

# The effects of Domestic Abuse on Children and Young People



## What a child might experience

Witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse is really distressing and scary for a child, and causes serious harm. Children can experience domestic abuse or violence in lots of different ways. They might:

- see the abuse
- hear the abuse from another room
- see/sense a parent's injuries or distress afterwards
- be hurt by being nearby or trying to stop the abuse

Further to this, a parent who is being abused may not be able to provide the necessary care for the child. For example if a parent is being financially abused then they may not be able to provide food, clothing, access to health care etc. If a parent is physically injured they may be unable/ ashamed to bring the child to school. If a parent is being emotionally abused or controlled then they may struggle to bond with the child, or to set appropriate boundaries. The child may not be able to grow up in a stable, loving environment and have opportunities to play, to socialise and to thrive. The child may also have to take on a caring role in the family.

The abusive parent may also use the child as part of the abuse, for example by encouraging them to participate in the abuse or by using the child to 'report back' about the non-abusive parent's behaviour.

Domestic abuse can also happen to young people in their own relationships.



## Warning signs and short-term effects

Children can experience both short and long term cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects as a result of witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse. Each child will respond differently to trauma and some may be resilient and not exhibit any negative effects.

### These are some of the effects we may identify-

- They may become anxious or depressed
- They may have difficulty sleeping, have nightmares or flashbacks
- They can be easily startled or conversely they may seem to daydream and be 'immune' to loud noises etc
- They may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches and may start to wet their bed
- They may have temper tantrums and problems in school
- They may behave as though they are much younger than they are
- They may become aggressive
- They may internalise their distress and withdraw from other people
- They may begin to play truant
- They may start to use alcohol or drugs, begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves or have an eating disorder
- They may develop inappropriate beliefs about relationships.

If you recognise any of these behaviours in a child or have concerns about a child

then you should follow your school safeguarding policy.

## Long term effects

Witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse is recognised as an ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) which means that the child is more likely to experience negative outcomes in adulthood. The impact of ACEs can increase risks of disease, psychological problems such as anxiety; and the adoption of harmful behaviours such as smoking, heavy alcohol consumption and early sexual activity. Also children raised in environments where violence, assault and abuse are common will often come to believe this behaviour is normal and therefore find it difficult to establish and maintain healthy relationships.

By recognising the trauma that the child has experienced and supporting the child we can mitigate the risks that ACEs present.

Children are better able to cope and recover when they get the right help and support, for example from other family members, peers, school or specialist domestic abuse workers. The presence of at least one supportive, caring, stable adult in a child's life is the most effective protective factor.

