



# Listening to Children: Children's Stories of Domestic Violence

## 1. What is the study's background?

This study was funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Fergus Hogan and Máire O'Reilly of the Centre for Social and Family Research, Waterford Institute of Technology.\* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2007.

## 2. What is the study's purpose?

This study was conducted in order to develop our understanding of childhood experiences of domestic violence. Research on domestic violence in Ireland has until relatively recently focused solely on the adults involved. Children have been afforded little opportunity to articulate their experiences of domestic violence and the services they engage with. While childhood experiences were the central focus of this study, the views and experiences of the children's mothers and key professionals were also sought. Given that research has shown that children's emotional recovery is linked to their mothers, mothers' views on the adequacy of child-centred services were established. The views of professionals who work with victims of domestic violence were also considered important in elucidating child-centred domestic violence services.

The aims of the research were:

- » to identify the impact on children of witnessing domestic violence;
- » to identify the nature, scope and adequacy of domestic violence services for children.

The specific objectives were:

- » to place children at the centre of the research by gathering original narrative accounts from those who had witnessed domestic violence;
- » to broaden our understanding of how best to engage children in this type of research;
- » to make a contribution to the challenge of listening to the voice of the child.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)

## 3. How was the study undertaken?

The methods employed were designed to achieve the above objectives. A review of the literature was undertaken to frame the aims and objectives of the study within the context of what is known about children and domestic violence. Primary research was conducted by adopting a qualitative approach through the use of in-depth interviews with a sample of key professionals (n = 22), mothers (n = 19) and children (n = 22). Access to a purposive sample was facilitated by gatekeepers working in domestic violence refuges and community-based services. Interviews were conducted in either a refuge service, community agency or family home.

A profile of the sample of children shows:

- » 13 females and 9 males;
- » in the age range 5-18 years;
- » included 3 young adults, aged 18-21 years;
- » 10 of the children had stayed in a domestic violence refuge;

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

- » 11 of the children had contact with a community-based service.

In-depth interviews, with their unstructured mode of enquiry, allowed research participants to identify the key issues involved and drive the research process in a safe and comfortable research atmosphere. Ethical considerations were paramount to the extent that key methodological decisions were made solely on ethical grounds. Informed consent was obtained from all children, as well as from their mothers, after careful explanation of the research aims, process and outcomes.

## 4. What are the key findings?

While recent studies offer an indication of the extent of domestic violence in families in Ireland, the number of children affected is unknown. Statistics on domestic violence as it pertains to children are not produced. Hence it is impossible to state definitely how many children live with domestic violence. Despite the lack of available data, given the increasing evidence of the extent of domestic violence in the population, we can assume that a considerable number of children live with a range of violent behaviours in the home. The findings highlight the range of domestic violent behaviour witnessed by children, the impact of such violence on children's lives and the response by refuge, community and child protection services.

### 4.1 Nature and impact of domestic violence

Children and their mothers provided often harrowing accounts of the nature of domestic violence, offering insights into the kinds of volatile households in which some children live. Interviews with children revealed the various forms of domestic violence they witnessed:

- » *Control by an abusive father or father figure:* Children spoke of a threatening atmosphere and derogatory talk, of witnessing how their mothers were controlled and belittled in front of them.
- » *Overhearing the violence, being present in the home:* For many of the children, including those who regularly saw the violence, overhearing the violence was the worst aspect, given that they simply did not know what was happening to their mothers. Overhearing the violence also left many of the children with a sense of guilt and misplaced responsibility for not intervening.

- » *Witnessing the violence and its aftermath:* Children spoke of being present during physical violence and witnessing their mother's physical injuries.
- » *Direct victims of the violence themselves:* Some of the older teenagers recalled how they actively intervened to try and protect their mother and younger siblings, and how the threat of direct physical assault was used as a tactic by the perpetrator to further control their mother.
- » *Use of mobile phones for threatening and abusive messages.*

Mothers identified the risks posed to children who intervened in the violence and expressed fears for their safety. Mothers' perceptions of what their children had witnessed varied and appeared to be linked to the age of the children.

Four main themes emerged from the children's narratives on the effects of witnessing domestic violence:

- » relationship with father or father figures;
- » relationship with mothers, siblings and friends;
- » going 'out of their minds' (the 'madness' making);
- » crisis, chaos and change, unplanned pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, behavioural problems, physical health problems, early school-leaving and homelessness.

### 4.2 Nature and adequacy of child-centred services

A key finding of the study was that many of the women and children had sought refuge on multiple occasions over several years. This has implications for child-centred services since many of the children had lived through a childhood dominated by violence. Some of the women recounted as many as 15 refuge stays. One woman described how she had sought shelter from 5 different refuges all over the country in an attempt to escape her violent partner. The women who sought refuge outlined the difficulties involved in trying to leave home with children and move to a refuge. Men's controlling behaviour in terms of not allowing women to leave with all of the children was evident in some interviews, raising questions about children's safety in the care of violent men.

Interviews with mothers, children and key professionals revealed significant gaps in service provision and the constraints within which child-centred services operate. The provision of child-centred services is hampered by a lack of child care workers in refuges, a lack of engagement with children by statutory services, limited community-based and therapeutic supports, and a lack of an integrated service approach. A key criticism was the lack of social work risk assessment and intervention. The study revealed little evidence of social workers engaging in risk assessments of children living with violent men. The very few children who did have a social worker were critical of their response. The findings showed that the extent and quality of interagency communication between refuges and social work departments varied considerably. Lack of resources and overstretched social work teams were identified as the main reasons for poor responses. Children were also very critical of their experiences of the police and Court system.

Key findings on services include:

- » Children, mothers and refuge staff identified the lack of community-based services, in particular a lack of resources for access to specialised therapeutic supports.
- » Children, mothers and professionals were remarkably similar in their assessment of the lack of social work intervention. According to the children and mothers in the study's sample, social workers did not directly interview the children, accepting parents' accounts of the domestic violence.
- » Regarding play facilities in refuges, these were considered limited in some refuges and playrooms were not always open due to staffing shortages; when available, play facilities were praised by both children and their mothers.
- » Waiting lists for therapeutic services, such as child psychology and counselling, are unacceptable.
- » For most children, their greatest support came from their siblings and mothers.
- » Children and mothers appreciated refuge accommodation and support services.
- » Teenage children did not want a refuge-based response.
- » Children, mothers and some professionals spoke out against the rule that teenage boys are excluded from most refuges.
- » Beyond refuge child care work (which only a minority of child victims of domestic violence have available to them), comprehensive services are not provided to children.
- » The lack of services for families who do not seek refuge or who leave the refuge constitutes the largest gap in services.

#### 4.3 Recruiting, engaging and listening to children in research

Ethical concerns drove this study's research process in relation to recruitment and engagement with children in terms of access, content and duration of interview. Access to children was negotiated through a three-stage process (professionals, mothers, children).

In the first instance, interviews were conducted with gatekeepers in refuge and community-based services, and access was negotiated to women known to their service. Significant differences were found in the gatekeepers' decision to provide access to a sample. Professionals differed in their judgement of who they considered were suitable mothers to refer to the study: some believed that women and children currently living in refuge were too vulnerable to be interviewed for research, while other professionals felt that it was unethical to contact women and children who had left the refuge since they wanted to allow them to bring some closure to their experiences. The complexity of ethical concerns resulted in a gatekeeper-filtering process, which ultimately dictated the overall sample profile.

The second phase involved interviewing mothers who were willing to participate and asking them if we could interview their children. Where access was provided, we then sought the informed consent of the children themselves. In some cases where mothers' consent to interview their children was obtained, the children themselves declined to be interviewed. No effort was made to persuade them to participate. Children sought, and were provided with, a great deal of reassurance on the outcome of the research (some, for example, expressed concerns that they would be recognisable) and all children were informed and reassured that their anonymity would be protected.

The researchers' direct experience of trying to meet with and interview children living in a refuge offered a very clear picture of just how chaotic and crisis-driven

their lives were. Nonetheless, the children showed that they were capable and willing to share a coherent narrative on their experiences of living with domestic violence. This study used creative and child-centred methods of engagement, including systemic interviews with siblings, use of children's drawings and allowing them to play with the recording equipment, all of which allowed the children themselves to set the pace of the interview.

## 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. **Children's witnessing of domestic violence has considerably damaging effects.** The study revealed distressing accounts of the nature of domestic violence witnessed by children in a variety of ways (not related solely to being physically present when the violence occurred, *see Section 4.1 above*) and the negative consequences and impact this had on their lives.
2. **Child-centred services for child victims of domestic violence are minimal and difficult to access.** Outside of refuge-based services, few child-centred services are available to protect children and address the impacts on them of domestic violence. The findings show some very strong correlations between how the children, mothers and professionals assessed the adequacy of the service response. The prevalence of key themes across all categories of interviewees strongly highlights the inadequacies of services.
3. **The study found very little evidence of child protection assessment and intervention.** Some of the children in the study had lived through a childhood dominated by domestic violence. Several cases were uncovered in which children were known to live in extremely violent households and yet there was no evidence of child protection intervention. An important conclusion is how the children themselves experienced an apparent lack of actual engagement from the statutory services mandated to protect them.

4. **The children's capacity to reflect on their experiences was evidenced in this study.** The challenge for social researchers is to explore children's private experiences and present them for public debate using non-intrusive and safe methods.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

A number of recommendations arise from the research, as follows:

### 1. Broadened understanding of the range of ways children can witness domestic violence and the impact of such violence

Greater recognition should be given by the professional system of the ways in which children witness domestic violence, resulting in an increased awareness of the huge adversities experienced by child victims of domestic violence.

### 2. Allow teenage boys to reside with their families in domestic violence refuges

Excluding teenage boys from refuge services was considered a huge problem. Many professionals were critical of this policy since it increases the risk of exposure to further violence and presents significant difficulties to women and children fleeing domestic violence.

### 3. Increase in availability of child-centred facilities in refuges and community-based supports

There should be an increase in both staff and funding for child care facilities in domestic violence refuges and in the availability of therapeutic supports for children overcoming violence.

## 7. What are the benefits of the study?

The benefit of this study arises from the contribution it makes to child-centred research. The voices of children were considered paramount in elucidating the complexities of domestic violence as it pertains to children. The study provides narrative accounts from the children themselves and gives considerable detail on the process of recruiting and engaging vulnerable children in this type of research.

This research has provided a forum for children to tell their stories about domestic violence; in fact, some of the children noted that it was their first opportunity to do so. Limited attention has been paid to children's views of the domestic violence services they encounter. In-depth interviews were used as a forum for one-to-one discussions with children to establish their experiences of the violence itself and the subsequent service responses. It is recognised that many mothers and children do not access specialised domestic violence services given that domestic violence can remain hidden and is thought to be under-reported. However, the purposive sampling of women and children known to service providers allowed the researchers to address the aims of the study.



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Check out [www.dcy.ie](http://www.dcy.ie) for full report of study