The impact of domestic abuse on babies and young children

Brining Domestic Abuse into the Light

• Domestic violence has a devastating impact on children and young people that can last into adulthood
• One in seven (14.2%) children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic abuse at some point in their childhood
• A study of 139 overview reports from Serious Case Reviews (a SCR takes place after a child dies or is seriously injured and abuse or neglect is thought to have been involved) found that about two-thirds (63%) of cases featured domestic abuse

For a child the effects of controlling, coercive behaviours, abuse and violence lasts a LIFETIME.
Too young to know?

It is a common misperception that infants and toddlers are too young to remember or be impacted by domestic violence, but the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study tells us that what happens early in life matters.

Research in neuroscience (brain and nervous system) tells us that infants and toddlers are most vulnerable, because trauma that occurs during this stage impacts a child’s entire system, including those systems that help infants build capacity for self regulation.
Children's experiences of domestic violence

• Studies show that far from watching passively, children experience the abuse with all of their senses.
• Children may not always observe the abusive behaviours (and in many instances the abuse is manifested in psychological and controlling behaviour by the perpetrator) but they are still aware that the abuse is happening.

How are children exposed to domestic abuse?

• Children are not just "witnesses" to events in their homes.
• Children living with conflict and abuse will actively interpret, predict, assess their roles in causing a "fight," worry about the consequences, engage in problem solving, and/or take measures to protect themselves or siblings, both physically and emotionally.

Some national statistics

• 950,000 children across the UK are affected by domestic abuse, either directly as victims of violence, or indirectly in terms of witnessing violence.
• 140,000 children live in households where there is high-risk domestic abuse.
• 64% of high and medium risk victims have children, on average 2 each.
• A quarter (25%) of children in high-risk domestic abuse households are under 3 years old. On average, high-risk abuse has been going on for 2.6 years, meaning these children are living with abuse for most of their life.
• 62% of children living in domestic abuse households are directly harmed by the perpetrator of the abuse, in addition to the harm caused by witnessing the abuse of others.
• Nearly one in three women who suffer from domestic abuse during their lifetime, report that the first incidence of violence happened while they were pregnant.
### Does it really happen in families with young children in Shropshire?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Band</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 4</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 9</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 14</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15+</td>
<td>99</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Every child is unique.
• Even children in the same family are affected in different ways, depending upon factors such as age, gender, relationship to the abuser and role in the family.

• Children’s age and developmental stage is a vital factor often not taken into account by mainstream services, particularly with children under three.

• Research has shown that infants as young as one year old can experience trauma symptoms as a result of witnessing domestic violence (Bogat, G.A., 2005).

• Symptoms may include eating problems, sleep disturbances, lack of normal responsiveness to adults, mood disturbances and problems interacting with peers and adults.

• Clinical reports indicate these babies often have poor health, poor sleeping habits or irritability, and exhibit high rates of screaming and crying (NSPCC, 2012).

I get picked on all the time – it feels like it’s my fault they argue.

I don’t feel like eating….. I’m just not hungry… if I eat I feel sick.

I’m scared to go to sleep … the noises frighten me!

So what?

• Children who grow up in a family where there is domestic abuse learn powerful lessons about the use of control, intimidation and force in relationships.

• For them, aggression is part of everyday life and that it is acceptable to shout at and hit other people.

• This can make it very confusing and difficult when children are in nursery settings where this behaviour is not seen as acceptable.

• Children who live with domestic abuse may not experience positive relationships being modelled.

• This can make it hard for either parent to be consistently physically or emotionally available for the child, resulting in the family being a very frightening place at times.
Common Reactions

- Sadness: why is this happening again?
- Confusion: why doesn’t Mum just kick him out?
- Concern: Mum is going to get really hurt one day
- Frustration: I have problems too, but no one seems to care
- Isolation: I can’t talk to anyone about this
- Guilt: I could have done something to prevent this
- Fear: he might turn on me next or hurt me
- Anxiety: is this what my future relationships will be like?
- Embarrassment: other families don’t do this
- Resignation: this is never going to stop
- Vengeful: I wish he would die or get hit by a bus
- Worthlessness: if they really cared about me, they would stop this
- Helplessness: there is nothing I can do to help
- Anger: why does Mum let him treat her (and me) so badly?
- Worry: I don’t want to move so I hope Mum puts up with it
- Panic: how will we afford to live or eat if Mum leaves him?

The Child’s Response

- It is extremely distressing for children to see or hear significant adults being physically and verbally abusive to each other
- It threatens their sense of security and the stability that is usually found within the family
- Children may react in different ways to living with domestic abuse, depending on their age and the external support available to them. They may feel that they are to blame
- Between the ages of two and three years old, children develop ‘magical thinking’, where they feel all powerful and that everything that happens is down to them. For example, “If I hadn’t been naughty then daddy wouldn’t be cross and wouldn’t have shouted at mummy”
- The child’s physical, emotional and social development can be affected in several ways. This can include irritability, sleep problems, emotional distress, fear of being alone, immature behaviour, and problems with toilet training
- Also, it’s a crime to beat a woman.
How can practitioners help children and their families?

• Provide a calm and reassuring environment for the child
• Provide opportunities for them to be in a caring role with a doll or other child to activate good feelings about themselves and show them how to nurture
• Offer a predictable and consistent routine
• Provide lots of praise, encouragement and reassurance
• Encourage them to have a transitional object to make them feel safe and secure
• Offer support and signpost parents to external agencies if appropriate
• Report any significant concerns, as with any child protection issue

Children see, children do – the importance of role models

Services and support in Shropshire include

• MARAC
• Freedom Programme and other programmes
  ➢ 01743 250485
• Shropshire Domestic Violence Service
  ➢ Tel: 0300 303 1191
  ➢ Email: soca@shropsdvas.org.uk
  ➢ Web: shropsdvas.org.uk
  ➢ The referral line is open Mon-Fri 9am-5pm
• West Mercia Women’s Aid IDVA service
  ➢ www.westmerciawomensaid.org

Shropshire Domestic Violence Service

West Mercia Women’s Aid IDVA service
For every child subject to a child protection plan or on a child protection register, we estimate another 8 children have suffered maltreatment.


What to say to children

- You have a special strength inside you.
- I hear you.
- I believe you.
- It isn’t your fault.
- A child is never responsible for the actions of an adult.
- It’s not your job to stop it.
- You have had to overcome obstacles that other children never had to.
- You are a special strength.
- I believe you.