**Impact of Coercive Control on Children & Young People**

**Introduction**

It is widely recognised that living with domestic abuse has an impact on children and young people. As Scotland moves further forward from considering domestic abuse as a series of discrete incidents and acknowledges the pattern of ongoing “coercive control”, there is growing information and evidence on just how wide reaching the impacts can be. Children and young people do not ‘witness’ domestic abuse, but experience it in their own right as ongoing and as pervasive into many areas of their lives.

**Impact of Coercive Control**

The term ‘coercive control’ was coined by Evan Stark in his 2006 published research of the same name. He firmly locates domestic abuse within a continuum of Violence Against Women and recognises it as both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. Where Stark highlights the interface of abuse and gender is in relation to the tactics used in coercive control, which he notes is the “microregulation of everyday life” for women and includes rules and regulations relating to their mothering, cooking, cleaning, appearance, and as a sexual partner. These are often based on highly gendered expectations of women’s role and purpose in society and in the home. The abuse will be tailored to the particular woman, often as a result of the privileged access to information that those of us in intimate relationships have.

The impact of domestic abuse on ‘mothering’ and on how children view their mothers can be significant. Children and young people can be used by perpetrators of abuse in a variety of ways whilst their mothers are with their partners and following separation during contact arrangements. Separation from an abusive man does not automatically equate to women and children’s safety and significant proportions of child murders in the UK and across the globe occur in this context. Risk of significant harm, including death, to children (and their mothers) can increase following separation.

**Recovery**

It is important to recognise that children and young people’s experiences are wide ranging and different. Adult survivors are likely to have memories of a life before abuse. They have a past history where they were able and supported to make their own decisions. Children and young people who have grown up in a context of domestic abuse may not have the same reference points. It is important to recognise this in terms of future recovery work – children and young people may have never felt ‘safe’ and therefore not understand the concept in its widest sense. Similarly, they may never have had the power to make their own decisions about their lives and may need support to be able to do this. They may also have difficulties in their relationship with their mum as a result of the perpetrator’s tactics to erode or prevent that relationship. Early intervention is crucial and routine enquiry of domestic abuse in maternity services and at the six week post natal check by health visitors supports this.

However, it must be remembered, that the majority of children and young people recover without significant agency input once they are physically and emotionally safe and once the domestic abuse has ended.

**Situation in Scotland**

All work on Violence Against Women in Scotland is underpinned by the Scottish Government’s Strategy Equally Safe: Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland. This Strategy recognises the impact of coercive control on children and young people, as well as the impacts of other forms of Violence Against Women. In particular, it highlights girls and young women’s vulnerability to specific forms of abuse precisely because they are female. Work around promoting gender equality in its entirety should have the result of reducing levels of Violence Against Women now and in the future.

A number of practice initiatives across Scotland are being implemented. Some of these are as a consequence of local case audits or as a response to recommendations in significant case reviews. In general, practitioners are good at recognising domestic abuse as a cause of concern in a family. However, those concerns may be better addressed and a number of discussions are happening nationally on how we can best support staff to develop their understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people and how we can change our practice to more effectively challenge perpetrators and engage with non abusing parents.

National work in Scotland is on going with the civil legal system in relation to child contact with a parent or step parent who has a history of perpetrating domestic abuse. Local improvements to practice can also be made that will help support decision makers in relation to child contact.

**Highland Data**

We know that in Highland we are only identifying a proportion of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. In 2013/14:

* 504 children were part of a household discussed at MARAC (2013) (repeats included)
* 22% of children on the Child Protection Register for domestic abuse (n=22) (2013/14)
* 543 individual children & young people supported by Women’s Aid Groups in Highland (2013/14)

**Next Steps**

* Embed principles in training that improve practice responses to domestic abuse in families
* Identify opportunities for the implementation of CEDAR (group work programme for children and young people affected by domestic abuse) in Highland
* Support staff to use assessment frameworks to determine the impact of coercive control on a child or young person
* Support staff to be confident in holding perpetrators of domestic abuse to account and to ensure that they are visible throughout the child planning processes
* Support staff to partner with the non-abusing parent to improve outcomes for children
* Identify the role of third sector domestic abuse staff (women’s and children’s workers) in the Child Concern Process (work initiated in 2015 but not completed)
* Identify Violence Against Women Partnership & Child Protection Committee leads to take forward these next steps

**Further Information & Reading**

* [Equally Safe: Scotland’s Strategy for the Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls](http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00498256.pdf)
* [Katz E (2015) “Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children living with Domestic Violence are Harmed by and Resist Coercive Control” (in Child Abuse Review, November 2015)](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/car.2422/full)
* [Sharpe C & Jones J (2014) “Children Living with Domestic Abuse”, Scottish Child Care & Protection Network](http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=10997&p=0)
* Stark E (2006) “Coercive Control”
* [Women’s Aid (2015) “Child First: Nineteen Child Homicides”](https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Child-First-Nineteen-Child-Homicides-Report.pdf)

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