

Believe in children

Barnardo's briefing on the Domestic Abuse Bill: Second Reading Debate (HoC)



Barnardo's Tuesday 28 April 2020

1. Summary

Barnardo's welcomes the Domestic Abuse Bill, which will raise awareness of this terrible crime, and has the potential to improve support for people in abusive relationships and their children.

However, in order for the Bill to achieve its aims, we believe it must be amended to place a duty on public authorities to support all victims and their children - whether they live in refuges OR in the family home.

Domestic abuse is one of the most common adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) facing vulnerable children in the UK.¹

- It is the most common factor amongst children qualifying for support from local authorities in England - featuring in 50% of assessments.²
- **Three quarters** of Barnardo's frontline staff delivering services to vulnerable families across the UK are supporting children who experience domestic abuse.³
- Our services describe children as the '**hidden victims**' of a crime with serious consequences for their short and long-term outcomes - including involvement in further abusive relationships as victim or abuser.⁴
- Access to specialist support is vital in order to help children break the cycle of abuse.

2. Impact of Covid-19

Since the lockdown began domestic abuse calls to the National Domestic Abuse helpline are up by **25%**.⁵ Domestic abuse killings, including children, are thought to have more than **doubled**.⁶

The risk to children has also increased significantly. With a maximum of just **5%**⁷ of vulnerable children attending school, many are isolated in unsafe homes with adults facing growing financial and emotional pressures - creating a 'perfect storm'.

Since the lockdown:

- **16%** of Barnardo's frontline staff report an increase in issues around domestic abuse amongst the children they support.
- **57%** of Barnardo's frontline staff are concerned about an increase in family conflict and stress.

However, we know many children at risk remain 'hidden'.

¹ [CDC-Kaiser ACE Study](#)

² Department for Education, [Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019, England](#).

³ Barnardo's 2020. [Not just collateral damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children](#).

⁴ Barnardo's, 2020. [Not Just Collateral Damage](#).

⁵ BBC, April 2020. [Coronavirus: Domestic abuse calls up 25% since lockdown](#).

⁶ Guardian, April 2020. [Domestic abuse killings more than double amid Covid-19 lockdown](#).

⁷ Department for Education, April 2020. [Coronavirus attendance in education and early years settings](#).

- Despite many more children being at risk, with fewer protective structures like school in place - **45%** of Barnardo's frontline staff report a decrease in referrals.⁸

There is a serious risk that children living in abusive households are going unrecognised and unsupported, and the numbers are growing.

About James

James grew up in an environment of violence between his biological parents. He disclosed physical and sexual abuse from his father. James has an extensive criminal record; his most recent offence was a domestic charge of assault. James disclosed that he almost killed his partner in the attack and he was now keen to change these behaviours. He self-referred to Barnardo's Be Free service; he identified his own controlling tendencies throughout the session. He engaged in 25 sessions on understanding healthy/unhealthy relationships, coping strategies, risks, and managing anger issues. The support that the service offered allowed him to "overcome the shame and make positive steps towards a healthy relationship in the future".

3. Amending the Bill - Clause 53: Support provided by local authorities to victims of domestic abuse

As it stands, the Domestic Abuse Bill risks creating a 'two-tier' system of support for victims of domestic abuse. Whilst there is a welcome duty on local authorities to ensure support for victims who live in safe accommodation/refuges, the majority of victims and children remain in their family home, or elsewhere in the community, and would not benefit.

The impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children and families makes it even more important that the Bill is strengthened to protect all victims and children. We are calling for the Bill to be strengthened so that it creates a duty on local authorities to secure the provision of specialist support to all victims and children.

Key points to raise

- The Bill is a unique opportunity to tackle the horrific crime of domestic abuse; to identify and protect victims and children.
- Domestic abuse is one of the most serious challenges facing vulnerable children and is a factor for 50% of children needing support from social services.
- Covid-19 exacerbates the risk of domestic abuse - especially to children in households under financial and emotional strain - the vast majority of whom are isolated at home, and not going to school.
- The Bill must be strengthened through an amendment to ensure **ALL** victims and children will have access to support.
- As currently drafted, the Bill would secure support for people in refuges/safe accommodation but not for the majority who remain in the family home.
- With a growing number of children and victims at risk, Parliament must act now to keep vulnerable people safe.

⁸ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

4. Why the Bill as drafted is insufficient to protect all victims and children

Clause 53: Support provided by local authorities to victims of domestic abuse

- Since its first iteration, the Government has amended the Bill to include a statutory duty to support all victims in refuges and supported accommodation - which is very welcome.
- However, the majority of victims and their children are not in this type of accommodation and some of the most vulnerable are more likely to stay at home, especially those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities or victims with disabilities.

Any duty should therefore extend to all victims and children, regardless of their accommodation.

- Support should also extend to **young people (including under 16s) in abusive relationships** - with the introduction of **Young People's Violence Advisers**.
- In many cases young people displaying abusive behaviour, as well as those being abused, have a history of vulnerability including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma - including growing up in a home where domestic abuse was the norm. There is a danger that these young people are criminalised and are not given the opportunity to change their behaviour, **break the cycle of violence**, and forge a positive future.

About Tammy

Tammy grew up in an environment of domestic abuse, experiencing violence and psychological abuse between her biological parents who both misused substances. After her father left when Tammy was seven, her mother engaged in numerous unhealthy abusive relationships, she experienced neglect and social workers became involved. She turned to using unhealthy coping strategies, such as heroin, to cope with the feelings of rejection and abandonment. At the age of 13, she disclosed that she found her mother dead when she returned from her day at school. This trauma led to anti-social behaviour, misuse of drugs, and assault to injury. She was entering into relationships that were abusive and controlling. She self-referred and during the initial assessment she was able to articulate that a lot of her difficulties stem from her traumatic childhood.

5. Additional facts & stats

Exposure to domestic abuse is common amongst all children and young people

- 1 in 5 children and young people are exposed to domestic abuse during their childhood.⁹
- Young people are the group most likely to be in an abusive relationship.¹⁰
- A survey of 13 to 17 year olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner.¹¹

⁹ Radford, L. et al (2011) [Child abuse and neglect in the UK today](#). London: NSPCC

¹⁰ SafeLives. [Safe young lives: Young people and domestic abuse](#).

¹¹ Ibid

Domestic abuse is often part of an intergenerational cycle

- Children who live in households where there is domestic abuse are more likely to be in abusive relationships when they are older, either as abusers or victims.

Impact of Covid-19 on children affected by domestic abuse

- 35% of our frontline staff working with families who they have safeguarding concerns about are most concerned about domestic abuse and child abuse.¹²
- 40% of our frontline staff have reported children and families they support are concerned about being unable to access the support available.¹³ Due to the social distancing measures, some children and families are now struggling to access support. Reasons include; a lack of access to devices/Wi-Fi, families self-isolating, or not having a safe space to speak.
- Without access to services for children to recover from domestic abuse it can have a significant impact, putting at risk their future wellbeing, their education, and their chance of forming happy, healthy relationships.¹⁴

*"We have seen a worrying disengagement from some families we were supporting at our children's centres where we are concerned about domestic abuse and associated harm to children. We know there are lots of reasons why it might be difficult for families to engage with us during lockdown, but we know they are the children that need us the most. Quite often they say - we'll see about accessing your service again when this is all blown over - but for these families 4, 6 or 8 weeks can see a huge change in the risks of harm they might face." - **Barnardo's frontline worker***

About Barnardo's

As the UK's largest national children's charity, last year we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. We run 14 specialist domestic abuse services who run programmes including therapeutic work with children, safety planning and perpetrator group work.

Mandala therapeutic service in Somerset works with children, parents and carers affected by domestic abuse. It offers counselling, therapy and support to help them recover from trauma and promote a better understanding of their needs.

BeFree service in South East Kent & Medway works with girls aged between 11-16 who are at risk or experiencing domestic abuse and teenage pregnancy. Its aims are to educate young people about positive relationships and how to identify abusive or controlling behaviour.

Opening closed doors provides domestic abuse and coercive control training for frontline workers in Wales, including police and social workers, to improve their understanding and decision making.

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¹² Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

¹³ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

¹⁴ Barnardo's, 2020. [Not Just Collateral Damage](#).