



## Saying safe at home during COVID-19

### Children and young people

## Podcast transcript

### Podcast length: 26.06

In this podcast Rachel Ozanne, Practice Advisor at SafeLives, talks to Georgia and Kathryn, SafeLives Pioneers both experienced domestic abuse in their family homes as a child.

They reflected on what they think it's like for children now, what they could do, and what those around them could do if they are worried. This includes agencies, including schools, and the importance of reaching in and not being a bystander.

Key:

**RO** – Rachel Ozanne

**K** – Kathryn

**G** – Georgia

*Start of audio at 00.07*

**RO**

So, welcome to Kathryn and to Georgia, who are two of our SafeLives Pioneers – thank you so much for joining me to record this podcast, where we're going to be talking about what the experience is going to be like at the moment for children living with domestic abuse in the family home, and think about what are some of the things that we could all do to kind of reach out and support young people. So, welcome.

So, Kathryn, there's a *lot* of worry about the impact of the current situation on families experiencing domestic abuse, in relation to kind of needing to stay at home, being isolated together; what do you think it would be like for children and young people living with domestic abuse, just now?

**K**

I think it really depends on their situation, and everyone will be – obviously – experiencing it differently. When I think about what it would have been like for me, it could have gone two ways; I would have really loved that my Mum was at home with me, and that she wasn't at work all the time – and that would have really helped me feel safer, because things tended to escalate while she was at work and...

before when she got back. I think, depending on what was happening at the time, we may have been able to use the lockdown situation to keep my Dad out of the house, and maybe we would have thought about using the Police to enforce that. But I think it's probably likely that my Dad would have tried to insist that he'd be locked down with us. At various times, he was homeless – or living in caravans – and I think he might have said that he had nowhere else safe to go, and we would have felt like there was no option but to let him come and be with us.

I did actually speak to my Mum about this the other day, about how she thought it would have panned out, and one of the things that she mentioned was that because he was a drug addict, that she knows that he would have had to have left the house at various times, and so that might have given us some space or a bit of... erm... a safe space, where maybe we could have sought some help at that point, or got him out of the house.

I suppose I feel really worried for children who are isolated in the home with an abuser during lockdown. We didn't have a garden, and I would often run away for hours at a time, and go and hide in the library or maybe even just go into the countryside and hide out – so, I really don't know how I would have coped with nowhere to go to. From that point of view, I think it's important that we let children know they can leave the house if it's not safe, and that it is ok to call 999.

**RO**

Thank you. Georgia, what do you think?

**G**

I think for me, in my situation, I mean I... I used to live on a farm, with my Mum, my Step-dad and my Step-brother, and ... you know... obviously, farmers are classed as key workers, so my Step-dad would have still been working, and potentially my Mum, as she was the manager at a dental practice, so they may have had to do emergency some days. But it would mean that, the majority of the time, she would be at home. And, funnily enough, the lockdown actually wouldn't be that dissimilar to school holidays for me, as I used to... in the school holidays I used to spend *every single day* at home. I wouldn't leave the farm, and ... you know... our nearest neighbour was pretty much a mile away, and we hardly ever spoke to them, so I would literally spend the whole of the week – or two weeks, or however long the holiday was – locked away in the farm. But the only difference would be that my Mum would be there. And it would probably have caused a very tense environment, especially ... you know... as my Step-dad was very, very... moody, and he would ... you know... constantly use the excuse 'Ah, well, I'm working – you're not – stop being lazy, dah-dah-dah...' just all the typical things. But yeah, it would definitely be a difficult situation to be in.

**RO**

So, Georgia, what would you say to those children and young people about what they could do, either in terms of coping with the situation, but also maybe reaching out for support?

**G**

Don't be afraid to call 999, or anyone that you need to access for support. Police are still coming out – they are still working as 'business as usual' and ... you know... there's always going to be people there to support you. Children do often feel 'bound and gagged' and threatened – they're often threatened that if they say anything, that there will be severe consequences. Telling someone is *not* going to result in those consequences, as the situation *will* be sorted out.

**RO**

Thank you. Kathryn?

**K**

Yeah. I really agree with what Georgia said there, that it's just really crucial that they... that they can speak to somebody. I think that, if they can talk to their Mum, or if they've got siblings, about what's going on, as a start. I know, in my situation, it wasn't really ever something that we talked about as a family, it was just like... we all experienced it, and kind of coped with it on a day-to-day basis, but we never really sat down and said 'Ok, this is what you need to do if this happens, or if things kick off' and I think, actually, that would have been good for us, to talk with ... you know... maybe me and my brother, or me and my Mum. So, if they can start to open that conversation, and think about putting together like a safety plan with their family members, and really crucial – like Georgia said – that part of that should be that it's ok to ring 999, and not waiting till a crisis to do that.

When I was a kid, we knew that we *could* phone 999, but it was only ever as a last resort, when things had got really bad. And I think, like Georgia said, really, that children are told that 999 is for emergencies only – but we need to let them know that it's ok for them to ring at an earlier stage.

I think another really crucial source of support for children might be, like, their friends. My two best friends knew what was going on, but I *begged* them not to tell their parents, because I was really worried that if their parents found out, they wouldn't have let their kids play with me anymore, or come round to my house. And I think friends are a crucial element of support for children and young people, and so it would be really good to get a message out to them, if we could, like what to do if you're worried about a friend, and letting them know that it's ok to tell someone. I think a lot of children probably living in lockdown at the moment will still have access to their friends, online, or via their mobile phone, so this could be a good way for them to seek help safely.

**RO**

Yeah, so it sort of sounds like you're both saying, like, like that children might have already their own routes of support that they had before this, and so kind of important to keep in contact with people, where you can, who might know what's going on, but actually there's times where it's alright to reach out. And I think that's a really good point about Police being the kind of... an emergency, so it's sort of... really hard to know what that means, doesn't it, so... I guess it's sort of something for services to do as well, about kind of putting that message out so... kind of children and young people know that.

**K**

Yeah, definitely.

**RO**

So, Kathryn, you started to talk about this – about what kind of friends and family, and neighbours, could do – so there'll be different people that are around a family. What do you think – is there sort of something particularly you think they could do right now?

**K**

I think the really crucial thing is 'don't be a bystander'. If you're worried about someone you know... if you were worried about them anyway, before this lockdown situation, then please check in on them, and ... you know... try and do that safely, obviously, but you might be able to offer to help with the shopping, or even asking *them* for help yourself, with some shopping, so that they've got an excuse to go out of the house, and then that might give them a bit of a safe space for you to be able to talk to them, or for them to be able to talk to someone.

If you hear or see something that's worrying you, please don't hesitate to call the Police – they will know what to do. And don't worry about whether you're doing the right thing by letting somebody know what you're worried about – that could save someone's life, so it's really important that you take that action.

**RO**

Yeah. Thank you.

**G**

Yeah, I mean, all I can do is reiterate that, really ... you know... it is up to friends, family and neighbours to be keeping tabs on *everyone* around them. It's the responsibility of the whole ... you know... estate, neighbourhood, area – that is your responsibility, in this lockdown, to be keeping tabs on people in... because it is a very, very dangerous time for those who *are* living in abusive situations.

**RO**

Do you think there's particular ways friends could reach in to each other, like is there kind of ... you know... if they're worried about saying the wrong thing, do you think there's ways that they can do that more gently, to just... maybe it's... kind of checking in quite 'generally', so it's not being specific, if they're worried about what that reaction might be, but just sort of opening that up to give people an opportunity to talk, maybe?

**G**

Yeah, I mean ... you know... friends are – well, we're in contact with each other, especially people that ... you know... people my age – being 16 – we check in with each other constantly on Snapchat and Instagram, etc, but ... you know... just drop in with your friends, just... send them a message, 'How are you doing today?' 'How did you sleep last night?' ... you know... 'What are your plans for the day?' Just

the general questions, and just... if you know that person well enough, you will know what they... how they are, by the way they're typing and the way they're texting, and their mood. And if you sense that *any* little thing is wrong, do not be afraid to probe. You know, you need to 'push' and see if it's anything relating to family. It might just be that they've had a rough night's sleep, or they were up watching YouTube or something until the early hours of the morning [chuckles] but don't be afraid to just ask them, and nudge them, and try and get some answers out.

**RO**

Yeah. Thank you. So, Georgia, we've sort of talked about friends and family, and neighbours, what about professionals and services? I suppose the one that we mainly think about, isn't it, is children and young people aren't in school at person at the moment, and a lot of services aren't seeing people face-to-face either, so there's not so much visibility, I guess, on children and young people. Do you think there's anything professionals could do in this situation?

**G**

Erm... I mean... I know, at my school, that the vulnerable children within the school, you know, they... they *are* getting phone calls back from school ... you know... every... once a week, twice a week, just to check that they're doing ok and their family's doing ok. And ... you know... on... so, for example, on our school website there's a Support Section ... you know... with a... with a 'worry box', and if you've got any concerns of any kind you can type ... you know... put it into the 'worry box' and that gets sent to one of the pastoral team at school, who will then look at it, and you can still go into school to book... you know... book an appointment and to in to speak to one of the pastoral staff, if you really, really need to. And I think that's what schools need to be offering; they need to be looking out for all of their students. And ... you know... they need to be looking out for the ones that *aren't* on the radar, the ones that haven't got the problems – well, the ones that they *believe* haven't got the problems – because most of the time it's the kids who are really, really studious and do loads of work and get their heads down, *they're* often the ones that have got the most problems going on.

**RO**

Absolutely. So, kind of keeping an eye on everybody, and not just the kids, maybe, that have been more in the sort of spotlight in that way, I suppose. What about you, Kathryn?

**K**

Yeah. Again, I really agree with what Georgia's said there. So, I think schools, at the moment, are really still a key service ... you know... pretty much all schools have set up online education, so are kind of in contact quite regularly with children through those portals that they're using. And I think that schools and teachers will be aware of the children they were worried about previously, so it would be really good if they can think about ways they can check in on those children safely and creatively. So, maybe they want to set up a codeword with them, or arrange a welfare check under the cover of food parcels. I saw on the news, recently, that one headteacher was going round with food parcels to all the children in his school, and that was just also giving him a way to ... you know... from a safe distance, but to at least check in on those children that aren't getting that kind of daily contact with a teacher.

I think ... you know... this really chimes with me, because one of the ways that I coped as a child was throwing myself into schoolwork, and school felt like a really safe place for me, and I would have really struggled with not being at school, and not seeing my friends. I would have felt really unsafe and trapped at home. But I don't think that anybody... any of the teachers, would have suspected that there was something going on at home, for me – I was a straight A student, with really good attendance – but I think, in this situation, for me, during the lockdown, my schoolwork might have started to suffer, and that might have been a clue that something was going on at home, and maybe the teachers could have picked up on that. So, a bit like what Georgia said, really, was ... you know... don't just focus on the children who... you know are struggling, but think about any change of behaviour for your other students who are normally quite studious, because ... you know... I could work really well at school, but I wouldn't have been... I wouldn't have had that same environment at home to be able to complete all the work. And so, yeah, that would have been out of character for me, and something that they could have possibly picked up on.

So, yeah, I suppose... I was also thinking about other ways they might be able to make contact. So, whether they can do like Skype sessions with children, under the guise of home schooling; whether they can kind of have that face-to-face contact through Skype. Yeah, and then... I guess... I suppose, as a kid, I was really worried about my Dad going to prison, or that I might be taken into care, so I didn't

tell any professionals what was happening to me until... until my work started to suffer at college, when I was 17, and it was only the thought of like failing my schoolwork that eventually led me to disclose to a teacher that I was close to. And I think that it's really important that professionals reach in to children, and ask the question, because I know that I wouldn't have voluntarily spoken to somebody.

**RO**

That's really important, isn't it? Because I suppose there's... and I guess, at the moment, with coronavirus having an impact on everyone, like a teacher could be 'Oh, well, that kid's normally... does all their work, does their homework, really attends everything – that's dropped off – it's probably because of the coronavirus' and it's important not to make those assumptions, isn't it? And do that ideally, I suppose, with *all* children, but certainly ones where you notice a change in behaviour, and to ask – but ask them in a way that's open, and not kind of closing that off – and that's a... real skill, sometimes, isn't it? It takes somebody to... be just genuinely interested and curious around what's going on for that young person, to just check in and not make assumptions.

**K**

Yeah. And I think that brings up for me, as well, just the point about language and ... you know... domestic abuse language ... you know... a lot of children won't relate to the terms 'domestic abuse'. I certainly didn't when I was a child. I didn't really think that that was something that my Mum was experiencing; I thought that ... you know... that my Dad was a drug addict, and everything else kind of fell out of... of that, and the violence my Mum was experiencing just seemed another part of that, really, not... I wouldn't have said that we were victims of domestic abuse at that time. It wasn't until I started working in the sector that that occurred to me that she was a high-risk victim of domestic abuse. So, I think it's really important around the language, and being explicit, as well, and kind of... you know... making sure that the question's obvious, and that they know that's what you're asking, and that ... you know... that they know it relates to them. I don't know, Georgia, how you feel about that?

**G**

Yeah. I mean, obviously, as we are finding out through different surveys and stuff, children are not relating to the term 'domestic abuse'... they are relating to ... you know... the terms 'toxic relationships' and ... you know... etc. And we *must* make sure that we are being clear in what we mean, and that they are going to understand what is... exactly what is being asked of them.

**K**

And I think, as well, don't just ask once. And like, I think, almost... you might ask someone, and they might not want to disclose at that time; but if you never ask again ... you know... like, sometimes I think maybe a professional might be *relieved* when they get a non-disclosure, because it's like 'Oh, phew! I don't have to take any action!' [laughs wryly] But it's really important that you don't take a non-disclosure as... like ... you know... as fact, really, I guess. I think it will take children a few times of being asked, and asked kind of in different ways, so if you have those worries, then please do act on them, and keep asking the questions.

**G**

Another important thing, just to mention, is ... you know... if any child of any age or ... you know... background, comes and tells you that something is happening in their home, *do not* ignore them – do not brush them off – because, the majority of the time, if a child opens up... has the courage to open up to you, and tell you that something is going on, and you brush them off and tell them that they're lying – or anything like that – they will ... you know... they will probably never tell anyone again.

**RO**

Yeah. That's really important, isn't it? Thank you, Georgia. Because the courage it takes to reach out... I mean, as you guys have been describing, that there's that fear of what will happen, isn't there? Whether there's consequences for the person who's being abusive, whether there's consequences to you, if you're taken into care... there's sort of so much fear, isn't there, about what the service response would be? So, the courage for someone to say, if things aren't ok ... you know... and then not to get a response that they need, would just... be absolutely heart-breaking, wouldn't it? It could be devastating for them.

The other thing that I was wondering about, as well – it would be good to get your thoughts on – is about kind of how young people are viewed... so, say if a young person didn't feel safe at home, was sort of trying to get some time out, and then ... you know... a neighbour, or police, or somebody kind of saw them, and was questioning them about 'Well, why are you out – what are you doing – is this an

essential kind of trip out? Have you been out too long?' I wonder whether the way that young people can be viewed sometimes is that that's being kind of 'bad behaviour', and that they're doing that because they don't want to follow the rules, or something like that, where actually they might be... might not feel safe to go home, and that that's part of their sort of safety plan, I guess, is to have some time out. Do you think *that* could be a kind of risk, at the moment?

**G**

Definitely. I ... you know... a lot of anti-social behaviour, sort of reports and views, and... x, y & z... you know, they are surrounding people who come from abusive situations. And ... you know... a lot of the time, kids *are* misunderstood, so ... you know... for example, the kid in class who's the joker and ... you know... or... not always 'acts up', but is always up for having a laugh and a bit of a giggle, and does mess around a little bit, you know – that might be because they are *massively* over-compensating for ... you know... the way they feel, and trying to throw people off, and thinking ... you know... 'Oh, well, this is so horrible – I feel awful – but I'm going to just completely over-compensate'. But then they always get in trouble at school, instead of someone actually trying to read through the behaviour, and read through the lines, and say 'Well actually, no – this kid's going through some awful stuff, and this is just a mask'.

**RO**

Yeah.

**K**

Yeah. I think we've heard some reports already, in some areas, that the... that parents are being fined when their children are out ... you know... out for longer than they're supposed to, or not for one of the required reasons, and I just would ask, really, that professionals *and* neighbours and bystanders are ... you know... have a bit of curiosity about that, and don't just assume the worst of those children. I think – again, going back to my own situation as a kid – I probably would have abided by the rules, but my brother ... you know... responded quite differently, and he would have been out, definitely, with his friends and... probably would have been one of those who was getting into trouble. And just the thought of my Mum being fined for my brother not being able to stay indoors, that would have just been an extra pressure on our family, that would have just caused more harm to us – we would have really struggled with the finances and... anyway – so, just really, like, for professionals, I guess, when you're seeing children out, and... don't assume the worst, and maybe ask the question. Check, 'Is everything ok at home?' and do a welfare check. I think...

**RO**

Yeah. That could be that one time, couldn't it, that somebody ... you know... with the right question, could be that... where they feel able to say what's happening? And I think one of the other things – and we talked about this before, when we were talking about this podcast – was about the kind of challenges... like, you both have described, for what you would normally be able to do. So, in some ways, things being quite similar, being used to living in a controlling situation, but potentially having that ... you know... be worse, at the moment, but also the coping mechanisms that you would normally have, like being able to get out of the house and that sort of stuff, that that would be more tricky. And I suppose ... you know... I suppose it's kind of... you want children to be empowered to be able to still use those coping mechanisms, as much as they can – not that obviously we'd be promoting that people break all the rules, and that sort of stuff – but that they've got to try and find ways of things that really help them cope with the situation, and with their like wellbeing, that they sort of still try and find ways to do that.

**G**

I mean, it's going to be... the reality is that this lockdown is going to be rough for anyone who's in an abusive situation, be that child, adult, whoever. And ... you know... unfortunately, as much as there are lots of things that *can* be done, such as calling the Police etc, it's *still* going to be a rough ride, whatever happens. And ... you know... just... sit tight, hold on, and grit your teeth, and you *will* get through it, and then ... you know... if you *cannot* do something, or cannot get out of the situation during lockdown, then you will have to sit tight and hold on, and you'll get out of it soon enough.

**K**

Yeah. I think I agree – I think ... you know... having some kind of safety plan in place would be useful, and it might make you feel a bit more in control of the situation, as well, if that is possible to do. You might not be able to write that down, but whether you can have a think, as a child, like, what you'll do when things get tough ... you know... where you can go in the house, whether there is some way you can go outside to get some air, and take some time out. But yeah, just remembering that... that you *can*

phone the Police and that they *will* respond, and that there are other support services out there as well that you can speak to online.

**RO**

Yeah. And we'll put some links to kind of go along with the podcast, for different sorts of support services, whether that's like domestic abuse or mental health, or sort of children specific.

So, finally, then, what is the key message that you want people to hear, that you want people to take away from this podcast? Kathryn, I'll start with you.

**K**

I think... so, the key message is that there are children that are experiencing this right now, and we need to find a way to reach them – and we've all got a role to play in that. So, whether you're a professional, whether you're a neighbour, a schoolfriend of that child or a family member, I just really want people to understand that... experiencing abuse in the family home as a child will have a huge impact on that person as they grow up. My brother and I were both severely impacted by what we went through, so... so, if you're worried about someone, *please*, just take some action now. And if you're a child listening to this, please let someone know what's happening, if you can – just like we said before, the Police and the support services will respond, and they will help you and your family get safe.

**RO**

Thank you. So, Georgia, what key message do *you* want people to hear?

**G**

I think the key message for me is 'Do not be a bystander'. You know... if you are... if you know that something is happening, and you refuse to take any sort of action whatsoever, and something serious happens, then you do have some sort of responsibility in that. It is everyone's responsibility, now, to take ... you know... take responsibility for the people around you. We have *nothing* else to do – we are in lockdown – we're spending more time than we ever are ... you know... talking to neighbours across the fence, or across the road ... you know... make sure you are keeping an eye on those neighbours. You know, too many domestic homicide reviews are saying that neighbours *knew* about the abuse, but *didn't* do anything, and ... you know... we shouldn't be... we shouldn't be having that sort of issue at all. People should be taking responsibility, and pointing out and standing up when they see an injustice.

**K**

I agree.

**RO**

Thank you both, very, very much.

**G**

Thank you, Rachel.

***End of audio at 25.54***