

## MY LETTER

When I talk PLEASE LISTEN TO ME -

When you listen PLEASE HEAR ME -

When you hear me PLEASE DON'T JUDGE ME -

When you don't judge me YOU AND I WILL BE FRIENDS -

Your problems became mine

But my problems stay my own

Until someone notices -

Until someone cares -

Until someone helps -

I belong in your world

But you can't see me

I live in your street

But you're too private

I sit in your class

But you're too busy

Please.....SOMEONE.....notice

from the quiet girl



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# Domestic Abuse and Education

Tens of thousands of children and young people in Scotland live with domestic abuse each year. This can have a devastating effect on their health, well-being and ultimately, on their ability to learn<sup>1</sup>. Their experience at school and the support they receive can make an enormous difference in how they cope with the abuse, and their resilience in the future.

This information leaflet has been produced to help and support all education staff to deal confidently with issues that may arise for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, and to encourage the integration of preventative work on all issues relating to anti-violence work throughout the curriculum and at all stages of education.

One of the most important advances in dealing with the widespread problem of domestic abuse has been bringing the subject out into the open and adopting a clear definition. This is reflected in the National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse<sup>2</sup> which was published by the Scottish Executive in 2002, which states:

Domestic abuse (as gender based abuse), can be perpetrated by partners or ex partners and can include physical abuse (assault and physical attack involving a range of behaviour), sexual abuse (acts which degrade and humiliate women and are perpetrated against their will, including rape) and mental and emotional abuse (such as threats, verbal abuse, racial abuse, withholding money and other types of controlling behaviour such as isolation from family or friends).

It is vital to recognise the gender specific elements of domestic abuse if we are to both respond effectively and communicate to children and young people the complexities and dynamics of domestic abuse. Indeed the Scottish Executive estimates that 93% of all domestic abuse cases are incidences of female victimisation compared to only 7% male victimisation. The National Strategy further clarifies: "The existence of violence against men is not denied, nor is the existence of violence in same sex relationships, nor other forms of abuse, but domestic abuse requires a response which takes account of the gender specific elements and the broader gender inequalities which women face". Of course, it is important for children to learn that all abuse is wrong and that all survivors of abuse have a right to support.

- 90% of children are in the same or next room during attacks on their mothers (Hughes 1992)
- A third of children try to intervene during attacks on their mothers (Hanmer 1990)
- In a study of 111 cases of child abuse dealt with by the NSPCC, in 69% of the cases where the father was the perpetrator he was also violent towards the mother (Hester and Pearson 1998)
- 76% of children ordered by courts to have contact with a violent parent were said to have been further abused as a result of contact being set up (Radford, Sayer and AMICA 1999)

<sup>1</sup> A local study conducted in South Ayrshire in 2002 with 255 secondary school pupils found that 32% were currently living with domestic abuse based on anonymous responses to a direct question about domestic abuse.

<sup>2</sup> National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse 2000

"I'm scared about when we have to leave the refuge because then I'll have to go to start another new school again."



"It's hard when you don't know anybody. When I try to join in, my words don't come out right so I just shut up."

### Impact of domestic abuse on children and young people

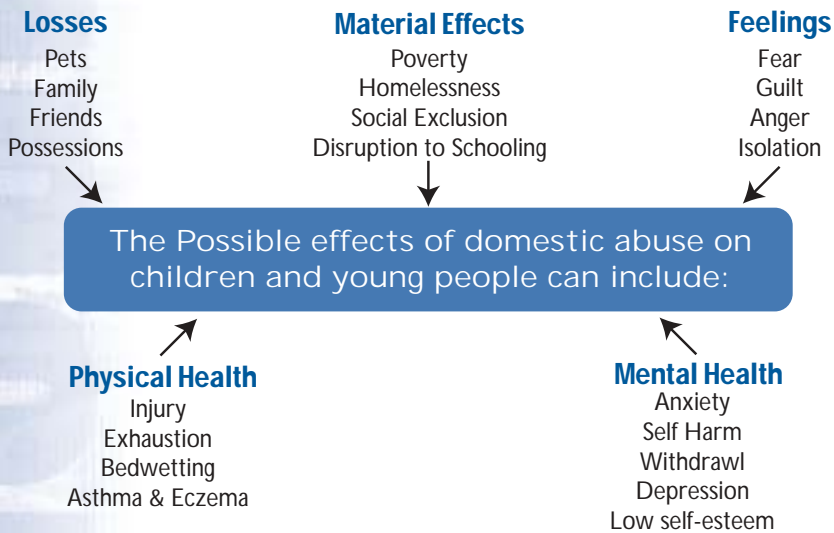
Children and young people respond to living with domestic abuse as individuals, so making assumptions about how they might be affected can be unhelpful to them. Nevertheless, there are a number of common ways in which domestic abuse may impact on their education, including:

- Constant tiredness/inability to concentrate at school due to lack of sleep or anxiety;
- Persistent lateness
- Truanting
- Depression and low self-esteem;
- Emotional and/or behavioural difficulties at school\*
- Exclusion from school;
- Being withdrawn;
- Persistent inability to do homework because of living environment

Children and young people deal with domestic abuse in different ways and it is easy to miss the signs, particularly if a child appears to be coping well within the school environment. Children experiencing domestic abuse can become very quiet and withdrawn, they may even over-achieve because of an anxiety around failing or they may simply appear to be coping well because school is the one stable constant in their lives and enables them to put what is happening at home out of their mind.

Where children and young people's anxiety is manifested in emotional and behavioural difficulties at school, it is vital to respond in a way that will communicate that they can expect help and support with the difficulties they may be facing. Where a child or young person is threatened with exclusion, safety implications must be considered i.e. it may be that in excluding the child from the relative safety of school they are forced to spend more time in a hostile or dangerous environment.

Children and young people may respond adversely to being shouted at or may have difficulty in completing pieces of work because they find the subject matter triggers difficult feelings. Understanding the potential difficulties and taking this into account can greatly improve how children cope within school.



\*There may be other reasons for such behaviour but experiencing domestic abuse is a possible factor and should be taken into consideration when deciding how best to respond.

### Domestic Abuse: A Child Protection Issue?

Domestic abuse is recognised as a form of child abuse as children and young people experiencing domestic abuse will almost certainly be living in a frightening, confusing, and often violent environment. There is also additional evidence to suggest that men who abuse their partners often also mentally, physically and/or sexually abuse their children. Children may also try and protect their mothers from physical assaults and be injured themselves as a result.<sup>3</sup> While education staff generally deal confidently with other child protection issues, there is still much uncertainty about how best to deal with domestic abuse. Years of consulting with women, children and young people has taught us that it is not helpful to focus too narrowly on protecting children experiencing domestic abuse without fully realising the potential for partnership with the non-abusing parent. The Child Protection Review 'It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright' recognises this, stating:

*While agencies are to be commended for recognising that domestic abuse constitutes emotional abuse of children and that children are also at risk of being physically and sexually injured themselves, the response to the problem to date has been haphazard. There is a danger that progress may be undermined if women find that their children are immediately viewed as in need of 'child protection' [c8]when they make a complaint to the police about their partner's violence. Current policies of treating every domestic abuse case, where there are children in the home, as a child protection matter or as a matter for immediate referral to the Reporter are not helpful. Agencies and professionals need to exercise greater levels of judgement, in consultation with others, about the best approach to securing a child's welfare, and recognise that protecting the mother may be the best way to protect the child/ren<sup>4</sup>*

The uncertainties around how to deal with domestic abuse have made it common for disclosures of abuse to either be ignored on the one hand or alternatively, for child protection procedures to be set in motion prematurely.. One of the most important ways education staff can help children and young people experiencing domestic abuse is to offer guidance and support, always ensuring that children's own views and best interests are central to any decision or action. Teachers should be alert to a child's experiences and changes in living circumstances, whilst at the same time being respectful of and supporting them at a pace which is comfortable for them.

Many schools have found it useful to consult with Women's Aid to access information and support on behalf of women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Some schools work very closely with Women's Aid Children's support workers often jointly supporting a child or young person in school.

However domestic abuse may come to light, it may be useful to consider the following:

- Is there a need to support the non-abusing parent?
- Is there a need to seek the help of other specialist agencies such as Women's Aid?

<sup>3</sup> 'It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright' Child Protection Review, Scottish Executive 2002  
<sup>4</sup> It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright 8.43

"They might want to try and forget about it and schools is the one place they can but if teachers knew then they would be constantly reminding us about it."

"It's o.k. some of the time but I miss my pals and I just have to go around on my own all the time now."



## Access to Information and Confidentiality

While schools' legal duty is to the child, they also have a specific responsibility to work in partnership with parents to ensure that children remain safe, and to promote their wellbeing. Domestic abuse experienced by a parent is relevant to the schools' role in ensuring the child's wellbeing.

Schools' policies and practice in relation to providing information about children and allowing access to school records should be consistent with good child protection practice. Information about children and their circumstances should only be shared with professionals who have a need for information to carry out their role effectively in the best interests of the child. Care must be taken to ensure all staff are aware of the dangers of providing details about children in their school to unidentified and unverified persons.

It is often the case that schools provide information regarding the school and the child's progress to both parents when they are separated. However, schools should be sensitive to circumstances when this practice may put a child and their parent at risk, i.e. in situations of domestic abuse. Schools should also consider carefully the presentation of information in the public domain, such as school photographs or other materials representing the school, such as school websites, to ensure the safety of individual children and their families can be sensitively ensured.

Many schools, especially those with close links to local Women's Aid groups, recognise that they have no legal obligation to give information to any caller over the phone, and insist that requests are made in writing and substantiated by evidence of the individual's right to obtain such information about a child. Where schools are aware of domestic abuse as a concern they should consider contacting the non-abusing parent as a matter of course if information or access is being sought. Attention to safety in this way has been tremendously reassuring to women and allowed them to access further support as a result.

A sensitive relationship between a named member of staff and the parent will contribute to a trusting relationship, encouraging the attendance of the child and also encouraging the parent to inform the school of ongoing changes to family circumstances.

If a family does have to move and a child attends a new school, the transfer of a pupil's school records from a previous school is important to ensure the needs of the child can be planned for by the new school. Good child protection practice suggests that when a child has left a school, for whatever reason, and their record has not been requested by another school, they should raise concerns with the education authority and investigate the whereabouts of the child and the family in order to ensure their safety. Again, sharing information with other relevant professionals in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child and their family is paramount. However, all possible precautions must be taken to avoid compromising the safety of children and their mothers.

*'I wouldn't know where to start with this problem. I do think we need to educate children about what is wrong but I feel I should be able to help those in distress now and I don't know how. I have no experience how they feel so how can I help now?'*

## Homelessness and Changing Schools

Children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are much more likely to experience a period of homelessness and consequently face changing schools. They may change schools a number of times until they are permanently re-housed. Even then, if the abuser manages to locate the family then they are often forced to move again in an effort to reach safety.

Living in refuge or Bed and Breakfast accommodation can bring additional problems. For example, there may be no quiet place to complete homework or study for exams. There may be a reluctance on behalf of children and young people to communicate the difficulties they may be facing because of the fear of being traced or because they feel ashamed. It is important that these stresses are not compounded in school particularly as this may represent the only area of stability in a child's life.

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 out-with the catchment area of their temporary accommodation. Some Local Authorities understand the difference that this can make to a child or young person's ability to cope and provide travel expenses to facilitate this. This has often made a significant difference and illustrates the importance of good inter-agency working to children's lives.

## Moving to a New School

Teachers can and do make a huge difference to this difficult transition period. Moving to a new school to escape domestic abuse means that children can 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 especially if they have moved away from a community where there has been a great deal of support.

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 and disruptive for young people studying for exams. Children and young people experiencing domestic abuse should be defined as 'in need' and should have support plans prepared and implemented for them. Having a support plan in place may also be an opportunity for education staff to review safety issues for children and to reinforce the need for strict confidentiality in order that this is not jeopardised.

## Training and Support for Education Staff

The importance of support, guidance and training for education staff around domestic abuse is beginning to be more widely recognised within many Local Authorities and specialist training is being sought as a result. The National Prevention Strategy stresses the importance of such training for all front-line staff, including education staff at every level<sup>5</sup>. Specialist training with agencies such as Women's Aid has been recommended in the National Strategy and again highlights the importance of inter-agency work.

Many education staff access Women's Aid domestic abuse training and have found this has contributed greatly to their day to day practice, enhancing their confidence in dealing with what can be a notoriously difficult issue to deal with. Local Women's Aid groups and Scottish Women's Aid both provide training as well as advice and information on domestic abuse.

<sup>5</sup> Quote from a young person in her first year at secondary school.

<sup>6</sup> Preventing Domestic Abuse: A National Strategy (2003) Scottish Executive

*'There should be more time made available in the curriculum to raise awareness in this most distressing and thought provoking issue'*

*'People ask questions. I was asked why I moved houses and schools all the time. I just said I had troubles and walked away. I didn't want to tell them I had been to 12 schools'<sup>5</sup>*



“The teacher told the class my name and they was all to say hello and my legs was shaking.”

### Preventative Work and National Priorities for Education

Schools which are seriously seeking to implement the full range of national priorities must have programmes designed to promote positive values including respect for self and others. [c15]It is a stated objective of the national priorities for education to promote respect for self and others and to promote positive values among young people. The promotion of equality and inclusion are clearly incompatible with the toleration of violence. The national priorities also stress the importance of raising achievement and attainment and that this should not be inhibited by adverse personal circumstances such as experiencing domestic abuse.

Addressing the subject of domestic abuse must be an intrinsic part of fulfilling these priorities and this can be achieved in two ways. Firstly, by adopting a programme of values education, or personal and social development, which stresses the importance of respect for others. This will in itself promote attitudes opposed to domestic abuse. Secondly, by discussing the issue of domestic abuse directly at appropriate stages with children and young people.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

### How School Staff Can Help:

#### Be aware

Given the many thousands of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse in Scotland at any one time, there will more than likely be at least one child in each class who has lived with or continues to live with domestic abuse.

#### Listen

For a variety of reasons domestic abuse can be very difficult to talk about. Children and young people find different ways to communicate what is happening in their lives without necessarily ‘betraying’ the confidence of their families. It is therefore very important that we listen to what they are saying without jumping to conclusions or thinking we know best.

#### Be supportive

Is important to communicate clearly that the child was brave to speak, that they are believed, that it is not their fault and what will happen next. It is crucial to be honest about this and to keep them informed throughout the process and let them have a say and explain decisions. It is also important to avoid ‘women-blaming’. Firstly, women are not to blame for their abuse, and secondly, in our experience children and young people often switch off immediately they feel that their mother is being judged in any way. Remember, they have lived through these experiences and often have a very clear view on what has happened and are quick to recognise any assumptions or prejudices.

#### Make space and time

Consider how a vulnerable child might approach you, and how you can make time and offer some privacy for a child who wants to talk. It is important for schools to consider how they can respect a child’s choice of adult with whom they discuss personal issues, and to try to ensure the child has some continuity in supportive relationships. The school should ensure every pupil and parent understands how pupil support and pastoral care is delivered in the school, so that they know who they can approach.

**Most importantly - Keep children and young people’s best interests and their own views central to any decision or action.**

<sup>7</sup> Making an Impact? reference

<sup>8</sup> Action Against Abuse (Glasgow City Council)

<sup>9</sup> Healthy Relationships (North Ayrshire Women’s Aid)

<sup>10</sup> Respect (Zero Tolerance)

### Children and young people’s support workers at Women’s Aid

There are 40 local Women’s Aid groups affiliated to Scottish Women’s Aid with approximately 80 Children and Young People’s Support Workers throughout Scotland. This support work is absolutely crucial in order to allow children and young people to make sense of their experiences and to be helped to cope with these. There is a range of work undertaken and this can take place within refuge or as part of follow-on or outreach services. Support for children and young people includes: one-to-one work; group work; supported play; activities and outings; advocacy; and support through legal procedures.

Children and young people are also supported with all aspects of their education including initial contact being made with schools if they are new to an area. Structured support in partnership with schools and education support services for young people experiencing particular difficulties in their school as a result of domestic abuse is also offered in some instances. This kind of inter-agency work has proved to be of enormous benefit to children and young people and it is our hope that it can be replicated in all relevant areas. <sup>11</sup>This would give a very clear message to children and young people that they are not to blame and that they do deserve to be supported by adults if and when they need this. It is also important to encourage peer support as this can add to the strength and resilience of young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Scottish Women’s Aid greatly acknowledges Royal Mail Group’s generous assistance in making the production of this document possible.

<sup>11</sup> The Scottish Executive and National Group to End Violence Against Women is committed to devising a Strategy for SWA Children’s Support Services throughout Scotland and it is hoped more outreach support will be available in the near future

“they might want to try and forget about it and school is the one place they can but if teachers knew then they would be constantly reminded about it”

**Domestic abuse can be extraordinarily difficult for children and young people to discuss. For many this is such a ‘taboo’ subject that it makes it all the more important that any response is informed and that the burden of keeping this a secret is not reinforced.**