

Domestic Abuse & Children's Education

Scottish Women's Aid

Educational Impact of domestic abuse

Many factors impact upon a child's education, & it is hard to disentangle these. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of children in Scotland live with domestic abuse each year & it is important that school staff have an awareness of possible issues for children arising from their experiences.

Children respond to living with domestic abuse as individuals (as detailed in Children, Young People & Domestic Abuse briefing) & are entitled to support and understanding in their own right. However, their experience of living with domestic abuse may mean they are:

constantly tired/unable to concentrate at school due to lack of sleep or anxiety.

persistently late for the same reasons or because their mothers are also exhausted.

forced to wait at home due to injury to themselves or their mother or threats from the abuser.

choosing to wait at home to care for their mother &/or siblings, &/or trying to protect them from abuse.

depressed and lacking in self-esteem

displaying emotional &/or behavioural difficulties at school.

'making trouble' in an attempt to unite their parents over their behaviour.

excluded from school

There may, of course, be other reasons for such behaviour but domestic abuse is a possible factor.

School Placements Scottish Women's Aid welcomes the recent motion on Placement for Vulnerable Children which was passed at the 1998 EIS AGM. Over 4,000 children & young people lived in Women's Aid refuges in Scotland in 98/99 & the majority had to change schools as a result in order to ensure that they & their mothers remained safe from further abuse. Many thousands more lived in temporary local authority accommodation or with friends & family in areas where no refuge provision exists.

Children experiencing domestic abuse live in the catchment areas of ALL schools in Scotland, not only those with Women's Aid refuges nearby. All schools should strive to ensure that children living with or leaving domestic abuse have access to education. A survey of 1/3 of Women's Aid groups in Scotland (13) found that 6 had experienced difficulties in placing a child at a nearby school because the school roll was already full. Secondary placements were more difficult to obtain & could take 3 weeks to organise.

ALL ABOUT ME

I am 9 when it is my birthday. I have a borther and a mum that i live with. I started school when I was just 5 I was scared and I did'nt like it because it was loud but when I was in primary 2 it was'nt so loud. My best friend used to be Tracey but Alison is my friend now. I like primary 5 the best because Mrs Murray is the best teacher in the hole world. When we left we had to live in the refruge. It was nice and it is very big but the thing is I have to go to a diffrent school now and that is what i dont like about the refruge and i dont like the shower as well. When i grew up i want to be teacher but i might not.

N. age 9

Access to Information Schools have a particular role to play in ensuring that children & their mothers remain safe. This means having clear school policies & practices on contact with children by fathers & access to school records, in line with the Schools Pupil Records (Scotland) Regulations 1990 & Part 1 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Several Women's Aid groups have fed in particular concerns about lack of understanding amongst schools staff in relation to parental responsibilities & rights & access to information. There is particular uncertainty around the status of unmarried fathers & step-fathers. As a result, schools have, on occasion, unnecessarily endangered women & children by divulging information about children to abusive fathers.

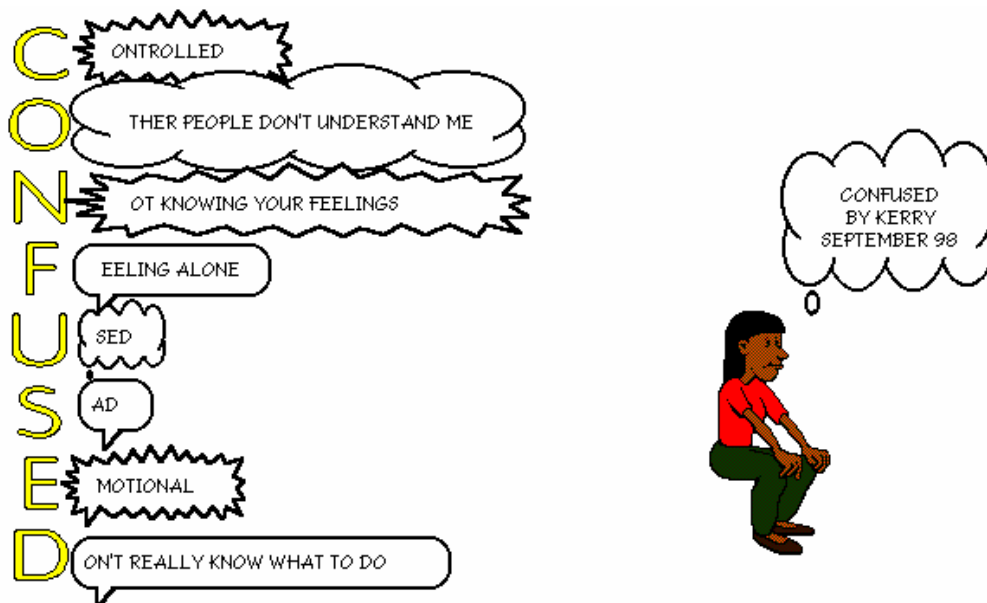
Many schools with close links to Women's Aid groups recognise that they have no legal obligation to give information to any caller over the phone & insist that requests are made in writing & substantiated by evidence of the individual's rights to obtain such information about a child. Some schools divert requests for information through the Education Department. Bearing in mind the risk of further abuse to women & children fleeing domestic violence, some automatically inform the child's mother whenever anyone asks for information about a child.



Changing Schools "Some children only have 1 school by I've had 4" J, age 12

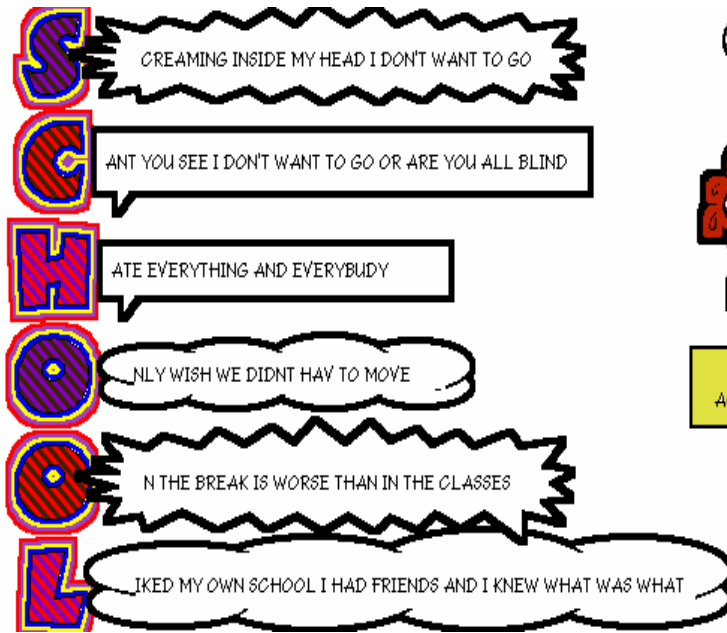
Over 4,000 children & young people lived in Women's Aid refuges last year. Many thousands will have lived in other forms of temporary accommodation. (local authority, family & friends) as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. Most of these children will have had to change school at least once in the effort to reach safety.

At a time of tremendous upheaval, it is very important to some children that they are able to attend the same school, where it is safe to do so, even if this is outwith the refuge/temporary accommodation catchment area. Local Authority practice varies in relation to exceptional travel arrangements to facilitate this. It tends to be easier to argue for Local Authority support where e.g. children are in 'key' years (P7 or studying for highers) or where children have special needs. Local Authorities which have offered assistance to children in refuge include Clackmannanshire (whose Ed. Dept. now gives the local Women's Aid group a limited emergency travel budget for school age children) & East Dunbartonshire (which provides taxis for children for up to a month. South Ayrshire council have also agreed to look at temporarily supporting such travel needs for 'homeless' school children (regardless of the cause).



New School Moving to a new school to escape domestic abuse often means that children lose the primary support of their friends. It can also mean standing out from the crowd because, for example, "I don't have the right uniform and everyone looks at me." or being left out or bullied for being new or different. Black and minority ethnic children and children with special needs may experience particular difficulties with bullying.

Academically, it can mean that "teachers get on your back when you don't know their stuff" or having to change subject options because they are not taught at the new school. Changing schools is particularly stressful for young people studying for exams.



BY A
AGE NEARLY 14

Homelessness and Education A 1998 Shelter/EIS report, Education, Homelessness & Poor Housing Report on a Survey of Directors of Education found that housing instability was considered generally more detrimental to children's education than the housing conditions themselves. Most Women's Aid groups in Scotland offer support to children living in refuge. Children's support workers listen to children, help them make sense of their experiences & promote self esteem. A number of Women's Aid groups offer structure support in partnership with schools &/or educational support services to young people experiencing particular difficulties at school. Women's Aid children's support workers should be recognised as valuable source of complimentary support, whilst acknowledging no single agency can address the range of issues facing many children experiencing domestic abuse. In refuge & other temporary accommodation, lack of space, particularly for older children & young people is a problem. Quiet space to do homework can be difficult to find since families share 1 or 2 rooms & often also share communal cooking & washing facilities with other families. Priority access for homeless children at after school or homework clubs, where these exist, is worth consideration.



Preventative Work Schools have a key role to play in encouraging preventative education with ALL children and young people on domestic abuse and related issues including gender inequality, respect in inter-personal relationships, human rights and self-esteem.

Recent research commissioned by the Zero Tolerance Campaign indicates that when asked simply if violence against a woman by her male partner was ever 'OK', one in five young men and one in ten young women thought it was. There is obviously a tremendous amount of work to be done in challenging attitudes to domestic abuse.

