

Children and Domestic Violence: Its Impacts and Links with Woman Abuse

Presented by *Linda Regan* at the *Impact of Domestic Violence on Children* Conference, London, October 2001.

What I have been asked to do here is to discuss what is known about the impact on children of living with domestic violence and the links between abuse of mothers and abuse of children. What I want to emphasise before I start is that you cannot separate out issues for children totally from those that pertain to their mothers/carers and their relationships with their fathers or male carers. I will give you an overview of what we know from research which has looked directly at domestic violence in relation to children, but want later to turn briefly to contextualising this information.

In the study completed last year, which we undertook as part of a team which included Audrey Mullender at University of Warwick, Gill Hague and Ellen Malos from University of Bristol and Umme Imam from Durham, titled 'Children's Needs, Coping Strategies and Understanding of Woman Abuse', we interviewed 45 children who had lived with domestic violence. Fifteen of the families were contacted through a refuge and 10 through outreach or support groups. We wanted to ensure that part of our sample included children who had never spent time in a refuge so that we could explore whether there were differences between them and children who had spent time in a refuge. In other words, are some of the observed effects in earlier research the result of the upheaval involved in moving to a refuge? The gender split was relatively even but we deliberately over sampled children from ethnic minorities to counter the lack of these children included in earlier research. We also had a high number of sibling groups because we wanted to look at the differences between children in the same family. Our primary interest was in reflecting children's perceptions, their actions and their comments and opinions. The range of experience within the sample was extremely broad, with some children having lived with domestic violence for long periods and others for short periods, some had had to leave their homes lots of times for safety, others only once or none at all. This variety in the experiences of the children was very revealing in lots of ways but it also meant that doing much more than just describing their experiences was very difficult. The numbers in each possible analytic group were just too small. That said, most of our findings are very similar to those of earlier studies.

I am going to just discuss some of the major findings from our interviews with these children. The study itself has information gained from interviews with mothers, workers, and the results from a questionnaire survey with children aged 8 to 16 in schools.

Awareness:

We found, as have other studies, that the children were aware of what was happening in their households. Some children were able to reflect on their limited awareness when they were younger, and their gradual realisation of what was actually happening. The range of awareness from knowing that something was wrong to full understanding, as you would expect was linked to age and to what they actually saw. This finding is important because so often mothers, true too in our mothers, believe that they have managed to hide what is happening from the children.

Safety:

A major impact of living with domestic violence was on these children's sense of safety and the actions they took to protect themselves from what was happening. Some locked themselves in their bedrooms or hid under bedclothes, some left the house. Where they could not get away, they attempted to shut out what was happening, and importantly - a demonstration of the fear these children lived with - they kept very still so as not to draw attention to themselves.

Fear:

Some of the children reported effects which we would expect to find in those living with fear on a daily basis - what some have referred to as living with domestic terrorism - sleeplessness, bed-wetting, nightmares. For some, these effects were long lasting and required some level of professional intervention. Where the children no longer had any contact with the perpetrator they felt safe and freedom from fear and the opportunity to form a better relationship with their mothers were notable gains for many. However, where contact was ongoing the level of fear, although reduced, was still present and the children reported feelings of insecurity and of not being safe.

Loss:

The sense of displacement and loss that fleeing from violence produces should not be underestimated. Loss of friends, school, personal belongings, pets, etc. Children resented hugely having to leave their home, possessions, pets, friends - literally everything that gave their daily lives structure, meaning and consistency - in order to be safe. This entirely justified resentment (children rightly ask why should they have to leave everything when they have done nothing wrong), expanded into anger and rage when the relative safety they had found, and the limited comfort of reconstructed daily routines, was disrupted yet again by the abusive man's actions, through his on-going attempts at contact, during post-separation contact or where the family had reunited.

These are the some of the main effects of domestic violence on children found in earlier research:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Internalised distress: | depression;
withdrawal;
anxiety/fear; |
| Externalised distress: | aggression;
difficult behaviour; |
| Stress indicators: | problems with sleeping;
problems with eating;
problems with toileting;
lower achievement at school;
truanting;
drug/alcohol abuse. |

All of these effects were found in our sample of children. Mothers tended to emphasise the psychological impacts that have been reported elsewhere in the literature (Jaffe et al, McGee, 2000): becoming withdrawn; fearfulness and anxiety; nightmares and disturbed sleep; becoming overly compliant or aggressive (both seen by mothers as applying equally to boys and girls). The accounts of developmental delays and withdrawal were most noticeable when mothers discussed

younger children, especially those whose early childhood involved extensive violence and/or periods when they were depressed and hopeless, and so unable to mitigate distress and anxiety. As I said earlier, our sample is not large enough to do anything other than report these observations - and there are questions we still need to look at in more detail. So it's possible that as children grow and develop they are able to find ways to cope more effectively, but equally it may be that being born into a household where domestic violence is ongoing and extensive has greater impacts, especially the possibility that this may be a background factor in diagnoses of 'failure to thrive'.

Very little of the earlier research has looked at how children decide if and when to intervene and much of the advice to children, and the development of safety planning advises children not to intervene, because they run the risk of being hurt themselves. Although this might be sensible advice, it is advice in the abstract. Children's decision making about intervening is entirely dependent on the context at the time - both what they think is going on, and their own assessment of what they can do and what effect that might have. Half of the children in our sample had directly intervened to protect their mother and half had not. Unsurprisingly older children, and in the majority, girls, were more likely to have intervened, and the most of those who had not intervened were under 12 at the time of the interview. Many children explained their choice not to intervene in terms of age and were clear what was or was not possible for them to do at the age when they were living with the violence. What is interesting is what intervention meant for these children, although often it is thought of as involving physically placing themselves between the adults, or seeking help, what these children most often did was to shout, to try to distract the perpetrator's attention and hopefully interrupt a particular assault. This method of intervening limited the risk of violence to these children (although not always), and also hopefully tried to make the man think and reflect on what he was doing.

One of the aims of this research project was to explore children's experiences and assessments of service provision and what they thought children need. When asked who they got the most support from, children invariably saw their mothers and/or siblings providing this; although almost half the children reported not talking to either their mothers or siblings about the abuse whilst it was occurring. A close second to mothers came specialist provision such as refuges/shelters and community domestic violence projects. Only three children mentioned a statutory worker: one a police officer, one a social worker and one a teacher. The significance of refuges/shelters and specialist services deserves note here, since those children with the most positive experiences always talked about the importance of being able to talk with other children who had shared your experience. When asked what children living with domestic violence need our sample of children were astonishingly clear and consistent. The most commonly cited need was for safety, closely followed by someone to talk to.

In terms of differences between siblings, being older meant that children had more experience of abuse, but also more knowledge and resources to draw on to both make sense of what was happening and to protect themselves physically and emotionally. Being younger meant the reverse. Whilst siblings share many things, our interviews made clear the importance of each child being able to explore memories and feelings. What featured strongly in one child's account was less significant for their brother or sister. Older children saw more, were more likely to have intervened at some point, and developed (in the main) a heightened sense of responsibility towards

their mother and siblings, and with some notable exceptions appeared to have sustained less damage.

Finally we can say that three elements appeared to play a part (probably in interaction) in the lives of the families who had coped less well, and none of these elements should be surprising:

- frequent violence over a long time;
- multiple moves/disruption;
- severe depletion of the mothers physical and emotional resources.

To summarise, our study clearly demonstrates the negative impacts of living with domestic violence and the disruption in children's lives by trying to end it. The emotional and psychological effects, as well as physical symptoms were all described by children in their own words. However, importantly children could also describe the way they coped, employing a wide range of coping strategies and what they wanted was to be involved in the process of ending the violence. We also found that children perceived professionals, including court welfare officers and social workers, as either ignoring or disbelieving their wishes and understandings of their situations.

Our findings reinforce those from a study on children living in refuges in the UK 'Children, Domestic Violence and Refuges: A Study of Needs and Responses', which demonstrated that while children may be severely traumatised, they often also demonstrate remarkable strengths and resilience, develop wide-ranging coping strategies and also that there is no one set of effects or responses. That study found that children respond in a wide variety of ways which may include increased aggression, withdrawal, school problems, anxiety, grief, insomnia, loss of confidence and psychological and behavioural difficulties. Caroline McGee's work for the Child Protection Research Group of the NSPCC, published as 'Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence' comes to very similar conclusions as both ours and the refuge study and reinforces the findings of the NCH Action for Children study based on interviews with mothers. All of that work builds on that done by internationally known researchers in this field such as Jaffe, Hughes, Finkelhor, Cummings etc.

What we now have is a body of knowledge which is telling us clearly what the impacts on children are, but what the research also demonstrates is that the vast majority of these effects and responses either vanish or diminish once children are out of a violent situation, not subjected to ongoing fear, and, where necessary, receive the support they require to deal with the impacts on them.

It is the impacts of living with domestic violence on children that has led to an understanding that this is a form of child abuse, psychological child abuse. Child protection guidelines now recognise this, as does the guidance from the Lord Chancellor's Department. In New Zealand, they have taken this one step further, and enshrined this understanding of the impact of living with domestic violence on children in their legislation. Their 1995 Domestic Violence Act includes the following:

A person psychologically abuses a child if that person -

1. Causes or allows the child to see or hear the physical, sexual or psychological abuse of a person with whom the child has a domestic relationship; or
2. Puts the child, or allows the child to be put, at real risk of seeing or hearing that abuse occurring.

But the person who suffers the abuse is not regarded, for the purposes of this subsection, as having caused or allowed the child to see or hear the abuse, or, as the case may be, as having put the child, or allowed the child to be put, at risk of seeing or hearing the abuse.

Note here that we are not talking about direct physical abuse of the child, simply the effects of living in a household where they are exposed to domestic violence. We also now have ample evidence from research about actual physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children and abuse of women existing in the same household. I am not going to give you a summary of all the research, just highlight some findings:

- A study by the Social Services Department of the London Borough of Hackney indicated that at least one third of children on the Child Protection Register had mothers who were experiencing domestic violence.
- US studies have found evidence of abuse of the woman and one or more of the children in 40 - 60% of cases of domestic violence and similar figures have been found in UK studies (Falmer and Owen, 1995, Hester and Pearson, 1998, Murphy, 1991: Stark and Flitcraft, 1988).
- Violence frequently commences or escalates during pregnancy endangering the life and/or health of the unborn child (Mezey, 1997). A survey based in GP's waiting rooms reported 2% of women respondents having suffered a miscarriage which they said was the result of violence from their partners. (Stanko et al, 1998).
- Of 206 cases of child abuse, domestic violence was found in 40% of the cases of child sexual abuse, and 55% of the cases of physical abuse of the child. (Hiller and Goddard, 1990).
- In 3 out of 5 cases (child protection) where children had suffered physical abuse, neglect or emotional abuse, the mothers were also subject to violence by their male partners. (Farmer and Owen, 1995).
- 25% of women who had suffered domestic violence contacted through NCH Action for Children reported that their partners had physically assaulted the children. (NCH, 1997)

I could go on and on as more and more research is and has been done in this area. What is important is the understanding that agencies now have that at the least domestic violence is psychological and emotional abuse of a child and at the worst where mothers are being assaulted there is an up to 50% chance that the perpetrator is also assaulting the child or children.

It is important, particularly for practitioners that they recognise that domestic violence and child abuse are not necessarily separate co-existing forms of violence. There are particular aspects of abusive men's behaviour that defy categorisation as either child abuse or domestic violence. Part of what needs to be understood here is a double level of intentionality: that an act directed towards one individual is at the same time intended to affect another or others. Examples would include:

- hitting/threatening a woman in front of her children;
- humiliating a woman in front of her children;

and of course the reverse:

- hitting/threatening a child in front of their mother;
- humiliating a child in front of their mother

in order to keep and/or increase control over both.

An example here from one case that we know about. A man used a baby as a weapon to assault the woman - he hit her with the baby. Is this domestic violence, or is it child abuse and just who is

the man abusing, her, the baby, both of them? This behaviour only makes sense if you understand domestic violence as a pattern of coercive control and that actions directed at one individual are not necessarily designed to impact only on that individual.

It is worth bearing in mind when thinking about this issue that 44% of murders of women are committed by current or ex partners compared with 6% of murders of men. In almost all of these cases there is evidence of prior domestic violence. All of the research demonstrates that the point of leaving and post leaving are the most likely times when women and/or children are in danger of being killed by violent men.

Having pointed to what the research evidence is telling us about the links between child abuse and domestic violence we do think it is important for all professionals involved question their assumptions about fathering and fatherhood. We would suggest that it is a strange version of parenting which proposes that using repeated, and in all too many cases brutal, violence against a child's mother has no implications at all for fatherhood. And yet too often professionals, including some social workers, court officials, etc. separate out the man's actions against a woman from his relationship with the children. The research that has asked children about their relationships with their fathers, both pre and post separation argue strongly for professionals to make very explicit links here. The children are very clear that they should not be expected to live with violence and those old enough to voice an opinion, in the majority do not want ongoing contact with a violent parent. Where they do want to see their fathers, they want to see them without fear and threats. I am not going to deal with the research in this area, as Lorraine Radford will address this later this morning.

What I want to turn to now is the other side of this issue, the impact on mothers and mothering of living with domestic violence. What we know from women themselves tell us, and what is reflected in the interviews we did with mothers is that living with, attempting to protect yourself and your children from. The impacts of domestic violence can have profound and far-reaching effects on women's feelings and behaviour towards their children, as well as their sense of identity as mothers and as women. For professionals one of the most important things to bear in mind is that the presenting relationship between mother and child or children is not necessarily the relationship that existed prior to the violence or what could exist if they escape from the violence. If you can change the context you could change the relationship. But the woman must be given the help and support she needs to both escape the violence and to work through the consequences for both herself and her children. We have said on numerous occasions that one simple and key principle should underpin the work: woman protection is frequently the most effective form of child protection. That philosophy changes practice fundamentally and enables women to have more confidence that professionals understand the impacts of domestic violence on them, their children and the dynamics within the family.

References

Hague, Gill., Kelly, Liz., Malos, Ellen., Mullender, Audrey with Debbonaire, Thangham. (1995), Children, Domestic Violence and Refuges: A Study of Needs and Responses, Women's Aid Federation England.

Hester, M., Pearson, C. and Harwin, N. (1998) Making an Impact, NSPCC.

Hughes, H.M. (1988), 'Psychological and behavioural correlates of family violence in child witnesses and victims'. In *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 18, p.77-90.

Hughes, H.M. et al (1989), 'Witnessing spousal abuse and experiencing physical abuse: a 'double whammy'? In *Journal of Family Violence*, 4(2), pp.197-209.

Jaffe, Peter et al (1990), *Children of Battered Women*, Sage.

McGee, Caroline (2000), *Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Mullender, Audrey and Morley, Rebecca (eds.), (1994), *Children Living with Domestic Violence*, Whiting and Birch.

NCH Action for Children, (1994), *The Hidden Victims: Children and Domestic Violence*, NCH London.

Saunders, Alex, (1998), 'It hurts me too'. *Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence and Refuge Life*, Women's Aid Federation England, ChildLine and National Institute for Social Work.

©Linda Regan (2001)