

Children as victims of domestic violence

For many years, children have been considered to be witnesses of domestic violence but not victims. Gradually, opinions are changing and the true impact on children is now acknowledged. In this feature, **Suzanne O'Connell** outlines the latest research findings and how they're addressing the issue in some parts of the country.



Historically, when police were called out to a domestic violence incident, little attention would have been given to any children on the scene. The focus was usually on the direct victim, and, if there was no evident harm inflicted on the children, they might receive no attention at all.

However, thinking is changing around this. **'Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence'** is a report completed by Jane E.M. Callaghan and Joanne H. Alexander from the University of Northampton. It compares practices and the experiences of children in relation to domestic violence across the UK, Spain, Greece and Italy.

The researchers found that children and young people involved in domestic violence incidents weren't listened to sufficiently. Not enough account was taken of the strategies that children and young people had developed to help them cope.

What seems to be vital to note is that children are not purely onlookers when it comes to domestic violence. This research and other accounts have drawn attention to the profound impact that there is on those who are growing up in households where domestic violence takes place.

In this section of ECJ, we:

- take a closer look at the research; and
- consider how some parts of the country are directly addressing the issue.

This issue's Child file also provides some practical materials that schools might use to address the impact of domestic violence on their own pupils.

The research

The report emphasises the capacity to cope and the resilience shown by children who are living in violent households. This isn't to condone the violence but to try and raise awareness of the coping strategies that children used and how their experiences and needs might be better acknowledged and supported.

The report is based on individual interviews and photo elicitation activities. More than 100 children were interviewed and a number of key themes emerged:

- Children were reluctant to disclose. They learnt to manage what to disclose and to whom, cautious due to the possible implications.
- Children managed those they allowed into their 'family' and those they didn't. They had complex strategies for forming and maintaining relationships.

- Caring for others was an empowering activity.
- Children managed space well and created safe spaces for themselves and siblings. They knew those that were dangerous and when to keep away from shared spaces.
- Their experience of services and professionals were not generally positive.
- Children find complex ways of managing themselves and relationships. These are sometimes considered to be dysfunctional to clinically trained adults.

The report includes a number of recommendations. These include:

- It is important for all organisations to consider the impact of domestic violence on children and recognise them as victims.
- Children should have a voice in relation to their experiences and be involved in the co-production of policy and service.
- A common language across professionals needs to be developed and multi-agency working improved.



- Professionals need to be skilled in responding to children.
- Services available to children need to be more accessible and flexible.
- More finance and resources need to be made available.
- There is a need to raise awareness including campaigns to improve the image of women in society and the citizenship rights of children.

The children and young people were aware of the issues to do with disclosure and were careful about who they shared information with. The need to disclose can place professionals in difficult situations and, in some cases, is preventing young people from communicating their difficulties or seeking help.

It's important to note that the children interviewed were not passive recipients but actively managed their relationships. A perpetrating adult was often excluded from drawings of the 'family' as the child 're-framed' who the family consisted of.



Children did have some difficulties managing friendships, and some felt a need to keep their distance. They had also lost friends and had to move away which also put up barriers to them making new friends in the places they moved to. There was evidence of children being subjected to bullying.

Children managed spaces at home, keeping away from those shared areas they considered dangerous and finding their own bolt holes. They used favourite blankets and stress balls as comforters. On occasions, they were involved directly and intervened. Even when moved to a refuge, children often still did not feel safe and worried about the perpetrator finding them there.

Experiences of services were not very positive from the children's point of view. They felt that they weren't listened to and that they were used as leverage, with professionals suggesting that children would be taken into care if the parent didn't leave the partner.

The safeguarding response of the school was often seen as a breach of trust. They felt that talking to a teacher was potentially dangerous and that they were not trustworthy. When the police were called, they did not talk directly to them or explain what was going on. Children felt that where the perpetrator was taken away, they were released too quickly.

The report also looked at the impact of group therapy interventions on young people living in violent households. The groups used creative methods such as drawing, music and drama therapy techniques. These activities enabled children to be able to work through their family experiences.

The report recommends that children should be listened to, and it should be acknowledged that they are experts on their own situation. Practitioners need to be trained in listening to what children have to say and services need to be more accessible at an early stage when problems are emerging.



Operation Encompass

Operation Encompass was originally developed in Plymouth due to the concerns raised by a local headteacher, Elisabeth Carney-Haworth, and her husband, Sergeant David Carney-Haworth. Due to their different roles, they could see that information was not being received in schools about incidents of domestic violence as quickly as it should be.

The main principle of the strategy is that of early reporting. Each school has a key worker as a point of contact, and this key worker is contacted by the police the day after an incident has taken place before 9.00am. The school can then prepare for the arrival of the child and apply the strategies that they think will be most appropriate.

The school can either offer:

- overt support – e.g. asking the child if they're ok and if they need anything
- silent support – a key individual keeps an eye on the child but might not say anything specifically to them.

Initially, the approach was trialled with 14 schools in the Plymouth area. Training was given to a key member of staff, including:

- information about the impact of domestic abuse
- the implications of the key adult receiving information from the police
- the types of support available to be given to children.

This training is important to the success of the project, as originally there had been concerns about data protection. Having one key person who receives information removes this as an issue.

Having the information available does not necessarily mean that any action is taken. Depending upon the individual child, family and circumstances, staff at the school might only monitor the pupil. It also makes a difference to relationships with parents. Parents know that any incident will have been reported to the school and that can change the dialogue between the school and the parent. Parents are more likely to come to the school and discuss what's happened.

The word is spreading

This approach has gradually spread and is now flourishing in many parts of the country. Last year, Merseyside police launched Operation Encompass and recently posted that it had supported over 3,000 children. The approach has also recently been launched by Cheshire police and West Mercia police too.

On 1 October, Elisabeth and David were invited as keynote speakers at Cleveland's Police Force launch. On their return journey, they were invited to present Operation Encompass to North Yorkshire's Chief Constable, local police and crime commissioners, chairs of the Local Children's Safeguarding Boards and Council members. Interest is growing and they are delighted to see the approach gradually reaching out to and supporting more young people.

It's not just in the UK that Operation Encompass is creating interest. The Augeo charity in the Netherlands recently visited as the launch of Operation Encompass is imminent in the Hague. The approach is being researched by two doctors of criminology from Gateshead University who are intending to identify the impact it has.

Speaking to The Herald, Chief Constable Cheer of Cleveland Police said after the launch: 'I don't understand why we weren't doing this earlier. It's one of the most poignant examples of the good we can do when we all work together and cut through the bureaucracy. People need to stop listening to the naysayers and just get on with it.'

For more information on Operation Encompass, visit: www.operationencompass.org.

■ See this issue's Child file for further information and materials on raising staff awareness of the impact of domestic violence on children.