



A Shared Understanding of Childhood Domestic Violence and Abuse

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Background

One of the most basic human rights principles is the right to live free from violence, including the threat of violence. Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which came into force in September 1990, guarantees this right to every child, and obliges States to take appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of violence. The Childhood Domestic Violence Project aims to promote the visibility of children living with violence and abuse perpetrated within their parents/carers relationships, and to highlight young people's experience of violence and abuse in their own early intimate relationships. The Project aims to support collective and collaborative approaches to identifying the needs of these children and young people, and to the delivery of effective and responsive services. Central to this is clearly naming children and young people's experience and developing a common understanding of this.

This definition is focused on abusive relationships underpinned by coercive control, as an all-encompassing control of the family unit, with one partner, most frequently the father/father figure¹ seeking to dominate and control the other partner, most frequently the mother, in a range of ways, which may or may not include physical violence. While this is quite distinct from relationships where violence is perpetrated by both partners, all forms of violence are however harmful for children to live with, and effective responses are contingent upon us understanding the context within which this is experienced. For example, if the abuse is mutual or bi-directional, the intervention for the child is one that protects them from both parents. However, if the abuse is perpetrated by one adult/parent, the child needs the non-abusive parents to be supported to protect them. These complex situations can challenge effective responses to protect children. While each context is different and harmful to children, understanding the dynamics of such situations is central to understanding children's experience, and is necessary to provide appropriate and effective responses. In particular, children need to see interventions which reject abusive tactics and are supportive to the non-abusing parent.

There is a gap in current national and international policies^{2 3 4 5 6} in relation to adequately capturing children and young people's experience of domestic violence and abuse and responding to their needs arising out of that experience. While an emerging and developing field of research provides ample evidence as to both the nature and extent of children's experiences, this knowledge has however tended to focus on children's exposure to physical violence⁷. Also emerging is a growing body of knowledge attesting to children and young people's capacity to contribute to research focused on those experiences⁸. Indeed, their right to be consulted on any matter that impacts on them is enshrined in the UNCRC.

To this end, frontline workers and managers of services for families who have experienced domestic abuse in the statutory, community and voluntary sectors have come together to develop a common understanding of childhood domestic violence and abuse. There is also a parallel process supporting children's input into this process.

¹ Stark, E. (2007)

² Ireland, Eithne Fitzgerald, and Ireland, eds. *Report of the Task Force on Violence Against Women*. Dublin: Stationery Office : Government Publications Sale Office, 1997. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/dvreport.pdf/Files/dvreport.pdf>.

³ Council of Europe. "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence." Treaty Office, 2011. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>.

⁴ HSE. "HSE Policy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence," 2010.

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Domestic_HSE_Policy_on_Domestic,_Sexual_and_Gender_Based_Violence.pdf.

⁵ Tusla, ed. *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, 2017. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children_First_National_Guidance_2017.pdf.

⁶ Tusla. "Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook," 2011.

https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/CF_WelfarePracticehandbook.pdf.

⁷ Katz, Emma. "Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence Are Harmed By and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control." *Child Abuse Review* 25, no. 1 (2016): 46–59. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2422>.

⁸ Øverlien, Carolina, and Stephanie Holt. "Letter to the Editor: Research on Children Experiencing Domestic Violence." *Journal of Family Violence* 34, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 65–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-9997-9>.

This document arises from this process, and serves as a statement of understanding of the lived experience of children and young people when there is domestic violence and abuse in their parents/carers relationships; and also the lived experience of young people when there is domestic violence and abuse in their own early intimate relationships. This document seeks to support service providers to effectively understand and assess what they observe/understand in order to provide the most effective and appropriate response.

Children's Voices: This is how children and young people have described their experience to us:

It is shouting, name calling, crying, shattered glass and sometimes punches, bruises and blood. It gets louder and louder, they don't think we can hear it, but we can hear it in our rooms, when we are in bed even if it is in the last corner of the house. It's like a fighting match and we are worried that mam might get killed. When he texts and rings he only asks about mam, I feel like he only cares about mam, not us. It is as if we don't matter.

Sometimes we are told whose side we are on but we don't like it.

It's a really bad feeling in our heart, and it feels like it's broken. We feel very very angry, afraid, frustrated, worried, scared, confused, nervous and sad. Sometimes we feel it in our bodies too, we might get weak, our eyes might go black, we get a pain in our belly, our bones start to hurt and sometimes we don't feel like eating a lot. Sometimes we feel like hurting ourselves to make all our problems go away.

We find it very hard to stay out of it, we try to stop it but it doesn't work. We want to help mam but we feel like we are not in control. We try to get away and go outside but this can be a very hard challenge. Our little sisters and brothers are relying on us and it is our job to protect them.

Our pets are important, it's like they understand what's happening and how we feel.

We hope it will pass in a few weeks and things will be back to normal but we are still kind of scared thinking about when it will happen again. If we expect it we will be ready for it, so it won't feel as bad as the last time.

Some adults think children are stupid and they don't know what they are talking about just because they are little but all children have a voice.

A Shared Understanding among service providers

Domestic violence and abuse is "all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim"⁹. It is typically a pattern of incidents and actions which result in controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence¹⁰. The prevalence and experience of domestic violence and abuse is influenced by societal gender norms and roles; with women being disproportionately affected¹¹.

When domestic violence and abuse occurs in adult relationships, this is a lived experience for children in the family. Domestic violence and abuse affects every aspect of a child's life, including their health, wellbeing, and development from conception through to adulthood. For the child, this violence and abuse

⁹ Council of Europe. "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence." Treaty Office, 2011. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>.

¹⁰ Women's Aid

¹¹ Council of Europe. "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence." Treaty Office, 2011. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>.

is experienced through all their senses, whereby their lives are dominated by fear, control, isolation, and intimidation. Children are not passive bystanders; they are centrally involved and experience the violence and abuse in their own right. The abuse may be directed towards them, they may intervene to stay safe, protect a parent or siblings, they may be encouraged or forced to participate in the abuse and are often used as a tool in abuse and control. Children living with domestic violence can also be at risk of child domestic homicide, as it is often within contexts of coercive control where children are killed¹².

Separately, young people are vulnerable to being abused in their own early intimate relationships. It can take place in person or online, where young people commonly also experience abuse through new technologies and social media, and which can be used as an additional monitoring or harassment tool by the abuser¹³. Both adults and young people have vulnerabilities and risks linked to their stage of development, which may impact on their understanding of what a healthy/unhealthy relationship is. This may influence and compromise their decisions and choices. Young people's options may be further constrained by their lack of access to resources such as legal protections and independent financial resources.

Important Factors when Considering Childhood Domestic Violence and Abuse

1. Children are centrally involved in the family dynamic of domestic violence and abuse.
2. Domestic violence and abuse is a harmful context for children to grow up in.
3. Determining the nature of power and control in the adult relationships is a critical step in providing effective help to children and their families.
4. Childhood domestic violence and abuse is frequently a consequence of gender-based violence and abuse against women.
5. Domestic violence and abuse can damage a child's relationship with their parents/carers – mothers and fathers, in addition to other family members such as siblings.
6. Children and young people's experience of domestic violence and abuse often happens alongside other significant adverse experiences.
7. Removing the person/separation who chooses to use violence and abuse from a child's home does not remove the violence and abuse.
8. Children's resilience and recovery must be supported.
9. Young people may experience abuse in their own early intimate relationships.
- 10.** A society which actively supports gender equality and where there is zero tolerance of domestic violence and abuse protects children and young people.

¹² Jaffe, Peter, Marcie Campbell, Katherine Reif, Jordan Fairbairn, and Randal David. "Children Killed in the Context of Domestic Violence: International Perspectives from Death Review Committees." In *Domestic Homicides and Death Reviews: An International Perspective*, edited by Myrna Dawson, 317–43. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56276-0_11.

¹³ SafeLives. "Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse." Accessed November 13, 2020. <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>.

Important Factors when considering Childhood Domestic Violence and Abuse

1. Children are centrally involved in the family dynamic of domestic violence and abuse.

Children and young people are always aware that their parent/carer is being abused. They see it, hear it and feel it. They may intervene, protecting other family members. As a result it can be a terrifying experience, as they worry about their parent's safety as well as their own.

Abusive and controlling behaviours are not limited to targeting the adult(s) in the family; rather the person who chooses to abuse can exert control over all family members' life activities. Additionally, a child can be targeted as a pawn in controlling the other parent/carer in the family.

2. Domestic violence and abuse is a harmful context for children to grow up in.

Children are reliant on their family unit for the four basic needs of human survival – love, shelter, food and education. Where domestic violence and abuse is present, the child's need for security, safety, consistency and attachment is undermined¹⁴.

Experiencing violence and abuse within the family or living in fear of violence and abuse are causes of toxic stress in a child's body. This impacts how children and young people engage with their daily activities - social, educational and community. The longer the violence and abuse goes on, and the more

severe the intensity of the abuse, the more harmful the impact on the child¹⁵. Early and prolonged experience of domestic violence and abuse potentially creates more severe difficulties for children and young people, because it affects the subsequent chain of a child's development¹⁶. Hearing and seeing their mothers/carers being attacked, and living in an atmosphere of control, fear and unpredictability, undermines children's development, health and well-being¹⁷.

Children and young people frequently feel responsible for the abuse in their family.

3. Determining the nature of power and control in the adult relationships is a critical step in providing effective help to children and their families.

It is very challenging for frontline workers to know the true dynamics of the adult relationships; and forming the wrong conclusion may lead to an ineffective response¹⁸. There is a need for a sophisticated understanding of the adult relationship in order to best respond to the needs of the children in the family. It is crucial that issues of coercive controlling adult behaviour are considered in order to determine the most appropriate supportive response to aid children's development and recovery.

Engaging perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse in taking responsibility for their behaviour has the potential to produce better outcomes for children. If domestic violence and abuse is framed as associated with an abuser's parenting choices¹⁹, predominantly

¹⁴ Barnardos. "What's the Harm: A Child-Centred Response to Domestic Abuse," 2016.

<https://www.barnardos.ie/media/1186/whats-the-harm-2016.pdf>.

¹⁵ Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System. *What about Me!: Seeking to Understand a Child's View of Violence in the Family*. London, Ont.: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System, 2004.

¹⁶ Holt, Stephanie, Helen Buckley, and Sadhbh Whelan. "The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Young People: A Review of the Literature." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 32, no. 8 (2008): 797–810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2008.02.004>.

¹⁷ Mullender, Audrey. *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012.

¹⁸ Katz, Emma. "Coercive Control, Domestic Violence, and a Five-Factor Framework: Five Factors That Influence Closeness, Distance, and Strain in Mother–Child Relationships." *Violence Against Women* 25, no. 15 (2019): 1829–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218824998>.

¹⁹ Mandel, David. "The Invisibility of the Domestic Violence Perpetrator as Parent," 2016. <https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/the-invisibility-of-the-domestic-violence-perpetrator-as-parent/>.

fathers, this would give clarity to the position of the children as victims in their own right and reduce blame of the non-offending parent, typically the mother; affording the opportunity of repairing the father-child relationships only if appropriate.

Therefore, there are benefits to working with abusive fathers²⁰ in enhancing the safety and well-being of their children. However, the starting point is to hold men responsible for their abusive behaviour in order to prioritise their children's needs. Services involved must challenge the continued presence of domestic abuse in children's lives, holding abusive men accountable for their abusive partnering, which cannot be separated from their parenting²¹.

4. Childhood domestic violence and abuse is frequently a consequence of gender-based violence and abuse against women.

Abuse can happen in any relationship, and both men and women can be abused or be abusers. Couples and partners can be abusive and violent towards each other.

Where men experience domestic violence and abuse, societal gender norms create difficulties for them in accessing supports.

However, a strong body of evidence demonstrates that women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence and abuse²². Research indicates that 1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse²³, and services indicate that up to 70% of women making contact are mothers²⁴.

Addressing violence against women, gender inequality and societal gender norms, in striving towards equality between men and women, is central to addressing childhood domestic violence and abuse.

5. Domestic violence and abuse can damage a child's relationship with their parents/carers – mothers and fathers as well as other family members including siblings.

It has been well-established in research that a safe, warm and nurturing relationship with their mother/carer is a protective factor in increasing resilience for children and young people growing up in an abusive environment²⁵.

Mothers and children have indicated that their relationship was often targeted by the abuser, more commonly their father, with closeness and bonding being affected by coercive control, frequency and severity of physical violence by the abuser. Additionally, mothers have frequently indicated that they have felt unable to meet their child's needs in a consistent way due to the family situation day-to-day²⁶. This can apply to any parent/carer whose primary carer role is targeted by an abuser.

Domestic violence and abuse can lead to a complex relationship for children and young people with a parent/step-parent who exerts violence and abuse, more commonly their father. Children and young people say they frequently miss a positive father figure and can have difficulty living with conflicting feelings of

²⁰ Caring Dads. "Leadership Team." Caring Dads™, 2017. <https://caringdads.org/our-team>.

²¹ Holt (2016) Focusing on Fathering in the Context of Domestic Abuse: Children's and Fathers' Perspectives

²² United Nations General Assembly. "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women." Refworld, 1993. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f25d2c.html>

²³ Safe Ireland. "National Domestic Violence Service Statistics," 2014. <https://www.safeireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/National-Domestic-Violence-Service-Statistics-2014.pdf>.

²⁴ Women's Aid. "Children Let down by the System Impact Report 2018," 2018.

https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_impact_report_2018.pdf.

²⁵ Barnardos 2018 - Warm, attuned, sensitive and responsive parenting from mothers tends to increase children's resilience and reduce the severity of the negative impacts that they experience

²⁶ Katz, Emma. "Coercive Control, Domestic Violence, and a Five-Factor Framework: Five Factors That Influence Closeness, Distance, and Strain in Mother-Child Relationships." *Violence Against Women* 25, no. 15 (2019): 1829–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801218824998>.

love for their father, and feelings of anger for the abuse and harm.

6. Children and young people's experience of domestic violence and abuse often happens alongside other significant adverse and harmful experiences

Domestic violence and abuse is rarely the only issue affecting the family. Children and young people in these circumstances frequently experience other adversities in their families such as addiction, poor mental health, and other socioeconomic factors like poverty²⁷ and unemployment, which can exacerbate their situation. These adversities are not the cause of the violence and abuse, rather they may relate to and influence the pattern of abuse. It is also known that the presence of domestic violence and abuse in a family increases the risk of child abuse – physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect²⁸.

7. Removing the person who chooses to use violence and abuse from a child's home does not remove the violence and abuse

Separation is not a vaccination against domestic violence²⁹. Separation from the person who chooses to use violence and abuse does not end the violence and abuse. The person who chooses to abuse can continue to track, monitor and control family activity from outside the family home, further aided by social media and technology in more recent times. The person who chooses to abuse can use post-separation contact with children, frequently custody and access arrangements,

to continue to exert control over the other parent. The process of separation needs therefore to be viewed as a time of increased risk for severe and lethal abuse, rather than a goal of intervention³⁰.

8. Children's resilience and recovery must be supported

While childhood domestic violence and abuse has been established as an adverse childhood experience (ACE)³¹ which can have a negative impact on development and later mental health, it does not affect all children in the same way, as each set of circumstances is different, and each child is different. It is important that children and young people are enabled to have their views heard and be supported in their ability to influence their own lives. This sense of agency can have a positive impact on their experiences and can improve their long-term outcomes after experiencing such adversity³². To create opportunities for fostering resilience and aiding recovery, it is important that children and young people who experience domestic violence and abuse be supported to name and understand their experiences, process and manage their emotions, and be heard in relation to what works for them. Children and young people will most often benefit from therapeutic support rather than just the cessation of violence and abuse. This needs to be tailored to their age and stage of development, and to what they have experienced. It is important that responses include play and having fun, as these everyday

²⁷ Scottish research highlights poverty and low age as the big risk factors for DVA
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520980392>

²⁸ Domestic Violence is recognised as a key indicator for child abuse and neglect (Stanley, 2011). Child abuse and intimate partner violence cases overlap in 40% to 60% of cases (Garcia-Moreno 2002, cited in The Women's Health Council 2007).

²⁹ Jaffe, Peter G, Nancy K. D Lemon, and Samantha E Poisson. *Child Custody & Domestic Violence: A Call for Safety and Accountability*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2003.

³⁰ Holt, Stephanie. "Domestic Abuse and Post-Separation Contact: Promoting Evidence-Informed Practice." *Child*

Abuse Review 29, no. 4 (2020): 325–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2643>.

³¹ Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful and traumatic events experienced by children under the age of 18 which are associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood (Koita, et al., 2018). The original ACEs study was conducted by Felitti et al., (1998) which examined the link between high-risk behaviour and disease in adulthood; and adverse events experienced in childhood (e.g. emotional abuse, household dysfunction etc.).

³² Barnardos 2018; Lundy Model of Participation 2007.

experiences are often denied to children living with domestic violence and abuse.

9. Young people may experience abuse in their own early intimate relationships.

Early intimate relationships are new and an exciting time in the lives of young people, however, abuse intimate relationships is harmful to their development and can damage a young person's wider family and peer relationships. Determining the nature of power and control within an intimate relationship is an important factor in considering an effective support response for a young person.

Like adults, young people's experience of domestic violence and abuse can happen alongside other significant adverse and harmful experiences, possibly increasing their vulnerability and impacting on their ability to seek support. We also know from research that young women are disproportionately affected³³.

Young people frequently do not live with their abusive partner in early intimate relationships, and separation may not stop the violence and abuse from happening. Young people may face extra challenges to separation such as access to legal protections and financial independence, and will require more age specific responses in order to maximise their safety and wellbeing.

Working collaboratively with young people who experience domestic violence and abuse is an important feature in fostering resilience and aiding recovery. It is important to support young people to have their experiences named and validated, to understand that violence and abuse is not their fault, and to have a sense of agency and control over their future lives.

10. A society which actively endorses gender equality and where there is zero tolerance to domestic violence and abuse protects children and young people.

Moving towards a shared understanding of zero tolerance in society for domestic violence and abuse is essential to ensure that children can live their lives free from violence, abuse and control.

This can be achieved through enhanced community collaboration which will support the development of shared collective community responsibility for domestic violence and abuse and its impact on children and young people, and this will ultimately save the lives of many women and children.

In addition to promoting zero tolerance at a community level, at a national level, in 2015 the Irish government signed up to Unicef's SDG goals for children and young which included; reducing inequality and a commitment to building more peaceful societies.³⁴

³³ SafeLives. "Children's Insights England and Wales Dataset 2015-18 Specialist Children's Domestic Abuse Services." Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Children's%20Insights%20national%20dataset%2036%20months%20to%20April%202018.pdf>

³⁴ UNICEF. "Goal 16 Department of Economic and Social Affairs." Accessed November 17, 2020. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

Barnardos' vision is a country where no child has to suffer and every child is able to reach its full potential.

Barnardos' mission is to deliver services and work with families, communities, and our partners to transform the lives of vulnerable children who are affected by adverse childhood experiences

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