

Appendix 3: The Impact of Witnessing Domestic Abuse on Children

Witnessing domestic abuse is child abuse

Domestic abuse can have a devastating impact on the victims and their families, with children and young people at risk of serious harm to both their emotional and physical health. Since the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children that have been exposed to domestic abuse are now recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, rather than just witnesses.

How are children affected by domestic abuse?

Children who witness domestic abuse are at risk of both short and long-term physical and mental health problems. Every child will be affected differently to the trauma of domestic abuse.

Short-term effects of domestic abuse:

For **young children** this can include:

- bed-wetting
- increased sensitivity and crying
- difficulty sleeping or falling asleep
- separation anxiety

For **school aged children** this can include:

- a loss of drive to participate in activities and school
- lower grades in school
- feeling guilty and to blame for the abuse happening to them
- getting into trouble more often
- physical signs such as headaches and stomach aches

For **teenagers** this can include:

- acting out in negative ways such as missing school or fighting with family members
- having low self-esteem
- finding it difficult to make friends
- engaging in risky behaviours such as using alcohol and other drugs

Long-term effects of domestic abuse:

- mental health problems, such as becoming anxious or depressed. Low mental health can also lead to big impacts on physical health, including self-harm or developing an eating disorder
- having a lowered sense of self-worth
- using alcohol and other drugs as unhealthy coping mechanisms
- repeating behaviours seen in their domestic setting

How to recognise the signs and indicators of a child experiencing domestic abuse at home

It can be difficult to know if domestic abuse is happening.

Even if they are not physically harmed, children may experience emotional and psychological damage as a result of witnessing domestic abuse.

Signs and indicators that a child has witnessed domestic abuse can include:

- withdrawn or detached behaviour
- ambivalent feelings towards both the abuser and the non-abusing parent
- constant or frequent sickness
- frustration or aggression
- bullying peers
- problems in school or with learning

- [anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts](#)
- [drug or alcohol use](#)
- easily startled or seem on edge
- fear of leaving the home
- bed-wetting or increased soiling
- nightmares or insomnia
- withdrawal or struggles with separation
- difficulty identifying feelings or communicating needs
- difficulty developing positive peer relationships

What should I do if I notice signs of domestic abuse or I'm worried about a child?

If you are concerned that a child may be at imminent risk of domestic abuse, always call **999** immediately.

If you are worried that a child may be being affected by domestic abuse, it is important that you share that concern. Consult with your Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), pastor or responsible person. The information you have may help professionals to build a picture about what might be happening to a child and help them.

What to do if a child reveals abuse

If a child speaks to you about domestic abuse it is important that you:

- provide a safe space for the young person to share
- let them know they've done the right thing telling you
- tell them it's not their fault
- listen to them and understand their needs
- do not push the child for answers, allow them to share as much as they are comfortable with
- do not confront the alleged abuser
- explain what you'll do next
- report what you've been told immediately (See Recording a Concern).