



Domestic Abuse

In Ireland today, there are babies, toddlers and young children growing up in households impacted by poverty, homelessness, neighbourhood violence, discrimination, addiction, mental health problems, traumatic grief and domestic violence, and some children are being subjected to chronic neglect and/or abuse.

Working in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings, we have seen first-hand the devastating impact that traumatic experiences such as these can have on the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable people in our society. For many children, the impact of adverse experiences will negatively affect their wellbeing and development, leading to poor outcomes and social, emotional and physical issues over the course of their lives.

As early years educators, we can play a critical role in supporting children and families by promoting a safe, supportive environment, and providing stable, caring relationships in those critical first years of life. Through our intimate relationships with young children and their families we have the opportunity to make a real, positive difference.

This resource, which is one in a series looking at how ELC settings can support children experiencing adversity, focuses on children who have lived or who are still living in homes where there is domestic abuse. It explores how experiences of domestic abuse can impact young children, how to recognise trauma symptoms in children in response to domestic abuse and violence, and how, as early years educators, in partnership with families and support agencies, we can support children to recover.

Childhood Trauma and Adversity

Childhood trauma can be defined as, 'An actual or perceived danger that undermines a child's sense of physical or emotional safety or poses a threat to the safety of the child's parents or caregivers, overwhelms their coping ability, and impacts their functioning and development' (Nicholson et al, 2018, p.viii).

Children who experience strong, frequent and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support are vulnerable to what is called toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Toxic stress experienced early in childhood takes a toll on a person's physical and mental health, and can seriously impact children across a range of different developmental domains (Byrne, 2022). This has lasting adverse effects on wellbeing, and increases the likelihood of physical, psychological and behavioural problems later in life (Felitti et al., 1998).

When children have the consistent caring support of at least one parent or caregiver who responds appropriately to their needs and acts as a buffer against stress, however, they are more likely to recover from frightening experiences and any potential lasting impacts on their health, wellbeing and life opportunities from the damaging effects of stress will be lessened.

Behaviour We Might See in a Child Experiencing Trauma

When young children experience traumatic events, they do not always have the words to talk about what has happened to them or how they feel, instead communicating their distress through their behaviour. Children experiencing toxic stress have a stress response system that is set to high alert, leaving them overly sensitive to triggers or trauma reminders. This means that they can experience the world as inherently dangerous, even in safe situations. Children might present in a constant state of hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (withdrawal or shut-down).

Behaviours that might be observed in traumatised young children include (NCTSN, 2008):

- Separation anxiety or clinginess towards educators or primary caregivers
- Regression in previously mastered stages of development (e.g. baby talk or toileting accidents)
- Re-creating the traumatic event (e.g. repeatedly talking about, 'playing' out, or drawing the event)
- Difficulty at naptime (e.g. avoiding sleep, waking up, or nightmares)
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches)
- Changes in behaviour (e.g. appetite, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lights, sudden movements, or loud sounds
- Increased distress (e.g. crying, unusually whiny, irritable)
- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Worry about recurrence of the traumatic event
- New fears (e.g. fear of the dark or monsters)
- Statements and questions about death and dying

What is Domestic Abuse?

Domestic abuse is defined as 'all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim' (Council of Europe, 2011). Domestic abuse includes coercive control, which is a persistent pattern of controlling and threatening behaviour. In the vast majority of cases, domestic abuse is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men but it can be used by women against men and can also occur in same sex relationships.

How Domestic Abuse Impacts on Children

There are misconceptions that children are merely passive witnesses of domestic abuse and not victims in their own right, and this can act as a barrier to accessing adequate supports. In cases where children are not subjected to direct maltreatment by the perpetrator of domestic abuse, including physical, sexual or emotional abuse, being exposed to domestic abuse by seeing or hearing the abuse or the aftermath of abuse used against someone in their home, typically their mother, is still abuse. In cases of domestic abuse, children's own needs are disregarded by the perpetrators of the abuse.

Children may experience coercive control alongside a parent and siblings including being isolated from important people in their lives, having their behaviour controlled and being punished for things out of their control. They may also be forced to participate in the abuse of others. Children may intervene to try to protect loved ones and they may even be at risk of child domestic homicide.



Impact on development

Exposure to domestic violence and abuse at any age will have a detrimental impact on a person and will significantly increase their likelihood of having trauma symptoms, depression, anxiety, behavioural and cognitive problems. Early exposure creates even more disruption, however, as it affects the developmental tasks of early childhood (Humphreys & Stanley, 2006).

The negative impacts of domestic abuse on children begins in pregnancy as high stress levels in the mother, known as pre-natal stress, can directly impact on foetal development and leave children more vulnerable to difficulties regulating their emotions, among other issues.

Research has found that exposure to domestic abuse in a child's first 1001 days of life, from conception to the age of two years, is linked with adverse outcomes throughout childhood and adolescence (Flach et al, 2011).

The impact on relationships

Domestic abuse has a negative impact on a child's current and future relationships. As well as affecting the relationship the child has with their abusive parent, domestic abuse can undermine the relationship between children and the parent being abused where, for example, the stress of living with domestic violence might be impacting on their ability to parent. Being exposed to domestic abuse significantly increases the likelihood of a child having insecure or disorganised attachment, which can have long lasting implications for their social and emotional wellbeing, and on their relationships with others.

Many children who have grown up with domestic abuse will avoid abuse in their adult relationships but others may come to see abusive behaviour as normal. Their experiences affect their understanding of what a healthy/unhealthy relationship is, and they may carry this into their adult relationships – either by being abusive themselves or by entering and staying in intimate relationships where they are abused.

Experiences of domestic abuse can leave children seeing the world as a dangerous place where bad things happen and adults are not to be trusted. As young children are egocentric, in that they are capable of contemplating the world only from their personal perspective, they might blame themselves for the bad things that have happened.



Important Factors when Considering Childhood Domestic Violence and Abuse

- Children are centrally involved in the family dynamic of domestic violence and abuse.
- Domestic violence and abuse is a harmful context for children to grow up in.
- Childhood domestic violence and abuse is frequently a consequence of gender-based violence and abuse against women.
- Domestic violence and abuse can damage a child's relationship with their parents/ carers – mothers and fathers, in addition to other family members such as siblings.
- Children's experience of domestic violence and abuse often happens alongside other significant adverse experiences.
- Removing the person who chooses to use violence and abuse from a child's home does not remove the violence and abuse.
- Children's resilience and recovery must be supported.
- A society which actively supports gender equality and where there is zero tolerance of domestic violence and abuse protects children.

(adapted from Barnardos, 2021)

Additional Risk Factors

The severity of children's responses to domestic abuse can be dependent on the level of danger, the child's perception of the threat and the child's proximity to it. For example, a child who was in their mother's arms when she was assaulted will likely be more affected than if they had been asleep at the time and noticed their mother's injury the next morning.

The presence of other stressors in their families' lives such as homelessness, poverty, discrimination and living in an unsafe neighbourhood can lead to a significantly increased likelihood of lasting adverse effects. Children living in households where there is mental ill health and/or substance abuse as well as domestic abuse are at an increased risk of abuse or neglect.

There is a risk of ongoing abuse of women and children even after separation. Research finds that child contact arrangements can provide opportunities for abuse to continue (James-Hanman & Holt, 2021).

The Importance of Relationships

Relationships are the most important influence on a child's psychological wellbeing. Being exposed to domestic violence and abuse disrupts the attachment that babies, toddlers and young children have to their caregivers and can be devastating to a young child's foundational experience of safety and security. Children with experiences of domestic abuse can learn that it is ok to be controlling or violent within relationships or that violence is in some way linked to expressions of closeness and love.

Not all domestic violence and abuse are the same, and children and their families will be impacted differently. Some children will have sources of support to help mitigate the impact of domestic violence such as the presence of caring adults in their lives like grandparents who they can spend time with. To buffer the impact of domestic abuse, children will benefit from the availability of trusted, sensitive and caring adults in their lives.



With adequate supports from family, friends and professionals, most children will recover from their experiences. As early years educators, we play a critical and ongoing role for children and families to buffer the impact of trauma and support the child and their family to recover and thrive.

Supporting Children Who Have Experiences of Domestic Abuse

Provide security and reassurance

In Early Learning and Care settings, we can offer children the opportunity to form secondary attachments that promote their social and emotional wellbeing.

Stay close to the child and connect with them often throughout the day. This will help reassure children that they are safe. When we give children the message 'I see you, I hear you, you are important', this creates a sense of security. Children with experiences of domestic abuse will particularly benefit from seeing adults in authority respond to situations in calm and fair ways.

Be available at arrival time to greet and welcome the child as they might find it difficult and distressing to separate from their caregivers. It is a good idea to plan for these separations ahead of time. If possible, ensure a gradual separation between the child and family member by slowly increasing the length of separations as the child becomes more settled in the setting. Encourage family members to stay with their child in the setting and support them to do so.

Encourage children to talk

By openly discussing the abuse, we create a supportive environment where the child feels safe to express their feelings and concerns, and this will help them to cope.

Sometimes adults, with the best of intentions, will avoid talking with young children about domestic abuse, fearing it will upset them. Not talking about what has occurred or is occurring in their home can add to the secrecy and shame that is often associated with domestic abuse, and can leave children confused and distressed.

Young children will need help making sense of what happened. They need to hear that what happened was not their fault and that they are loved. Try to give developmentally appropriate information without overwhelming them. Children will process as much information as they can. Ensure that they know that they can return and ask for more information when they are ready or are feeling confused.

Helpful messages for children about domestic abuse (NCTSN, 2014):

- Violence isn't OK.
- It isn't your fault.
- I will do everything I can to help you be safe.
- It's not your job to fix what is wrong in the family.
- I want you to tell me how you feel. It's important, and I can handle it.
- It's OK to have mixed feelings about either or both of your parents.

Co-regulate with the child

When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos. – L.R. Knost

When children are feeling stressed or anxious, they may struggle to manage the intensity and duration of their emotions, resulting in them becoming easily overwhelmed and dysregulated. They may struggle to self-regulate, not only on an emotional level but also on a physiological level. Experiences of domestic abuse will trigger a range of different feelings, thoughts and behaviours in children, for example, they might seem fearful around people, fight a lot with other children or be very passive in their interactions, and they will need help to stay calm and regulated.

Through the relationship we have with children, we engage in a process called co-regulation, which means that we organise their feelings, offer them strategies to help them manage their big emotions and behaviours, and support them to feel calm and regulated. When children are feeling calm and regulated, encourage them to practise some coping skills such as taking deep breaths, engaging in sensory activities, snuggling a soft toy or asking for a hug, and help them to use these strategies during their times of stress. Aim to stay close to children who become easily dysregulated so you can notice quickly if they are becoming dysregulated and respond appropriately, supporting them to stay calm.

Co-regulation helps children to learn that it is ok to have big feelings and that we will be there to comfort and soothe their emotional distress.



Think about the environment

The physical environment can make a big difference to how children feel in a space. It can help children feel safe and welcome or it can have the opposite effect and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.

- Provide a low arousal environment, considering the number of people in the room, lighting, noise, tone of voice etc. Children who have experiences of domestic abuse may be more easily frightened by loud noises, by strangers coming into the setting, by loud voices or when other children are fighting.
- Provide natural spaces in the environment as being around nature improves wellbeing and helps children to feel calmer.
- Create calm, cosy spaces where children can go to take a break away when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed or are not able to focus on activities or listen to others.
- Include objects that support regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft toys, mind jars and sensory materials.
- Ensure children have ongoing access to a wide range of activities and materials that they find calming and regulating such as art, music, storytelling and books.
- Provide materials that support imaginative play such as open-ended materials and toys like blocks and wooden dolls, which children can use to express what they need. The more open-ended their toys are, the more opportunities children will have to play out and talk through their thoughts, fears and concerns.
- Some children will benefit from engaging with materials that encourage them to take on caring roles with a doll or other child as this will activate good feelings about themselves. Offer children opportunities to experience being nurturing.

Provide familiarity and routine


Early Learning and Care settings are important places to foster a sense of safety for children. Experiences of domestic abuse can mean that children's home environments may feel chaotic at times. The familiarity and routine of attending their ELC setting can provide much comfort to distressed children.

Domestic abuse can change the way a child sees the world, making it seem a scary and dangerous place. Maintaining consistent and predictable daily routines within the setting that children experience as familiar and dependable helps to provide a sense of security and safety. Be particularly sensitive to transition times, especially arrival and departure times, and unexpected changes such as staff absences. Unexpected change can be stressful and children might need extra support.

Some children will have comfort items from home that help to calm and soothe them and these should be easily accessible.

Provide for play

Play can help children cope by providing a medium where they can work through their thoughts, experiences and feelings and help them make sense of their experiences (Byrne, 2022). Experiences of trauma can inhibit children's exploration and play.

- Provide ample opportunities for children to play and stay close by to watch out for signs of distress and to offer support when needed.
 - Consider what activities the child enjoys engaging with, those activities that you notice foster positive emotions in the child such as joy, interest, happiness and humour, and plan around these.
- 
- Ensure children are supported to make decisions about what activity they would like to do so they know their views are important and their decisions are respected.
 - Spend time outside as outdoor play offers children many opportunities to regulate through gross motor movements like swinging, climbing and hanging from monkey bars.

Offer choice and control

Children in homes where there is domestic abuse often feel like they have little or no control over their lives.

Perpetrators of domestic abuse may have disempowered children in ways that have undermined their confidence, self-esteem and sense of efficacy (Katz, 2022). For example, a father might have harshly criticised or punished a child for small mistakes or for being independent, leaving them afraid to use their voice or try new things. To help children to develop a sense of agency in their lives, provide them with many opportunities to make choices, express a preference and exercise control throughout the day. Encourage children to see themselves as important by acknowledging their efforts and building their awareness of their ability to take charge and be successful.

Adopt a strengths-based approach

Adopt a strengths-based approach, which believes in the ability of children to heal and recover from traumatic events such as experiences of domestic abuse. Make time to share good news and talk about positive stories from children and families' lives, such as family outings and acts of kindness.

Supporting Families

The trauma of domestic abuse can leave families feeling a complete loss of control and can impact on how people see the world around them, including how they perceive interactions with others and their environments. Some families may find it difficult to trust others, to feel safe and to cope with challenges. As early years educators, we need to listen carefully to families, allowing them space to talk and trying to understand what their behaviour is communicating, for example a distressed parent might come across as angry or disinterested, and will need reassurance from us to help them feel safe and in control.

In situations of domestic abuse, mothers in particular are often scrutinised, resulting in ‘mother blaming’ women who are already struggling with the impact of the abuse on themselves and their children (Callaghan et al, 2018). Their abusers may have told them they are bad mothers, and/or they may have received accusatory messages from people trying to get them out of the situation about the impact of the domestic abuse on their children. This can undermine the mother’s sense that they can be a good enough parent and challenge their confidence in their ability to love and protect their child. The relationship between a mother and their child has been identified as the most important factor in helping children to recover from the domestic abuse experiences. Strive to support a mother’s relationship with their child and recognise that any difficulties in the relationship are most likely to be as a result of the abuse.

Families under stress might interpret their child’s behaviour as ‘bold’ or ‘difficult’. Share with families that these behaviours are normal responses to the trauma they have experienced as a result of the domestic abuse and offer guidance as to how to respond to the child in a sensitive and attuned way.

Those in abusive relationships may feel powerless, with limited control over their lives. For this reason, it is especially important that we work in partnership with them in a consistent, respectful and meaningful way. Be sensitive and find the balance between getting information from the parent about what their child has experienced, and how they and their child have been coping, without being too intrusive and risking retraumatising them.



After leaving domestic abuse situations, families may have additional stressors such as lower income, housing problems and employment difficulties. These stressors will place even more strain on the family and they may benefit from our support. Build a caring, trusting relationship with families and be a helpful source of support in times of need, for example, signposting families to relevant agencies that can offer expert advice.

When faced with distressing situations like domestic abuse, we need to remember to maintain professional boundaries and not put ourselves into the role of ‘rescuer’ by having inappropriate engagement with the family as this can damage our relationships with families, leaving them feeling disempowered and us feeling stressed and burnt out.

Be an advocate for better supports for families who have experienced domestic abuse.

Families might be reluctant to disclose domestic abuse because of worries about losing their child. As early years educators we cannot ignore safeguarding concerns for children but we can offer support and advice and be non-judgemental in our interactions.

As a mandated person under the Children First Act 2015, if you have a reasonable grounds for concern that a child may have been, is being, or is at risk of being abused, you must always inform Tusla. Child abuse can be categorised into four types: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse is the systematic emotional or psychological ill-treatment of a child as part of the overall relationship between a caregiver and a child (DCYA, 2017)

Our Own Wellbeing

We will not be able to support children’s emotional wellbeing if our own emotional needs are not being met.

Our ability to respond appropriately to children with experiences of domestic abuse requires presence, sensitivity and empathy. When we work with children and families who have experienced domestic abuse we can be left feeling sad, outraged, or shocked. There is a cost to caring and any professional who works with traumatised children is vulnerable to the effects of trauma (Figley, 1995). It is important that we recognise signs that we are becoming stressed or overwhelmed in our work and seek support from colleagues and from the management in our setting. We can also actively engage in the self-care practices we find restorative, whether that is hobbies, relaxing activities or spending time with supportive people. It is important to access professional supports should they be needed.



All early years educators will benefit from accessing information, guidance and mentoring support to help us in our role supporting children.

Further Support

Working in partnership with other professionals and agencies is key to ensuring children and their families get the right supports when they need them. Identify the domestic abuse support agencies and family support services available in your local area and build working relationships with these services so that you can call on them when you need them.

Click on the links below for information.

Domestic abuse supports

- [Domestic Abuse - Barnardos](#)
- [Domestic Violence and Abuse - HSE.ie](#)
- [Safe Ireland](#)
- [Women's Aid](#)
- [Men's Aid](#)

Other supports

- [The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years](#)
- [Creative Mindfulness](#)
- [Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care](#)
- [Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)
- [Staff Wellbeing in Early Learning and Care](#)
- [Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)
- [National Child Safeguarding Programme – Early Learning and Care](#)



References

- Byrne, S. (2022). *Trauma and Young Children: Building trauma awareness in early learning and care*. Dublin: Barnardos.
- Barnardos (2021). *A Shared Understanding of Childhood Domestic Violence and Abuse*. [a-shared-understanding-of-childhood-domestic-violence-and-abuse.pdf \(barnardos.ie\)](#)
- Callaghan, J., Morrison, F., & Abdullatif, A. (2018). *Supporting women and babies after domestic abuse: A toolkit for domestic abuse specialists*. London: Women's Aid Federation of England.
- Center on the Developing Child. (2007). *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief). www.developingchild.harvard.edu.
- Council of Europe (2011). *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*. Council of Europe Treaty Series No 210.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). (2017). *Children First: National guidance for the protection and welfare of children*. Government Publications.
- Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P., Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14 (4), 245-258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Figley, C. R. (Ed.). (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Routledge.
- Flach, C., Leese, M., Heron, J., Evans, J., Feder, G., Sharp, D., & Howard, L. (2011). Antenatal domestic violence, maternal mental health and subsequent child behaviour: A cohort study. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 118(11), 1383–1391.
- Humphreys, C. and Stanley, N. (2006) *Domestic Violence and Child Protection: Directions for Good Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- James-Hanman, D. and Holt, S. (2021). Post-Separation Contact and Domestic Violence: Our 7-Point Plan for Safe[r] Contact for Children. *Journal of Family Violence* 36 p. 991-1001.
- Katz, E. (2022). *Coercive Control in Children's lives and Mothers' Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (2008). *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. [CTT inside cover.indd \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (2008). *Children and Domestic Violence: Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence*. [children_domestic_violence_listening_talking_to_your_child.pdf \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- Nicholson, J., Perez, L. & Kurtz, J. (2018). *Trauma-informed practices for early childhood educators: Relationship-based approaches that support healing and build resilience in young children*. Routledge.

T: 01 453 0355

E: resources@barnardos.ie

W: www.barnardos.ie

For regular updates join us on Facebook

Registered Charity No: CHY 6015 / RCN 20010027

© Barnardos 2023



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

