

## Mothering and domestic abuse

In addition to domestic abuse impacting on women and their children individually, it has become increasingly recognised that perpetrators of domestic abuse frequently use strategies to undermine mother-child relationships as part of their abuse (Morris 2009; Humphreys et al 2006; Heward-Belle 2017) in an attempt to reduce supportiveness between mothers and children and therefore maintain domination over the household. Attacking women's identities as mothers is a control tactic used by perpetrators, who exploit societal expectations of what makes a good mother; for example, in one study men inflicted deliberate attacks on their partners' identity as a competent mother, threatening to report women to child protection authorities (Heward-Belle, 2017).

### How mothering can be affected by domestic abuse

Research has documented multiple direct and indirect strategies which undermines mothering and the mother-child relationship. These strategies can include:

- Women report that assaults on mothering often begin prior to conception and childbirth. For example, women's choices to become mothers may be violated through reproductive coercion, which may include contraceptive sabotage, pregnancy coercion, and intimidation or pressure with regard to reproductive decision-making (Burton & Carlyle, 2015).
- A mother's capacity for caretaking may be compromised by fear, depression or the perpetrator's control of her resources, such as money (Stark, 2012).
- Maternal authority may be undermined; for instance, belittling and insulting a woman in front of her children undermines not only her respect for herself, but also the authority needed to parent confidently. Perpetrators may also further undermine maternal authority by constructing role reversals where mothers are treated like children and children like adults (Heward-Belle, 2017). Perpetrators can also coerce or manipulate children and young people into being involved in the abuse of their mothers, for instance through taking part in belittling and insulting her.
- Perpetrators may control the time a mother and child spend together; for instance one study found that women and their children were prevented from enjoying time together on their own terms, depriving both mother and child of a valuable source of support and comfort (Katz, 2016).
- Perpetrators may directly interfere with a woman's parenting, for instance by coercing her to parent in a style she isn't comfortable with (Heward-Belle, 2017).
- Separation from an abusive partner does not necessarily mean the end of abuse and attacks on the mother-child relationship; perpetrators can continue to inflict abuse through child contact arrangements which can greatly impact on children and their relationship with their mothers (Humphreys and Thiara, 2015). Perpetrators may also report partners or ex-partners as 'unfit mothers' to child protection services (Heward-Belle, 2017).

Despite these sustained attacks on mothering and the mother-child relationship, research suggests that the majority of mothers experiencing domestic abuse parent as effectively as non-abused women, in spite of the obstacles they face (Radford and Hester, 2006).

## **'Failing to protect'**

In spite of mothers' strategies to parent effectively in the face of domestic abuse, authorities such as the police, child protection and social work sometimes identify abused mothers as culpable for 'failing to protect their children' from the abuse, at fault for choosing an abusive partner and for 'choosing' to remain in abusive relationships (Heward-Belle, 2017). This attitude fails to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse (including that leaving an abusive relationship can be a particularly dangerous time, and therefore a key factor in why some women may choose to stay), wrongly places blame on the woman and does not hold the perpetrator accountable for his actions.

This issue is compounded by contradictory practice approaches to domestic abuse, child protection and child contact, where domestic abuse is treated as an entirely separate issue to a perpetrator's parenting ability by services and authorities, such as civil courts dealing in family actions. It is not uncommon, for instance, for a woman to have a protective order against a perpetrator in place and yet still be ordered by the court to facilitate contact arrangements (Buchanan et al. 2001). This is often because of incorrect assumptions that the abuse will stop on separation, and that contact with both parents is in the child's best interests despite a history of domestic abuse. An assumption persists that 'poor partners' can make 'good fathers', despite a strong body of evidence to the contrary (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012; Harne, 2011; Radford and Hester, 2006). This assumption continues to place women and their children in unsafe situations.

## **Supporting recovery of the mother-child relationship**

Much research suggests that strong and supportive mother-child relationships are an important protective factor in helping mothers and children to survive and recover from domestic abuse (Katz, 2015). In order for interventions and support to be effective, it is therefore essential for services and authorities to: take into account the harmful impacts of domestic abuse on mothering and the mother-child relationship; recognise the links between a perpetrator's abuse and their parenting and hold perpetrators to account accordingly; and for support services to focus on strengthening the mother-child relationship (Katz, 2015). Approaches such as the [Safe and Together](#) model provide a valuable roadmap for institutions to ensure best practice, through the principles of:

- Keeping children with the non-offending parent (usually the mother) wherever possible
- Partnering with the non-offending parent
- Intervening with the perpetrator to reduce risk of harm to the child

This approach helps combat contradictory practices between domestic abuse, child protection and child contact and centres the safety of the non-abusing parent and child.

## References

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