

## NSPCC Written Evidence Submission for Domestic Abuse Bill Committee

The NSPCC helps children who have been abused to rebuild their lives, protects those at risk, and finds the best ways of preventing abuse from ever happening.

Preventing abuse in families facing adversity is one of our five strategy goals, because we know that domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health problems are some of the most significant risk factors which can lead to child abuse and neglect. Department for Education figures for 2018/19 show domestic abuse was a factor in over 250,000 child protection assessments across England - more than half of the total assessments. But we also know that even in difficult circumstances, with the right support, children can thrive.

At a time when the coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on the prevalence and effects of domestic abuse on children and adults, the Domestic Abuse Bill is a landmark opportunity to ensure the experiences of these hundreds of thousands of children receive legal recognition and they can get access to the specialist support they need.

The NSPCC has been part of a broad coalition of children's and violence against women and girl's sector organisations campaigning together to ensure that children's direct experiences are recognised in the Domestic Abuse Bill.

### Together, we are calling for the following changes to the Domestic Abuse Bill:

1. Amendment 50: The proposed statutory definition of domestic abuse must be amended to recognise that children also experience domestic abuse.
2. Amendment NC19/20: The proposed statutory duty on local authorities and their partners must be broadened to provide specialist, community based support services for children and adults who have experienced domestic abuse.

### The impact of domestic abuse on children

The impact of domestic abuse on children includes the effect on a child of living in a household where one adult is being abusive and possibly violent to another adult. In this situation children could be exposed to abuse, violence and coercive and controlling behaviours. Children can also be directly affected by a parent's (or parent's partner's) controlling and coercive treatment of another person. Examples of this include becoming involved to defend the abused parent against physical harm or, conversely, being drawn into violence or coercively controlling behaviours to further punish the adult victim.<sup>1</sup> A perpetrator of domestic abuse might, in their abuse of another adult, prevent a child from visiting their grandmother, or going over to a friend's house for a sleepover, or participating in extracurricular activities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Callaghan (Beyond Witnessing: Children's Experiences of Coercive Control in Domestic Violence and Abuse, 2016, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*)

<sup>2</sup> Katz (2015) 'Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed By and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control', *Child Abuse Review* 25(1)

There can also be an overlap between domestic abuse and the direct harm of children, for example, through neglect or physical or emotional abuse<sup>3</sup>.

The impact of domestic abuse on children can be profound and long-term. It can include experiencing physical and mental health difficulties with children's development and ability to learn being affected. One study found that over half of children who experienced abuse (52%) had developed behavioural problems, over a third (39%) had difficulties adjusting at school and nearly two thirds (60%) felt responsible or to blame for negative events.<sup>4</sup> Longer term, children can also face increased risks of criminal behaviour, interpersonal difficulties in future intimate relationships and friendships, and risks of experiencing sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence and abuse in later life.<sup>5</sup>

However, we also know that with the right support children can be supported to deal with the impact of these experiences. Through our programme, Domestic Abuse Recovering Together (DART™), children and mothers can talk to each other about domestic abuse, learn to communicate and rebuild their relationship<sup>6</sup>. After receiving the DART programme children had fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties; practitioners, mothers and children said that the joint sessions helped them to work together; and the sessions helped children share their experiences of the abuse and their mothers to understand them<sup>7</sup>.

### The urgent need for change

Children and adults are increasingly reaching out to the NSPCC for advice and support on domestic abuse. In 2017/18 the NSPCC's helpline received a total of 7,377 contacts from members of the public concerned about children at risk because of domestic abuse. During the coronavirus pandemic there has been an increase in the number of people contacting the helpline about domestic abuse - rising from an average of around 140 contacts a week earlier this year, to an average of around 185 contacts a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued<sup>8</sup>. 58% of these contacts resulted in a referral being made to, or updated information being shared with, a local agency. In early 2020, Childline delivered an average of around 50 counselling sessions a week to children and young people concerned about domestic abuse in their family and, since the pandemic began, that has risen to approximately 65 per week.

The NSPCC has prepared two, evidence-based reports for the Bill Committee which underline the urgent need for change.

1. An **analysis of serious case reviews** from 2019 where domestic abuse resulted in the serious harm or death of a child, raises significant concerns about how the current child protection system is not able to fully meet the needs of children experiencing domestic abuse.

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<sup>3</sup> [SafeLives \(2014\) In plain sight: the evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse](#). Two thirds (62%) of the children exposed to domestic abuse were also directly harmed, most often physically or emotionally abused, or neglected.

<sup>4</sup> See SafeLives (2014), fn 2 above

<sup>5</sup> Barnardo's (2020), 'Not Just Collateral Damage: the impact of domestic abuse on children'

<sup>6</sup> <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/services-children-families/dart>

<sup>7</sup> For the evaluation of DART see: <https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C6566>

<sup>8</sup> This covers the period before the government issued its stay at home guidance (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 17 May).

2. A report on the **NSPCC's Childline and Helpline data** giving details of the numbers and types of calls relating to domestic abuse we have received which highlights how coronavirus and stay-at-home measures have exacerbated concerns about domestic abuse for children and young people.

### **The importance of the Domestic Abuse Bill**

The NSPCC has welcomed the Home Office's commitment to ensuring children are protected from domestic abuse. We believe the most effective way to achieve sustainable, long-term protection and support for children impacted by domestic abuse is through legal recognition in the Domestic Abuse Bill. Fully recognising the impact experiencing domestic abuse has on children would make it easier to give children explicit protection. Local authorities also need support and funding to target specific services for children to overcome the trauma of domestic abuse and lessen its effects in the future.

We urge Committee members to amend the Bill as suggested so the new legislation will help society move beyond the idea that children are merely witnesses to domestic abuse and ensure the harm it can have on them is fully recognised and responded to by statutory services.

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# The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: domestic abuse

**This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts to highlight the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic.**

June 2020

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## Key Statistics

Both Childline and the NSPCC Helpline have seen an increase in the number of people worried about domestic abuse since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

- Between 23 March and 17 May 2020 the NSPCC helpline received 1,500 contacts from adults worried about the impact of domestic abuse on children. 58% of these contacts resulted in a referral being made to, or updated information being shared with, a local agency.
- In 40% of these contacts, the caller told us the domestic abuse had been going on for at least 6 months.
- We have seen an increase in the number of people contacting the NSPCC helpline about domestic abuse, rising from an average of around 140 contacts a

week earlier this year<sup>1</sup>, to an average of around 185 contacts a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

- Between 23 March and 17 May 2020 Childline delivered over 500 counselling sessions to children and young people worried about domestic abuse.
- There has been an increase in the number of counselling sessions Childline has delivered about domestic abuse, rising from an average of around 50 a week earlier this year<sup>1</sup>, compared to an average of around 65 a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

## Recognising domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, bullying, threatening or violent behaviour between people who are, or have been, in a relationship.

Adults are contacting the NSPCC helpline because they are worried about children who are experiencing domestic abuse in the family home. Children and young people are telling Childline about the impact of parental domestic abuse on them, but also that they are worried about the other family members who are being abused. Children, young people and adults are talking to us about physical and emotional domestic abuse, but also sexual domestic abuse, cultural violence, and coercive control such as limiting access to money and communications.

Domestic abuse – like all types of abuse - can be difficult to recognise and hard to talk about, so the statistics in this briefing should not be should read as an indicator of prevalence.

**“The father is a bully and the family are scared of him. He has been abusive towards the mother in the past and threatens the mother with violence if challenged. I’m really worried about the child, can you please advise?”**

*NSPCC helpline*

**“I’m calling about my three children who live with their father. My ex has banned me from seeing them due to coronavirus – he says it’s not safe. My ex can be very manipulative and controlling at times - he’s always trying to**

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government issued its stay at home guidance (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 17 May). See the methodology section for more details.

**turn the kids against me, saying I'm the reason the family isn't together anymore. He also has a nasty temper on him and I worry it'll only get worse being cooped up indoors all day. I miss my children desperately but not sure what I can do."**

*Mother, NSPCC helpline*

**"I really need your help; my dad has been physically abusing my mum. He has an anger problem and it's getting out of hand. The smallest things make him angry and he starts shouting. I'm terrified of him and I've had enough, I can't take it anymore - please help me!"**

*Boy, aged 14, Childline*

## Impact of domestic abuse on children

Children and young people tell us about their experiences of living in households where there is domestic abuse. Some talk about the impact on their mental and physical wellbeing, as well as their behaviour, including: anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts; self-harming; eating disorders; nightmares or problems sleeping; drug or alcohol use; aggression; difficulty concentrating; tried or are thinking about running away from home.

## Key Themes

### Reduced access to support networks

Children who experience domestic abuse tell us that they are finding it harder to cope than usual, as sources of support that might previously have been available to them - friends, teachers, school counsellors, health visitors, sports clubs - have been reduced or cut off entirely. Now, more than ever, children are turning to Childline for emotional support and advice on how to keep themselves safe.

**"My CAMHS appointments are now online, but it's not the same. I don't feel like I can talk to anyone"**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

The closure, for most children, of nurseries and pre-schools has caused some adults to contact the NSPCC helpline because they are worried about a child who they think is at an increased risk of abuse at home.

Other adults have contacted the NSPCC helpline with concerns about domestic abuse because parents or carers with problems such as alcohol and/or substance dependence and mental health problems are not able to access their usual support.

A grandmother contacted the NSPCC helpline after her son-in law had displayed 'psychotic' behaviour towards her daughter and grandchildren, which she thought was being aggravated by the stress of being in lockdown. She became even more concerned after the local mental health team said that, due to lockdown, they could not provide their usual support.

A 13-year-old girl contacted Childline to talk about her dad's anger problems:

**"Dad is sleeping in a separate room tonight to calm down. He's been in one of his angry moods again, throwing stuff everywhere and threatening to hurt mum with a towel. He's been like this for years, I'm kind of used to it now. Before lockdown happened, dad was seeing a counsellor for his anger problems. I'm pretty sure those meetings have stopped and I'm worried what he's gonna be like if lockdown carries on like this. I love my dad and don't want anything to happen to him, but I just needed to tell someone"**

*Girl, aged 13, Childline*

### Lockdown has brought domestic abuse into sharp focus

While some children have been experiencing domestic abuse for a number of years, other children told us how they've only become aware of domestic abuse since the stay at home measures, because the whole family has been in close proximity for extended periods. This was the case for one young boy who had recently discovered his mother was being physically abused by his step-dad; if he was in the room at the time, he would be told to turn around or leave the room.

**"We should be allowed back to school now so my step-dad stops hitting mummy"**

*Boy, aged 10, Childline*

With most adults now at home all day, people have become more aware of what's happening in neighbouring houses. Some people contacting the NSPCC helpline express their concerns about abusive relationships by describing parents fighting. One adult said that they'd been concerned for some time by 'aggressive shouting' and

'crashing noises' coming from a family next door, and that these concerns had been 'amplified' since lockdown:

**"I used to only hear them late at night or first thing in the morning before I left for work – now I'm working from home, I realise it's happening throughout the day. I sometimes hear the toddler crying as the parents are fighting. It pains me to think the child is having to live like this – can you help?"**

*Neighbour, NSPCC helpline*

### Making it harder to speak out

Some children who are experiencing domestic abuse and made to feel unsafe at home spoke of their reluctance to speak out due to fears of making the situation worse, of being separated from their siblings and of not wanting family members to be prosecuted. Others told us they were worried that key workers, such as the police or children's services, might bring coronavirus into the family home.

**"I really wish I was back living with my foster carers, but I'm stuck at my mum's place cos of the lockdown. My step-dad makes mum drink every night and I hear them shouting and throwing stuff at each other - it makes me so uncomfortable. I don't like being alone with my step-dad either – he tries to kiss me really hard on the neck and other private places. Last time it made a bruise. He said I'm not allowed to 'snitch' on him as everyone will be cross with me. I don't know what to do"**

*Girl, age unknown, Childline*

**"I could hear mum and dad shouting last night, and mum hit dad. There was blood on dad's face and it was horrible. I'm feeling scared and worried because I haven't seen him all day. Mum told me not to tell anyone - have I done the right thing?"**

*Boy, 9, Childline*

### Making it more difficult to leave

Adults experiencing domestic abuse at home have told us how coronavirus and the stay at home measures from government, have made any attempt to leave their home all but impossible. They told us they:

- worry about leaving children alone with their abusive partner, especially in cases where the behaviour had recently got worse
- worry about catching Covid-19 if they leave the house

- are recently unemployed and having to rely on their partner's income
- hope the abuse will stop once lockdown restrictions are eased.

**"Mum says we can't use our 'emergency bags' until after coronavirus is over".**

*Girl, aged 13, Childline*

### Drinking during lockdown

Whilst talking about to us about domestic abuse, some adults and young people said that parents and carers were drinking more since the government's stay at home guidance, whilst others said the abuse was getting worse.

**"I'm really scared of my dad, especially when he's been drinking. Sometimes he gets really angry and throws things at my mum. It's been getting worse since the coronavirus and I worry a lot. I have no idea what to do as I can't escape because of the lockdown."**

*Boy, 15, Childline*

**"Mummy lies that she is okay when she is not. Daddy hits mummy because mummy wouldn't give him money to get beers. Daddy tells me to go upstairs to my room but I can hear mummy crying and loud banging sounds. I am scared of daddy and I want daddy to stop hurting mummy."**

*Girl, 7, Childline*

### Exploiting fears about the coronavirus

Some of the adults and young people gave accounts of how the fear of coronavirus was being used to intimidate family members. One adult told the NSPCC helpline how a family member had threatened to **"breathe all over them"**. A young child contacted Childline in tears after hearing his father shout, **"We're all going to catch it anyway, so just deal with it!"**.

Others gave us examples of adults using coronavirus as an excuse to control family members such as not allowing partners to leave the home or seek employment; limiting their contact with family and friends; controlling their finances and monitoring their movements – all under the pretext of 'keeping them safe' from the virus.

**"My ex-partner has taken my baby son away from me and I don't know what to do. He stormed into the house the other day saying he was going to take the baby for a few days – he said he wouldn't get to see**

him 'til the summer cos of the lockdown. When I refused, he pushed me against the wall and took off with the baby and house keys. I've not heard from him since and I'm really worried about my baby's safety. My ex can be a bit rough when he handles him, and he sometimes tell him to "shut the \*\*\*\* up". I told my social worker what's happened and they're trying to locate him so I can get my baby back".

*Mother, NSPCC helpline*

### Young people worried about others

Some young people contact Childline because they are worried about other family members who are experiencing domestic abuse.

**"I want to be there for my granddad but because of the lockdown I am unable to visit him. My grandma is very controlling - she won't let him use the internet or a mobile phone, and all his money gets paid into her account. The whole family know what grandma is doing, but they're too afraid to tell on her. Since the lockdown, I'm becoming increasingly worried for his safety and I feel so sick. Please can you let me know what I can do to help?"**

*Girl, 16, Childline*

## Conclusion

As this briefing highlights, the restrictions on everyday life, imposed because of the coronavirus pandemic, are increasing the risk for some children who are experiencing domestic abuse in their homes. It can be more difficult for people to access to support and protection they need.

But in some cases, the stay at home rules have resulted in domestic abuse being recognised and reported, when it was previously hidden.

The NSPCC is calling on government to recognise the impact of domestic abuse on children and ensure that their welfare is taken into account when legislating around support for those experiencing domestic abuse.

## Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact the NSPCC helpline and Childline, the counsellors record what they tell us.

The insight in this briefing is taken from those Helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions where the counsellors recorded that domestic abuse was talked about.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC and Childline. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and Helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

## The time periods

The first time an adult mentioned coronavirus when contacting the NSPCC helpline was 6 January 2020. The first time a child mentioned coronavirus when contacting Childline was 10 January 2020.

For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government introduced its stay at home rules (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 17 May). We have used weekly averages to compare between the 2 time periods.

- The NSPCC helpline saw an increase from a weekly average of around 140 to around 185 contacts where domestic abuse was talked about, since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.
- Childline saw an increase from a weekly average of around 50 to around 65 counselling sessions where domestic abuse was talked about, since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

# Domestic abuse: learning from case reviews

## Summary of key issues and learning for improved practice around domestic abuse

June 2020

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### Introduction

Published case reviews suggest professionals sometimes struggle to keep their focus on children when they are working with families where there is domestic abuse. The parents' relationship can end up overshadowing the experiences of their children.

The learning from these case reviews highlights that professionals need to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and the effect it can have on children, and not make assumptions about gender roles within relationships where there is domestic abuse. Professionals must prioritise the impact that living with domestic abuse has on children.

### Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2019 where children experienced domestic abuse. It summarises and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between people who are, or who have been in a relationship. It can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or financial abuse. Exposure to domestic abuse in childhood is child abuse. Physical violence was a key aspect in all the case reviews we analysed.

In these case reviews, children died or suffered serious harm in a number of different ways:

- physical injuries at the hands of the father, mother's partner or mother
- murder of the child following issues around post-separation contact
- serious and ongoing neglect linked to domestic abuse.

## Key issues

### Perceptions of gender

People of any gender can perpetrate domestic abuse and it can happen in different- and same-sex couples. In the case reviews analysed, both men and women perpetrated domestic abuse - but the majority of cases involved male perpetrators. Academic research has shown that domestic abuse is a form of harm that disproportionately affects women and girls.

In some cases, practitioners were unclear whether a mother was the victim or perpetrator of abuse. They did not always view physical abuse by a woman against a man as a crime. Some men also held this view and therefore did not see themselves as victims of domestic abuse. This means practitioners were not always alert to children living in a family where domestic abuse was being perpetrated by a woman and underestimated the risk a mother may pose to her own children.

A perception that mothers are responsible for the care and protection of their children led some practitioners to rely too heavily on a mother's ability to keep her children safe from abuse. This was particularly the case if a father was absent or not engaged with services.

If practitioners do not engage fully with the men in a child's life, a man's role in the family can be overlooked. This means practitioners are unaware of the man's potential to protect or harm the child.

### Understanding the complex nature of domestic abuse

Practitioners in these case reviews did not always understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and the effect that it can have on children. Domestic abuse was not always recognised as a child protection issue, which meant assessments focussed on the needs of the parents, rather than the safety of the child.

In one of the reports we looked at, an adult victim of domestic abuse needed to leave her home and was unable to take her children with her. Whilst it was important to

keep the victim safe, professionals did not consider the risks for the children who were left being cared for by the perpetrator of the abuse.

Professionals may underestimate the risk to children during relationship breakdown and disputes about post-separation contact. Domestic abuse can continue after parents have separated and sometimes the stress of separation can be a trigger for a violent event. In one of the reports we looked at, a perpetrator of domestic abuse killed their child and themselves during a contact visit after separating from their partner due to physical violence.

Relationships where domestic abuse is prevalent may also be characterised by separations and reconciliations. Practitioners sometimes relied on out-of-date information about a parent's relationship status and were not always aware of separated couples getting back together.

Domestic abuse can cause adult victims to live in fear for their own safety and the safety of their children. They may also be afraid of the consequences of seeking help. This can make it difficult for them to speak out and result in victims minimising abusive incidents and/or retracting disclosures they have made to a professional.

If professionals neglect to act on disclosures, particularly from children, those children may be less likely to make further disclosures. This can mean that the risk to children may not be fully understood.

### Engagement with services

Families who have experienced domestic abuse do not always engage with services, such as domestic abuse support programmes or mental health services. They may participate in a service and gradually stop, suddenly stop attending support sessions or not engage with support at all. If practitioners are not aware of this, they may believe children and families are being supported when they are not.

In one of the reports we looked at, the lack of engagement between support services and a family in which domestic abuse was being perpetrated meant that professionals were unaware of the mother's pregnancy, and the birth and death of a child. Professionals were therefore unable to protect the child and support the family.

Parents who are not engaging with support services might not understand that they need support. Other parents may appear to comply with support services in order to allay concerns and reduce engagement with organisations such as children's social care. This can pose a risk to children's safety as professionals may be unaware of the full risk to the child.

### A history of violence

Anyone with a history of violent offending, against adults or children, may present a high risk to partners or children. Those who have experienced abuse may have difficulty forming healthy relationships with new partners and family members.

Professionals weren't always aware that a partner had a violent history, and this limited their view of the risk to the child.

People who experienced domestic abuse were not always offered support and those who had a history of perpetrating domestic abuse were not always regularly assessed.

### Triggers for violent incidents

Traumatic, distressing or unexpected events can elevate risk and trigger a violent incident that seriously harms or results in the death of a child. Drug and alcohol misuse can also fuel violent behaviour. In these case reviews, the main triggers were:

- relationship breakdown and issues surrounding post-separation contact with the child
- loss of employment
- injury
- physical and/or mental ill health.

### Parental mental health problems

Experiencing domestic abuse can lead victims to have mental health issues, such as depression and suicidal thoughts. This can affect how they are able to care for and protect their children.

If a perpetrator of domestic abuse has mental health issues, this can be a contributing factor to violent incidents.

The case reviews we looked at listed some factors that could lead to abusive incidents. These included a perpetrator:

- having suicidal thoughts
- self-harming
- ceasing to take medication
- stopping engaging with services.

## Learning for improved practice

### Understanding the impact of domestic abuse on children

Professionals working with families where there is domestic abuse should be trained to understand the impact it has on children. Anyone working or volunteering with an adult who is experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse should find out whether there are children in their family and, if so, make a referral to children's services.

### Understanding relationships within the family

Any assessment should include information about all members of a child's household and all adults with significance in the child and their parents' lives. This should include birth parents, new partners and relevant ex-partners. Professionals should verify information about the composition of a household, understand who has contact with a child and regularly check that this information is up-to-date.

Practitioners should engage in a full and meaningful way with separated parents and other partners to understand their role in the child's life. This includes accessing records about partners' history and background where appropriate.

It's important to consider partners of the child's parents and carers, whether they are living in the family home or not. A parent's own relationships can affect how they care for their child. All the adults in a child's life should be included in child protection planning.

Professionals should always investigate whether domestic abuse could be a factor in a family, including speaking with parents, parents' partners and children individually to provide opportunities for people to disclose abuse.

Practitioners should investigate the reasons why a child and their parents or carers may not have contact with their wider family. For example, the members of a child's wider family may be aware of and concerned about domestic abuse. They may find it difficult to speak to the victim and perpetrator about it and therefore choose to distance themselves. Practitioners should be aware that isolation from extended family may indicate domestic abuse is taking place and take into account that the family may have less support as a result.

### Assessing risk

Instances of domestic abuse should always be viewed as increasing the risk to children's safety. If parents who are experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse request support, the whole family should be assessed and appropriate support should be provided quickly for children and adults.

Assessments should consider all the factors that may contribute to a parent's ability to care for and protect their child.

Assessments should happen regularly in families where domestic abuse is taking place to enable practitioners to identify and respond to any changes. Practitioners should

not be too reliant on information from parents and should exercise professional curiosity.

Professionals should remain focused on the emotional and physical wellbeing of the child. Asking parents questions should be one part of a wider assessment which includes children's explanations of events. Seeking the voice of the child will help practitioners understand how the child has been affected and put in place the right measures and support.

During disputes about contact after parental separation, it is particularly important that agencies maintain a focus on the needs and safety of the children involved.

Agencies should not rely solely on mothers to protect their children from domestic abuse, as the mothers' own experiences of abuse and/or coercive control may impact their ability to keep their children safe. Professionals should ensure that they are holding the abusive parent accountable for their actions and putting responsibility on them to not cause harm.

Rather than making assumptions about gender roles, practitioners should consider that, in some cases, a father may be more able to protect a child than a mother, for example if the mother is perpetrating domestic abuse, or where the mother's partner is abusive, and the child's father may be able to provide safe care.

### Seeing the bigger picture

Incidents of domestic abuse or physical injury need to be seen within the context of what else is known about a family. Professional agencies should keep up-to-date, good quality, relevant records about children and families to help gain a fuller understanding of the family environment.

Information about domestic abuse should be shared quickly and regularly with all agencies involved with a family. This includes historic information and information about each new domestic abuse incident, regardless of whether it is classed as low risk. This can help agencies take domestic abuse seriously and enable them to identify patterns of behaviour that may pose a high level of risk to a child.

Practitioners should be curious about claims that domestic abuse is not taking place – particularly when there is a history of violence or a previous disclosure of abuse is retracted. Practitioners need to be aware that victims and perpetrators may not recognise that the relationship is abusive.

## References

A list of the case reviews analysed for this briefing is available on the [NSPCC Library Catalogue](#).

The national case review repository makes it easier to access and share learning from published case reviews at local, regional and national level. You can access the repository via the [NSPCC Library](#).

