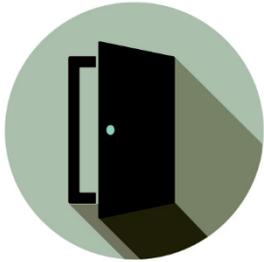


## What would you

Brief for August 2017 theme for the  
localisation of the National  
Awareness Campaign 'What

# Domestic Violence and Children

The National Awareness Campaign as part of the Second National  
Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-  
2021



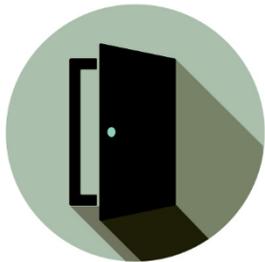
## Domestic Violence and Children

In 2016, 73% of the women using the Women's Aid one to one support service for the first time disclosed that they had children<sup>1</sup>. Until relatively recently, discussions of domestic violence focused mainly on the adults who were involved. When children were mentioned, it was usually in the context of 'witnessing' domestic violence in their home. Thanks to research carried out in recent years however, especially research that began to ask children themselves what it was like living in a home where domestic violence was happening, we now know children don't just witness the domestic violence, they experience it.

Victims of domestic violence will often try everything in their power to shield their children from the abuse they themselves are suffering. Victims have reported harrowing accounts such as luring their attacker to a different part of the house, when they knew an attack was imminent, so the children would not be woken up and exposed to it. Some abusers do not act violently in front of their children out of a somewhat perverse sense of morality<sup>2</sup>. However, efforts to protect the children from domestic abuse can have the unfortunate result that parents can underestimate the effect the abuse can have on their child. Research conducted with children has highlighted that their awareness of the abuse is greater than their parents acknowledge or even realise. Children are neither untouched by the violence nor passive bystanders<sup>3</sup>.

Although children can often be in the room when physical, emotional or sexual abuse happens to their mother or father, they do not have to be physically present to be deeply traumatised by it. Research has shown that a number of children report that hearing the violence was more distressing than actually seeing it, in terms of feelings of powerlessness<sup>4</sup>. Even when children are spared from seeing or hearing the violence, they see the aftermath, such as blood, bruises, tears and broken items. They are aware of the fear and tension in the house. They can be afraid they will do something to set off the violence. They can feel guilt for not being able to stop it, or because they feel they are somehow responsible for the violence or, tragically, they can come to think that it is normal.

Risk of severe abuse for both men and women in the Republic of Ireland has been found to increase with the presence of children, with this enhanced threat significantly higher for women than men. It has been suggested that this can arise from the increased stresses of parenthood, greater difficulty leaving a relationship or restricted options for moving on when children are involved<sup>7</sup>. A survey conducted by the Rotunda Maternity Hospital found that 1 in 8 women surveyed were being abused by their partner<sup>5</sup>. It is also known that 30% of women who experience domestic violence are physically assaulted for the first time during pregnancy<sup>6</sup>. Male victims of domestic violence report staying in abusive relationships to ensure that their children are protected, as they know it is more likely that their partner would get custody<sup>8</sup>.



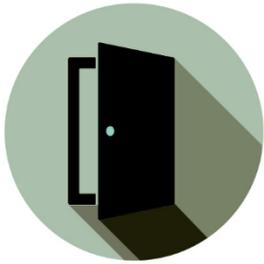
## The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Children exposed to domestic violence can be affected in many ways. Living in an abusive environment can hinder a child's development and lead to a range of social, emotional, physical and behavioural problems. The manner in which children react to domestic violence can depend on many factors such as their age, gender, personality, socio-economic status, role within the family, frequency, nature and length of abuse<sup>9</sup>. Different children develop different coping mechanisms to deal with what is happening to them. Some express the effects of the abuse internally and suffer from anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, while others express outwardly through aggression, tantrums and anti-social behaviour.

Many children and young people who remain resilient in the face of their adverse experience, emerging from their experiences relatively unscathed, or with developed coping and survival strategies<sup>10</sup>. For those children who do not, resilience and the ability to develop normally under difficult circumstances can be promoted and nurtured. The research evidence indicates that all children living with domestic violence or its aftermath can benefit from a range of interventions to help them overcome the negative impact of living with abuse, and to move forward in their lives<sup>11</sup>.

Research into the impact domestic violence can have on children has suggested that there are five key areas of impact that can be identified<sup>12</sup>. The following key areas of impact should only be used as a useful illustrator of how children can be affected and should not be taken to be true of every child suffering domestic violence in their family.

**Domestic violence and child abuse.** There is a clear link between the presence of domestic violence and child abuse. Violent partners are often violent parents. Children can be attacked if they try to intervene, or they can be in the arms of the parent that is being attacked. Violence or threats of violence against children can be used as a tactic to control the parent suffering domestic violence. Children living in abusive homes can experience physical abuse by the parent who is suffering domestic violence, who is stressed and suffering psychological trauma. There is also evidence that they are at a higher risk of suffering sexual abuse by the perpetrator of domestic violence<sup>13</sup>. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency recognise that simply being in a house where domestic violence is happening is a form of emotional abuse of a child and recommends child protection referrals are made where a child under a year old is present in a home where domestic violence is a concern<sup>14</sup>.



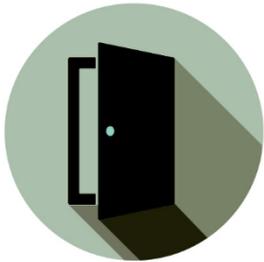
# The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

**Impact of domestic violence on parenting ability.** Domestic violence can have a significant impact on the quality of parenting and diminishes both parents ability to meet the needs of their children<sup>15</sup>. Stress, fear and depression caused by abuse can lead to emotional distance or compromised attachment for the abused parent. Domestic violence can undermine the authority of the abused parent and can result in the child emulating the lack of respect or aggression shown by the perpetrator. This can to a situation where the victim of the domestic violence has to rely on their abuser to discipline their child.

**Impact of living in abusive environment on child development.** An analysis of studies looking into domestic violence found significantly poorer outcomes on 21 developmental and behavioural dimensions for most of the children exposed to domestic violence in comparison to children who had not been exposed to such abuse<sup>16</sup>. For example infants and toddlers exposed to violence don't have the verbal skills to express their feelings so their distress may manifest itself behaviourally in excessive irritability, regressed behaviour around language and toilet training, sleep disturbance, emotional distress and fear of being alone<sup>17</sup>. Older children face issues in areas such as their social development. Research is emerging which links exposure to domestic violence to negatively impacting children's brain development. It argues that when a child's stress levels are high, persistent, elevated stress hormones and altered levels of key brain chemicals produce an internal physiological state that disrupts the structure of the developing brain and can lead to difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation<sup>18</sup>.

**The impact of domestic violence on the family system.** Many families in which domestic violence is present struggle with multiple problems including poverty, homelessness, social exclusion and exposure to other forms of violence<sup>19</sup>. These problems can be a result of the domestic violence or occur alongside it in a wider dysfunctional family system.

**Post-Separation Violence.** In domestic violence situations, the ending of the relationship does not always result in the ending of violence, with parental access often acting as a flashpoint, or catalyst for more violence. Women's Aid report that the majority of women they support want to find a way to support an ongoing relationship between their children and their fathers. However, Women's Aid also reported that in 2016 they had received 411 disclosures from mothers who were abused by their ex-partners during access visits. The question of whether or not it is in the child's best interest to maintain contact with an abusive and violent parent has strong and persuasive arguments on both sides of the equation. The complexity of the issue is most apparent in research that gives the children themselves a voice to express their experience of domestic violence. Every one of the young children in one such report<sup>20</sup>, who had to flee their homes and were living in domestic violence victims refuge, spoke of missing their fathers, even when they clearly understood that he was violent and that was the reason they were not living together.



## Signs of childhood exposure to domestic violence

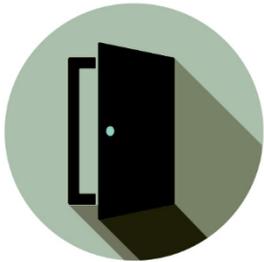
As already stated, children will be impacted by exposure in different ways, depending on many different factors. Again, the following information<sup>21</sup> should only be seen as illustrative and should not be taken to be true of every child suffering domestic violence in their family. Some or all of these signs may also be indicative of issues other than domestic violence.

**Psychological and Emotional Signs.** Separation anxiety; clingy, insecure behaviour; easily upset; low self-esteem; preoccupied; intolerant of praise; frequent need for reassurance; fear of authority figures. Distress that may include: anger, aggression, anxiety, sadness, fear of failure; apparent difficulties distinguishing fact from fantasy; passive and withdrawn behaviour, dissociation. Older children may also show signs of self-blame; anxiety about repeating the cycle of violence, anxiety about family; depression; self-harm and suicidal thoughts, particularly if sexually or physically abused; low self-esteem and feeling of self-worth.

**Social and Behavioural Signs.** Taking on the role of carer, especially girls; drawn to groups that indulge in anti-social behaviour, including drinking, taking drugs and criminal activity; lack of sleep; early sexual activity; running away from home; truancy and disaffection with education; difficulties relating to other children; social isolation; aggressive play; bullying or being a victim of bullying; poor attention and concentration; attention seeking behaviour; extreme responses to minor things (increasing with age)

**Physical Signs.** Fatigue; hunger; frequent complaints about illness/being unfit to be in school; unkempt appearance; possible undiagnosed medical condition because of missed medical appointments; signs of injury; bed wetting; stomach aches; head aches and somatic problems.

**Signs when in a learning or play environment.** Delayed language and cognitive skills; poor communication skills; poor cooperative play and turn taking skills; reluctance to try new things; signs of missed early play and learning opportunities; an inconsistent and erratic approach to work; difficulties with group work; destroying work; homework not done (increasing with age); under achievement; work related anxiety. Conversely, some children become totally absorbed by schoolwork.



## How to help children exposed to domestic violence

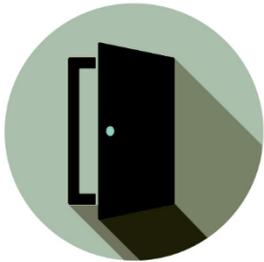
The aim of the ‘What would you do?’ campaign is to increase the awareness of domestic and sexual violence, to bring about a change in long established societal behaviours and attitudes and to activate bystanders with the aim of decreasing and preventing this violence. A bystander approach to ending domestic violence is about enabling people in the community to prevent and intervene if it is safe and legal to do so. In this approach, whole communities are part of the solution to end abuse. Bystanders intervening in domestic violence situations can find it a daunting and complex prospect; intervening with a child will be particularly so.

Many of us come into contact with children, whether in our professional or personal lives, and so we should educate ourselves to be able to identify possible signs of abuse. This responsibility is particularly relevant for professionals such as teachers, childcare workers, health professionals and those working with adults with serious parenting difficulties. It is also an important responsibility for staff and people involved in sports clubs, community activities, youth clubs, faith-based organisations and other organisations catering for children.

When it comes to intervening with a child impacted by domestic violence, there is no one size fits all solution. We must be aware that most children want the abuse to stop, but do not necessarily want the abusing parent to leave. Children do not, in many instances, wish to hear negative comments said about the abusing parent, and doing so may make them reluctant to talk with a trusted adult.

We should arm ourselves with the knowledge needed to best respond to the child’s individual need, whether that is to report our concerns to child protection agencies such as Tusla or the Gardaí, display helpful information in places where children or their abused parent can discover it, or to simply, and only if appropriate and safe to do so, ask the child if they are ok. Interventions should begin with the knowledge that the protection and empowerment of the victim of domestic violence, in most cases the child’s mother, will be the most effective form of child protection<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, in most cases, the best way a bystander could help a child that they are concerned about is to seek out the child’s parent who is suffering the abuse and ask the parent if they are ok.

In order to respond to the needs of children who have been impacted by their experience of domestic violence, the nature and form of the support they need may involve challenging and supportive interventions, which should be tailored to meet the needs of the individual child. Only professionals who understand the dynamics of the child’s experiences can provide such interventions. A bystander intervention should only ever be about putting the child in contact with such professionals, either directly or indirectly through the professionals helping the abused parent.



## What help is available to children exposed to domestic violence?

### How to report a concern you have about a child

In an emergency, where the person is at immediate risk, you should contact the Garda Síochána or emergency services on 999 or 112.

Anyone can report a concern about a child. If you have any concerns about a child you should report it to Tusla, The Child and Family Agency. A report can be made in person, by telephone or in writing. Any member of the public who has a concern about a child can contact the local social work duty service in the area where the child lives: <http://www.tusla.ie/services/child-protection-welfare/contact-a-social-worker> If the child is in danger outside office hours you can contact the Gardaí.

For more information on how to report a concern, and to learn about the ‘Children First’ guidelines which acts as a roadmap to help parents, professionals, organisations and the general public to identify and report child abuse and welfare concerns go to: <http://www.tusla.ie/children-first/how-do-i-report-abuse>

### Information on helplines available to children

- In an emergency - dial 999 for an Garda Síochána
- Childline freephone – 1800 666 666 or [www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)
- Teenline freephone – 1800 833 634 - 7pm-10pm daily or [info@teenline.ie](mailto:info@teenline.ie)
- Teentext by texting 'talk' to 50101 - 10am-4pm daily
- CARI - 1890 924 567 - 9am-5pm Mon to Friday for victims of child sexual abuse and non offending parents.

### Information on services available to children

- Barnardos provides services to families experiencing domestic violence as part of an inter-agency approach. It also publishes excellent material aimed at both children and parents on how to deal with domestic violence. Details of their work in relation to domestic violence can be found at: <https://www.barnardos.ie/resources-advice/parents/domestic-abuse.html>

Barnardos also has a comprehensive dedicated section of their website aimed directly at young people who are experiencing domestic abuse in their family:

<https://www.barnardos.ie/resources-advice/young-people/teen-help/domestic-abuse.html>

- The ‘What would you do?’ campaign website has an area dedicated to providing information to people under the age of 18 experiencing domestic violence. It can be found at:

<http://whatwouldyoudo.ie/#page-under18>



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