

# A summary of the multi-agency safeguarding and domestic abuse briefing

**CASPAR briefing providing an overview of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's briefing on learning from rapid reviews and child practice reviews about domestic abuse.**

**October 2022**

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## Background to the briefing

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel commissioned a thematic analysis of rapid reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews in England where domestic abuse featured. A literature review of recent research and evidence on domestic abuse and child protection was also carried out.

The aim of the briefing was to develop understanding of the implications of domestic abuse for child protection practice, with a focus on:

- understanding the effectiveness of multi-agency practice in safeguarding children where domestic abuse has contributed to serious incidents
- learning from literature what works in protecting children from domestic abuse
- evaluating how services and practice might be improved to support children as victims of domestic abuse.

## Multi-agency join-up in safeguarding children

Of the reviews looked at, the analysis found no evidence of a coordinated multi-agency response to domestic abuse. Very few specialist domestic abuse services were

referenced in the reviews, and no specialist domestic abuse practitioners appeared as members of review panels.

### **Lack of understanding of domestic abuse**

- Practitioners often used the term 'domestic abuse' without clarifying the nature and impact of the abuse involved. This led to a lack of understanding about the risks posed to children and non-abusing parents.

### **No 'whole system' response**

- Evidence of multi-agency working only occurred in cases deemed 'high risk'.
- Multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) were designed and used to respond to adults who had experienced domestic abuse. There was little evidence of them being used to effectively coordinate responses for children.
- Where the need for specialist domestic abuse support was referenced, it was only in the context of signposting adults to services.

### **Distinguishing domestic abuse from 'parental conflict'**

- An overemphasis on physical violence as the primary indicator of domestic abuse meant that non-physical abuse was viewed as less serious and not responded to appropriately.
- 'Low level' incidents of domestic abuse were often described as 'parental conflict'. This led to inappropriate interventions being used to manage risk in the household.

## Children as victims of domestic abuse

### **Identifying children as being directly harmed by domestic abuse**

- Domestic abuse experienced by children was described as 'emotional harm' or 'neglect', rather than as direct harm from domestic abuse.
- Responses focused on supporting the non-abusive parent to protect their child from the behaviour of the perpetrator, rather than directly addressing the harm caused to the child.
- The change in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which recognised children as victims of domestic abuse, was sometimes seen as a legal issue which required further guidance to implement, rather than a cultural issue with immediate implications for how practitioners understand children's experiences.

### **Impact of abusers' behaviours on children and young people**

The analysis identified differences in the impact domestic abuse had at different ages and stages of childhood.

- Nearly all reviews relating to children pre-birth, in infancy, or pre-school involved death or serious injury.
- Co-occurring issues, such as sexual abuse, were more common in reviews about older children or adolescents.

There was a lack of understanding and attention given to how children were able to recover from abuse.

- A lack of funding led to a focus on crisis support, ending at the point at which a family were deemed 'safe'.
- There was a lack of knowledge of the long-term impacts of domestic abuse on children.
- Practitioners struggled to identify how early traumatic experiences had an ongoing impact on children.

### Children's voices and their experiences of services

- A key issue identified by the review was that practitioners involved in domestic abuse incidents, particularly the police, did not speak directly with children to gain their perspective.
- However, there was a significant positive impact when practitioners engaged directly with children in a supportive way and considered their wellbeing.

### The impact of COVID-19 lockdown

- The restrictions in place due to the pandemic response meant that perpetrators of domestic abuse were able to continue their controlling and coercive behaviour.
- Children were also isolated from wider family and support services, and children who were experiencing abuse were not always able to speak freely during virtual meetings with practitioners.

## The needs of children, young people, and families from diverse backgrounds

The analysis and literature review found that there was a significant lack of recording, understanding and research into the needs of children, parents, and carers from diverse backgrounds.

- A third of the reviews did not record the child's ethnicity.

- In nearly all cases, key men in a child's life, such as a father, stepfather, or mother's partner, were perpetrators of domestic abuse, yet these men went 'unseen' by practitioners.
- It was identified that there was a lack of research into the experiences of disabled adults and children and domestic abuse, despite evidence that disabled adults are more likely to experience domestic abuse and have increased barriers to accessing support.
- Domestic abuse victims who had an insecure immigration status were less likely to report their abuse due to fear that statutory services would remove their child or place them with someone with a secure immigration status, which may be the perpetrator.

## Core practice principles

The briefing recommends an interlinked and interdependent practice approach in relation to domestic abuse work with children and young people and their families based on four core principles.

### Domestic abuse informed

- The source of the harm is named, and the behaviours of the abuser are described.
- The impact on the parents and children experiencing abuse is identified.
- The focus of work is on the continuous patterns of behaviour, rather than each individual incident.

### Trauma-informed

- Those seeking help are responded to in a non-judgemental, non-blaming and strengths-based way.
- Practitioners work towards building trusting relationships and prioritise avoiding re-traumatisation.

### Intersectional

- Agencies and practitioners seek to understand how the characteristics and identities of the people they help lead to discrimination and oppression.
- Practitioners aim to reflect and be aware of their own values and biases and how these views may impact their work.

### Whole family

- The support and safety of the child and the non-abusing parent is prioritised.

- The impact of abuse on the care given by the non-abusing parent is taken into consideration.
- The abusive parent's harmful behaviours are not separated from the impact they have on the children in their care.
- Abusive behaviours are challenged and there is a focus on specialist support and behaviour change.

## Practice and intervention

### Common practice and processes within the safeguarding system

- Children's concerns can be better addressed through a move away from 'front door' arrangements and 'managing demand' responses, such as in multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH), towards a focus on a systematic and child-centred approach.
- The communication of concerns from school safeguarding leads to other agencies could be done through a notification system, such as Operation Encompass.
- Domestic abuse partnerships and boards need a clear role and avenue of reporting, and connections with other agencies and partnerships.

### Child and family domestic abuse projects

- The briefing identified projects, tools, guidance and examples of local child safeguarding partnership responses that influenced actions and improved outcomes for children and families. However, implementation levels varied across the country.

## Recommendations

### Roles and responses

- Child safeguarding partners should recognise their central role in the local response to domestic abuse.
- A domestic abuse-informed response should be embedded in training across all safeguarding partners.
- Local partnerships should look at local safeguarding systems and responses as a whole and move beyond the need to 'manage demand'.

## Involvement

- Local child safeguarding and domestic abuse partnerships should involve specialist domestic abuse services and experts by experience in the development of strategies and local responses.
- Rapid reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews should involve local specialist domestic abuse services in every review where domestic abuse is mentioned.

## Information sharing and record keeping

- Safeguarding partners need to establish stronger working relationships and clear information sharing protocols with specialist domestic abuse services.
- Safeguarding partners must commission domestic abuse services and ensure all staff have a robust understanding of what the domestic abuse support system is in their area.
- Rapid reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews should identify and record the protected characteristics of each family member to ensure that families' diverse needs and experiences are identified and analysed appropriately.

## References

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022) **Multi-agency safeguarding and domestic abuse paper**. [Accessed 12/10/2022].

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-agency-safeguarding-and-domestic-abuse-paper>>

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