



# Keeping Safe

## Top tips for working with families affected by domestic abuse

For children and family social workers

## The purpose of this leaflet

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**This leaflet is for social workers working with families affected by domestic abuse. Sometimes you will know that domestic abuse is happening within a family, but sometimes it may not be evident, and family members may need to know they can trust you before they ask you for help and advice about their situation.**

More detailed advice and information is on Family Rights Group's website ([www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)), along with details of specialist organisations that provide information and advice to professionals and to families affected by domestic abuse. You should make sure that you know and understand the legal framework and your authority's policies and procedures. If the policies are having unintended consequences, you should alert your manager. Make sure you know and understand the legal remedies open to women affected by domestic abuse.

Men and women can both be perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Domestic abuse can occur within heterosexual and same sex relationships. It can take place when people live together or apart. It can occur once couples have separated and it can occur between family members (e.g. a mother-in-law abusing her daughter-in-law or a son victimising his mother or a man abusing his new partner and her child from a previous relationship). Statistics show that in the majority of domestic violence cases the perpetrator is male and the adult survivor is female, and the language in this leaflet reflects that. However, this does not disregard male survivors and female perpetrators, nor minimise the importance that fathers can play in protecting children.

## Engage and communicate with mothers

- Always listen to, and explore, her views respectfully and sensitively.
- Try to develop together a shared understanding of the harm to the children within the family.
- Don't blame the victim for the abuse they have experienced, or for not leaving her partner. Support the mother and child to understand that the abuse is not their fault and that they have a right to live safe from abuse.
- Discuss with the mother whether she would like to access advice and help from specialist domestic abuse services, advocacy services, legal services and housing.
- Arrange consistent, professional interpreting and translation services for mothers whose first language is not English and who are not comfortable in communicating in English in formal processes. Always ask if the adult victim would like an interpreter of the same gender. Use interpreters, unconnected to the family's network. Provide sign language support for deaf women.
- Be aware of the danger of placing the burden on the mother to protect the child, denying the need for the perpetrator to stop his abusive behaviour.

### Safety planning

- Support the mother to make, and regularly review, a safety plan for herself and her children, within the relationship or following a separation. Be aware that research tells us that separation can increase, not reduce, the risk of violence.
- The Women's Aid website ([www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)) has helpful information on safety planning, including information on preparing to leave.

## Prioritise safety

- Mothers can be put at further risk because of their fear that seeking help from the police could result in a situation where social workers remove their children from the home. The perpetrator should not feel empowered to continue the abuse because they know that their partner feels too fearful to seek help. Avoid placing the woman in this dilemma and try to make sure that she has access to specialist domestic violence services to help her. Also, be aware if your authority's policies have, possibly inadvertently, placed women in this dilemma.
- Help parents understand that both the mother and the father are equally responsible for keeping their child safe from harm, including harm from witnessing abuse.
- Discuss with the mother whether she would consider involving the wider family network in supporting her and the child to be safe, perhaps through a family group conference, which helps bring the family network together to make safe plans for the child.

## Power issues

Think about the power dynamics that may be at play and what the impact of these are. The mother may feel that the perpetrator of domestic abuse and children's services are both exerting power over her and her children, that they are attempting to control her, which may leave her feeling powerless and fearful.

## Working with resistance

Recognise some of the fears that women may have when social workers become involved, including that:

- She could lose her child.
- She could lose her identity, her partner, her home, her income, her family, her community, her job, her right to stay in this country etc.
- You could judge her and find fault with her lifestyle and choices.
- She and her child could be more at risk from her partner because of your involvement – he may try to blame her for your presence.
- She could be blamed for not being able to protect herself and her children and for getting social workers involved.
- She can't call the police for help again as this will make you more worried for her child and you may take more serious action, possibly removing her child.

Listen to her, reassure her where you can and discuss with her, her rights and options, including sources of independent advice and support

Explain to her your concerns and how you can support her or who else she can turn to for help. She may not view what is happening as domestic abuse. She may need time and specialist support to come to terms with the fact that the man she fell in love with is abusing her, she may believe the abuse will stop, she may be too scared of him to confront the abuse, or she may have worked out that she is not in a financial position to leave or she may think to leave would be more unsettling or detrimental to the child in terms of their schooling, housing, friendship network and her access to employment. She may be under pressure from family members. This may result in mothers initially minimising or denying domestic abuse when social workers first become

involved with their family. But this does not have to be the end point.

Engage with the mother in thinking about how the domestic abuse has impacted on her child and try to develop a shared understanding of the harm to the children within the family.

Be honest with her about why social workers tend to be more concerned when parents show less concern about, or appear to minimise, domestic abuse.

## Communication

- Put information in writing, whenever it is safe to do so.
- Be specific: be clear about your concerns, what action you may take if risks continue or escalate, and where she can get independent advice and support.
- Explain very clearly why you are involved/what process and legal provisions you are working with the family under (e.g. early help, family support, is it a child protection enquiry (section 47 Children Act 1989) or has a letter before proceedings letter been issued), what her options are and provide written information to help her understand this
- Be realistic and listen to her: avoid giving an impractical list of tasks to complete independently. Help her to access some individual or key worker support from a specialist agency to move forward with the recommendations.
- Before sharing any of her personal information think about whether it could put a mother or child at risk. Discuss with her what information you are planning to share, with whom and why and listen to her concerns.

## Engage and communicate with fathers and father-figures directly

- Where it is safe to do so, make the perpetrator aware of the concerns you have about the impact of his behaviour on the safety and welfare of his/the child, and what he needs to do address these concerns. He should be told this directly by social workers rather than there being an expectation that the child's mother will pass on any information to him.
- Consider a referral to domestic abuse perpetrator programmes which offer risk assessment and violence prevention services for perpetrators, and support services for adult (this could include the perpetrator's current and former partner) and child victims.
- Discuss with the family the need to assess the father and father figures as a risk/resource to the children.
- Discuss with the mother the arrangements for conferences and meetings, using split child protection conferences where appropriate, to promote safety and confidentiality.

### Further information

Make sure you provide information about services in your area for adult and child victims of domestic abuse, including those provided by community groups.

Provide information on advocacy and support services in your area for children and parents affected by domestic abuse.

The following national organisations also provide useful information and resources:

**Family Rights Group** works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or in the care system. Provides a telephone advice line for parents and information and resources for parents and practitioners [www.frg.org.uk](http://www.frg.org.uk)

**Women's Aid** a federation of local organisations providing support to women across the country [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

**Rights of Women** runs telephone advice lines providing free and confidential legal advice to women [rightsofwomen.org.uk](http://rightsofwomen.org.uk)

**Refuge** runs a range of specialist services to help survivors access safety and rebuild their lives [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

**Solace Women's Aid** offers free advice and support to women and children in London to build safe and strong lives [www.solacewomensaid.org](http://www.solacewomensaid.org)

**Ashiana** provides housing and support to BME women and girls experiencing domestic violence and sexual violence [thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk/partners/ashiana-network](http://thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk/partners/ashiana-network)

**Latin American Women's Rights Service** delivers a range of services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence [www.lawrs.org.uk/services/violence-against-women-and-girls](http://www.lawrs.org.uk/services/violence-against-women-and-girls)

**Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP)** support parents and children affected by domestic violence, run services for men who have been violent to their partner, and for women who have suffered domestic violence [dvip.org](http://dvip.org)

**Respect** runs helplines for perpetrators and for men experiencing domestic abuse and provides specialised training on working with perpetrators [respect.uk.net](http://respect.uk.net)

**Men's Advice Line** (<http://www.mensadvice.org.uk>) and **Mankind Initiative** (<https://www.mankind.org.uk>) provide information and support for fathers who are victims of domestic abuse