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Violence Against Women and Girls: The Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children and Young People, Their Health and Wellbeing - A UK Perspective

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Abstract

Background: Around one in five children are affected by domestic abuse in the UK. This is likely to be a significant underestimation as survivors and victims are often fearful and reluctant to disclose what is happening to them. The consequences for children can be long-term and affect every aspect of their safety and wellbeing.

Objective: The aim is to understand how exposure to domestic abuse can affect children's health, development and relationships in middle and late childhood.

Participants and settings: This paper is based on a review of a wide range of national and international research.

Methods: A developmental framework is used to explore how domestic abuse can affect the various aspect of children's growth including their social, emotional and cognitive development.

Conclusions: How children react will depend on their individual characteristics and circumstances. When children have been exposed to an abusive home environment for long periods, they will probably have suffered long-lasting harm to many aspects of their health and development. For others, the abuse may have been of short duration, only starting with the introduction of a new adult into the household. Nonetheless, the impact of witnessing a single very violent assault can result in post-traumatic stress disorder.

Introduction

'Violence against women and girls (VAWG) refers to acts of violence or abuse that disproportionately affect women and girls. 'It includes rape, sexual offences, stalking, domestic abuse and technology-facilitated abuse' [1]. In 2024, the UK government committed to halving violence against women and girls over the next 10 years [2].

Domestic abuse, a key feature of violence against women and girls, is fundamentally about one person's need to exert power and control over their partner. It can involve coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, and rarely exists in isolation.

'Domestic abuse related crimes represent 15.8% of all offences recorded by the police in the last year' [3]. However, this is likely to be a serious underrepresentation. Statistics suggest one in four women experience domestic abuse at the hands of their partner but at least half goes unreported due to the social stigma that surrounds it [4].

In the UK around one in five children are exposed to domestic abuse [5]. Research suggests that child protection systems often fail to respond appropriately to families in which domestic abuse presents a risk of harm to children [6]. The findings from 6 joint inspections showed how these children are frequently overlooked as victims in their own right. Despite the changes in legislation through the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, strategic leaders do not fully recognise the needs of children who are victims [7].

The probability of being a victim of domestic abuse is different for different population groups. A survey of 5000 children living

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in Scotland showed that mothers in the lowest income group are disproportionately more likely to be exposed to domestic abuse, to experience more types of abuse, and more often. Twenty per cent of mothers in the lowest income group reported such abuse compared with seven per cent in the highest [8].

Living with domestic abuse can have long-term consequences for children's health and wellbeing. They will react differently to their abusive parent's violent, frightening and unpredictable behaviour depending on their age, sex, personality, level of self-esteem, and the opportunities open to them. Work by the found that domestic abuse, particularly coercive control, was not always fully understood by professionals or how it can impact on children's ability to speak out [9].

Previous work on how domestic abuse may affect children has, in general, examined the overall harm they can experience. The aim of this paper is to explore, through adopting a developmental approach, how exposure can affect children's social, emotional and cognitive development. An awareness of the changes in children's behaviour will help practitioners to identify those exposed to domestic abuse and understand the risk posed by the perpetrators. It covers the key messages for professionals in contact with children, and highlights the importance of sharing information within and between agencies. Emphasis is placed on the value of keeping children at the heart of practice when working with adult victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The findings are based on a search of relevant literature and draws on a wide range of research.

Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children's Health

It is often assumed that very young children are unaware of, and consequently shielded from, the impact of domestic abuse. This belief is misplaced because infancy is the time of greatest post-natal brain development and day-to-day experiences determine which brain circuits are reinforced and retained. Trauma elevates stress hormones, such as cortisol, and high levels of cortisol during infancy increase the brain structure involved in vigilance and arousal. Subsequently, the slightest stress will result in, for example, hyperarousal, aggressive responses, hyperactivity, anxiety and impulsive behaviour [10].

Children who live with the constant fear and anxiety generated by domestic abuse, including coercive control, may experience a range of other health issues, including allergies and respiratory tract infections, headaches and stomach pains, nausea and diarrhoea [11]. The trauma of experiencing domestic abuse or witnessing violence directed at a sibling can have a long-term negative impact on a child's mental health [12]. Some children reported that they had never felt safe while living at home.

Constantly on edge. Never free, never safe. It was like, there was no safe [place] … being at home wasn't safe at all, it was just that's the place where you are and you're constantly alert. You don't sleep properly, you just sit there and wait for something to happen [13].

Growing up with domestic abuse can increase the risk of physical injury. For example, young children may be in their mother's arms when an assault takes place. Others may be injured if they intervene to try to protect their abused parent from violence, or may be directly targeted. Almost two-thirds (62%) of children exposed to domestic abuse have been directly harmed; physically, sexually or emotionally or have been neglected. In the majority (91%) of cases the perpetrator of the domestic abuse also abused the child [14].

He hit (my son) with a leather belt. He was a fussy eater … "You bastard, eat that dinner", and he would pick up the belt and just lash him with it [15].

Exposure to domestic abuse has also been shown to increase the risk of child sexual abuse. Approximately fifty-per-cent of sexually abused children are living with domestic abuse [16,17]. In the majority of cases the child's father or mother's male partner is the perpetrator.

Learning and Education

Children's education may be affected because parents fail to support regular attendance, and leave them to take care of themselves, including getting to school on time.

Jackie had to do a lot of her own care, her schooling was affected as she had to get herself up and ready for school which made her late a lot [18].

For some children, school provides a place of safety, friendships and caring adults. Free of the fear of violence and constant degradation, they may throw themselves into school life and become high achievers [19].

I think that's the main reason I wasn't as sad as I could have been, I was being at school, seeing friends, it would be at the back of my head but I forget about it for a bit. It's six-and-a-half hours a day when I'm not at home [20].

Sadly, for many others, the abuse of their mother can dominate a child's thoughts and affect their capacity to function and thrive in school. The inability to concentrate can lead to impaired literacy, mathematics and general knowledge [21].

School attendance and learning may also be affected when children fear for the safety of their mother. In an attempt to remain in the house and protect her, children may feign illness or become disruptive at school in order to be sent home.

Because I was scared in case, like, he battered her and she went away and then I went home and she wasnae there and it was just me left and he … So I was scared [22].

For others, the trauma of living with domestic abuse can lead to difficulties in controlling emotions. Boys in particular may ape their aggressive parent and view bullying and physical and sexual violence as acceptable behaviours, attitudes that may be reinforced by social media and influencers. Girls aged 10 to 15 are particularly vulnerable to such abuse and violence. Research suggests that a quarter of girls in mixed schools experience unwanted sexual touching by their male peers [23]. Ofsted found that 9 in 10 girls had reported sexist name-calling or unsolicited sexual images [24].

The cross-government strategy to tackle violence against women and girls focuses on healthy relationships and consent. It aims to tackle relationship abuse through a new helpline. The intention is to ensure the next generation of girls are better protected and boys are steered away from misogynistic influences [25].

Exposure to domestic abuse can also lead to boys fighting with peers, talking back to teachers and a generally negative attitude to school.

That's what you have to do to make the bitch pay attention – she doesn't listen to me [15].

Finally, learning can be affected when mothers and children flee a violent situation, necessitating unplanned moves and changes of school with the inevitable disruption to learning and coursework, and the loss of friends, teachers and community support.

Emotional and Behavioural Development

The biggest impact on the children we support is the psychological trauma domestic abuse brings and they battle to deal with it perhaps the rest of their lives [26].

Research by [14], based on a sample of 877 children aged 0-18 years who had experienced domestic abuse, found over half (52%) the children developed behaviour problems and were significantly more likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress than non-exposed children. Symptoms included:

- Hyperarousal – child is jumpy, nervous or easily startled
- Re-experiencing – child continues to see or relive memories of domestic abuse
- Avoidance – avoids situations and people associated with the abuse
- Withdrawal - feeling numb or frozen, cut off from normal life
- Sleep problems – trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, nightmares
- Repetitive talk or play – play centres on the domestic abuse experienced

Boys and girls are equally disturbed by their parents' dysfunctional relationship but tend to react in different ways. Boys are more likely to express their distress outwardly, by becoming anti-social, disobedient, attention seeking and aggressive towards peers or younger children. In contrast, girls are more likely to respond by internalising their suffering, becoming depressed, anxious and withdrawn [27].

Children may cope with their distress by seeking to escape, some through fantasy, listening to music, gaming, reading, or participating in virtual worlds online. Others may physically withdraw within the home or spend increasing amounts of time away from home.

If they, my parents, are fighting then I normally go with my brother and hide upstairs and we don't feel very safe in that environment … You can hear my mum crying, my dad shouting and screaming and sometimes you can hear whacks of my mum being hit [28].

Older children may escape or dissociate themselves from emotional pain, anxiety and anger through the use of alcohol or illicit drugs. Research shows that witnessing domestic abuse during childhood is associated with early alcohol use [29]. Others may try to cope through self-harming or by severely restricting their food intake.

When I was 13 I was really stressed, and having a lot of anxiety. I was self-harming myself, and I was trying to commit suicide and stuff … and then again, either last year or year before, I was causing myself to throw up so I was diagnosed with bulimia – and that was due to stress and not feeling confident in myself … Yeah I think that was the two major things I have ever done to myself to try and cope [20].

Many children will find solace in a particular treasured toy or with the family pet. Sadly, such attachments may lead to further distress when their violent father or father figure threatens or metes out cruelty to the animal.

That day that my dad said he would burn my dog on the grill, I took him to my room and locked him in the closet with food and water until the next day [30].

Identity

Domestic abuse may result in parents having little time or emotional space to fulfil a child's need for acceptance, validation and protection. When parents fail to provide positive reinforcement and celebrate their child's skills and express confidence in their potential, it can leave children with very low self-esteem, feelings of shame, and a belief that something is wrong with them. Low self-esteem and a sense of helplessness will be compounded if the perpetrator of the abuse also targets the child. Continual rejection and humiliation can result in these beliefs becoming entrenched.

Children frequently assume that their parents discord and abuse is their fault because something they did triggered the violence. They may hold misplaced feelings of responsibility for not having been able to stop it.

Sometimes, like I feel like it's my fault, like why did I never stop it. Like why did I never go down … I still remember like, I couldn't go downstairs. Like what if he did it to me or something. It was horrible [31].

Research suggests that children's reactions may be gender-specific. Boys are more likely to feel that they should physically intervene to protect their mother. 'I want to catch him alone … and I want to hit him hard … break all his teeth …' Girls are more likely to manifest their feelings through crying: 'I didn't like them fighting … it made me cry [32].

Some children will value the support of a sibling. However, sibling relationships are complex. Older siblings may feel isolated and responsible for protecting the abused parent and caring for younger ones. They will have to grow up quickly to assume such adult responsibilities and can miss out on everyday childhood experiences.

Because of everything that was happening I kinda had to grow up quite quickly, so most of the stuff people did at my age I didn't really do as much so like having the time to go out with friends and stuff like that wasn't really an option – because I was helping out with chores and I was helping my siblings – and because I didn't want to leave my siblings alone because I didn't know what would happen so I kind of stayed at home most of the time [20].

The biological relationship between child and abusing adult affects its impact. Research suggests the effects are more traumatising when the child's biological parent perpetrates the abuse, than if inflicted by a more recent partner. 'There may be something especially painful in the experience of witnessing one's own father abuse one's own mother' [33].

Family and Social Relationships

Perpetrators of domestic abuse often resent and restrict the time mothers and children spend together, leaving children feeling undervalued, sad, annoyed and angry.

Lots of times when Mum was giving me attention he'd tell her to go over to him so she'd have to leave me to play by myself [34].

How well children cope with the stress and trauma of domestic abuse will be affected by the child's level of attachment to their non-abusing parent or carer [35]. Sadly, this relationship may be undermined if the child is coerced into witnessing their mother's physical or sexual abuse. The experience is likely to debase this relationship, and have a negative impact on the child's perception of their father or father figure. Boys in particular, may fear that they will grow up to be like their violent father. But relationships are complex, and children may continue to both love and hate their abusive parent.

It's a tense environment as the police is coming and then even though my dad does all these things I'm really, I feel quite sorry for him, that he has to go through all this even though it is his fault but I just feel so guilty afterwards [20].

Friendships may also be affected. For some children spending time with their peers may provide an escape from the trauma of home life, as one child explained … when we're playing I forget all of this [the abuse] for a while, [32]. Some teenage girls found that peer friendships provided support and someone with whom they could discuss their thoughts and feelings.

I talk to one of my closest friends about it. But I'll be careful like who I tell things to, and then, yeah. She's been one of my closest friends ever since the beginning of secondary [20].

Research has shown that positive and supportive peer relationships can counter the negative impact of domestic abuse on adolescents' mental health [36]. A key message from adolescents who have experienced domestic abuse is that talking about what is happening at home can help.

I think as a teenager, yes it's hard to speak about your emotions. But I think that if you know that you need help yourself and if you know that you're struggling at home or at school or something, speak to someone that you know you can trust … the best way in getting help is to speak out about it [20].

For others, fear that exposing their family situation would result in further problems meant that they were very wary of forming close relationships. The secrecy and stigma that surrounds domestic abuse can affect their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Children's ability to form close relationships will also be affected when the coercive and controlling parent prevents children from leaving the house, whether to see friends or wider family. This will reduce their understanding of how to interact with peers or adults due to a less well-developed ability to interpret body language and other subtle cues.

Teenagers who blame themselves for the abuse between their parents may place themselves in danger by running away from home. In other families, teenagers may be scapegoated and blamed for the abuse, resulting in the child being 'thrown out'. Research has shown the 26 per cent of homeless 16 to 25-year-olds left home due to domestic abuse [37].

Children who feel rejected by their family and those who wander the streets are vulnerable to exploitation. Abusive adults will target such children through seemingly offering support and friendship in order to groom them for prostitution, drug dealing or other criminal activities.

Adolescents may fear that their experience of domestic abuse will impact on their own future relationships. This concern is supported by research which found a significant overlap of experiencing 'victimisation and witnessing abuse between adult carers/parents: 67 per cent of those 13 to 14-year-olds who had witnessed abuse at home had also experienced it in their own dating relationships, compared to 32 per cent who had not witnessed it' [38].

When mothers and children need to flee their abuser this can have a devastating impact on a child's support networks. Leaving home may result in mixed emotions; relief at escaping the abusive parent but sadness for the loss of friends, wider family, teachers, much loved family pets and familiar surroundings.

Social presentation and self-care skills

Domestic abuse is frequently associated with parental substance misuse and poor mental health, issues that can have a very detrimental impact on parenting [18,39]. The abused parent may suffer depression and become numb, uncommunicative and unresponsive. Children may feel abandoned and neglected and be left to feed and dress themselves and younger siblings.

We would get hungry and we wouldn't be clean [20].

Living with domestic abuse can result in the traditional roles of parent and child being reversed leaving children having to assume too much responsibility both for themselves and other family members. As a result they may curtail their interaction with peers and any involvement in social activities.

I've never actually had that time to live and be a kid, I haven't had that time to go running about, messing with my friends or going to do my things, play football [40].

Social presentation refers to how children present themselves to the world including their appearance, behaviour, and the way they believe others perceive them. When domestic abuse is linked with parental substance misuse this often results in a lack of funds for children's clothing and general health care. The report of one teenage boy clearly shows how this affected him:

They spend all the money on drink. There's no soap in the house and all my clothes are too small. I lost my girlfriend because she said I smell. Others call me names and make fun of me [41].

Older children are frequently under pressure to 'fit in' with their peer group, to wear the right clothes and shoes, to have the latest mobile or other electronic device. When families live in poverty, and domestic abuse has resulted in a lack of parental guidance, children may seek to avoid peer ridicule by stealing the items they perceive as essential.

Growing up in an abusive household can leave children with few social skills because they have never had the opportunity to learn how to interact in an acceptable manner with adults and peers. Violent language and behaviour may have become normalised and aggression seen as an acceptable way of solving problems. An inability to control anger may not only jeopardise friendships but also place school and work careers at risk through exclusion or encounters with the law.

Discussion

Implications for policy and practice

Children and teenagers will naturally come into contact with a wide range of professionals, including teachers, youth workers, doctors and, for some, social workers and the police. Although some may talk to long-standing trusted friends about their family and the trauma they are experiencing, few will reveal any information to professionals. Moreover, children educated at home are more vulnerable if exposed to domestic abuse because they do not have the same access to people working in services that can act to protect and support them.

Children will only reveal challenges and difficulties at home to adults whom they have learned to trust. To develop a trusting relationship and identify any possible safeguarding concerns takes time. This is more challenging when a child has special educational needs or disabilities because they may need expert help to enable their voice to be heard. Professional curiosity is key to fully exploring concerns and identifying patterns of abuse. Professionals should accurately record what children share about their experiences in their own words.

Unfortunately, workforce shortages in many of the services that have regular contact with children can result in professionals having insufficient time and resources to focus on individual children.

A study for the National Foundation for Educational Research (2025) shows that schools in England have an unfilled teacher vacancy rate six times higher than pre-pandemic times [42]. In the health service, since 2015, there has also been a steady decline in the number of qualified full-time general practitioners, although the numbers have started to increase over the past 12 months [43]. There is a similar shortage of trained youth workers, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention and prevention [44]. Finally, an online survey found that only 5% of child protection teams are fully staffed and 52% are struggling with social worker shortage of 30% or more [45].

Teachers and other professionals working in schools have regular and close contact with the majority of children. These practitioners are in a better position than others to identify concerns early, provide help for children, promote their welfare and prevent concerns escalating. They may notice changes in a child's behaviour, demeanour and general health. Differences in children's attendance, interaction with peers and teaching staff, in their physical appearance and emotional and mental health, may be indicative of living with domestic abuse and coercive control.

The statutory guidance for schools and colleges, Keeping Children Safe in Education, is clear that staff should be prepared to identify children who may benefit from early help and any concerns should be acted on immediately and reported to the designated safeguarding lead. The following options are then set out and include:

- managing any support for the child internally via the school or college's own pastoral support processes
- undertaking an early help assessment or
- making a referral to statutory services, for example as the child could be in need, is in need or is suffering, or likely to suffer harm [46].

Government guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) applies to all organisations in contact with children, including children's social care, sport, youth services as well as and general practitioners. Emphasis is placed on taking a child-centred approach to safety and promoting the welfare of children, and for strong multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working [47].

No individual professional will have a full picture of a child's needs and circumstances. Many people in different agencies often hold information about various aspects of a child's life. It is only when information is shared that it is possible to understand fully a child's lived experience. Early information sharing may be vital in keeping children safe.

If children and families are to receive the right help at the right time, everyone who comes into contact with them has a role to play in identifying concerns, sharing information and taking prompt action [46].

When a child discloses information that suggests possible abuse, the recipient should reassure the child that they are believed, ensure they understand action will be taken to keep them safe, and explain that information must be shared with other relevant professionals.

The importance of sharing information when there are concerns about a child applies to all professionals who have contact with children.

Practitioners should be proactive in sharing information as early as possible to help identify, assess, and respond to risks or

concerns about the safety and welfare of children [48].

A lack of information sharing, both within and between organisations, was a key theme identified in many safeguarding and rapid reviews, and area inspections [7,9]. Despite government guidance and inter-agency protocols, practitioners held different understandings of what can be shared and how information should be transmitted. Data protection law allows information to be shared in order to identify, protect and promote the welfare of children. Protocols for information sharing between agencies are important and so too is the development of robust systems for this to be carried out [49]. When concerns are not robustly pursued professionals should understand how to trigger their agency's escalation policy.

Conclusion

Although studies suggest that one in five children in the UK have been exposed to domestic abuse, because it is often a hidden crime, the number may be far greater. Until recently domestic abuse, including coercive control, has not been acknowledged. It is only with the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 that children have been considered victims. Despite this change in policy findings from our work, inspections carried out in four inspectorates, and case reviews published between 2022 and 2025, show that the potential harm to children is not always identified or understood [7,9].It is essential that children be recognised as victims in their own right.

Children may be reluctant to reveal their home situation for a number of reasons including fear of not be believed; of their father's (or other male carer's) violent reaction; and of having to leave home with subsequent loss of school, neighbourhood and friends. Others may have conflicting emotions about their violent father, both fearing and loving him.

Some children may appear relatively unscathed, particularly if they have relatives or friends they can turn to for support. The use of genograms can provide a more complete picture of the possible support structures within the family. Other children will recover once they feel safe. Nonetheless, all will inevitably be affected by the anxiety, fear and disruption that they have experienced.

How children react will depend on their individual characteristics and circumstances. When children have been exposed to an abusive home environment for long periods, they will probably have suffered enduring harm to many aspects of their health and development. For others, the abuse may have been of short duration, only starting with the introduction of a new adult into the household. Nonetheless, the impact of witnessing a single very violent assault can result in post-traumatic stress disorder.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that exposure to domestic abuse can have profound and long-term consequences for children, even when their circumstances change for the better. The long-term effects include mental health problems, a low sense of self-worth, alcohol and drug misuse, difficulties in forming healthy romantic attachments, and boys perpetrating unwanted sexual and physical abuse directed against girls.

The findings suggest only a small proportion of children exposed to domestic abuse are identified and get the help and support they need. These are very vulnerable children and their voices must be heard. All professionals working with children need to be alert to any changes in their behaviour or appearance and explore what may be the cause. In order to identify patterns of concerns or incidents of domestic abuse professionals should always record individual issues.

Any suggestion that a child may be living in an abusive household must be acted on and the information shared with other relevant professionals. No one agency has a full picture of a child's life and the harms they are experiencing. When there is a range of professionals working with a child and their family it can lead to the presumption that concerns about a child are someone else's responsibility. Any suggestion that a child is suffering abuse must be pursued and the information shared with other relevant professionals. The overwhelming message from this paper is that we listen and attend to the wishes and feelings of these very vulnerable children.

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