

Children & Domestic Abuse

831,000 children in England are living in households with domestic abuse, children are also victims of domestic abuse, either directly or indirectly through living in an unsafe and frightening environment. It is crucial that they are safeguarded and protected.

- Two in five children (41%) in families where there is domestic abuse have been living with that abuse since they were born and by the time they start school, at least one child in every class will have been living with domestic abuse since they were born.
- Domestic abuse often begins or escalates during pregnancy. 1 in 3 pregnant women experience domestic abuse ([NHS, 2023](#)).
- 20% of children have lived with domestic abuse at home and 1 in 5 young women experience abuse in their own dating relationships.

The Domestic Abuse act recognises children as victims in their own right as they 'see or hear, or experience the effect of, the abuse'. The act acknowledges that a wide range of family members will be considered to be "relatives" that can perpetrate and be victims of abuse. Abuse by family members also encompasses forced marriage, "honour"-based abuse and female genital mutilation. Young people in particular may be at an increased risk of abuse by family members and this may especially be the case if they belong to a marginalised group.



How Do Children Experience Abuse?

- Seeing a parent assaulted physically, sexually, emotionally
- Hearing loud conflict and violence
- Picking up on a tense atmosphere
- Learning about what happened to a parent victim/survivor
- Being used by an abusive parent as part of the abuse
- Reduced space/permission to simply be a child
- Deprivation / neglect / isolation / secrecy
- Court proceedings/abuse taking place in contact sessions

A parent's ability to look after their children is often undermined by the abuse of the perpetrator. Perpetrators use many tactics in order to do this, including:

- Disguised compliance, missing or cancelling appointments, non-attendance, playing different professionals off against one another
- Making false allegations against victims and convincing professionals that their controlling tactics are for the victim/children's own safety
- Using the courts to continue abuse - not turning up to court dates, sending unnecessary and repeated legal letters and making threats around contact
- Making counter-allegations against the victim
- Exploiting interpretations of religion or faith to maintain control of victims and perpetuate harm
- Using children as a form of control – e.g. access visits, seeking to manipulate children's feelings towards ex-partner
- Attempting to interfere with a police investigation, including attempting to undermine the victim's statements by claiming they are mentally ill
- Telling the victim that they will not be believed because they have mental health issues/learning difficulties/disabilities/issues with substance abuse
- Using threats in order to manipulate the victim
- Manipulating the victim's immigration status including withholding ID, passports/visas from victims, lying about their status, purposely letting a victim's visa lapse
- Direct interference with parenting (preventing them from going to child etc).

How Do Children Experience Abuse?

Trauma is an event or series of events such as abuse, maltreatment, neglect or tragedy that causes a profound experience of helplessness leading to terror.

- Trauma can be via acts of commission (abuse) or omission (absence of love, safety, attachment)
- The child is powerless and can't change the continually frightening experience
- As they often can't use words – they respond subconsciously via behaviour and emotions which can be easily misdiagnosed
- Trauma is not an event, but rather a response. Our body has scripts that it follows when we face danger/threat, some may be from when we were pre-verbal children.

[This article offers a brilliant explanation of developmental trauma.](#)

It is easy to feel triggered by a child's 'big emotions'. We need to become 'feelings detectives' and understand that difficult behaviours are also strategies that children use to regulate their mind, body, and emotions. However, parents need to be able to emotionally regulate themselves first before they can properly respond to, and support, their child.

One of the most helpful ways to move children anxiety states to their calmer 'thinking brain' is patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity.

[EXamples of these simple brainstem calming activities can be found here.](#)

