Supporting children in a domestic violence situation

Summary of issues and findings from the Domestic Violence Outreach Service (DVOS)

Madeleine Bell with Julie Healy
Domestic violence is a criminal offence and a violation of the victim’s human rights. Domestic violence can take many different forms of violent and abusive behaviour and the term generally refers to ‘physical, sexual, emotional, psychological or financial abuse, used by one person to control or dominate another person with whom they have or have had a relationship’ (1).

Domestic violence recognises no boundaries – women and families from all walks of life, regardless of age, class, ethnic origin or background can experience domestic violence. Myths that only women from a ‘certain’ class or ‘certain’ communities experience domestic violence are misleading and dangerous as they help hide the true extent of the problem.

Unfortunately, domestic violence in Northern Ireland is a common occurrence, with as many as four out of every ten women being affected (2). Indeed, it is estimated that in the UK the police receive one call every minute from someone seeking assistance with domestic violence (3). In many of these situations children will also be present; they are affected by domestic violence within the home even if the violence is not directed at them. Recent statistics show that a minimum of 11,000 children are known to be living in domestic violence situations in Northern Ireland. The true figure is undoubtedly many times greater than this given the high levels of unreported cases (4).

Introduction
The Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Domestic Violence Outreach Scheme (DVOS) opened in November 1997. It has developed a range of services to meet women’s and children’s needs; has established itself at local and regional levels; and has been instrumental in moving forward aspects of policy and practice development in domestic violence work. The scheme provides safety counselling and planning services to abused women and their children.

This briefing highlights some issues and interventions that will be of assistance to others who would like to develop their own policies and services in this field. It is targeted towards policy makers, service providers and practitioners.

Children and domestic violence
Domestic violence is an abusive context for children and they may experience emotional or psychological damage and suffer physical harm as a result. Children feel deep hurt and confusion over the violence and may feel that they are to blame for what is happening. Young children may show signs of distress through bedwetting or disturbed sleep while older children can become withdrawn or exhibit problematic behaviour.

From research findings (5, 6) we know that:
- the perpetrator of domestic violence may also be directly abusing the child
- being exposed to domestic violence often has a detrimental effect and may have an abusive impact on a child
- the perpetrator may abuse the child as part of their violence against the woman
- the perpetrator can continue to emotionally and physically abuse the child during contact visits
- if the woman experiences post-separation violence, the perpetrator may continue to emotionally and/or physically abuse the child.

It is essential that domestic violence interventions and services focus on the needs and situation of any children involved. Relevant information about the incidents must be recorded and monitored, particularly the frequency and duration of the violence. Violence recorded as one ‘incident’ for example,
may last anywhere between a few minutes to as long as two hours. The implications of the duration of the incident on a child’s safety and well-being are significant. This information must be sought, recorded and considered as part of the child protection procedure.

Impact of domestic violence on relationships

Domestic violence distorts family relationships between mother and child, and also between father and child. Conflicting loyalties within families can also cause divisions between siblings and among extended family members, and children may often feel torn between their parents.

Mother and child relationship

‘I know that my relationship with my children was not good enough at times, because I didn’t feel close to them emotionally. When the violence was happening, I had little left emotionally to give to my children. I couldn’t talk to them about what was happening between their father and me, yet they saw me upset, bruised and unhappy.’

Mother in abusive relationship

The mother in a family suffering domestic violence is often emotionally distanced from her children as she attempts to both deal with the abuse and keep it hidden from the child. The mother’s parenting ability and emotional availability are affected by the physical and emotional abuse while communication is strained as family members try to ‘hold’ the family secret.

Father and child relationship

Children often have mixed feelings about their dad (or abusing man) and identify two sides to him: a caring/nice side and a hurting/violent side. The children have to work out how to respond to their father’s moods and behaviour. They may use avoidance behaviour to limit the time spent with him or engage in pleasing behaviour in an attempt to keep him in a good mood.

Child protection and safety counselling

‘Supporting the safety of non-abusing mothers is a positive response to child protection and domestic violence.’

Department of Health (1999)

Child protection

DVOS aims to support the non-abusing mother by providing safety counselling as a response to child protection.

Safety Counselling

Safety counselling is a short-term intervention with individual women and their children. It gives them safety advice and support in their current situation.

In undertaking safety counselling, safety issues and education are the principle focus of the work. A key task for the worker is to educate the woman about the nature of abusive behaviour, while acknowledging that her fears about her partner are real. This can help the woman identify her partner/ex-partner’s dangerous behaviour and may help her to think more constructively about her and her children’s safety.

‘The safety counselling service was very good. I was given information on the police, Women’s Aid and who to ring in an emergency. It made me aware of the need to be ready at an early stage, to have a bag packed, a spare key cut, and have a safe place to go if I needed it. I now have a plan to get my children and myself to a place of safety until I have time to get my protection orders. It is scary but it is reality for me.’

Abused woman with two children under three years

The safety counselling service focuses on building a partnership with the woman to enhance both her safety and that of her children. The service adheres to the Barnardo’s guidelines, policies and organisational methods required to operate a safety-oriented approach. This includes recording polices that encourage open access but incorporate special conditions for domestic violence cases.

Safety planning with a child/young person

DVOS also provides a children’s safety counselling service aimed at children aged 6 to 12 years. The number and duration of sessions held depend on the child’s age and all take place jointly with the child’s mother. This work primarily takes place, either at the point of crisis or after the alleged perpetrator has left the family home.

‘It is safer for me to try and get help for mum than to try and stop dad because he is a lot bigger and stronger than me and I could get hurt. I can go outside and get help from the neighbours. My sisters know to stay in their bedroom.’

Daughter (12) of abused woman
Safety planning with children and young people has several purposes:

- to enable children to keep safe when violence is happening at home by providing them with a simple, concrete plan to get to safety
- to educate them about domestic violence and show that it is their dad (or whoever is the abuser) and not them who is responsible for the violence and abuse in the home
- to stress the importance of keeping out of mum and dad’s fights, especially when dad is being violent towards mum
- to establish boundaries and help them understand that their dad needn’t be told about their safety plan if he should return to the family home.

Safety planning undertaken jointly with children and their mothers encourages communication about the violence and provides the child with an honest explanation as to why their family circumstances have changed.

There are many techniques that can be used to encourage a child to engage in the work. If the child cannot or is finding it difficult to express themselves and/or talk about the violence, talking pictures or play activities like a doll’s house, puppets and role play can be used to communicate key messages. Art activities like a floor map/plan of the child’s house can illustrate the safety plan, while quiz games can be developed to test a child’s recall of their safety plan and key messages.

Children are helped to remember the safety plan in their head, to identify a trusted adult they can talk to and shown how to use the phone safely. They are also given the national ChildLine number:

‘My children and myself have done a course of safety planning. This was done with me first, then the children with a worker and me. It was very helpful, although the children did find it hard to talk about their father’s violence. Using the plan of the house and talking to the children about the best room for them to go to be safe was a good way of getting the safety plan across to them.’

Abused woman with three children aged 13, 12 and 9

Post-separation issues

Some mothers feel that their children have a better relationship with their fathers after the separation. While some children may decide that they do not want contact with their father, others maintain contact for many reasons, loyalty to father, to accompany other siblings or to keep him happy.

This is a difficult situation for children with conflict often arising from the fact that they liked or loved their father but detest his violence.

The problem does not simply end if the woman leaves her partner. When a woman leaves an abusive relationship and establishes a new family unit, she needs support adapting to a new pattern of parenting and family life. This is when the relationship between the mother and her children can be repaired as both recover from the abuse. Post-separation violence and contact issues may be ongoing, so the children’s safety must remain a key priority for the mother.

Some key safety messages for children (7)

- Children don’t have to keep secrets when they feel sad or scared.
- Children are not to blame when dad hits mum.
- Anger and frustrations are normal, but violence is not OK. There are other ways to deal with these feelings.
- It’s OK to feel angry with mum and/or dad. It doesn’t mean that you don’t love them.
- There are safe places for mum to take you.
- It’s OK to feel mixed up about things.
- It’s OK to like dad and at the same time not like his violent/hurting behaviour.
- Stay out of mum and dad’s fights. You need to keep yourself safe when dad hurts mum.
- There are some things you can do to help mum, if you can:
  - go to your safe place
  - go to neighbours for help
  - ring the police. If you cannot speak, leave the phone off the hook so they will be able to trace your call. They may be able to hear the violent row and come to help
  - use your mobile phone, give your name and address to the police and tell them what’s happening
  - keep your younger brothers and sisters in a safe place too.
Overview of some relevant developments

1995

Government policy *Tackling Domestic Violence: A policy for Northern Ireland* is published.

Creation of the Northern Ireland Regional Forum on Domestic Violence, drawing together all key professionals in the field.

1998

*Family Homes and Domestic Violence (NI) Order* – replaced the separate legislation dealing with protection from violence and occupation of the family home with a single code to improve the level of protection available.

2000

RUC publish *Domestic Violence Help is Available*

2002


Obstacles to effective intervention

- Lack of an agreed definition of domestic violence among health professionals and childcare organisations.

- Need for greater awareness of the implications for child safety within domestic violence situations.

- No co-ordinated response or agreed procedures for staff encountering children within domestic violence situations. This is particularly important for GPs as research indicates they are more likely to have direct contact with women than social workers or health visitors.

- No agreed or consistent system of recording and screening data among services, the potential risk to children may therefore go unnoticed.

- Data that is collected is not routinely collated and analysed to offer women and children protection and prevention from further harm.

- Strategies to combat and address the impact of domestic violence are hampered by the lack of accurate statistics on the levels and nature of the problem.

Recommendations

- The needs of and impact of domestic violence on children must be paramount when dealing with every domestic violence situation.

- We would like to see a new duty imposed on health and social services trusts to ensure that where young children (under 12) regularly witness domestic violence social workers must undertake an initial assessment. This will determine whether the child is in need of protection and if the family need family support services.

- There must be a more consistent approach among health and social service trusts when dealing with child safety in domestic violence situations.

- We welcome the forthcoming Children’s Strategy and Children’s Commissioner for Northern Ireland and urge those in power to take the opportunity presented with these initiatives to ensure that the impact of domestic violence on children is addressed with a cross-departmental strategy with the necessary resourcing.

- Education and awareness campaign for the public, education, health and social services professionals and practitioners together with a focus on promoting healthy relationships among children from an early age.

- Agreed definition of domestic violence in use across all relevant agencies and services.

- Standardised monitoring procedures to record the details of domestic violence and the development of a computer package to assist with collation and analysis of records. This should include details of:
  - nature and severity of the violence, particularly the duration and frequency of incidents
  - relationship of perpetrator to the child
  - number, gender and ages of children in the household
  - whether the case was referred and what other agencies are involved
  - are the children on the child protection register or known to social services.

- Training and guidance to facilitate the process of integrating safety planning and risk assessment with women and children in domestic violence procedures.
References:


Who can help?
ChildLine 0800 1111
Women’s Aid 24 hour helpline 028 9033 1818