

# Build-a-Future

Main Road, West Ashby, Horncastle, Lincolnshire, LN9 5PT 01507 524015

## Protecting Children from Domestic Abuse Policy



Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between people who are, or who have been in a relationship, regardless of gender or sexuality. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse.

Each UK nation has its own definition of domestic abuse for professionals who are working to prevent domestic abuse and protect those who have experienced it (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2016; Home Office, 2013; Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, 2017; Welsh Government, 2016).

Domestic abuse can include:

- sexual abuse and rape (including within a relationship)
- punching, kicking, cutting, hitting with an object
- withholding money or preventing someone from earning money
- taking control over aspects of someone's everyday life, which can include where they go and what they wear
- not letting someone leave the house
- reading emails, text messages or letters
- threatening to kill or harm them, a partner, another family member or pet.
- Witnessing domestic abuse
- Exposure to domestic abuse or violence in childhood is child abuse.
- Children may witness domestic abuse directly, but they can also witness it indirectly by:
  - hearing the abuse from another room
  - seeing a parent's injuries or distress afterwards
  - finding disarray like broken furniture
  - being hurt from being nearby or trying to stop the abuse
- experiencing a reduced quality in parenting as a result of the abuse (Royal College of General Practitioners and NSPCC, 2014; Holt, Buckley and Whelan, 2008).

Impact of domestic abuse

Domestic abuse can have a serious effect on a child's behaviour and overall wellbeing. It undermines a child's basic need for safety and security and can have a negative impact on a child's:

- development
- education outcomes
- mental health (Holt, Buckley and Whelan, 2008; Stanley, 2011; Szilassy et al, 2017).
- Psychological effects of witnessing domestic abuse include:
  - aggression and challenging behaviour
  - depression
  - anxiety - including worrying about a parent's safety
  - changes in mood

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- difficulty interacting with others
- withdrawal
- fearfulness, including fear of conflict
- suicidal thoughts or feelings (Diez, et al 2018; Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

Witnessing parental conflict may also increase the likelihood of a child developing risk-taking behaviour, like smoking, drug use and early sexual activity (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

Domestic abuse can cause confusing relationships with parents. Children may:

- not be able to develop a strong bond with their parents/carers (poor attachment)
- worry their parents will divorce
- hope an abused parent will leave for safety reasons
- be afraid of their parents.

Teenagers may worry that being raised in abusive environment will affect their own future relationships.

One young person who contacted our Childline service explained:

"I have seen my parents physically hurting each other for years. I used to cry every day and self-harm. I feel like I'm really affected by what I've seen. I have a boyfriend now and I feel like he's acting just like my dad. I feel like I can never be in a stable relationship."

Gender unknown, 18 (NSPCC, 2018)

Physical effects include:

- higher rates of illness and fatigue
- reduced physical growth
- impact on nervous and hormonal systems (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

Recognising domestic abuse

Domestic abuse can happen in any relationship. It can continue even after the relationship has ended, for example during contact visits or on social media.

Both men and women can be abused or be abusers.

Young adolescents or older teenagers can also experience domestic abuse in their own relationships (Barter et al, 2009).

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### Risk and vulnerability factors

#### Times of transition or adversity

All families have their ups and downs. While many parents or carers experiencing challenging circumstances are able to provide safe and loving care for their family, it can be difficult to cope if problems mount up. This can leave children more vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Times of transition, such as pregnancy, having a baby or separation and divorce, can increase levels of stress and conflict in a relationship.

When parents are already experiencing challenges such as mental health problems or substance misuse it can be more difficult to maintain healthy relationships.

In some cases, these factors can lead to or worsen domestic abuse.

#### Links to other forms of abuse

If a child lives in a home where domestic abuse is happening, they're more at risk of other types of abuse (Stanley, 2011).

#### Signs and indicators

It can be difficult to tell if domestic abuse is happening, because perpetrators can act very differently when other people are around.

Children who witness domestic abuse may:

- display challenging behaviour
- suffer from depression and anxiety
- not do as well at school as usual.
- Signs of anxiety
- Children who experience domestic abuse may feel on constant alert. Signs of anxiety or fear-related behaviour include:
  - bed wetting or unexplained illness
  - running away from home
  - constant worry about possible danger or safety of family members
  - aggression towards others (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

### Responding to domestic abuse

#### Reporting

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on 999. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns. Follow Build-a-Future's child protection procedures. Organisations that work with children and families must have safeguarding policies and procedures in place.

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Review Date: September 2020

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Contact the NSPCC Helpline on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk). Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.

Contact your local child protection services. Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.

Contact the police.

Services will risk assess the situation and take action to protect the child as appropriate either through statutory involvement or other support. This may include making a referral to the local authority.

### Talking about domestic abuse

Children may find it difficult to talk about domestic abuse for many reasons. They may feel ashamed, afraid, or not have the language to describe what they've experienced. If they have been living with domestic abuse since they were very young, they may not realise that it's wrong – and they may think it's their fault.

If a child shares details of domestic abuse with you, it's important to:

- listen carefully
- let them know they've done the right thing by telling you
- tell them it's not their fault
- say you will take them seriously
- don't confront the alleged abuser
- explain what you'll do next
- follow the instructions above to report what the child has told you as soon as possible.

### Preventing domestic abuse

#### Early help

By supporting families as soon as challenges are identified, practitioners can help parents and carers develop the skills needed to cope with stress and adversity, reducing potential conflict and improving outcomes for children.

#### Healthy family relationships

Effective interventions to help adults develop more healthy ways to interact with each other include:

- helping them understand the impact of conflict and see what they could do differently
- developing coping and problem-solving strategies to help handle stress
- building skills to communicate better and avoid conflict through modelling, roleplay and feedback

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- improving the quality of parenting
- learning how to co-parent positively (if divorced or separated) (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

### Giving children a voice

People who work with children have a key role to play in recognising the signs of domestic abuse and reporting any concerns. But they also have an essential role in teaching children to recognise if it's happening to them and know where to ask for help.

### Direct work with children who have witnessed domestic abuse

#### Intervention

Although the effects of witnessing domestic abuse can last into adulthood, many children can move forward once they're in a safer and more stable environment and have the right therapeutic support.

### Legislation about domestic abuse

#### Key legislation

Legislation in England, Northern Ireland and Wales states that "seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another person" is a form of harm (Section 120. Adoption and Children Act 2002; Section 28. Family Homes and Domestic Violence (Northern Ireland) Order 1998). In Scotland, legislation includes domestic abuse in the definition of child abuse (Section 24. Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006).

In England and Wales, "controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship" is an offence (Section 76. Serious Crime Act 2015). The offence carries a maximum sentence of 5 years' imprisonment, a fine or both.

In Scotland the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016 aims to improve the justice system's response to abusive behaviour and sexual harm. When sentencing, courts are required to take into account whether an offence involved abuse of a partner or ex-partner. Offences committed elsewhere in the UK can now be prosecuted in Scottish courts and a criminal non-harassment order can be imposed in a wider range of circumstances than before.

In Wales, the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 includes provisions to improve arrangements to promote awareness of gender-based violence and to prevent, protect and support victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The Act also introduces a needs-based approach to developing strategies to respond to all forms of violence against women.

Date: September 2018

Review Date: September 2020

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### Guidance

Statutory guidance highlights the responsibility of those in the education, community and care sectors to safeguard children from all forms of abuse and neglect:

- Child protection in England
- Child protection in Northern Ireland
- Child protection in Scotland
- Child protection in Wales

### Other policy and guidance

In England and Wales, the Ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) Strategy 2016-2020 focuses on early intervention and prevention.

The strategy includes an action plan that highlights key areas:

- preventing violence and abuse
- preventing online abuse and exploitation
- provision of services
- partnership working
- pursuing perpetrators (Home Office, 2016).
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In Northern Ireland, the government has set out its approach to preventing sexual abuse in Stopping domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland: a seven year strategy (PDF) (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and Department of Justice, 2016).

The strategy has five strands.

- Driving change through co-operation and leadership.
- Prevention and early intervention.
- Delivering change through responsive services.
- Support for victims of domestic and/or sexual violence and abuse.
- Protection and justice.

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