



Spotlight #5: Episode 4

Podcast Transcript

Title: Considering children's experiences of homelessness and domestic abuse

Key:

I = Interviewer

A = Respondent - Aly

Introduction:

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victim and survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of our Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, my colleague Deidre has met Aly Vernon, a specialist who supports children affected by domestic abuse. In her interview, Aly talks about the impact of homelessness and domestic abuse on children, and what children need to overcome the trauma of these experiences. We hope you find the interview as interesting as we have.

I: Hi, Aly. Thank you for joining me to speak about homelessness and domestic abuse.

A: Thank you for having me.

I: You're welcome. I think an aspect of domestic abuse and homelessness that is often overlooked is how it's experienced by children. Can you talk to me first of all about some of the work that you have done and do currently do with children affected by domestic abuse and how they might be experiencing homelessness as well?

A: So, until very recently I was working as a play lead in our children and family refuges, and that involved running play sessions for children who were in refuge, and also family sessions, so that was for mothers and younger children in refuge. Now my work focuses more on one-to-one work with children who have been affected by domestic abuse, meeting them for weekly sessions to focus on exploring the abuse and having a safe space to talk about what's happened. I also assist with our group work for children who are affected by domestic abuse, and that's a weekly programme for groups of children coming together to explore the issue as well.

Obviously my role in refuge came into contact with a lot of children who were made homeless because of fleeing domestic abuse, so essentially, all families who came into refuge were homeless. And actually when we think of a women's refuge, we think of it as a women's refuge, and we don't really think that actually the majority of refuge residents are children, in fact, because a mother might flee with several children. So children are actually the majority residents in refuges in the UK and that, I think, really

isn't thought about enough, because often refuges aren't set up for children enough, really, and there isn't enough support for them whilst they're in there.

We're not taking into account the massive upheaval that it is for children who are leaving, perhaps very suddenly leaving their home, leaving family members, pets - there's a really huge source of pain for children, is leaving behind family pets. Leaving behind all their toys, they might have moved schools, they might be leaving everything they know, all trusted adults that they've had, all their friends, family members, to go and live in a strange place with other families that they don't know. Really what a huge upheaval that is in a child's life, when they've already experienced a huge trauma of living with domestic abuse as well.

I: Yeah. Now in your current role, as an outreach worker with children, these children based within refuge, have they had other experiences of being displaced or made homeless because of domestic abuse?

A: Yeah. So, some children that I work with might be staying in the same home that they were in, but obviously a lot of them will have to have moved, because it's not safe for them to stay in that home. They might have had times of staying with family members, perhaps children who've stayed on sofas, stayed in spare rooms of a family member or friends for a while, who've had to move around doing that - a week here a week there. Who might have spent a few nights being in hotels or in different places and then, of course, who've moved areas. So, not just to a homeless, but they've been displaced by the domestic abuse which, again, has a huge effect on their development and on their wellbeing.

I: Yeah. In your work currently and within refuge, how have you seen the effects of domestic abuse and homelessness on the children? I'm guessing you can't compartmentalise either of them, 'cause it's a very big mixture of experiences. But how is that displayed in children, how does that play out?

A: Well, lots of really varying effects for children. There's a lot of impact there that's displayed in different ways. I think it's important to think about the experience of being in refuge for a family, for a child. So they might be usually sharing a room, a whole family sharing a room, so mother...in my time in refuge, there was a family of six siblings in one room with their mum. We have a lot of families of varying ages so, for example, a teenage boy then sharing with a younger sister, and then perhaps a baby or a toddler. So think about that, as a teenage boy, to be sharing a room with your mum and then younger siblings, has a really huge effect, perhaps on sleeping. We have a lot of children who have a lot of problems sleeping because of this sharing rooms with younger sibling or disabled siblings as well. Not being able to have your friends round, you're obviously not being able to socialise, not being able to go out, because you're now living a long bus ride away from where all your friends are. All that has a really huge effect on children's ability to socialise, on their developmental stages of being able to enjoy life in a safe home.

There are then obviously other huge effects that are felt physically, so not just being moved out, we have children who really feel the psychological pain through their bodies. So, perhaps, through experiencing things like incontinence, bed wetting, perhaps developing eating disorders, is another physical effect. Also such huge psychological effects for children and young people living in refuge or experiencing homelessness because of domestic abuse, which might be manifested through their behaviour. So, lots of anxiety, anger, perhaps, withdrawal, and things that are affecting school work, building friendships, forming relationships - the list is very long of effects from this.

I: One thing that we explored in the young people's Spotlight is how experiencing domestic abuse manifests itself in young people and children. One of the ways was sometimes aggression towards the parent who's experienced domestic abuse. Is that something that you've noticed within the refuge setting? Or had to deal with through your work?

A: Yeah, definitely. So the effects on the child-parent relationship with the non-abusive parent, they really vary as well. We do see quite a lot, particularly perhaps in teenage boys or older boys, who might start to re-enact some of those abusive behaviours, often towards their mother, who they might blame for all this upheaval in their lives, for them moving, for their situation of homelessness. They might think that she's responsible for the abuse which, of course, she's not, but a lot of confusion about what the abuse is, and why that happened, might have led to that. Or they might start to display abusive behaviour in their own relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends, or friendships as well - we see that a lot.

But there are other effects as well that children might have, effects on their relationship between the parent and the child. A woman's ability to...or a man's ability to parent when having been the victim of domestic abuse could be really particularly undermined by the abuser, made to feel that they're worthless, that they're not a good parent. Feelings of being put down a lot - all this makes it really hard to parent and, therefore, often breaks the bonds between the parent and child.

Some families also become very divided through the effects of domestic abuse, so some siblings might side with one parent, and some with the other. We have families who come into refuge who've left some siblings behind, which is obviously really hard, both for the mother and for the other siblings. There's a lot of confusion around that, a lot of grief and loss of having to leave behind one of your siblings. And we also see the effect of some children becoming over protective of their mother or sibling, so it might be the opposite of displaying abusive behaviours and then becoming very protective of the non-abusive parent. Then becoming very clinging to them, needing that feeling of safety as well - so that's another effect on the relationship, which can sometimes be hard for the non-abusive parent, who's trying to recover from their own trauma, and has a child who really needs extra support and protection.

I: I'm guessing it might be the first time that that parent has had to establish their own method of parenting, if they've experienced a lot of coercion and control, controlling the child, the relationship with the child?

A: Yeah, hugely. So for a lot it might be, as you say, the first time in their whole child's life that they've been left to bring up the child, and to have to establish what sort of methods of parenting they actually want to put into practice, whereas they've been controlled for the rest of their time as a parent. So they're trying to establish their own sense of identity as a person, and as a parent, all of this whilst perhaps in a foreign and a new environment when they've been made homeless in a new place. And really importantly, without the support networks that we all need to bring up a child. Often abuse leads to isolation of women and children, or of the victim and the children, because the perpetrator has really isolated them from friends and family, and this means that we don't always see the support needed from other family members and from friends.

I: From my understanding of domestic abuse support and children's support, often those things are very separate. So the support that's offered to a woman is very much based on her experience of domestic abuse, and the support offered to children is their experiences, and it must be hard to think about the family as a whole and how they experience domestic abuse. What do you do? And what have you done in your roles to support children in these environments, to help them cope?

A: So, in refuge my main role was coordinating the play service, which ran weekly play sessions in the refuges. We also ran family sessions in the refuges, which were really important for, as you said, that experience of the mother and child together, and this was a session for mums and younger children under-fives to come together and do a simple activity. This would give them a chance to reconnect, because often the bonds, as we said, between mother and child can be severed during abuse, for those reasons that we discussed, and it's important to have opportunities for the child and mum to come together and to re-bond, to reconnect, to share a positive experience together.

I: Is there a child or a family that stands out in your mind as one that you've supported, that, kind of, represents the things that you've been talking about to me?

A: When thinking about children who are affected by homelessness and domestic abuse, it's also really important to think of those children with additional needs as well as the trauma that they might have suffered through the abuse, they might have other needs as well. So, for example, a family that I worked with in which one of the children was autistic

For them being made homeless was just so difficult, particularly because of the boy's autism, and obviously any change is really difficult for him. But being completely displaced into a whole new area, into a whole new building with lots of other people that he didn't know, and who didn't understand all of his needs, and things, was really particularly hard. And when he first moved into refuge, he was very non-verbal, didn't really speak at all, would often have tantrums, would often express his anger and frustration. And it was very difficult for his sister, as I mentioned before, children having sleeping problems who are sharing a room together. His sister was having a lot of nightmares, she was having a lot of trouble getting to sleep, and then having nightmares when she did, and mum felt that this was partly because of her son's difficulties sleeping as well, and the noises that he'd make in the night, and things like that. So, for this family, it was really hard to be displaced and in temporary accommodation.

I: Yeah. And knowing the effects on the children in particular of experiencing that trauma, but also the effects of being uprooted, that must be massive. 'Cause I think societally there's still a massive emphasis on: why doesn't she leave? Why doesn't family leave that abusive situation? Instead of why doesn't he leave?

A: Yeah.

I: Why doesn't he stop the abuse? What's being done to make them safe in the home? And I think looking at how it massively impacts children, kind of, brings that home for me.

I think more could be done to help women and children to be able to stay in their own homes, rather than making them homeless. And this isn't my area of expertise at all, but more to be done so that perpetrators are the ones who have to move out and experience that loss, particularly rather than the children. I think one way of helping with that is, a lot of more specific domestic abuse training for professionals around this, so for housing officers, for social workers and perhaps for police as well. And then in the wider area as well, more training for schools and others working with children, so

that they can recognise some of the effects on the child, recognise and be able to deal with some of those effects as well. I think a lot of professionals working with children might feel quite scared when they hear their child has experienced domestic abuse and not know how to deal with that, or how to help them. So, I think more training in general of everyone working with children and young people, specifically around domestic abuse, would be a really useful thing

A: Yeah, because it is a big thing to take into consideration, you know, taking your children, uprooting your children into another place, another area and potentially another school, it does have a massive effect, and we do need to really think about that before always asking: why doesn't she leave? It is a huge effect.

I: And it is something that's stops women leaving, or victims leaving, men as well, is the idea of uprooting their whole family, of being made homeless, of having to shift their entire lives - it's like a big ask.

A: Yeah, yeah. It can take a long time for families to be able to resettle, for them to perhaps find new accommodation, particularly at a time of a housing crisis and in areas where housing's in such strong demand. We had families sit in refuge up to 18 months, and that's a huge sacrifice to go through, before being able to resettle and to start to build your life up again.

I: Are they then moved into temporary accommodation or permanent accommodation, or did it vary?

A: It varied, it varied a lot. A lot of women in refuge would go onto the council housing list, which can take a really long time to be housed. For some that was then a long term solution, for others they had to leave refuge and so would go into other temporary accommodation. We had several families who had been from one refuge to another, so really feeling those effects twice, three times, of being uprooted in that way. So, yeah, it varied with different families.

I: What do you think needs to change in that regard, so that women and children aren't moving from emergency accommodation to emergency accommodation, so that they have, I guess, a secure home

A: I think something that would really help was for all victims of domestic abuse and their children, those families, to be automatically placed in the highest banding of council housing, so that they found accommodation quicker. And then in the private rental sector for it to be made easier for families to find homes through stricter, I think, legislation on private rentals to enable secure homes as well for families. So many private rentals are only a one-year lease, and so a family can then be uprooted again, and that's a problem across the board, in terms of housing, that we need to have more secure rental for families, and for everyone really.

So we talked about what you think ideally a refuge should look like to consider children, and how they're constructed and developed. What else do you think needs to be done to support children who are affected by domestic abuse and homelessness?

A: So the two things that I think are the most important for children affected by domestic abuse are, first of all feeling safe and secure. So after traumatic experiences, to then be able to live in a safe and secure place, so tackling the issue of homelessness. And then for children to have a safe space to explore and understand what's happened. So I think it's really important that there's better funding for children's services that are specifically for domestic abuse victims who are children. So, really for professionals to

have a strong understanding of what that means, what they've been through, and for there to be funding for them to have safe spaces to explore those, or safe group programmes or one-to-one, for them to be able to understand what they've been through.

I: Yeah. So it sounds like not just thinking that once a child is in safe, new accommodation, away from the perpetrator that they're fine. To really reflect on what that trauma, how that trauma impacted on them and how they can address it?

A: Yeah. We get referrals from children who were...perhaps the abusive relationship ended many years ago, and they're still feeling the effects. So it really shows that if we don't have a space to process those feelings, at some point, and hopefully as soon as we're ready to, they can be still felt in a much longer term...you know, for many years to come. So it's important that those spaces are provided, because otherwise we're just adding to the mental health crisis of young people, and then of adults, if we don't address those as soon as the child or young person feels ready to.

I: So to be addressed by a specialist who has a good understanding of children's needs, but also around domestic abuse as well on how to address that?

A: Yeah, yeah.

I: It sounds like that's what you guys are doing now.

A: Yeah. So, that's what we provide through our one-to-one sessions with children, and also our group work, we aim to provide that space as specialist professionals, to give children that opportunity to explore what abuse is, and why it's wrong and then any feelings that emerge from that alongside it.

I: Great. It sounds like you're doing good work. Thank you for speaking with me.

A: Thank you for having me.

I: You're welcome.

Conclusion:

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about SafeLives Spotlight on domestic abuse and homelessness, go to our website [SafeLives.org.uk](https://www.SafeLives.org.uk) where we will be uploading content every week from different experts from the 7th August through the 15th Sept. And we want to hear from you-we need your views, experiences and practice tips, so join the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag #SafeAtHome and get involved on the SafeLives Community.