

Involving Children and Young People in Research on Domestic Violence and Housing

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This article argues that a lack of research on domestic violence which engages with children and young people has led to a paucity of effective service provision for such young people. Methodological issues and ethical concerns involved in conducting research on sensitive topics such as domestic violence, together with presumptions relating to the social status of children in society, have limited the amount of empirical research which engages with this vulnerable group. The article discusses such issues in light of the experience of conducting a 12-month child-focused project. The importance of ascertaining children's views is demonstrated through new and important housing-related findings that were identified by the young people interviewed during this project.

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Introduction

Despite the attention given to the effects of domestic violence upon adult women, its impact upon children and young people has been comparatively neglected (Humphreys & Morley, 1994, p.2). However, children can be profoundly affected by domestic violence, whether or not they experience it 'directly' or as observers (Humphreys, 2000b, p.6; Humphreys *et al.*, 2000, p.3; Mullender *et al.*, 2002, p.207). As many as one in three women experience domestic violence and at least half of that group have children under the age of 16 living with them (Mirlees-Black, 1999). Also, between a third and a half of children whose mothers experience domestic violence are aware of the violence (The Cabinet Office, 1999). Finally, children who live with domestic violence are also at a significantly increased risk of abuse and, in some cases, death (Parkinson & Humphreys, 1998, p.149). However, the legal and policy response to these problems has operated upon a presumption that service provision

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for women who experience domestic violence is also sufficient to meet the needs of children and young people (Mullender & Morley, 1994, p.2; Parkinson & Humphreys, 1998, p.147; Humphreys *et al.*, 2000, p.2).

The invisibility of children who experience domestic violence stems from an apparent reluctance on the part of researchers to conduct child-focused qualitative research on this issue (Mullender *et al.*, 2002, p.2). Consequently, few studies have engaged with children and young people about their experiences of domestic violence (but see NCH Action for Children, 1994; Hague *et al.*, 1996; McGee, 2000; Mullender *et al.*, 2002, Gorin, 2004). This is despite significant efforts in family and social policy research more generally to involve and consult directly with children and young people about their views and experiences (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Smart *et al.*, 2001).

Empirical research on domestic violence remains focused on adult male violence towards women (Mullender & Morley, 1994, p.2). This emphasis can be partly explained by the methodological and ethical dilemmas surrounding confidentiality, anonymity, consent and related issues of access that can arise when conducting sensitive research with children and young people. As Humphreys states:

The ethics of researching/consulting about issues which are potentially distressing and where confidentiality issues are essential to maintain safety has often created barriers to hearing the stories of women escaping domestic violence. The issues for children are even more complex and sensitive and require not only the permission of the children, but also their mothers. (Humphreys, 2000, p.7)

Conducting sensitive research with children rather than adults raises additional dilemmas, primarily because of how children are viewed as a societal group. They are often seen as immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and acultural in comparison to adults (James & Prout, 1990, p.13). This has meant that: ‘... [R]ather than speaking for themselves, others have spoken on children’s behalf, with parents and other adults acting as children’s chief spokespersons ...’ (Brannen, 1999, p.143). Such views have operated alongside misguided paternalistic attempts to protect children, which have, ironically, served to further disenfranchise them and enhance their vulnerability (Prout, 2003, p.12; see also Smart, 2001, p.22).

However, recent research suggests that children and young people are highly competent commentators, capable of articulating their own views about living with domestic violence (Hague *et al.*, 1994; Mullender & Morley, 1994; James *et al.*, 1998, p.182; Parkinson & Humphreys, 1998, p.149; Humphreys *et al.*, 2000; Mullender *et al.*, 2002). There has been growing recognition that children and young people are social actors, with their own views, culture and perspectives, who are actively involved in the construction of their own lives and with different preoccupations to those of adults (James & Prout, 1990, p.4; James *et al.*, 1998, p.182).

The Rural Domestic Violence Project

During 2002, responding to this dearth of research, The Countryside Agency commissioned Save the Children UK, who employed our research team at The

University of Liverpool, to conduct a child-focused study on the service provision needs of children who experience domestic violence in rural areas. A specific rural focus for the project was chosen because of the lack of studies concentrating upon the geographical dynamics underpinning the availability and accessibility of domestic violence service provision (see Turner, 1997; Hicks, 1999). The aims of the project were to involve children and young people in the research in a participatory manner, to investigate service provision available for children and young people experiencing violence, to make concrete recommendations for change and to highlight good practice.

The research initially set out to interview children and young people in Warwickshire. However, in order to identify a greater number of potential participants, the geographical remit of the research was later extended to Herefordshire, Lancashire and Worcestershire. The research was conducted in three stages: the first involved a detailed review of the research, policy and legal framework for children and young people that underpins service provision in rural areas. This was followed by a postal and email questionnaire distributed to 300 service providers nationwide. The final and third stage of the research involved direct consultation with children and service providers. Nineteen children and young people aged between five and 16, and five parents, were asked about their experiences of domestic violence service provision in a rural context. Of these young people, eight were living in a refuge and the remaining 11 had either been former residents or had never lived in refuge accommodation. In addition, 39 interviews were conducted with service providers across a range of areas. These included refuges and health, criminal justice, education, social services, housing and non-governmental organisations. The difference between the number of children and young people interviewed compared to that of service providers resulted from methodological difficulties surrounding access and consent. These are discussed in detail in the next section of this article.

The article focuses on one key area of domestic violence service provision; housing. We asked children about their experiences of living in temporary accommodation, whether it had fulfilled their needs in both practical and emotional support terms and what could be done to improve service provision for them. The methodological challenges of involving children and young people in domestic violence research are discussed in the following section of this article. Following that, the key findings from our young respondents in relation to housing, which revealed a different range of issues from those raised by adults, are outlined. This is followed by the final section of the article, which focuses on refuge accommodation and shows how focusing on the views of children can help us to develop a different understanding of the purposes and effects of refuges.

Developing a Suitable Methodology for Engaging Children in Domestic Violence Research

One of the most significant issues when conducting domestic violence research which actively engages children is the need to develop methods through which children are

clearly able to express themselves. As our project demonstrated, developing these methods is an organic process which requires innovation and fast thinking (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 169). As methodological lessons were acquired during the process of the research, the methodology for the project was effectively piloted in tandem with the conduct of the research project.

In the project, the children ranged from ages five to 16. They had a wide range of abilities and mechanisms for expressing their views. This necessitated the use of a wide range of methods to elicit their views. These included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, vignettes and drawings. We drew on a range of social science and child psychology techniques. The use of methods such as focus groups, for example, can lessen the power imbalances between the adult researcher and child because of the support of peers present in this situation (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 190). Some of the younger children were most comfortable drawing pictures relating to their experiences and talking about them, while others were presented with vignettes of fictional situations in which the young person was asked to advise another young person experiencing domestic violence. Older children chose to be interviewed on a one-to-one basis.¹ The research 'interviews' with the children and young people were limited by time; in most cases, it was only possible to speak to them for an hour because of the difficulties of negotiating access around refuge activities and the school day as well as constraints on the research team's time.

Consent

With regards to research involving children, it has been commented (Greig & Taylor, 1991, p. 150) that similar considerations to those operating in relation to child consent to medical treatment should prevail. Children are considered able to consent to treatment, or to be '*Gillick*, competent', if it can be shown that they have sufficient understanding and intelligence to understand fully what is proposed.² In child-focused research, in addition to gaining the consent of the young person themselves, an extra hurdle must be overcome:

... [G]aining informed consent for children to participate in research often amounts in practice to gaining consent from adult gate-keepers such as parents and teachers. Social and legal rules position children as minors with few decision-making rights so that consent inevitably gets delegated to those who are deemed to have responsibility for children. (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 187)

In our project, consent was gained from the child or young person themselves and also their parent or guardian. The research project was clearly explained to the child in a leaflet designed specifically with young people in mind. This made clear that they could withdraw from the process at any time they wished, a point that was emphasised again before and after speaking to the young person. Unfortunately there will always be a danger with research involving children that, since they are subject to power relations at home, school and in other institutions, they may feel that they have to comply or consent through fear of sanction (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 187).

However, we found that children and young people were also able to assert themselves through the use of subtle methods of objecting to participation such as silence and disruptive behaviour. This places a responsibility on the researcher to be experienced enough to read these subtle signals in the ways in which children intend rather than expecting them to conform to adult standards and 'formally object' to participating any further in the research.

Related to the question of consent is the issue of whether to give child participants a payment or gift. There is no clear consensus on the ethics and appropriateness of this (Wiles *et al.*, 2004, p. 6). Discussion on this issue centres upon whether, if participants are paid, their consent to be involved in the research will be compromised. This is because payment may feel like an inducement to participate. This can impact on the voluntary, consensual nature of research participation (Wiles *et al.*, 2004, p. 6). In this research project, the research team, in agreement with Save the Children, gave each child who participated in the research a £5 gift voucher as a thank you token for participating. The young people had no knowledge of this before taking part in the research, thus nullifying any impact of payment on the interview itself.

Access through Proxies and Gatekeepers

Accessing young respondents who had experienced domestic violence was extremely problematic and it took us six months to access a relatively small sample group. A regular presence over time is needed when accessing children and young people, in order to build up a relationship of trust before the issue of interviews can even be broached (Mullender *et al.*, 2002, p. 10). Difficulties arose partially because of an unwillingness on the part of gatekeepers to issue an invitation to the children to participate in the project, an invitation which the child could then decide whether to accept. Also, the confines of research funding and tight timetables did not allow sufficient time for this process.

Potential gatekeepers were identified through exploratory interviews with service providers who worked directly with young people in the housing, education, social services, health, refuge and criminal justice sectors. Some gatekeepers allowed access, but many we approached would not do so due to a fear that it would compromise them professionally or negatively impact upon the progress they had already made with the children. Most of the children and young people were eventually accessed through refuges, as refuge staff had already built up a relationship of trust with them. Consequently, older boys were also harder to access than girls because many refuges have an age limit for boys (often 14) (see also Mullender *et al.*, 2004, p. 16).

Parents, too, were often extremely reluctant to allow access and to consent to their child participating in the research, fearing that the experience would upset their children (see also Mullender *et al.*, 2002, p. 27). Time, therefore, needed to be taken to ensure that potential gatekeepers and parents understood the safeguards operated by researchers, such as those relating to issues of consent and confidentiality, in order to enable them to fulfil their duty of protection towards the children in their care.

Confidentiality/Disclosure/Anonymity

In our research, confidentiality was imperative in order to protect children from potential reprisals from the abuser. However, the need to protect their perceived vulnerability also meant that absolute guarantees of confidentiality could not be given (James *et al.*, 1998, pp. 187–188, Roberts in Christensen & James, 2000, p. 237). As a research team we were obliged to conform to Save the Children's Child Protection Policy (Save the Children, 2002). Under this, any disclosure from a child which raised issues regarding possible abuse had to be reported back to Save the Children. This caveat to confidentiality when talking with children may mean that the researcher's hard work in building trust with the child proves fruitless (James *et al.*, 1998, pp. 187–188). However, effects on levels of trust can be mitigated by informing children of the obligation to disclose before interviewing them. In practice, this may also mean that some children, who want to disclose, see the obligation to disclose as liberating. The Socio-Legal Studies Association, of which all the research team were members, also gives guidance on confidentiality issues, stating that no unconditional guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity should ever be given (Socio-Legal Studies Association, 2005). However, good ethical practice dictates that when issues of concern arise these will be discussed with the child first before the disclosure takes place. Fortunately, in our research project no issues relating to further abuse occurred.

Due to the dangers associated with escaping domestic violence, maintaining the anonymity of the children and young people involved in the research through changing identifying features such as names and places was vital. As in our research, it is good ethical practice to clearly explain to children why their names cannot be included in any report or articles which are produced, otherwise they may feel that their contribution is unimportant or start to distrust the researcher (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 190).

Dissemination

The methods used to disseminate the findings of our project were as significant as those used to conduct the research. Eliciting, and integrating into the final report, the views of the young people we talked to during the project were important. It was equally vital to inform them of what was happening to 'their' report. However, most of our young people were from highly transient refugee populations and in need of secrecy regarding their new home. This meant that reporting back or involving them in dissemination activities proved difficult. We therefore utilised our gatekeepers or proxies to report back to the children, in order to ensure that their new home remained known to as few people as possible. We also utilised our consultation network, which operated throughout the project in an advisory capacity, to feed back the results and to ensure that the concerns of children and young people were heard. Nevertheless, one young person, Jade (aged 15), was involved in writing up the final report and came to the university to identify what she thought were the main issues for children. A young person was also involved in talking with the media about the

project findings. Clearly, if it had been possible, a more desirable situation would have been for more young people to be actively involved in the dissemination of the report.

Limitations

Our sample was limited in a number of ways. Firstly, it was limited in relation to geographical location, as it was only possible and/or strategically desirable to concentrate on three areas due to previous contacts established by Save the Children UK and time/funding restraints. Secondly, the difficulties of accessing young people who have experienced domestic violence meant that the range of experiences may be skewed towards those who have more effectively sought and obtained help; there are, of course, many more children who never get the help they need. Although the research did identify a number of agencies and refuges specifically targeting the needs of ethnic minority communities, the sample of young people also heavily favoured the experiences of white children. There is evidence to suggest that children from ethnic minorities can face specific difficulties in seeking help (Imam, 1994, p.188). The specific rural focus of the research also influenced the ethnicity of the sample, since fewer ethnic minorities tend to be clustered in rural England than in urban areas.

Applying a Qualitative Methodology to Domestic Violence Research with Children: Housing

While law and policy might suggest a clear commitment to accommodating children and young people, our research findings highlight a disparity between formal legal provision and the actual lived experiences of children and young people. Our interviews with 19 children revealed some new housing-related issues and also supported previous research findings in this area. Although the initial focus of the research project was much broader—ranging across issues such as education, and health and welfare—housing emerged as a critical feature of domestic violence service provision.

Housing is a key resource for children and young people who experience domestic violence. This is because domestic violence, together with poverty and social deprivation, can trigger homelessness among children and young people (Diaz, 2002; cf. Coombes, 2004). The UK government has also acknowledged the correlation between domestic violence and homelessness (DTLR, 2000, p.3). Indeed, in 2004 approximately 13% of all homeless households cited domestic violence as the reason for the loss of their last settled home (ODPM, 2005, p.15). However, children and young people have rarely been consulted about housing policy which affects them and their access to housing services has historically been, and still is, mediated through their parent or the state (Cowan & Dearden, 2002, pp.166–167).

Becoming Homeless

The experience of leaving home to escape from domestic violence and become homeless can be traumatic for children (Hague & Malos, 1994, p. 124). Women are often forced to make a sudden decision to leave the family home. There is often no time to explain the situation clearly to children, with the result that they may feel confused, insecure and angry about having to move. Jack (aged 11) described what happened to him:

It just happened all of a sudden because my dad came home one night and then—well there's more bits than this. I'm telling you—and then he got really angry ... and everything so we got in a massive argument and then we just packed ... well, we just went.

Jade (aged 15) was forced to leave behind everything when her mother left her abusive husband:

... [I]t all got too much for her and so she had to leave and then we had to leave ... we had to leave our pets and stuff and clothes and personal belongings which we had.

Children often have no choice but to leave home (Hague & Malos, 1994, p. 122), in spite of legal provisions under which children and young people are afforded the right to remain in their family home and be safe from the abuser. Under the provisions of The Family Law Act 1996, s.33, a court is able to grant an occupation order of a family home for the benefit of an entitled person (a spouse or cohabitant) and is also able to grant non-molestation orders under s.42 of The Family Law Act 1996. Under s.47, powers of arrest must be attached to the order unless the court thinks that any applicant or relevant child will be adequately protected without it. Significantly, when granting any order under The Family Law Act 1996, under s.33(6) the court must examine the likely effect of any order or lack of order on the health, safety or well being of the parties and any relevant child. For some families, utilizing these legal remedies and remaining in the family home is a realistic and safe option. For others, it is not. Thus, despite these provisions, some 57% children and their mothers are still forced to leave their homes as the protection afforded by occupation orders is still not sufficient to safeguard them from further abuse. Those who enter refuges rarely use occupation orders, since they wish to be re-housed to where the abuser cannot trace them (Barron, 2002, p. 7).

Local Authority Homelessness Duties

Local authorities are under increased statutory obligation to give priority in providing accommodation to those people who are unintentionally homeless and in 'priority need' as a result of domestic violence under s.167(2) of The Housing Act 1996 (as amended by The Homelessness Act 2002). Firstly, the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 section 6 amended The Housing Act 1996 and extended the categories of priority need to include those

vulnerable as a result of fleeing violence or threats of violence. Secondly, an additional hurdle of having to have a local connection to the local authority area in which the applicant is applying for housing, which is unreasonable to expect in the context of domestic violence, is also now unnecessary under s.198 of The Housing Act 1996 (as amended by The Homelessness Act 2002). Thirdly, in the past those fleeing domestic violence were also seen as making themselves 'intentionally homeless' by leaving the marital home. However, under Section 177 of The Housing Act 1996 (as amended by The Homelessness Act 2002), those made homeless as a result of domestic violence will not be considered as intentionally homeless and, therefore, would not forfeit their right to local authority housing assistance.

However, despite these improvements, strain is placed on local authorities by the lack of available public sector housing stock. Government policies such as the right to buy council houses have meant that: '... it is clear to everyone in the field of public housing that there is just not enough public sector housing to go round' (Hague & Malos, 1994, p. 124). Our research found that this often results in children and young people who experience domestic violence, particularly those from rural areas, having to move to an unfamiliar and sometimes frightening (urban) environment.

Local Authorities are under an additional duty to provide accommodation that is suitable or reasonable to occupy, under The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) Order 1996 and section 210 of The Housing Act 1996. The children and young people we interviewed indicated that 'appropriate' accommodation for them entailed a safe physical environment in which to play, with access to public transport networks to enable them to get to school or to meet up with friends. However, in practice children and young people have often been placed in unsuitable accommodation for families as housing is often in short supply, particularly in rural areas. As one Housing Officer stated:

There is a lack of social housing in a lot of the villages and if that woman wishes to stay local then she can be sitting in a B&B for six months while she is waiting to be re-housed because of the shortage, so really a lot of the women tend to expand where they want to go and possibly settle.

The UK government also acknowledged that families are often placed in unsuitable accommodation: '... families with children [are] forced to live for excessive lengths of time in cramped bed and breakfast (B&B) hotel rooms, with no room to play or do homework, and have to share washing and cooking facilities with strangers' (ODPM, 2005, p. 11).

Security, also a key concern for these children and their mothers, is often inadequate in this type of accommodation. One mother in our project had been accommodated in one B&B room with one of her children whilst her other two children were in a separate room across the hallway. Significantly for this vulnerable group, The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003 has curtailed the use of bed and breakfast accommodation where children are involved. Under this Order, B&B accommodation is not to be regarded as suitable for an

applicant who is pregnant or with dependent children, except where there is no other accommodation available. In such cases, it can only be occupied for up to a maximum of six weeks (ODPM, 2005, p. 11). Since 2002, the number of families with children staying in bed and breakfast hostels has been reduced from 6,700 to less than 1,000.

Due to the chronic shortage of social housing, refuges fill a crucial gap for women, children and young people fleeing their homes as a result of domestic violence. Refuges also fulfil a different purpose from social housing, in maintaining the invisibility and anonymity of women and children in order to keep them safe from further abuse. The next section of this article will discuss the vital role which our child participants said refuges play in providing housing and support to them. It also highlights the gaps in refuge service provision which still exist and the implications these have for children and young people.

Refuge Accommodation

As a national umbrella organisation, The Women's Aid Federation of England and Wales (WAFE) has been at the forefront of refuge provision for women and children who flee domestic violence. Refuges frequently accommodate women and children fleeing domestic violence not just from their local area but also from outside the area (Ball, 1994, p. 35). WAFE supports 270 refuge organisations and manages 567 safe houses across England and Wales (WAFE, 2001). However, the number of refuge places available today still falls short of the recommendation of the 1975 Select Committee on Violence in Marriage that there should be one family refuge place per 10,000 of the population (WAFE, 2001). Refuges have long struggled to attract enough central or local government funding to survive. Consequently, they have historically been funded from a variety of sources. These include local authority housing departments and social services departments, charities and trusts, housing associations and housing benefit (Ball, 1994, p. 39). The majority of funding costs for refuges are spent on wages for a mixture of full, part-time and volunteer staff. Estimates suggest that 19.8% of refuges have no full-time staff, 75% of refuges employ part-time staff, 16% employ part-time staff only and 20.5% employ sessional staff (mainly to work with children) (Ball, 1994, p. 23).

Refuge Provision for Children and Young People

A Women's Aid survey indicated that 18,569 women and 23,084 children and young people were accommodated in refuges during 2003/2004 (Toren, 2004). This demonstrates that children, rather than women, are the primary users of refuge service provision. The majority (84%) of these children are either under five or between the ages of five and 11; 11 to 16-year-olds account for just 16% of the total (Toren, 2004). Refuges provide crucial emotional and practical support for children and young people in the form of children's play activities, counselling sessions for women and children and day trips. Eighty per cent of WAFE-affiliated refuges in England have

children's workers, or a family support worker who fulfils a similar role, and the majority of refugees also organise structured play activities for children. However, we found that these sessions were often organised in an *ad-hoc* manner, dependent upon when children's workers, who were often employed part-time, were available.

The children and young people identified children's workers as instrumental and valuable in helping them to deal with the effects of domestic violence. Paula (aged 11) felt that the child support worker in the refuge had helped her the most and, when asked why, said: 'She's really nice and we just used to stay in the playroom for ages'. Similarly, Esmie (aged 6) and Marcus (aged 8) said that the refuge staff were particularly helpful to them 'By playing in the playroom and having lots of fun with us'. Jack (aged 11) expressed how crucial it was for him to have someone to talk to and help to explain how he was feeling:

I don't know. I can't really explain it to a teacher or I can't explain it to my mum ... so I wanted to explain something and get some ideas off someone to help me through it.

Despite the value of these workers to children and young people, the lack of ongoing funding to sustain such posts is a problem shared by all refugees. However, provision varied hugely across refuges. Significantly, only 40% of funding for children's workers came from Local Authorities. Charitable sources and The Children's Fund provided the remainder (Dahms, 2004, pp.9–10). As this funding is of a temporary nature (usually lasting from between one and three years), refugees have no choice but to make relentless applications for funding to a variety of charitable and local government sources. Moreover, the demands on the time of children's workers in refuges often mean that the needs of children and young people to talk with someone were not fully met, particularly at evenings and weekends. There was also limited time available for in-depth counselling work on an individual basis, which children in our study said they would value (see also Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, pp.60–61). One young person said:

In my experience it was hard because the workers were helping my mum but because I was under 16 they don't really talk to you about violence, so I think if people in refuges would talk to you it would help—even if the kids haven't been hit it doesn't mean they don't need help. (Jade, aged 15)

Recently, refuges have also been under increased pressure in relation to the services they provide for children and young people, as a direct result of the introduction in 2003 of 'The National Day Care Standards for under 8's'. These standards are designed to achieve good child-to-staff ratios and enough space in which to conduct activities with children. Under Chapter 14 of The Care Standards Act 2000, any person who provides day care for a child for over two hours on 'particular premises' (which are deemed not to include a child's home) is subject to minimum standards in relation to the suitability of the premises, persons and level of staffing. Every premise must also be registered with Ofsted. Refuges were initially told they would be exempted from these standards, but this position was later reversed (Dahms, 2004, p.2). Women's Aid have found that 22% of all respondent refuge organisations

cannot meet the National Standards and that frequently their play sessions have been reduced to under the two-hour limit (Dahms, 2004, p.7). In addition, the requirement of two staff to be on site at all times when providing services to children has also proved problematic. Research conducted prior to the introduction of these standards found that children and young people already felt that access to playrooms in the refuge was inadequate due to a lack of available staff members to supervise the children (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p.61). Meeting these minimum requirements has meant that the day care services which most refuges offer to children, and which children themselves value, have worsened and have either been discontinued (so as not to exceed the two-hour maximum and thus avoid the provisions of the act) or reduced significantly.

Furthermore, the Supporting People Programme, introduced in April 2003 as a new needs-led inter-agency framework for housing-related services for the vulnerable (ODPM, 2004, p.1), seems to have impacted negatively upon services for children and young people. It clearly acknowledges the relationship between domestic violence and housing (ODPM, 2002, see Section 7) and will fund any work conducted with the mother to support her children in the refuge, in order to ensure that she and her children are safe and secure in that accommodation. It also recognises that access to housing-related support for mothers can be aided by providing crèche facilities for their children. Despite a Government consultation document which proposed the introduction of standards for refuge accommodation, services and outreach work, and recommended the provision of specialist support for children, including appropriate living/play space and activities (DTLR, 2001), the Supporting People framework does not address this (ODPM, 2002). It suggested that such services could be funded from other sources. Significantly, for children and young people, despite Supporting People recognising their needs, it will not support therapeutic or direct work with them in their own right (ODPM, 2002, p.26). This policy approach has been criticised on the basis that children are acutely aware of any lack of service provision and of the reasons behind this (Mullender *et al.*, 2002, p.215).

The lack of physical space in refuges and the difficulties of living in a confined space with other families have long been recognised (Binney *et al.*, 1981, pp.30–32). Despite dramatic improvements our research found that children and young people still identified these issues as problems (see also Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p.57). As Ronnie (aged 12) said: ‘The refuge is hard to live in “cause of all the people here”’. In addition, large families can often be difficult to accommodate in refuges due to housing benefit rules, which will only fund one room, rather than a lack of physical space. One refuge worker commented on the situation in her refuge:

... [I]f we have a large family we’ve got a connecting door that we’d open up a full suite for one family so there would be three bedrooms and two bathrooms and one kitchen. However, we’ve come up against a problem. At the moment we’re finding it hard for housing benefit to pay for two accommodations for one family.

Even in a modern purpose-built refuge, there can be problems, as the following refuge worker notes:

I mean the kids get the rough end of the deal every time. They're uprooted from their friends and all their toys and stuff and they have to come and play in probably one of the smallest rooms in the building. We have twice as many children through the door as we've had women.

All of the refuges involved in our study had also made efforts to make a playroom or activity space available. However, most were designed to meet the needs of younger children. None of the refuges visited had separate spaces for teenagers to relax and do homework, which both younger children and teenagers themselves believed was important to their comfort and well-being. Although refuges try their best to cater for teenagers, with trips out and some one-to-one counselling, their needs often seem to be neglected in comparison to those of younger children (Hague *et al.*, 1994, p. 19). Many refuges simply do not have the necessary resources to cater for a few teenagers. Some of the children and staff interviewed in our research commented that the teenagers in the refuge did not want to spend time 'with the children' in the playroom and were in need of a more 'grown-up' room. Even younger children in refuges often feel that older children need their own space (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p. 58). In 1999, all refuges accommodating children had inside or outside play spaces, while 72% had both. However, only 16% had separate spaces for teenagers (ODPM, 2002, p. 19). Refuges also face additional pressures. The introduction of minimum requirements under The Care Standards Act 2000 (mentioned above) has also meant that playrooms are required to be of an adequate size. Under these standards, 32% of refuge playrooms are too small (Dahms, 2004, p. 8).

The availability of outside play space for children can also be restricted in a refuge environment because of safety concerns. Refuges play a crucial role in keeping young people safe from further harm through rules on confidentiality and limited access to the refuge. However, the children and young people we spoke to found that these rules impacted upon their ability to play with their friends and maintain friendships. This often made them feel socially isolated. Dale (aged 12) expressed the common sentiments of many children who found it difficult to sustain new friendships when they could not go out freely or invite friends back to the refuge: '[T]he most difficult thing was not being able to go out'. Teenagers in particular find the adjustment to refuge life especially difficult and stigmatising. Penny said, '[T]here was nothing to do ... It was boring'. Other children also highlighted problems with maintaining or making friendships.

As a group, they often felt embarrassed about living in the refuge itself and also feel particularly isolated, since they are not allowed to bring their friends back to the refuge and there may be few teenagers in the refuge itself (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p. 58). In one case, Penny and her mother were forced to move on from one refuge because Penny had brought a friend back to the refuge.

Teenage Boys

A key issue identified in our study is the treatment of boys approaching or over the age of 16 (see also Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p. 72). We found that the main concern in relation to this group was the inconsistency of admissions policies of many refuges

across the country. WAFE's Code of Practice 2002 states that residents should not bring males over the age of 16 into refuges, but those boys *may* be accommodated up to the age of 18 if they are still dependent upon their mothers. However, this policy is contradicted by the individual policies of many refuges, which refuse to admit boys as young as 12 or 14. In contrast with this, some refuges do not impose a limit at all and determine access on a case-by-case basis.

These policies on the admission of teenage boys are a response to concerns about how young men would affect the general atmosphere and security of the refuge, fears relating to the formation of relationships between teenage boys and girls and the lack of appropriate 24-hour supervision within the refuge. Furthermore, the presence of teenage boys within refuges is often viewed as undesirable because they may threaten the security of women residents by reminding them of the abuser they have left. A recent study has found that boys in refuges see these policies as unfair and sometimes take the view that they are being 'labelled' as potentially violent men (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2003, p. 72). Significantly, these policies seem to be influenced by a (highly contested) belief in the 'inter-generational transmission of violence', the view that boys will copy the violent, externalising behaviour of their fathers while girls 'will become "victims" and learn internalised responses (such as anxiety and depression)' (Hester, 2000, p. 52).

This also raises significant issues about where teenage boys can be accommodated if not admitted to refuges, which may result in their separation from their mother and siblings. Although none of the teenage boys we approached wanted to be interviewed for this research, one mother described the difficulties of living in a refuge with her younger children, away from her 17-year-old son:

I used to phone [my son] up every night and he would say, 'Mum, I want to come down and stop with you', and I was telling [my friend] and she said, 'Well, I've got a spare room. You can live [in the refuge] and your son can live here with me'.

Teenage boys who have nowhere else to go will often rely on the goodwill of family and friends, most often grandparents, who do not receive any additional financial support for this. In addition, if teenagers are living with relatives they may not be classed as 'in priority need' for re-housing by a local authority housing department. Also, it is only when teenagers reach the age of 16 that local authorities have a duty to place them, in their own right, on the housing list for more permanent accommodation. However, if teenage boys are re-housed they are often rehoused in a flat on their own, with limited contact with their mother and siblings. This can often make teenage boys feel socially isolated, without any formal support to help them come to terms with what has happened. Under the Housing Act 1996, s.193, accommodation must be habitable *and* suitable. Significantly, the Court of Appeal's decision in *R v Newham London Borough Council, ex p Sacupima* (2000) 33 HLR 2 indicates that the location of accommodation and the circumstances of the applicant and their family are relevant as regards its suitability.

However, not all teenage boys leave the family home to either live with their mother and siblings in a refuge or other temporary accommodation or to move into individual accommodation. Some 'choose' to stay with the perpetrator in order to

carry on with their schooling and maintain their social network. Bearing in mind the strong correlation between domestic violence and child abuse (Humphreys & Mullender, 2000, p. 5), the safety of these vulnerable young people remains an issue. Two of the young people we interviewed had older brothers who had remained in the family home. This had created a considerable amount of tension between the sons 'left behind' and their mothers. Jack was one of these children. Jack's mother and father had been married for 21 years before Jack and his mother finally left, after experiencing four years of abuse. Jack's 14-year-old brother, Sebastian, decided to stay with his father so that he could remain in the same school. Jack and his mother had stayed with relatives before moving into council housing in rural Warwickshire. They had only seen Sebastian a few times since they had left home. Jack missed Sebastian but still used him as a confidante about the domestic violence and his parent's separation. This separation from his brother is significant because, apart from mothers, siblings are the most important source of support for young people experiencing domestic violence (Mullender *et al.*, 2002).

Thus, we gained proxy accounts of the lives of these boys from their younger siblings and mothers rather than from the teenage boys themselves. Nevertheless, we did gain a useful insight into the experience of being a teenage boy in this situation and these findings illustrate the importance of research which engages with teenagers who experience domestic violence if we are to identify and cater for the specific needs of this group.

Conclusion

The research findings presented above suggest that further child-focused domestic violence research is needed. This requires an innovative and flexible methodological approach which is integrated into the research design. The difficulties caused by issues relating to access and consent are surmountable with careful planning and training. The key housing-related findings identified by the children and young people interviewed in this research project demonstrate not only the problems with providing services for children without consulting them but also the benefits for children and service providers alike when young people are listened to. Housing law and policy still rarely consider the needs of children in their own right, although this is improving. Refuges are amongst the best service providers to children who experience domestic violence. However, they are still primarily aimed at mothers even though children are the majority of refuge service users. The most concerning issue in relation to research in the area of domestic violence is the lack of information regarding specific groups, such as teenage boys.

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Notes

- [1] Save the Children UK trained the research team to use other appropriate methods for conducting research with children and young people, such as substitute dolls (although this method was not used in the actual research).
- [2] *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Health Authority* [1986] AC 112.

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