

INFORMATION BRIEFING – NO. 4

Children and young people's exposure to domestic abuse

Introduction

Domestic abuse impacts the lives of children in a number of ways. This briefing describes some of the most widely reported ways that children and young people are exposed to domestic abuse. The extent to which domestic abuse affects the well-being of children and young people is discussed in Information Briefing 3 – The impact of domestic abuse on children and young people.

How many children and young people?

A United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children (2006) estimated that between 240,000 and 963,000 children in the UK were exposed to domestic abuse. We don't yet know how many children and young people in Scotland experience domestic abuse.

Getting a reliable estimate about the numbers of children and young people in Scotland who experience domestic abuse is difficult for a several reasons. First, most of our population estimates are based either on police recorded domestic abuse incidents, crime victim surveys of adults, or the uptake of specialist services like Women's Aid or Child Line. These sources rely on adult reports of domestic abuse and don't usually count the number of children or young people involved. Second, many of the studies used to report the prevalence of domestic abuse focus on incidents of physical and sexual violence. Other types, such as emotional abuse, are rarely counted. Third, as with a lot of women who experience domestic abuse, many children and young people don't know who to talk to or where to get help. This means abuse may go unreported and our estimates are likely to be much lower than the actual numbers of children and young people affected.

We do know that 21% of women who took part in a recent Scottish Crime Victim Survey (2008-09) had experienced domestic abuse in the 12 months prior to the survey. The researchers estimated that 70,000 women throughout Scotland will have experienced physical or psychological abuse by a partner or ex-partner during that time period. The British Crime Survey (1999) estimated that half of the women who experienced violence from a partner were living with children aged 16 or younger. We can accept, therefore, that a substantial number of children and young people were living with women who experienced domestic abuse, and we know from previous research that most of those children and young people will have been exposed to the abuse inflicted on their mothers by a partner or ex-partner (Abrahams, 1995).

How children are exposed to domestic abuse

Domestic abuse can affect children in several ways. Some of the most widely reported ways include: during pregnancy, by witnessing the abuse of their mother, being directly abused themselves, and being used as part of the abuse.

During pregnancy

For many women, domestic abuse begins or escalates during pregnancy. Abuse during pregnancy has been described as 'double intentioned violence' (Kelly, 1994) because the physical attacks are often directed at both the woman and the unborn child. The unborn foetus is exposed through direct assaults on the woman's abdomen, violent sexual assaults, and any stress the woman experiences in response to the abuse.

Key findings:

- Physical attacks during pregnancy are often directed at a woman's abdomen and breasts (BMA, 2007).
- Domestic abuse during pregnancy is associated with higher rates of miscarriage and low birth weights (Campbell, 2002 and Taft et al, 2004).

Witnessing domestic abuse

Children whose mother's experience domestic abuse are rarely protected from the knowledge that domestic abuse is occurring. Children may see the abuse happening, they may overhear incidents and they may witness the aftermath of assaults.

Key findings:

- An NSPCC prevalence study of 2,869 young adults in England revealed that 26% of the participants had witnessed violence between their parents at least once, and for 5% the violence was frequent and on-going (Cawson, 2002).
- In-depth interviews with mothers who'd experienced domestic abuse revealed that 86% of children were either in the same or adjoining room during an incident of domestic abuse, 73% saw their mothers being violently assaulted, and 10% had witnessed sexual violence (Abrahams, 1994).
- During a research study about family violence, nearly half of the children said they witnessed their fathers choking their mothers (McCloskey et al, 1995).

Child abuse

Some children and young people are emotionally, physically, or sexually abused by their mother's abusive partner or ex-partner. Previous research has indicated that domestic abuse is the most common context for child abuse and is often considered a significant risk indicator. Within this context children and young people may also experience abuse as a result of intervening to protect their mother or another sibling.

Key findings:

- A meta-analysis of 31 American studies found that in 32-53 per cent of families where women were assaulted by their partners, the perpetrators also directly abused the children (Edlson, 1999).
- In a review of child abuse cases presented at a child protection unit of an Australian hospital, domestic abuse was found to be prevalent in 55 per cent of cases of child physical abuse and 40 per cent of child sexual abuse (Goddard and Hiller, 1993).

Being used as part of the abuse

Abusers may force children and young people to witness or participate in the abuse of their mother (Mullender, 2002). These actions are intended to humiliate and undermine their mother's role as a parent. It also weakens her position as someone they can depend on for safety and protection.

Forced witnessing and participation in the abuse of children's mothers can continue even after parental separation. For many women, domestic abuse escalates when they leave or shortly thereafter. Child contact and associated legal proceedings can be used as a way for the abusive ex-partner to be involved in a woman's life and to continue exerting control over her. Abusive ex-partners may use child contact visits to inflict further abuse.

Key findings:

- Women describe being sexually assaulted and humiliated in front of their children as part of the abuse they experience (Abraham, 1994 and McGee, 2000).
- Perpetrators have used child contact as a way to 'track' women and children following separation (Humphreys and Thiara, 2003).
- Research has identified child contact as a site for post-separation violence (Hester and Radford, 1996, Aris et al, 2002).

References

- Abrahams, C (1994) *Hidden Victims: Children and Domestic Violence*, London: NCH Action for Children
- Aris R, Harrison C, Humphreys C (2002), *Safety and Child Contact: An Analysis of the Role of Child Contact Centres in the Context of Family Violence and Child Welfare Concerns*, London: Lord Chancellors Department.
- BMA (2007) *Domestic Abuse - A Report from the BMA Board of Science*, BMA: London
- Campbell, J (2002) 'Health Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence', *Lancet*, Vol. 359, pp1331-1336
- Cawson, P (2002) *Child Maltreatment in the Family: The Experience of a National Sample of Young People*, London: NSPCC
- Edleson, J (1999) 'Children Witnessing of Adult Domestic Violence', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp839-70
- Goddard, C and Hiller, P (1993) 'Child Sexual Abuse: Assault in a Violent Context,' *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp20-33
- Hester, M. and Radford, L. (1996) *Domestic Violence and Child Contact Arrangements in England and Denmark*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- McCloskey, L, Figueredo, A and Koss, P (1995) 'The Effects of Systemic Family Violence on Children's Mental Health', *Child Development*, Vol. 66, pp1239-61
- McGee, C (2000) *Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Mirrlees-Black, C (1999) *Domestic Violence: findings from a new British Crime Survey self-completion questionnaire*, London: HMSO
- Mullender, A, Kelly, L, Hague, G, Malos, E and Iman, U (2002) *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*, London: Routledge
- Scottish Government (2009) *2008-09 Scottish Crime and Justice Study: Partner Abuse*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Taft, A, Watson, L, and Lee, C (2004) 'Violence Against Young Australian Women and Association with Reproductive Events: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of a National Population Sample', *Aust N Z J Public Health*, Vol. 28, pp324-9
- Scottish Women's Aid charity number SC001099. Recognized as a charitable organization by the Inland Revenue in Scotland.