allow the practitioner to understand their point of view. The right questions might include:



Who is in your family?



Who are you least

close to?



Who makes you feel

safe in your family?



Are there some things

which happen in your

family which are scary?



What do you do when

scary things happen?



What do you think needs

to change to make

things better at home?

How do you think you

can change things?



What can other people

do to change things?



I’d always hesitate of what I would say...even if I said “Hello”, I’d always think before like, is he just going to shut me out? Is he going to respond in a nice way, or be angry or anything like that? I’d always think ahead of what I was saying.

*Child’s quote (Callaghan et al. 2015)*

Direct quotes from the child in answer

to your questions can be powerful

when writing a report and making a

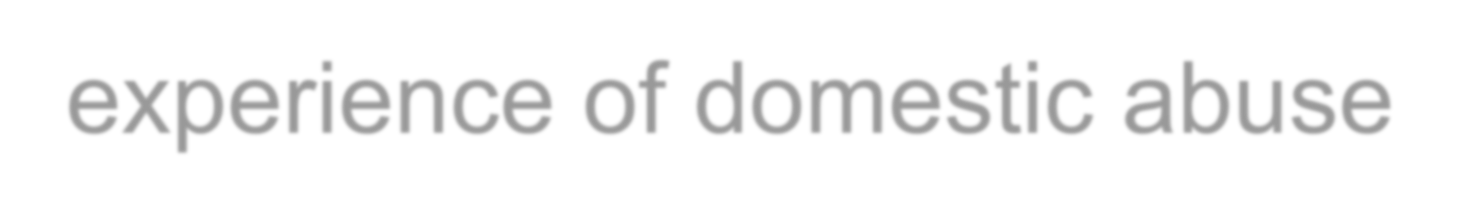
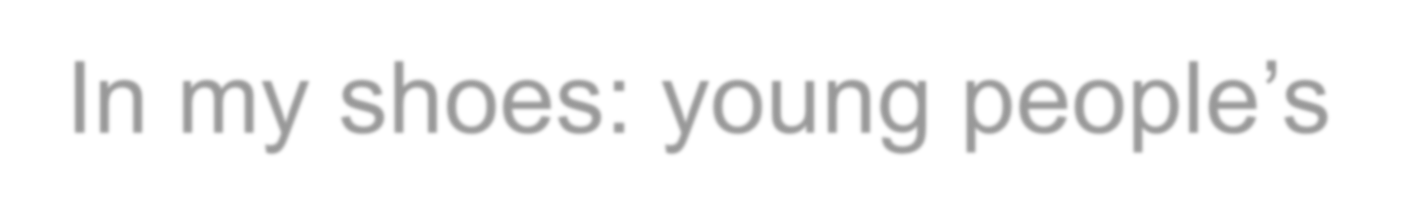
recommendation to the court.

Practitioners should also consider how

the child should be supported once the

interview is finished.

# In my shoes: young people’s experience of domestic abuse



**Direct work with children**

8-year-old Benjamin concentrated intently whilst he

drew a picture of a small person standing on a desert island in

a pool of water. He explained this was himself standing in a pool of his own tears. He said he feels no one can

reach him on the island and he’d rather be in the tornado

that he drew in the sea next to the island. He drew a very large figure next to him who he said was ‘roaring and

shouting’. This was his father. He explained in detail his

memories of this. He said he could not draw his mum on the island because he knows she can’t stop his dad, because the court is in charge.

Simon told his FCA that from his bedroom door he heard his mother, tell his father that she had “had enough” and saw her throwing clothes into a holdall. Simon vividly recalled his

father shouting “if you think you’re taking the car you’ve got

another think coming!”. When I asked Simon to describe how he felt at that moment he said his heart was “beating like a

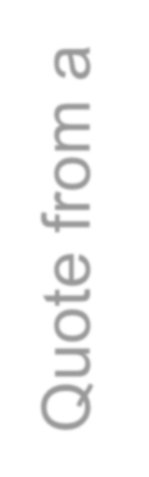
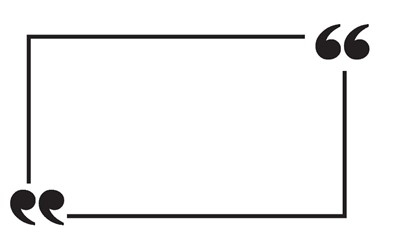
storm” and that he “froze for a minute” not knowing what to do. He could hear the shouting getting louder and was

worried that “someone might get hurt”. Simon described how he then pulled on his Playmobil knight costume and dashed down stairs to find his father “wrestling” his mother on the

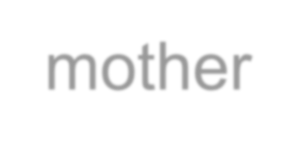
sofa (PNC records indicate he was trying to get the car keys

out of her hand and that mother sustained minor injuries as a result). Simon said he “whacked Dad, again and again” with his plastic sword until father got hold of the keys, shoved Simon out of the way and then left in the car.

Perpetrators can undermine victims parenting ability, making them feel like they are not a good enough parent. Lapeirre (2010) states *‘men’s attacks on mothering and mother-child relationships are central to their exercise of control and domination’*. Radford and Hester (2006) explain that women experiencing domestic abuse can lose confidence in their parenting ability and capacity and leave them feeling as though they have little left to give as a parent.



Quote from a



Children can be directly involved in coercive and controlling activities i.e. undermining the non-abusive parent’s role as a parent. These include isolation, blackmailing, monitoring activities, stalking, and can be used in other ways by abusers to minimize, legitimise and justify violent behaviour

**Impact on parenting**

**capacity**

(Johnson, 2009, Stark, 2007).

Victims will often try to act as the protective parent by attempting to limit the damage to the children. This is normally in two main ways:

Radford et al (2011) add that perpetrators often attempt to damage children’s respect for their mother, prevent mothers from being able to provide consistent routines for their children, and attempt to turn the children against her. Constraining the amount of parenting time is also a common tactic which prevents attachment and limits natural engagement.

Protection as a constant process they engage in to create an environment that is free of violence and provided some form of stability or normality for their children often placating the perpetrator to prevent an attack

Protection as an act to stop physical violence being perpetrated on their children by their partner

## mother

I was cooking for six hours a day, he wanted fresh meals, he wanted different items. I was cooking to

keep the peace. If I was to go out with my friends, he would make sure that I had his meal ready in the

oven or all mixed together so all he had to do was put the oven on. It so scared me that sometimes I would forget to do that and I’d run back from the station just to do that so I wouldn’t get in trouble.

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**Resilience**

**Impact on parenting**

**capacity**

Every assessment and impact statement requires the inclusion of the resilience potential for that individual child. It is important to balance harm with protective factors and offset strengths against the adversity experienced.

Discussions of resilience are typically framed with reference to risk, vulnerability and protective

factors. It is the complex interplay of these factors over time that determines children’s

outcomes. The following definitions of these factors have been offered by Newman (2004) in a

review of what works in building resilience:

**Risk**

Any factor or combination of factors

that increases the chance of an

undesirable outcome affecting a

person.

**Protective factors**

The circumstances that moderate

the effects of risk.

**Vulnerability**

A feature that renders a person

more susceptible to a threat.

**Resilience**

Positive adaptation in the face of

severe adversities

**Masten et al ( 1990) identified three types of resilience in children:**

1. Children who do not succumb to adversities, despite their high-risk status, for example babies of low birth-weight.
2. Children who develop coping strategies in situations of chronic stress, for example the children of drug-using or alcoholic parents.
3. Children who have suffered extreme trauma, for example through disasters, sudden loss of a close relative, or abuse, and who have recovered and prospered.

*Newman, 2004*

Resilient children, therefore, are those who resist adversity, manage to cope with uncertainly and are able to recover successfully from trauma.

### Individual factors associated with resilience

Female

Sense of competence and self-efficacy

Internal locus of control

Empathy with others

Problem-solving skills

Sociable

Independent

Reflective, not impulsive

Ability to concentrate on schoolwork

Autonomy (girls)

Emotional expressiveness (boys)

Sense of humour

Hobbies

Willingness and capacity to plan

**Summary of factors associated with resilience during school years**

*(Daniel and Wassell 2002)*

**Family factors associated with resilience**

Close bond with at least one person

Nurturance and trust

Lack of separations

Lack of parental mental health or addiction problems

Required helpfulness

Encouragement for autonomy (girls)

Encouragement for expression of feeling (boys)

Close grandparents

Sibling attachment

Four or fewer children

Sufficient financial and material resources

Willingness and capacity to plan

*)*

#### Individual factorsassociated

Mal

Empathy with others

Internal locus of control

Social maturity

Positive self-concept

Achievement orientation

Gentleness, nurturance

Social perceptiveness

Preference for structure

A set of values

Intelligence



**Summary of factors associated with resilience during adolescent years**

*(Daniel and Wassell 2002*

Exposure to domestic abuse can have lasting effects on children and adolescents. Not all young people are affected in the same way; some children are resilient, able to heal and go on to thrive. Various risk and protective factors within the child, family and community can impact the ways in which children and young people process and understand the exposure to abuse. *(Edelson 2004)*

**Wider community factors associated with resilience**

Neighbour and other non-kin support

Positive adult role models

Peer contact

Good school experiences

**Individual factors associated with resilience**

Male

Responsibility

Empathy with others

Internal locus of control

Social maturity

Positive self-concept

Achievement orientation

Gentleness, nurturance

Social perceptiveness

Preference for structure

A set of values

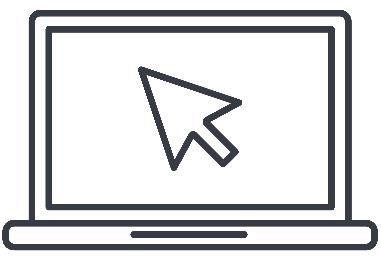
Intelligence

Willingness and capacity to plan

Willingness and capacity to plan

**www.cedarnetwork.org.uk/**

(Children Experience Domestic Abuse Recovery)



[**Impact of domestic abuse on children by developmental level**](https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/documents/crime-prevention-and-emergencies/domestic-abuse/resources/child-safety-resources/impact-of-domestic-abuse-on-children-by-developmental-level.pdf)(pdf)

[**www.cedarnetwork.org.uk**](http://www.cedarnetwork.org.uk)(Children Experience Domestic Abuse Recovery)

Protective Factors within the family and community that help

promote victim resilience



Strong

cultural

identity

Access to

health care

Stable

housing

Economic stability:

ability to earn a

livable

wage

Social support:

connections to family

and friends

Affiliation with a

supportive religious

or faith community

**Helpful resources**

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