

Policy Briefing

The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Children & Young People

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Children are the hidden victims of domestic abuse; this experience can impact their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing throughout their life.

About Barnardo's Northern Ireland

We are the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support.

The issue: an overview

Barnardo's NI welcomes the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. In particular, we welcome the Bill's intention to recognise the serious impact of domestic abuse on children, including controlling behaviour. Children and young people are the hidden victims of domestic abuse. We strongly urge that the Bill recognises that a child does not have to witness domestic abuse, through either sight or sound, to be aware of and significantly impacted by it. The lockdown enforced in response to the [coronavirus](#) pandemic has resulted in a reported increase in domestic violence in many countries, including Northern Ireland. This has further highlighted the risk to children in abusive homes, and therefore the need to ensure that home is a place of safety for children and young people.

Key messages

- The behaviours of domestic abuse impact negatively on children, and where a person chooses to coercively control a parent, they are thereby choosing to abuse a child. **Children experience the harmful impacts of domestic abuse, even if they do not witness it by sight or sound.** Experiencing domestic abuse in the home is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE); research has shown that ACEs can have a long term impact on children's mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.
- The moment of **separation can be the most high risk time** in homes where there is domestic abuse. In addition, **post-separation contact visits** between parents and children can often be used as a means of continuing domestic abuse when a relationship has ended.
- We welcome that this legislation intends to cover all 'intimate personal relationships', including teen relationships. It is important that this legislation is implemented alongside support services which can specifically target and respond to the circumstances of **domestic abuse in teen relationships**.



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Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos: 216250 and SC037605

Our services

- Our Family Resource Centres work with parents to undertake Parenting Assessments and Capacity to Change assessments; this work includes helping parents understand how domestic abuse affects the whole family, including children.
- Our regional service SEEN (Sexual Exploitation Ends Now), is a specialist child sexual exploitation (CSE) service, which supports children, young people and families affected by, or at risk of, sexual abuse, and can provide specialist therapeutic support for children who have experienced sexual exploitation. In many cases of CSE, there is an element of domestic abuse present within a controlling relationship.
- We also have a varied portfolio of mental and emotional health and wellbeing services, reflecting an ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) -aware approach and trauma-informed practice ethos.
- In 2017, we developed the Domestic Violence Risk Assessment for Children (DVRAC)¹. The DVRAC manual was developed to support practitioners working with families experiencing domestic abuse by a male perpetrator to: identify risks to children from domestic violence and begin the risk assessment process; decide whether a case needs a safeguarding response or family support; and identify appropriate interventions for the children, the non-abusing parents and the abusive father/ father figure.

Impact of domestic abuse on children

- We welcome the Bill's recognition of the specific impact of domestic abuse on children, in particular through aggravation outlined in Clause 9, subsection (2)(b). Our Domestic Violence Risk Assessment for Children (DVRAC) outlines that "Children can be affected by domestic violence, even if they are not in the same room as it is happening".
- A recent UK research report by Barnardo's, '[Not just Collateral Damage](#)', outlines that children are the hidden victims of domestic abuse and the long term impact on children includes a detrimental impact on their mental health, child development, risk of harmful sexual behaviour, future cycles of abuse, and potential of youth offending.
- It is important the legislation reflects that a child can be aware of domestic abuse in the home, even if they do not see or hear the moment in which it occurs. Children can pick up on a parent's distress, or be impacted by the parent's compromised capacity for parenting in the context of fear. The impact of domestic abuse is felt throughout a household and can often follow a cycle. The cycle of violence outlined by Women's Aid NI highlights that the most stressful and tense periods in a household where there is domestic violence can be in the time leading up to an 'explosion' where an act of domestic abuse or control can occur at any time.
- ACEs, such as domestic abuse, can cause a child's brain to develop differently in ways that are detrimental to their physical and emotional health in both the short and long term. Children affected by domestic abuse need specialist services to help them deal with trauma and give them the chance to lead healthy and happy lives.
- It is important that support services addressing domestic violence consider the needs of children and the trauma they have suffered.

¹ Sneddon, H and Janes, M (2017) 'Domestic Violence Risk Assessment for Children: Guidance Manual', Barnardo's Northern Ireland.



Separation and contact visits

- We welcome the Bill's intention to recognise all intimate personal relationships. As our DVRAC outlines, "a sizeable proportion of domestic violence occurs in families where adults are living separately".
- The moment of separation, and the time following it, can be a high risk period for children and victims of domestic violence. Feedback from our Family Resource Centres indicates that families need a high level of support during this time: in cases of post separation violence, one third involved child contact issues.
- Contact visits with children can often be used as a means of continuing a pattern of abuse or exerting control. As a result, contact visits can become a stressful and potentially traumatic experience for children; this can impact on other areas of a child's life, including their mental health and capacity to engage in education.

Teen-peer relationships

- We welcome that the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum explicitly references teen relationships as included in this legislation. The patterns and impact of domestic abuse are reflected in many relationships, regardless of age and nature.
- However, there are particular factors to consider when implementing this legislation, in particular, support services designed to support and protect young people, and the diversion from criminalisation of young people displaying abusive behaviour.
- Many young people who experience domestic abuse do not see themselves reflected in the public conversation around domestic abuse – they don't have a family life with the perpetrator, they don't share finances or a family home. Therefore, it can be difficult for them to recognise and accept that they have experienced domestic abuse.
- In our specialist child sexual exploitation service, SEEN, many instances of grooming would fall under the definition of domestic abuse and coercive control, however the young people involved do not feel that they fit that picture. In addition, young people may be more isolated from help due to their age.
- We know that digital communication plays a key role in many teen relationships, and information exchanged through sexting can often be used in threats to enforce control.
- Finally, specialist support should be available to young people exhibiting abusive behaviours in order to break the cycle before adulthood.

Summary

It is crucial that the impact of domestic abuse on children is fully considered in the development and implementation of this Bill. Awareness of domestic abuse in the home can impact children throughout their life, and the legislation must recognise and reflect the severity of this effect. Furthermore, domestic abuse often continues after separation, with the negative effect on children continuing. It is also important that young people experiencing domestic abuse are supported to recognise the signs of an abusive relationship and that support services are designed to address their needs.

For further information, please contact:

Julia Buchanan
Assistant Director, Policy
julia.buchanan@barnardos.org.uk

Trása Canavan
Policy & Research Officer
trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk

