

**About Barnardo's**

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. Last year we worked with 301,100 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. We run specialist domestic abuse services who support victims, perpetrators and children through group work, safety planning & therapeutic support. However, domestic abuse is a common risk factor amongst children across all our services - especially those referred to us for child sexual exploitation (CSE), harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), and young carers.

**Key messages**

- Although we welcome the Government's focus on domestic abuse and violence, we feel that the draft Bill fails to recognise the full picture of risks and vulnerabilities that children affected by domestic abuse experience.
- Children and young people are not just witnesses. Barnardo's knows first-hand from our services that children and young people are often the forgotten victims of domestic abuse and violence.
- Domestic abuse is an adverse childhood experience (ACE) which can affect their life chances, increase problems with mental and physical health later in life, and potential to go on to be in abusive relationships.
- Children are currently only covered in the Bill's prospective guidance which suggests their inclusion is simply a tick box exercise. This will not fully recognise children as victims of domestic abuse and therefore they will not receive the vital support they need to recover from their trauma.
- Currently there is a postcode lottery of support for victims of domestic abuse, especially for children. We believe there should be statutory support for children affected by domestic abuse.
- Young people experience the highest rates of domestic abuse of any age group and they need to receive appropriate and timely support from their local authority.

**The definition in the Domestic Abuse Bill and how it links to the Children Act 1989**

Barnardo's supports the Government's decision to maintain the age limit in the definition to 16 years old in the draft Bill as this maintains a distinction in law with child abuse. We do believe however, that there should be a recognition on the face of the Bill of the devastating impact of domestic abuse on children. The ultimate aim should be that children are recognised as being directly affected by domestic abuse and are offered appropriate, timely support.

The definition of significant harm in the Children's Act 1989 was extended in 2002 to acknowledge the adverse effects of children's exposure to domestic violence. It says harm to children includes "*the impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another.*" This does not sufficiently protect children and young people experiencing domestic abuse as it positions them as passive bystanders rather than victims themselves.

**Key Recommendation**

Although the age limit should remain, the Government needs to examine how the proposed statutory definition can include the impact domestic abuse has on children. This also needs to be similarly reflected in the Children Act.

## **Statutory support duty for children affected by domestic abuse**

We believe that there should be statutory support for children affected by domestic abuse. There is **currently a significant postcode lottery of support for victims of domestic abuse**. As well as this statutory support, professionals involved in domestic abuse need to be trained in supporting adult and child victims of domestic abuse. More and better training of teachers and medical professionals is needed in spotting the signs of domestic abuse and how to help children and young people who are affected by it.

### **What this statutory support could look like**

Many services focus primarily on perpetrator work and support for the non-abusive parent/partner and not the trauma children have suffered and the long term impact on their lives. There needs to be **more specialist children's workers supporting children**. We believe that children need their own support worker as most Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) services do not or are not trained to work directly with children and support.

### **What our specialist services have told us**

Nearly 100% of our domestic abuse services have told us that they believed children need a **specialist support worker**. Children want and need support with:

- Brokering relationships with siblings, non-abusive parents, school and extended family including extended family of the abusive parent/partner.
- Managing feelings and behaviours, grief and loss and specialist services within Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- Specialist trauma informed support workers within domestic abuse services could help to alleviate the long term impact.

### **Example of good practice - Barnardo's Mandala Therapy**

In our Barnardo's Mandala therapeutic service in Somerset, we work closely with parents, carers and key professionals to provide gentle, nurturing therapeutic support to help them recover from trauma they have experienced and promote a better understanding of their needs. Our therapeutic model is systemic, humanistic, child-led, creative-arts based and supported by current research and evidence. Children are given a choice as to where they receive counselling and therapy to ensure they feel secure and comfortable.

### **Key Recommendation**

There should be a statutory duty on all local authorities to provide a support service for children affected by domestic abuse and this duty should be sufficiently resourced.

## **Specialist support for young people under 16 who are in abusive intimate relationships**

More than half of young people have experienced controlling behavior in relationships.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent girls in abusive relationships are not routinely supported particularly when the perpetrator is at the same school and/or social circles.

Our domestic abuse services frequently support young people under 16 who are in abusive intimate relationships. There is a lack of recognition and support for children experiencing domestic abuse within relationships under the age of 16, which leaves them at serious risk of short and long-term harm, as well as being vulnerable to subsequent abusive relationships in adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup>Refuge, 2017. Available at: <https://www.refuge.org.uk/more-than-half-of-young-people-experiencing-controlling-behaviour-in-relationships/>

One practitioner told us:

*"I have service users who are as young as 14 and 15 who are in abusive relationship with peers and they are unprotected by the law. Perpetrators do not have the opportunity to change their behaviours and learn a new path".*

These young people, victims and perpetrators, need specialist support as early as possible without criminalising them.

#### **Example of Barnardo's Service for Teenagers - BeFree Service, South East Kent & Medway**

BeFree works with young girls aged between 11-16 who are at risk or experiencing domestic abuse and teenage pregnancy. BeFree provides a seven to ten week individual programme, dependant on the young person's wants and needs. Its key aims are to educate young people around positive relationships and how to identify abusive or controlling behaviour. The programme also uses a therapeutic approach to help a young person understand and gain closure on experiences of domestic abuse from their past. BeFree assists young people to build resilience and give them strategies to develop healthy relationships in the future.

#### **Key Recommendation**

We recommend that the Young Persons Violence Advisor (YPVA) model<sup>2</sup> or something similar should be rolled out in all local authorities with the associated funding to support young people affected by domestic abuse.

#### **Role of YPVA**

The YPVA holding a caseload will be responsible for young people who are experiencing serious harm who are identified through the local referral/care pathway. This activity should be supported by co-ordination with other social care practitioners. They will mediate with local agencies, professionals and forums who would need to be involved in identifying the cases of young people experiencing serious harm, and ensure that they are linked into the agreed referral/care pathway that includes both safeguarding and the multi-agency risk assessment committee (Marac) convened for adult victims of domestic abuse.

**For more information, contact Sarah Murray, Public Affairs and Campaigns Officer, on 0208 498 7659 or email [sarah.murray@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:sarah.murray@barnardos.org.uk)**

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<sup>2</sup>Young Persons' Violence Advisor Service helps to provide a safe and supportive response to teenagers aged 13-17 years who are direct victims of relationship abuse and a range of interpersonal violence. This could include domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, gang-related violence, 'honour' based violence, forced marriage and stalking. The YPVA Service also offers guidance to staff to develop work that supports young perpetrators.