



and



**UK TRAUMA
COUNCIL**

Research Round Up

SPECIAL EDITION #3

**Childhood
Trauma and
Domestic
Abuse**

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Domestic abuse (DA), is defined by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as “the behaviour of a person to another person, where both individuals are aged 16 or over, personally connected and the behaviour is abusive. It does not matter whether the behaviour is a single incident or a course of conduct”. It is notable that until 2021, there was not a universal, cross government definition of domestic abuse in England and Wales.

It was also not until the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 where children were recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right through being related to, or under parental responsibility of the victim or perpetrator. It is a huge challenge to determine the actual number of children and young people in the UK who are exposed to DA, one reasonable estimate suggests that in 2023 more 800,000 children or young people experienced domestic abuse in just in England and Wales.

Although it can be, DA is rarely a single event trauma, more often it unfolds as a series of incidents over months or years, creating an environment of ongoing fear and instability. Refuge understands that domestic abuse is rooted in power, control and misogyny. For children and young people, the impact is particularly profound—not only because they witness abuse against their caregiver but also because the perpetrator is often someone they know well and should be able to trust. This combination of betrayal, fear, and repeated exposure creates a uniquely complex and severe

form of potential trauma, which can result in a wide range of emotional, psychological, and social challenges.

For practitioners working with children affected by DA, this complexity and severity can sometimes feel overwhelming. In such moments, there may be a natural inclination to grasp onto any available approach to provide a sense of steadiness. However, if that approach is not evidence-based, there is a real risk that it may fail to provide meaningful support—or, worse, unintentionally cause harm.

Refuge has partnered with the UK Trauma Council to develop a therapeutic intervention specifically for children living in temporary refuge accommodation. The goal is to minimise the traumatic impact of DA and create an environment that supports recovery. As part of this work, we felt it was essential to review academic research on the effects of DA on children and young people, as well as the factors that can help mitigate harm. This document is not a systematic review or formal synthesis;



rather, it is a curated roundup of key research that we consider important and useful. Research consistently shows that while exposure to DA increases the risk of negative outcomes, several factors—both protective and harmful—can influence its impact. This synthesis highlights key findings from recent academic studies, focusing on the factors that exacerbate harm, those that foster resilience, and promising interventions to support children and young people affected by DA.

The Emotional and Psychological Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children

Unsurprisingly, children who witness or experience DA are at heightened risk of developing emotional and psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, aggression and other traumatic reactions (Holt et al., 2008). There is an established link between experiencing DA and also experiencing other forms of abuse. But even without the likelihood of co-occurring abuse, the trauma of witnessing violence can be as damaging as direct abuse, leading to long-term emotional distress. Adolescents, in particular, describe the presence of DA as an ongoing and unpredictable reality, creating feelings of fear, helplessness, and confusion (Chester & Joscelyne, 2018). Many take on protective roles within their families, attempting to shield siblings or intervene in violent situations—efforts that often prove ineffective, may contribute to direct abuse to the child, and further contribute to their own emotional distress.

Factors That Exacerbate Harm

Several factors can amplify the negative impact of DA on children's mental health. Relational victimisation—where a child's relationships and social reputation are deliberately harmed—has been identified as a significant risk factor (Carter et al., 2022). When parents experience high levels of stress or struggle to be emotionally available—often due to their own difficult circumstances—children may be more vulnerable to psychological distress. Additionally, the transition to temporary accommodation following DA, whilst essential for safety, can be an emotional upheaval, with children and young people reporting feelings of uncertainty, lack of control, and insecurity (Bowyer et al., 2015). Whilst not inevitable, DA can increase the risk of a child developing long-term patterns of aggression, including child-to-parent violence, particularly when coupled with cognitive distortions such as feelings of rejection or grandiosity (Calvete et al., 2015).

Protective Factors and Pathways to Resilience

Despite these risks, research highlights several factors that help children and young people cope with the impact of DA. Emotional intelligence and engagement in extracurricular activities have been found to reduce the psychological burden of exposure to violence (Carter et al., 2022). Supportive relationships—with non-abusive parents, peers, and teachers—are also key in



mitigating harm (Holt et al., 2008). The quality of conversations between mothers and children about emotions can play a critical role, with sensitive, supportive discussions—particularly about anger—linked to reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms and healthier coping strategies (Overbeek et al., 2022). Furthermore, parental warmth has been shown to counteract negative cognitive schemas and reduce aggression towards parents over time (Calvete et al., 2015).

According to young people in Thibault et al.'s 2025 study, moving into a shelter can play a hugely positive role in a young person's recovery. They were clear that being free from violence, feeling safe, empowered, and involved in decision-making can significantly contribute to their recovery.

Interventions to Support Children Exposed to Domestic Abuse

Several intervention models have demonstrated effectiveness in helping children recover from the trauma of DA. Group interventions, whether psychoeducational or therapeutic, have been shown to reduce emotional and behavioural symptoms in children, with trauma-specific therapeutic approaches yielding the greatest improvements (Pernebo et al., 2018). A 12-week intervention focusing on psychoeducation, emotional regulation, and parent-child relationship-building led to improved child well-being and reduced hyperactivity and emotional difficulties (Schubert, 2022).

Innovative approaches combining art, play, and trauma-focused therapy have also proven

beneficial. A pilot study using these methods in domestic violence shelters found that children experienced reductions in depressive symptoms and improved emotional regulation, while mothers gained a better understanding of trauma and parenting strategies (Woollett et al., 2020).

Recognising Diversity in Children's Experiences

While much research has focused on broad patterns of risk and resilience, it is important to recognise that children affected by DA are not simply one group of children with similar characteristics and identifies. Intersectionality offers a valuable lens for understanding how children's experiences of DA vary based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identities (Etherington & Baker, 2018). Greater attention to these intersecting factors is necessary for developing inclusive, tailored support systems that meet the diverse needs of children exposed to DA.

Conclusion

Children and young people affected by domestic abuse experience a range of emotional and psychological challenges, but their outcomes are not predetermined. Protective factors such as positive parenting, emotional intelligence, and social support can foster resilience, while targeted interventions can help mitigate the effects of trauma. Future research and practice must continue to explore individualised



approaches that consider children's and families diverse experiences, ensuring that support systems and access to care are effective and equitable for all affected children and young people.

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How Domestic Violence Affects Children's Mental Health: Key Factors that Help or Harm

Carter et al. (2022) conducted a systematic literature review to identify factors that influence the impact of child exposure to domestic abuse (DA) on emotional and psychological problems among children and adolescents. The review focused on individual, familial, and community-level factors and included twelve longitudinal studies published between 1990 and 2018, primarily from the United States.

The findings revealed that higher emotional intelligence and participation in extracurricular activities help to reduce the negative impact of DA on children's mental health. Positive parenting (maternal warmth and availability) and family social support were also found to lessen the negative effects of DA. Conversely, relational victimisation (behaviours aimed at

damaging relationships or social reputation), negative parenting, and parenting stress worsen the effects of DA. No significant community-level factors were identified. **In sum, this review highlights various factors that can either mitigate or worsen the emotional and psychological impact of domestic violence on children, providing insights into potential areas for intervention.**

Carter, B., Paranjothy, S., Davies, A., & Kemp, A. (2022). Mediators and Effect Modifiers of the Causal Pathway Between Child Exposure to Domestic Violence and Emotional and Psychological Problems Among Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Literature Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 23(2), 594-604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020965964>



A Review on The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Abuse on Children and Young People

A seminal paper by **Holt, Buckley, and Whelan (2008)** reviewed the impact of domestic abuse on children. This comprehensive review included 41 studies, making it a pivotal reference in understanding how domestic abuse affects children. Despite being published over a decade ago, the insights and conclusions from this review have resisted the test of time.

Findings from the review indicated that children in households with domestic abuse face higher risks of emotional, behavioural, and social problems compared to their peers. The review found that the impact of witnessing domestic abuse could be as detrimental as direct abuse. Additionally, children exposed to domestic abuse

often exhibited symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and aggression. The authors also noted that supportive relationships with non-abusive parents, peers, and teachers could mitigate some negative effects. **In sum, this seminal review provides a comprehensive understanding of the profound and lasting impact of domestic abuse on children, emphasizing the need for accurate reporting and effective interventions.**

Holt, S., Buckley, H., & Whelan, S. (2008). The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32(8), 797-810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2008.02.004>



How Mother-Child Conversations About Emotions Affect Children Exposed to Trauma

Overbeek et al. (2022) examined how the quality of conversations between mothers and children about emotional events impacts the children's stress symptoms following exposure to traumatic events. The study involved mother-child pairs who had experienced trauma, such as domestic or sexual abuse (n = 169; mean age = 9.3; female = 46%; ethnic composition not reported).

The research found that better quality dialogues, characterised by maternal sensitive guidance and child cooperation, were linked to fewer stress symptoms in children. Specifically, effective conversations about feeling angry were associated with children using healthier coping strategies, such as seeking support from

others or finding positive ways to manage their feelings and showing fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms. However, these positive effects were not observed when discussing feelings of fear or sadness. **In sum, the study highlights the importance of supportive mother-child conversations about emotions, particularly anger, in helping children cope with trauma.**

Overbeek, M. M., Koren-Karie, N., de Schipper, J. C., van Delft, I., & Schuengel, C. (2022). Quality of Mother-Child Dialogue About Emotional Events, Coping and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Among Children Exposed to Interpersonal Trauma. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 15, 201-208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00381-x>



Children's and Young People's Experiences in Domestic Violence Shelters

Thibault, Lapierre, and Molgat (2025) explored the experiences of children and young people staying in domestic violence shelters in Québec and Ontario, Canada. The study focused on how these environments contribute to recovery from domestic abuse, highlighting the perspectives of children themselves—a group often overlooked in research.

The study involved 25 semi-structured interviews with children and young people aged 7 to 18 who had experienced domestic violence and received shelter services. The findings emphasised the importance of safety and normality in the recovery process. Children described being able to play without fear as a significant factor in their healing, allowing them to reclaim a sense of normal childhood. Additionally, having opportunities to talk about their experiences, both with shelter workers and peers, helped them process their emotions and recognise that they were not alone. Support for their mothers was also seen as crucial, as children linked their own well-being to their mothers' recovery.

However, the study also highlighted barriers to recovery, including the upheaval caused by relocating to a shelter, adjusting to strict rules, and disruptions to schooling and friendships. Some young people expressed frustration at the lack of autonomy and privacy, particularly older adolescents who struggled with shelter regulations designed primarily for younger children.

In sum, the study underscores the positive role of shelters in providing safety and emotional recovery for children and young people affected by domestic abuse. However, it also calls for greater consideration of their specific needs, including opportunities for participation in decision-making, age-appropriate support, and a more child-centred approach to shelter services.

Thibault, J., Lapierre, S., & Molgat, M. (2025). Children's and Young People's Experiences in Shelters and Their Recovery from Domestic Violence. *Journal of Family Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-025-00819-y>



Experiences of Girls Moving into Temporary Accommodation After Domestic Abuse

A study by **Bowyer and colleagues (2015)** explored the experiences of girls aged 10-16 who moved into temporary accommodation, such as refuges or bed and breakfast facilities, after exposure to domestic abuse. Researchers conducted interviews with five girls (mean age = 13.6; three White British, one White/Afro-Caribbean, one British Asian), focusing on their lives before and after moving into the temporary accommodation.

Findings revealed that the girls faced significant emotional and social challenges during the transition, including a lack of agency, constant uncertainty, and feeling unsafe. Despite these difficulties, the girls displayed resilience and found ways to adapt to their new environments.

Support from family, friends, and staff at the temporary accommodations played a crucial role in helping them manage their experiences. **In sum, this study highlights the importance of social support to aid the adjustment and well-being of young girls who move into temporary accommodation following domestic abuse.**

Bowyer, L., Swanston, J., & Vetere, A. (2015). 'Eventually you just get used to it': An interpretative phenomenological analysis of 10–16 year-old girls' experiences of the transition into temporary accommodation after exposure to domestic violence perpetrated by men against their mothers. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 20(2), 304-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104513508963>



Adolescents' Attempts to Make Sense of Domestic Abuse in Their Families

Chester and Joscelyne (2018) conducted a study to understand how adolescents interpret and cope with experiences of domestic abuse within their families. The study involved five adolescents (n = 5; age range = 14-18; three female, two male; all White British) who had witnessed or been victims of parental domestic abuse. The participants were recruited through a Child and Family Mental Health service, and interviews were conducted to explore their experiences and perceptions.

Findings revealed that domestic abuse was perceived as ever-present and unpredictable, creating an environment of fear and confusion at home. Adolescents often took on protective roles for younger siblings, though their efforts to prevent or stop the violence generally proved ineffective, leading to feelings of helplessness. Long-term impacts included fear and depression, with participants displaying a

mix of internalised responses (e.g., depression, panic attacks) and externalised behaviours (e.g., aggression). The study also highlighted that adolescents' understanding and responses to violence were influenced by interactions with people outside their immediate family, such as at school, where they learned alternative strategies for conflict resolution. **In sum, this research highlights the pervasive impact of domestic abuse on adolescents, affecting their emotional well-being and behaviour, and underscores the importance of supportive environments in helping them cope and recover from such traumatic experiences.**

Chester, J., & Joscelyne, T. (2018). "I Thought It Was Normal": Adolescents' Attempts to Make Sense of Their Experiences of Domestic Violence in Their Families. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(11-12), 5250-5276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518802847>



Outcomes of Group Interventions for Children Exposed to Domestic Abuse

Pernebo et al. (2018) investigated the effectiveness of two group interventions for children exposed to domestic abuse (DA). The study included 50 children (mean age = 7.4 years; 48% female; 90% born in Sweden) and their mothers. The children were divided into two groups: one group participated in a community-based psychoeducational intervention, and the other in a therapeutic treatment intervention. The psychoeducational intervention aimed to provide children with knowledge about DA, coping strategies, and ways to express and understand their emotions. It included 12-15 weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, and covered themes such as safety planning, family relationships, and communication. The therapeutic intervention, also comprising 12-15 weekly 90-minute sessions, focused on trauma-specific therapy, addressing complex reactions to DA through activities like trauma-focused play and dialogue.

Findings indicated that both interventions led to improvements in children's emotional and behavioural symptoms. However, children in the therapeutic group showed greater symptom reduction, particularly those with high levels of trauma symptoms at the start. Despite these improvements, many children continued to exhibit clinical levels of trauma symptoms post-treatment. Additionally, both interventions significantly reduced maternal post-traumatic stress symptoms. **In sum, the study highlights the benefits of group interventions for children exposed to DA but suggests that those with severe trauma symptoms may require more intensive or extended support.**

Pernebo, K., Fridell, M., & Almqvist, K. (2018). Outcomes of psychotherapeutic and psychoeducative group interventions for children exposed to intimate partner violence. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 79, 213-223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.014>



Supporting Children Who Experience Domestic Violence: Evaluating a 12-Week Program

Schubert (2022) evaluated the impact of a 12-week program aimed at supporting children exposed to domestic abuse (DA) and their mothers. The study involved 69 children and 33 mothers in the intervention group and 80 children and 39 mothers in the control group (n = 149 children; mean age = 8.11 years; female = 45%; ethnic composition not reported). The intervention group participated in a program providing psychoeducation on the impact of trauma and DA, fostering parent and child well-being, and improving relationships among families. The program included components such as separate sessions for parents and children, age-appropriate lessons on DA, safety planning, assertive conflict resolution, and activities to enhance self-esteem and promote positive family interactions. The control group received adult-focused DA services without child-focused interventions.

Findings showed that participation in the program improved child functioning. Children in the intervention group exhibited less hyperactivity, fewer negative emotional symptoms, and fewer behavioural difficulties compared to the control group. Additionally, mothers in the intervention group demonstrated higher levels of hope and confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. **In sum, the study provides promising evidence that this 12-week program effectively promotes healing and well-being among children and parents exposed to domestic abuse.**

Schubert, E. C. (2022). Supporting children who experience domestic violence: Evaluating the Child Witness to Domestic Violence Program. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(19-20), NP18175-NP18193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211035874>



Combining Art, Play, and Therapy to Help Children and Mothers Heal from Domestic Violence

Woollett et al. (2020) conducted a pilot study to investigate the effects of a trauma-focused intervention combining art, play, and cognitive-behavioural therapy on children and mothers living in domestic violence shelters in New York City and Johannesburg. The sample included 21 children (age range = 5-14 years; 52% female; ethnicity not reported) and 16 mothers. The intervention aimed to help children and mothers express and manage their emotions, improve their mental health, and strengthen their relationships.

Findings revealed that the intervention led to a decrease in depressive symptoms among children, while PTSD symptoms showed some improvement. Children reported that the non-verbal nature of art therapy, along with

play activities, helped them manage difficult emotions and behaviours. The mothers' sessions focused on understanding trauma, improving parenting skills, and recognizing the strengths in their children, contributing to an overall positive impact on parent-child relationships. **In sum, this pilot study highlights the potential of combining art, play, and therapy to support the mental health and well-being of children and mothers in domestic violence shelters.**

Woollett, N., Bandeira, M., & Hatcher, A. (2020). Trauma-informed art and play therapy: Pilot study with mothers and children exposed to intimate partner violence in New York City and Johannesburg. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 13(2), 233-246. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-019-00269-7>



The Effect of Domestic Abuse on Child-to-Parent Aggression Over Time

Calvete and colleagues (2015) studied how domestic abuse affects aggression towards parents over three years. Participants included 591 adolescents (mean age = 14.8; 52% female; ethnicity not reported) and their parents. The study examined how witnessing violence between parents and experiencing violence from parents influenced aggressive behaviour towards parents, with a focus on the role of cognitive schemas (deeply held beliefs about oneself and others). Parental warmth was measured through children's reports of their parents' supportive, affectionate, and nurturing behaviours.

Findings revealed that adolescents exposed to domestic abuse were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour towards their parents over time. Cognitive schemas, specifically feelings of rejection and narcissistic self-views

(exaggerated perceptions of one's importance), increased the likelihood of aggression towards parents. Parental warmth helped reduce these negative schemas, which in turn decreased aggression. Gender differences were observed, with narcissism predicting aggression in boys, and feelings of disconnection and rejection predicting aggression in both genders. **In sum, this study highlights the significant impact of domestic abuse on child-to-parent aggression and underscores the importance of promoting positive parenting practices to mitigate these effects.**

Calvete, E., Orue, I., Gamez-Guadix, M., & Bushman, B. J. (2015). Longitudinal trajectories of child-to-parent aggression: Family risk factors and the roles of parenting and cognitive schemas. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 29(5), 655-665. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000103>



Applying intersectionality to Children Exposed to Domestic Abuse

Etherington and Baker (2018) conducted a comprehensive review to examine how intersectionality can be applied to understanding the experiences of children exposed to domestic abuse. The review included an analysis of seven studies, highlighting the complexities of multiple intersecting identities such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status in shaping children's experiences of domestic abuse.

Findings indicated that research on children exposed to domestic abuse often treats children as a homogenous group, failing to account for the diverse identities and social locations that influence their experiences. The review emphasized that understanding the multifaceted identities of children is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems. It also highlighted the need for tailored approaches

that consider the unique contexts and challenges faced by different groups of children. Strategies for implementing intersectionality in research, policy, and practice were provided, advocating for an inclusive and nuanced understanding of children's experiences. **In sum, this review underscores the importance of applying an intersectional framework to better understand and support children exposed to domestic abuse, emphasizing the need for research and interventions that recognise and address the diverse identities and experiences of these children.**

Etherington, C., & Baker, L. (2018). From "Buzzword" to Best Practice: Applying Intersectionality to Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(1), 58-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016631128>



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