

Domestic abuse and Supporting Families

A practice briefing for multi-agency workers

Who is this briefing for?

- Professionals working with families through the Supporting Families programme

What does this briefing cover?

- The definition of domestic abuse
- The link between Supporting Families and domestic abuse
- Working with adult and child victims and perpetrators within a family context
- Using a risk-led model for working with domestic abuse

What is domestic abuse?

(2) Behaviour of a person (“A”) towards another person (“B”) is “domestic abuse” if: A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and the behaviour is abusive.

(3) Behaviour is “abusive” if it consists of any of the following: physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse (see subsection (4)); psychological, emotional or other abuse, and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

(4) “Economic abuse” means any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B’s ability to: acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or obtain goods or services.

(5) For the purposes of this Act A’s behaviour may be behaviour “towards” B despite the fact that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B’s child)

Domestic Abuse Act (2021)

Some notes on the definition of domestic abuse

- ‘Personally connect’ includes current or ex-intimate partners and family members.
- Domestic abuse can take different forms, including:
 - Coercive and controlling behaviour
 - Psychological abuse
 - Emotional abuse
 - Physical abuse
 - Sexual abuse
 - Economic abuse (incorporating financial abuse)
- “Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour. Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.” (Home Office, 2013)
- There is no single criminal offence of domestic abuse but Coercive and Controlling Behaviour is a criminal offence introduced in the Serious Crime Act (2015).¹

¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

- Women are disproportionately affected by domestic abuse, with one in four women experiencing domestic abuse in their lifetime, and one in seven men. The gendered nature of abuse is particularly evident in relation to victims at the highest risk of serious harm or murder – around 95% of Marac (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference) referrals are women. Domestic abuse and sexual violence can exist in relationships between people of any gender or sexuality.
- The new definition in the Domestic Abuse Act enshrines in law that children are direct victims of abuse: they experience domestic abuse and don't merely 'witness' it.
- The definition includes non-intimate family members. Extended family members can and do perpetrate abuse.

Supporting Families and domestic abuse

In 2012, Louise Casey CB, the then Director General of the Government's Troubled Families programme, produced the report *Listening to Troubled Families*. In close to three quarters of the families she interviewed, Casey found that the mother had experienced domestic abuse. In some cases, daughters who grew up in abusive households then went on to experience abuse within their own intimate relationship. In the majority of cases, violence within the family was multi-generational.

Domestic abuse is a significant and serious issue which affects all members of a family. For this reason, it is important to consider the impact of domestic abuse from the perspective of each family member. Relevant interventions and support should be offered to each family member, wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so. The aim of any intervention should be to reduce the risk to the adult and child victims. It should also address the perpetrator's behaviour in order to prevent future abuse, both within the family in question and any future families.

Complex needs

Families experiencing domestic abuse can experience complex needs, for example: poor mental health, or drug or alcohol misuse. These can heighten levels of risk, and require a coordinated, multi-agency approach which seeks to join up support for survivors.

While each need will require specialist and specific intervention, it is likely that these issues will also be inter-related. It is important that practitioners do not work with each issue in isolation but rather consider how they might work together with other specialist agencies. For example, a victim of domestic abuse may be using a substance as a coping strategy to manage the impact of the abuse, and so will require a joint intervention. This is true for both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Effective identification and assessment of complex needs is essential to ensure families receive the right support. Speak to your line manager about possible training or development opportunities. This could include shadowing other specialists or undertaking independent reading. Take time to build your knowledge of local resources and the referral criteria of other services in the local area.

Prevalence of complex needs

According to our Insights datasets, of the victims of domestic abuse accessing Independent domestic violence advisor (Idva) services in England and Wales in 2019-20:

- 10% had needs around alcohol misuse
- 8% had needs around drug misuse
- 44% had needs around mental health, of which 19% were experiencing self-harm and 6% were experiencing suicidal thoughts and/or behaviour
- 26% had needs around finances, benefits, and debt
- 14% had a disability

Source: SafeLives, 2021

Working with domestic abuse within a family context

Abuse in the home

There are all sorts of examples of abusive situations in the home, but they vary in many ways, including: the form(s) of abuse being perpetrated, the impact on the children, which interventions will work best for the victim, and which intervention will work best for the perpetrator.

A victim of domestic abuse may exhibit 'disguised compliance' when communicating with professionals. This means they may say what they think practitioners need to hear, in order to have 'an easier life', rather than disclosing what is actually happening. Their aim may be to promote harmony in the home

and to try to protect the family dynamic from an escalation of abuse and physical violence by the perpetrator.

Victims of domestic abuse sometimes respond to a perpetrator's behaviour in a retaliatory way. However, violent behaviour from victims of abuse has very different motivations than abuse from those who perpetrate it, including: a form of safety planning – by provoking violence from the primary aggressor, the victim can 'speed up' the cycle of abuse to get to the stage after violence where they feel they are safest; survival – fighting back and trying to stay alive; or maintaining dignity and an element of control – "I won't be treated like this." It is important to note that, in cases such as these, retaliation may provoke greater violence from the primary aggressor and increased risk of serious, or even fatal, violence.

You may work with families where the common response to a disagreement, or to the daily stresses of their lives, often escalates to violence. It may be that in these families the dynamics of power and control are less clear, and it is difficult to identify the primary aggressor. Be aware that, in spite of this, these cases can still represent a high risk to adult and child victims of the violence, and can still result in murder (Johnson, 2003).

5 key points for practice

1. Child protection: always consider your child protection procedures as you work with domestic abuse.
2. The safety of the victim of domestic abuse: always ask yourself if your planned course of action could put somebody at further risk.
3. The challenges of working with the perpetrator: it is easy to be manipulated by perpetrators of abuse, be careful not to collude in the abuse.
4. Use of resources: there will be experts in domestic abuse in your area. Locate them and work in partnership with them when you identify domestic abuse
5. The safety of the professional: keep yourself safe and consider the risks posed to you as you work in homes where domestic abuse is ongoing.

Identifying risk

There are known risk factors for domestic abuse homicides, developed through research of previous homicide cases and cases where victims of domestic abuse have been seriously injured. The SafeLives Dash (domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence) Risk Checklist offers a universal and easy-to-use tool for frontline professionals to identify the level of risk faced by an individual who is either currently experiencing or has recently experienced domestic abuse.²

The Dash Risk Checklist is accompanied by full practice guidance and is available in 14 languages. Those working with families can either work through the tool with the client or refer them on to a specialist domestic abuse practitioner who can do it for them. Training on risk assessment from SafeLives is also available.

Safety

A risk assessment must be followed up by a plan, developed with the client, which addresses the risks they are experiencing. This plan is best developed between the client and a specialist domestic abuse worker who can offer expert advice to the client on their choices and options.

This plan should also address:

- The wider context in which the client is living. A plan for someone who has separated from an abusive partner will look very different to a

The risk of murder

Two women are killed by a current or former partner every week, in England and Wales.

Between April 2016 and March 2019, 40.9% of all murders of women aged 16 or over in England and Wales were committed by the victim's partner or ex-partner. In comparison, 2.9% of men over the age of 16 who were murdered in that time frame were killed by a partner or ex-partner.

² <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Dash%20risk%20checklist%20quick%20start%20guidance%20FINAL.doc>

- plan for someone who wants to stay in a relationship with their partner;
- Any risk they face from any other people in their family;
- Any interrelated needs which require a joined up, multi-agency approach.

It is important that you work together with the expert domestic abuse practitioner and the client to create the most comprehensive plan possible.

Practice points

- ✓ Multi-agency working is the key to increasing the safety of families experiencing domestic abuse. See Howarth et al (2009) for more information on the benefits of this approach.
- ✓ It is essential that you accurately assess any violence occurring within a family in order to provide the correct response. Use a tool such as the SafeLives Dash risk checklist to help you do this.
- ✓ Always take a risk-led approach to the work. This will include identifying any key risk factors and, if necessary, sharing this information with other agencies. It is essential that this is done in a proportionate way. Consider what information to share and with whom and bear the safety of the whole family in mind when making the decision to share information.

Working with abusive people within the family context

Those who perpetrate domestic abuse vary widely in terms of social demographics, but some common characteristics have been identified through research (Blacklock, 2001; Bancroft and Silverman, 2002; Rode et al., 2015):

- Controlling behaviour;
- Possessive;
- Manipulative;
- Superior;
- Minimises and denies abuse;
- Blames partner;
- Sense of entitlement;
- Uses children as part of abuse (see: Katz, 2015).

Living arrangements

At the time of intake to an Idva service, one fifth (20%) of victims of domestic abuse were living with or intermittently living with the perpetrator of the abuse. Of those who were not living with the perpetrator, 2% were not because they were living in refuge, and 9% were not because the perpetrator was in jail.

Source: SafeLives, 2021

Guidelines for working with perpetrators of domestic abuse

If, within your role, you find that you are working with someone who is perpetrating domestic abuse against their partner, ex-partner, or family member, it is important to remember that working with perpetrators about their abusive behaviour is a specialist area of work and requires specific training and skills. There are organisations and partners that can provide this. Make links with services in your local area. For more information, see *Useful links* at the end of this briefing.

However, it is also important that all professionals who work in any capacity with people who perpetrate domestic abuse follow the following basic guidelines.

If an abuser discloses their behaviour:

- **Acknowledge that any form of domestic abuse is wrong.** Ensure that this message is clear and consistent. Remember that domestic abuse is a crime.
- **Acknowledge that the disclosure is an important first step** towards stopping the abusive behaviour.
- **Affirm any accountability shown by them.** Their behaviour is a choice, and they can choose to stop.
- **Be respectful and empathic, but do not collude.** Perpetrators will often try to avoid responsibility for what they are doing. They may blame their partner, stress, or substance or alcohol use, amongst other things. Be clear that the use of violence and abuse is always wrong.
- **Be aware that perpetrators may deny what is happening** or, if they do accept it, they may minimise the level of the abuse. Do not rely on their account for risk assessment purposes.
- **Seek out specialist support for the victim of abuse** if their partner is accessing a perpetrator programme.

However, be careful that you:

- **Don't make assumptions.** Anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse and anyone can be a perpetrator; be careful not to stereotype. Domestic abuse occurs across all areas of society, regardless of culture, religion, or class.
- **Don't discuss the abuse with the couple.** Try to speak with each party alone and, if a victim of abuse discloses to your service, don't share this with the perpetrator unless you have addressed the risks in doing so.
- **Don't assume that perpetrator programmes will 'fix' things.** They may not work in all cases.
- **Don't assume that alcohol and drugs are the cause of domestic abuse.** They may escalate situations but will not be the underlying cause.
- **Don't assume that accessing help for alcohol or drug difficulties will stop someone's violence or abuse.** They may need to get help for their substance misuse alongside help for their abusive behaviour.
- **Never assume this is a problem with anger management.** Remember domestic abuse is usually about power and control, rather than any loss of control.
- **Never automatically refer to mediation or couple's counselling.** These can be dangerous and may not be appropriate if there is inequality in the balance of power between partners.

Practice points

- ✓ Take time to learn about your nearest perpetrator programme or projects that work with abusers.
- ✓ Utilise the Respect Phone Line. This is available to those who recognise that need help as well as for professionals.
- ✓ Ensure that your service can implement appropriate safety precautions if you identify that a member of the family you are working with is a victim of domestic abuse.
- ✓ Maintain a compassionate and challenging culture but avoid being collusive.
- ✓ Try to motivate someone who has acknowledged their behaviour to take specific, positive steps to change their relationships.
- ✓ Perpetrators of domestic abuse are often more motivated by their desire to be good parents. Talking about the impact the abuse is having on their children can help to encourage change.
- ✓ Work with families experiencing domestic abuse is most effective when conducted within a multi-agency context: there may be information that you are not aware of and that the person you are talking to may not disclose to you.
- ✓ The safety of the victim should always be the priority. Any actions undertaken should not put the other party at increased risk; work with the perpetrator should never be done in isolation and it is essential that professionals liaise with the victim or someone working with the victim. Respect give excellent guidance on this on their website (see link at end of briefing)
- ✓ It is important to name abuse where it is identified, however, where information is received through a disclosure by a victim, this information should be treated carefully and the risk of sharing this disclosure must be considered with the victim or the person working with them.

Identifying the primary perpetrator

It may be clear that there is a problem with violence and abuse in the family you are working with. However, you may come across an individual who states that they are a victim of domestic abuse but who also uses violence according to information from partner agencies ('violent resistance,' see: Johnson, 2008).

It is crucial to establish if this is a situation where there is coercive control and, if so, who the primary perpetrator of the abuse is. This will not only benefit your own work, but also your role in the multi-agency response to troubled families and domestic abuse as you are able to provide a more accurate picture of the dynamic of abuse within the family to the other agencies which work with them.

What is a "primary perpetrator"?

This the term used to describe the person whose belief system is one of superiority and entitlement, and whose violent and abusive behaviour relates to power and control. While any violence or abuse experienced within the home is serious, that which occurs in the context of coercive control is known to escalate and become more serious over time.

Assessment

Often called 'screening', assessment helps professionals to understand who within a family is exhibiting the beliefs, behaviours and values that are most connected with the perpetration of domestic abuse.

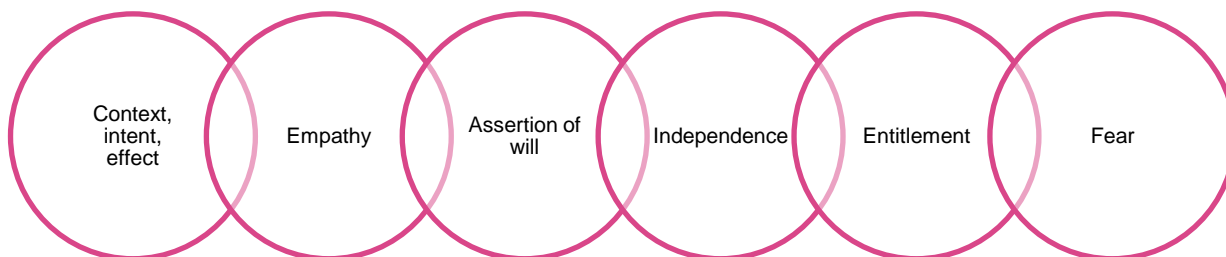
The ability to screen effectively is acquired through training and experience. Seek advice from an Idva or an organisation which specialise in working with perpetrators, such as Respect and the Drive programme.

It is crucial that a nuanced understanding of domestic abuse is applied to any assessment undertaken in order to avoid:

- Colluding with a perpetrator of domestic abuse;
- Equipping a perpetrator who presents as a victim with information that may be used against their partner;
- Failing to accurately assess risk to a partner and any children;
- Providing services to someone who does not need them.

Assessment should not be an interrogation, but rather an attempt to understand the dynamics of the relationship. Listen carefully to what you are told, use follow up questions and probe for any inconsistencies. The questions you ask will not be dissimilar from those you would normally use when enquiring about someone's relationship. It is the answers that should be analysed.

The factors to consider in screening are illustrated below. These areas should be explored in conjunction with the characteristics of perpetrators shown later in this briefing. For example, does the person you are talking to about their relationship seem frightened of their partner or do they seem to have a high sense of their entitlement to having their needs met, even if this means that sometimes their partner is frightened of them? These factors can be used as the basis of an assessment tool. For more information, contact Respect.



Practice points

- ✓ Domestic abuse is a systematic attempt by the perpetrator to gain and exercise power and control. Taking time to gain a clear understanding of this is essential.
- ✓ Assessing for domestic abuse is not a failsafe “tool”. It relies on an understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and an ability to listen critically to what you are being told.
- ✓ Someone who is a perpetrator is potentially skilled at manipulating any exchange. Be sure to link any interviews with an information sharing protocol, for example records of past incidents.
- ✓ This assessment should always be done in a multi-agency context to ensure you have access to all the information you need to make an accurate judgement.

Working with children experiencing domestic abuse within a family context

The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) recognises children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right. Domestic abuse is one of the most common adverse childhood experiences. Analysis by the Children's Commissioner found that 831,000 children in England are living in households that report domestic abuse (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Domestic abuse is the most common factor amongst children assessed as 'in need' by local authorities in England, featuring in over 50% of relevant assessments (Department for Education, 2019). As many as one in five children and young people experience domestic abuse during their childhood.

The impact of living with domestic abuse on children's biological and social development is well documented (see Katz, 2015; Hester et al, 2007; Humphreys & Stanley, 2006; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Cleaver et al, 2007). As well as being very frightening, households experiencing domestic abuse are often high-criticism and low-warmth environments for children to grow up in.

Complex needs and children

The frequent co-occurrence of domestic abuse with other complex needs can result in a wider experience of family adversity for any children. Often within troubled families, the problems of the adults started or were experienced in their own childhood. The experience may increase the vulnerability of the child to both “acting out” abusive behaviour and becoming victimised themselves. It can also increase their risk of suicide and may raise the likelihood of the child becoming involved in anti-social behaviour.

Parenting

This combination of domestic abuse with other complex needs can also detrimentally affect the parent/parents’ ability to care for their child and/or the examples they set through their own behaviour. There are a number of ways in which domestic abuse and even hostile-but-non-violent conflict may negatively affect the quality of parenting:

- **Loss of confidence and damage to the parent/child relationship.** Perpetrators can undermine the non-abusive parent’s confidence in their own ability to parent (Radford and Hester, 2006). Attacks on the victim’s parenting and their relationship with their child/ren “are central to [the perpetrator’s] exercise of control and domination,” (Lapierre, 2010). Perpetrators will often attempt to damage children’s respect for the non-abusive parent, prevent the non-abusive parent from providing consistent routines for the children, and attempt to turn the children against the non-abusive parent.
- **Child involvement in the abusive behaviour.** Perpetrators can involve children directly in coercive and controlling activities, for example, getting them to monitor the non-abusive parent’s behaviour and movements and report back. They can also be involved in isolation, blackmailing, or used by perpetrators to minimise, legitimise and/or justify violence against the non-abusive parent (Johnson, 2009; Stark, 2007).
- **Attempts to protect the children from the effects of abuse.** Adult victims will often attempt to protect the children from the worst of the abuse. This may be through acting to stop physical violence perpetrated against the children by the abusive parent. It can also be through a continual process of attempting to create a violence-free, more stable, or more ‘normal’ environment for the children, by trying to placate the perpetrator and mitigate the escalation phase of the often cyclical pattern of abuse, for a period of time.
- **Blurring of boundaries.** Boundaries between the non-abusive parent and their children may become blurred, where one parent criticises the other to the child, or leans on a child for emotional or practical support. This may be overwhelming for a child, leading to anxiety and depression. Alternatively, it may evoke feelings of resentment towards a non-abusive parent who expects the child to play a role in supporting them. This, too, may lead to child exhibiting aggressive behaviour. In addition, the child may feel an overwhelming need to act as a protector of the non-abusive parent, which can heighten their anxiety.
- **Setting an example of aggression.** Children growing up in an abusive household can find that aggression and controlling behaviours are normalised and deemed an acceptable means of communication and problem-solving. They may then replicate this behaviour in their own relationships.

Impacts on children

According to our Insights dataset on children and young people accessing specialist services between April 2019 and March 2020:

1. 90% were home while the abuse took place and 81% saw it happening. 4% were injured as a result of the abuse of a parent. Children were exposed to domestic abuse for 6 years and 2 months on average.
2. 44% were direct victims of the abuse, of which 89% experienced emotional abuse and 37% physical abuse. Children were directly abused for 4 years and 10 months on average.
3. 10% were supported with their own harmful behaviour. Of these, 72% were demonstrating harmful behaviour towards their mother.
4. Only 60% were known to social care.

Source: SafeLives, 2021

Practice points

- ✓ Take opportunities to see the children and talk to them, even if the primary purpose of your role is to support older family members. Keep the issue of safeguarding in your mind at all times. The voice of the child is key to understanding the family dynamic and what is happening behind closed doors.
- ✓ Children are directly affected by the abuse. As of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), children who experience domestic abuse in the household are victims in their own right, even when too young to be conscious of the harmful behaviours. Research indicates that perpetrators of domestic abuse are up to 7 times more likely to physically abuse their children than those who are not violent to their partner. Around 10% of perpetrators of domestic abuse also sexually abuse their children (Bancroft, 2002).
- ✓ The overlapping of abuse and other complex issues can be very detrimental to a child's development and pose specific risks to them. Ensure you are up to date with local safeguarding children's procedures.
- ✓ Children and young people tell us that they want the professionals they come into contact with to understand domestic abuse, rather than having to attend specialist services. Ensure that you are knowledgeable about how domestic abuse affects children and young people in order to support them effectively.

Useful links

The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is a freephone, 24-hour helpline which can support survivors to help find community-based services or accommodation services such as refuge. 0808 2000 247

Respect provides support to people who are concerned about their abusive behaviour towards a partner. They offer advice and resources to professionals, including details of domestic violence perpetrator programmes and associated support services. www.respect.uk.net 0845 122 8609

The Hideout provides help and support to children and young people who are living with domestic abuse, or those who want to help a friend. www.thehideout.org.uk

SafeLives is the UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.

We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We want what you would want for your best friend. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking 'why doesn't he stop?' rather than 'why doesn't she leave?' This applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator, and whatever the nature of their relationship.

safelives.org.uk 0117 317 8750

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