

Domestic Violence and Children

A handbook for schools and early years settings

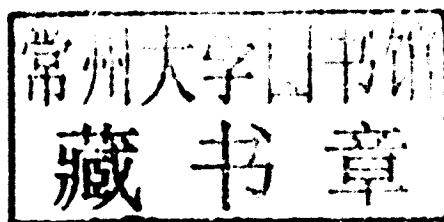
Abigail Sterne and Liz Poole

with Donna Chadwick, Catherine Lawler
and Lynda W Dodd

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Foreword

An ambition of the Children's Plan is to make England a better place for children and young people to grow up in. We know that many are privileged to experience genuine personalisation, great teaching and remarkable learning environments where they make progress and thrive. However, there are vulnerable pupils in all our schools who need even more support, understanding and positive interventions if we are to achieve the ambition.

We are one year into the Children's Plan and there is an increasing focus on the attainment of vulnerable groups in school and society. This timely book has brought together a wealth of information and guidance for all those working within Children's Services. It affirms the notion that schools can, and often do, make a difference, especially to the 750,000 children a year who are exposed to domestic violence.

Those who work in schools need to be alert to the many ways that young victims or children of victims communicate, either consciously or unconsciously, that they are living in fear. Persistent absences, high mobility, fatigue, delayed language or cognitive skills, over- or under-reactions to stressful situations are just a few of these. The resulting missed learning opportunities mean that these children fall further and further behind their peers. This book *Domestic Violence and Children* explains in great detail the impact that domestic violence has upon its victims and brings together considerable research in this area. Although the impact is harrowing, later chapters provide realistic guidance and focus on how schools can support families and build resiliency within the young victims.

For the Children's Plan to become a reality and for young people to remain fully engaged with education until at least the age of 18, acquiring the skills, understanding and qualifications that will serve them well in the future, then schools will need the knowledge and skills both to support victims of domestic violence and educate the wider community. *Domestic Violence and Children* provides us with the tools to do this. It is an important book to add to the booklists of education professionals.

Mary Daly
Programme leader for The Inclusion Development Programme
National Strategies

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- All illustrations are by Jessica Crawford, a student of illustration at Kingston University. She is highly skilled at creating sensitive pictures and is available for commissions. Email: jessacaca@hotmail.com

Introduction

‘Children are very much the silent victims of domestic violence. They may witness it or be subject to it, but often their voice is not heard.’

Home Office 2003: 48

Large numbers of children in our schools and pre-schools live in families where there is domestic violence. It is very common and happens to people from all walks of life: from every social class, race, religion and age group.

A turbulent home environment makes children anxious and unhappy. It can prevent them from thriving in school and learning effectively. It is often a key factor underlying emotional and social difficulties, and problematic behaviour in school, including poor attendance and punctuality.

‘My attendance has been poor. I’ve hardly been in. I’ve not been so well. I’m worried about my mum. It’s just me. I’m too tired, I can’t be bothered.’

A teenage girl living in a refuge

Some young people have their education repeatedly disrupted by moving house and changing schools to flee violence. For some, school or pre-school can provide a release from home tensions and a haven of calm; for others, the demands of an educational establishment may add to their anxieties and confusion.

The impact of domestic violence on children often goes unrecognised in education settings. Even when staff know there is something amiss in a family or are aware of the negative impact of domestic violence on a child, they can find it difficult to know what to do and how to safeguard the child and family.

Schools and pre-schools can be hugely beneficial to young people affected by domestic abuse. For many children and families, they are the natural first port of call for help. They provide:

- adults and other young people who can listen and offer support
- help accessing other support services
- a safe and nurturing environment
- consistency, stability and routine for children whose families may be chaotic
- support for parents and carers

- opportunities to learn relationship skills and appropriate ways of dealing with conflict
- opportunities to learn about domestic violence and healthy relationships
- opportunities to develop self-esteem, confidence and resilience.

Many of the ideas for this book come from professionals working in schools with children who experience domestic violence: children's counsellors, family workers, learning mentors, children's refuge workers, teachers and year heads. There are contributions from staff working in schools located near refuges. We also hear from young people and their mothers. Education settings can and do make a real difference to the lives of children from backgrounds of domestic violence but people find this a sensitive and difficult topic. Staff say they need more information and training if they are to feel confident to tackle the issue, support young people and families effectively and educate children about domestic violence. This book aims to address this need.

Part 1 provides background information, key facts, considers the impact of domestic violence on children at different stages of development and the particular issues facing young people living in refuges and temporary accommodation. Domestic violence affects adults' ability to parent effectively so we also consider the impact on mothers.

Part 2 focuses on what schools and early years settings can do to help young people and their families: how they can reach out to parents and ways in which they can support children, including young people in temporary accommodation. There is information about safety and confidentiality, dealing with disclosures and relevant government guidance. Education about domestic violence plays an important role in prevention and we consider ways that schools can teach young people about it.

High quality pastoral care and teaching can provide invaluable support to this vulnerable group of young people. We describe how schools can and do make a difference.

'It's about creating an ethos within an organisation. This is what we want to happen within this school. We understand the difficulties that these young people face and although some cause a lot of difficulty in our teaching situation, we have the compassion ... life can throw challenges at you from time to time.'

A head teacher of a primary school near a refuge

A note about male victims of domestic violence

Throughout this book, we generally refer to the abused parent or carer as being female. This should not negate the experiences of male victims of domestic violence; a significant number of men are victims (see key facts about domestic violence, Chapter 1). However, women are more likely to experience sustained or repeated episodes of emotional, physical and psychological abuse, and where domestic violence is known about in schools, it is more likely that staff will be supporting the mother as the abused parent.

We make no distinction when condemning domestic violence, regardless of the victim's sex, age, race or sexuality. It is a basic human right to live life free from the fear of being abused.

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The impact of domestic violence on young people and families

Introduction and background

Children living with domestic violence

Key facts about domestic violence

- One in four women and one in six men will experience domestic violence at some time in their lives. One in nine women are thought to experience domestic violence annually (Council of Europe 2002).
- At least 750,000 children a year in the UK witness domestic violence and nearly three-quarters of children on the 'at risk' register live in households where domestic violence occurs (Department of Health 2002: 16).
- The majority of incidents occur when the children are in the same or the next room (Hughes 1992: 9–11).
- The risk of domestic violence for women is nearly doubled if there are children present in the household (Walby and Allen 2004: 87).
- Seventy per cent of children living in UK refuges have been abused by their father (Bowker *et al.* 1998).
- Thirty per cent of domestic violence starts in pregnancy and between four and nine women in every hundred are abused during their pregnancy and/or after the birth (Department of Health 2005: para 2.4).
- Before a woman reports domestic violence to the police, she will on average have been assaulted 35 times. By the time a woman's injuries are visible, violence is a long-established pattern (Jaffe *et al.* 1986: 38 in Morley and Mullender 1994: 12).
- Violence in teenage relationships is common. More than 40 per cent of young people know girls whose boyfriends have hit them and 40 per cent know girls whose boyfriends have coerced them to have sex (End Violence Against Women 2006: 14–15).
- On average, two women a week are killed by a partner or former partner (Department of Health 2005: para 2.1).

What is domestic violence?

A widely accepted definition, used by the UK government, is: 'any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been in a relationship together, or between family members, regardless of gender or sexuality' (Home Office 2005a: 7).

The following is an explanation taken from The Hideout, a web site for young people created by the national domestic violence charity Women's Aid (<http://www.thehideout.org.uk>). It can be a useful starting point for discussion and teaching.

WHAT IS ABUSE?

Domestic abuse is when one grown-up hurts or bullies another grown-up who is or was their partner, or who is in the same family. Domestic abuse can happen between people who are boyfriend and girlfriend or people who are married.

It can happen when people live together or in different houses. Usually (but not always) it is the man who hurts the woman. Although domestic abuse happens between grown-ups, children can be affected by the abuse that they see and hear. Children can also be hurt or bullied as part of domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse can be:

- *physical* – for example, hitting, pushing, kicking
- *emotional* – sayings things to frighten the other person or make them feel bad
- *sexual* – making someone do sexual things that they don't want to
- *financial* – such as taking away the other person's money, or not letting them get a job.

Domestic abuse is a repeated pattern of behaviour. Grown-ups use domestic abuse to control other people. If someone in your family is abusive, remember it's not your fault. If this is happening in your family, remember that you are not alone. Domestic abuse happens in many families and there are people that can help you and your family. Everyone has the right to be and feel safe.

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What children see, hear and experience

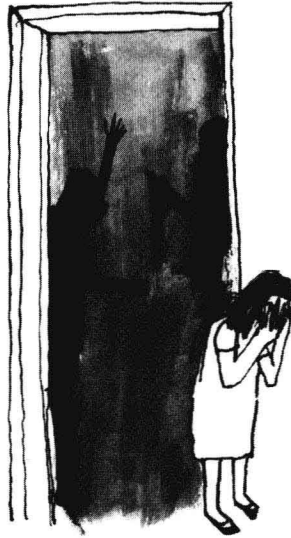
Around 750,000 children a year are exposed to domestic violence and there will be children affected by it in almost every school (Department of Health 2002: 16). For many, home is a stressful, unpredictable place; the family is a source of conflict and some children live in an almost constant state of fear about the next violent episode. Children may fear for the safety of their mother and themselves. Violent acts are often committed by someone who should be caring for and protecting them. The impact is profound, the fear never goes away and young people can be traumatised by their experiences.

'The force of a shouting adult can feel like a terrible tidal wave to a child.'

Sunderland and Hancock 1999: 35

'Children hear their parents, the adults they love and depend on, screaming in anger, pleading in fear and sobbing in pain. They hear fists hitting bodies, objects thrown and shattered, people thrown against walls and knocked to floors. They may see blood, bruises and weapons. Some children witness domestic rapes.'

Wolak and Finkelhor 1998: 74



One study of children and mothers exposed to domestic violence, found the following (McGee 2000: 66):

- eighty-five per cent of children were present while their mothers were being abused in some way
- in 71 per cent of families, children saw their mothers being physically assaulted
- fifty-eight per cent of children overheard the violence. For example, children were in bed and woke up because of the violence or were sent out of the room
- twenty-seven per cent of children witnessed the outcome of the violence, for example, injury to the mother.

Some parents may think or hope that their children are unaware of the violence or the extent of it; that they may not actually have seen anything. In fact children are usually far more aware than parents like to believe.

Children may hear or witness some of the following:

- verbal abuse, screaming, swearing
- their mothers being grabbed, hit, kicked, beaten, choked – resulting in bruises, cuts, broken bones, lost teeth, internal injuries or miscarriages
- objects being thrown, the use of knives or other weapons
- the outcome of the abuse – the distress, injury to the mother, the mother going to hospital, the police arriving
- windows being smashed, doors kicked down
- parts of their homes and furniture destroyed
- their toys and possessions being damaged or destroyed – favourite toys, comforters may be deliberately destroyed
- their pets being deliberately tortured or killed
- their mothers being sexually assaulted.



'Dad pinned mum up against the stairs. I went for him with a knife. Dad smacked me across the head and my sister got kicked.'

A primary school boy

'When I was nine, my mum got seriously beaten up. I saw every little piece of it. I was really scared and phoned the police. My mum had to go to hospital.'

A primary school girl

Some schools will be aware that a child comes from a home where there is domestic violence, though many children will be living with domestic violence of which schools are unaware. Out of fear and shame, many children make great efforts to hide it from the outside world. Some children and their mothers will have fled domestic violence, though may still live in fear of it and the mother may still be threatened and intimidated by a former partner. Some children suffer the embarrassment of knowing that neighbours and friends have overheard or witnessed incidents and are discussing it. Although frequently the abuse occurs behind closed doors, it can also occur in public.

'The effect of domestic violence on children is such that it must be considered as abuse. Either witnessing it, or being the subject of it is not only traumatic in itself but is likely to adversely impact on a child and it should be treated as physical or emotional abuse as appropriate.'

Department for Education and Skills 2006: 74

The impact on children's well-being and safety

- Children may be woken up by arguments and fighting; they may lie in bed listening.
- Children may get hurt when they try and intervene to protect their mother or siblings.
- Children may be left terrified as to what will happen next.
- After violent episodes, mothers may be physically and emotionally unavailable for their children and unable to tackle basic parenting tasks such as getting the children up and out and providing breakfast.