

## Children and young people's experiences and a human rights approach

In the last thirty years, it has been increasingly recognised that exposure to domestic abuse has a significant impact on children and young people. There is now a general understanding that children and young people do not have to directly witness abuse to be negatively affected by it; as members of a household in which domestic abuse takes place, they experience its effects in profound and multiple ways. Research consistently shows that children and young people living with domestic abuse have higher rates of depression, trauma symptoms, and behavioural/cognitive problems than other children (Humphreys, 2006).

### How children and young people experience domestic abuse

Children and young people can experience domestic abuse in many ways. Some of the most common include:

- **Affected by abuse inflicted on mother:** Children whose mothers experience domestic abuse are rarely protected from the knowledge that it is happening. Children may see the abuse happening, overhear incidents, or observe the effects of abuse. Evidence suggests that witnessing domestic abuse may be as harmful to children as directly suffering physical abuse (Margolin, 1998). Children can also be exposed to, and negatively affected by, non-physical forms of domestic abuse (see SWA's [briefing](#) on children's and young people's experiences of coercive control). Children and young people's wellbeing will also be undermined if a woman's capacity to take care of her children is compromised by the effects of the abuse, for instance depression or the perpetrator's control of her resources (Stark, 2012).
- **Being used as part of the abuse:** Abusers may force or manipulate children and young people to take part in the abuse of their mother (Mullender, 2002). This is meant to humiliate and undermine their mother's role as a parent, and to weaken the relationship between mother and child, depriving children and young people of a much-needed source of support, comfort and protection. Forced participation in the abuse of children's mothers can continue even after parental separation. For many women, domestic abuse increases when they leave their abuser. Child contact and accompanying 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. Learn more about children and young people's experiences of contact proceedings [here](#).
- **At increased risk of child abuse:** Research indicates that domestic abuse is the most common context for child abuse; one study found a co-occurrence of domestic abuse and child abuse in 40% of cases (Walby and Allen, 2004). Children and young people may also experience abuse as a result of intervening to protect their mother or a sibling. The increased risk of being directly abused can even begin in the womb; for many women, domestic abuse begins or gets worse 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.

### **Children and young people: silent victims?**

While children and young people experience the effects of domestic abuse both directly and indirectly, they should not be seen as passive, silent victims; in reality, children and young people actively resist the abuse and take steps to keep themselves, their siblings and mother safe. Children and young people have been found to use a wide range of coping strategies, including:

- Keeping themselves and siblings away from the danger
- Physically intervening to protect their mothers during violent incidents
- Getting outside help
- Offering their mothers emotional support (Mullender et al., 2000)

### **Taking a children's rights approach**

Like everyone, children and young people are entitled to human rights. Knowing what we now do about how children and young people are exposed to and affected by domestic abuse, it has become increasingly clear that domestic abuse is a violation of children and young people's rights. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) is an international document setting out the rights of everyone aged under 18, and includes:

- The right to life, survival and development
- The right to protection from violence, abuse or neglect
- The right to have a child's best interests as a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect them.

These rights, along with others set out in the UNCRC, cannot be fully met if children are experiencing domestic abuse. Working to make sure that children and young people's rights under the UNCRC are fully met is known as taking a child rights approach.

Taking a child rights approach is important for making sure that individuals and organisations who are responsible for respecting, protecting and promoting children and young people's rights (for instance the Scottish Government, the police, and local authorities) are meeting their obligations. It is also important for empowering children and young people to effectively participate in matters affecting their lives. This involves promoting the right of children and young people with experience of domestic abuse to have their views heard and taken seriously in matters that affect them. SWA believes that children and young people are experts of their own lives; therefore the most effective way of providing the right support and protection for children and young people is to build on their own understandings and coping strategies. Children and young people with experience of domestic abuse do not want to be silenced; they want to be listened to, taken seriously, to be told about what is going on and to be involved in decisions about their lives (Mullender et al., 2000).

Read more about SWA's participation work with children and young people affected by domestic abuse by clicking [here](#).

## References

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