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# Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence



# Domestic violence: A widespread problem for children

- The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) report on violence against women estimates that one in three women in Europe are victims of violence during their lifetime
- and that 40% of women in Europe have experienced psychological abuse.
- 29.5% of young people under 18 have been exposed to domestic violence during their lifetime (12% of children under 11, and 17.5% aged 11-18)
- 5.7% of children and young people, will experience domestic violence in a year (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013)
- Domestic violence and abuse are issues that affect a large percentage of European children
- research evidence suggests that its psychosocial impact can be severe.

# Impact of domestic violence on children

- higher risk of mental health difficulties throughout their lives (e.g Bogat et al, 2006; Fergusson, et al, 2005; Meltzer, et al , 2009; Mezey et al, 2005; Peltonen et al, 2010)
- Possible lasting neurological impact, with far-reaching implications for young people's lifelong wellbeing (Anda et al., 2006; Choi et al 2012; Koenen et al., 2003).
- increased risk of physical health difficulties (Bair-Merritt et al 2006)



# Impact of domestic violence on children

- risk of educational drop out and other educational challenges (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Koenen et al 2003; Willis et al., 2010)
- risk of criminalisation (R.Gilbert et al., 2009; T. Gilbert et al, 2012; Kwong et al 2003)
- interpersonal difficulties (Black et al 2010; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Siegel, 2013).
- Vulnerable to being bullied, and bullying (Baldry, 2003; Lepistö et al 2011)
- more vulnerable to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, becoming involved in violent relationships themselves and other possible abuses across their lifespan (Finkelhor et al 2007; Turner et al, 2010).



# The lasting impact of domestic violence on children

- It has been suggested that ‘witnessing’ domestic violence is at least as impactful, and possibly has even worse consequences, than being directly physically abused (Moynan et al., 2010; Sousa et al., 2011).
- This is because domestic violence and abuse pervades the family and has a negative impact on patterns of relating throughout the household (Cooper & Vetere, 2008).
- Research by the organization Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse (CAADA, 2014) demonstrates a correlation between children’s experience of domestic violence, and their experience of direct harm, with 62% of children on their case database being victims of both.

# Review of 177 scientific articles – ‘child\*’, ‘domestic violence’

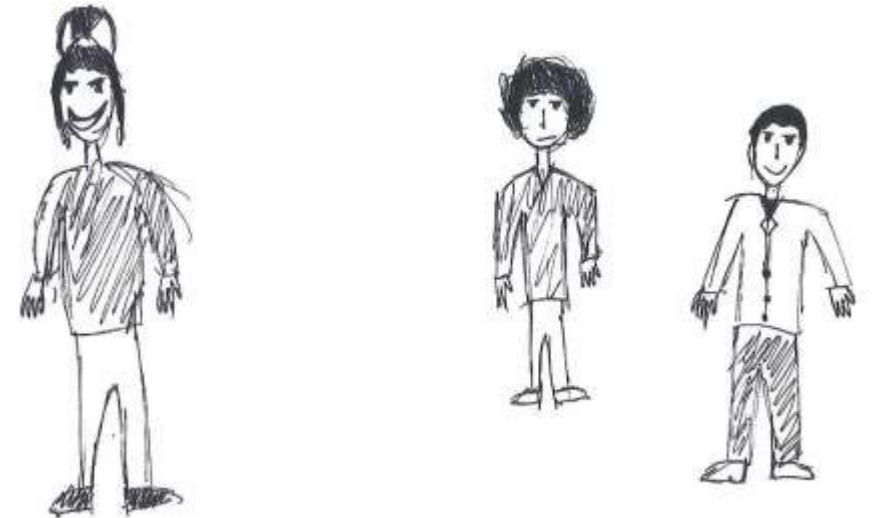
Key word cloud

Larger items are more significant.  
Underused items are shown in italics.  
Move your mouse over each item to show extra information in a tooltip.  
Click on a word to show the concordance.

**1 = A. abuse** abused adolescent adolescents **adult** aggression attachment battered **behavior** *behaviors* **child child\_abuse**  
childhood **children** childrens *childs* clinical data dating **domestic dv** e.g. *edt* **effects** emotional *et* experienced **experiences**  
**exposed exposure** *externalizing* factors families **family** *gender* *guest* *infant* *ing* *internalizing* **interpersonal** *intervention* **interview** *interviewer* *interviews* intimate **ipv**  
**m.** maltreatment maternal *mental\_health* **mothers** *n* *narrative* neglect outcomes *p* *parental* *parenting* *parents* **participants** partner **physical** *pregnancy*  
prevention *problems* **psychological** **PTSD** *relationship* *relationships* **reported** *representations* **research** *researchers* Resilience risk *s.* **sample** scores **sexual** social  
**social\_work** strategies **studies** **study** symptoms *their* **trauma** *victimization* *victims* **violence** violent witnessed **witnessing**  
**women** *youth*

# General critiques of literature on children's experiences

- Pathologising: this literature focuses on the *damaging impact* of domestic violence, but not on what *helps*, or how children *cope*
- Primarily quantitative – questionnaire driven
- Quantitative measures - the vast majority were not completed by child
- Small number of qual studies
- Children's voice obscured and elided in research
- Child rendered passive, lacks agency or capacity to resist





- Recognising children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse is an important concern in working effectively with them as victims and survivors *in their own right* (Mullender et al., 2003; Øverlien, 2011).

# Our work: The UNARS project

- Our focus is on children's capacity to voice their experiences
- We are interested in how children *cope*, their ability to be *resilient*, their sense of *agency*
- 100 interviews with children in Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK – including drawings, photos
- 10 week interventions with small groups of young people, focused on agency, resistance, resilience
- Focus groups with professionals and carers
- training programme



# Children's voice in domestic violence

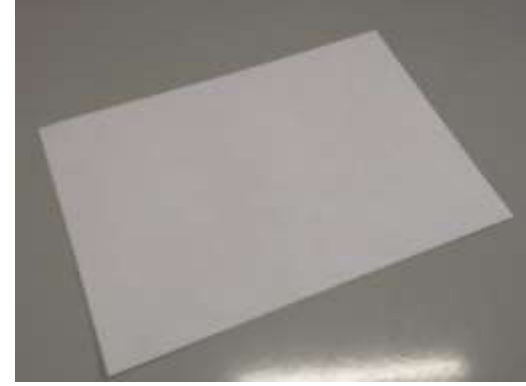
# Managing disclosure

- The young people we spoke to had highly crafted accounts of their lives, structured around practices of safe disclosure, strategic telling, and NOT telling
- The dangers of speaking out, the dangers of staying silent
- Stories are (consciously) managed by children
- Produces challenges in 'hearing' children's point of view
- The key lesson children learn from abuse is the danger of speaking out. Speaking out draws unwanted attention and consequences – from the abuser, from social services, from bullies, from unwanted helpers.

# That which must not be named....

- Avoidance of naming violence as violence

# Violence is a lesson in learning to be quiet



- Monitoring and self-regulating
- Aware of their environment, and of shifting atmosphere, moods
- Clear strategies for keeping themselves safe
- Learning to manage what you do and do not say, who you speak to, and how you speak, is a clear strategy that children use in coping with domestic abuse on a daily basis.
- Children's accounts here are not dissimilar from those of adult victims of domestic abuse

# Constrained use of space



- sense of constraint extends into children's use of physical space
- Children have clear strategies for managing their use of space
- Keep out of the way of violent parent
- Keep safe and secure
- Safe vs risky spaces
- Shifting use of space
- Shared areas of the house unsafe, spaces in which they were particularly careful

# Monitoring and use of space

- Knowing safe and unsafe spaces and times enabled them to move in and out of these spaces to keep themselves out of harm's way:
- very conscious strategy of monitoring – 'sneaking' downstairs to check if it was peaceful, and making use of the shared spaces if it was safe.
- carefully attuned to the atmosphere of the house, and if a fight was imminent she would remove herself and her brother to one of the safer spaces in the house.





# Monitoring and use of space

- Post violence – monitoring of space continues
- Outside world as hostile space, constant awareness of risk and danger.
- Again, this has echoes of the experiences of adult women in abusive relationships.
- If you read the two extracts – one is from a child interviewee. The other is from an adult interview. Can you tell the difference?

# Using Space: Dens and Hideaways

## Dens and Hideaways

- Small 'tight' spaces

# Not being heard

- Children we interviewed also complained that nobody really listened. That nobody picked up 'the signs'. That when they tried to speak they were unheard or disbelieved.
- Is this kind of lack of focus on children set up in policy and legislation? If the focus of legislation is on *the adult victim* (typically defined as the woman) children are 'additional'. Does this create a space in which it is harder for us to take children's experiences as seriously?

# Getting the story right....

## *Beth*

- She hesitates to tell the story. Double checks WHICH story we want to hear.
- Importance of telling the 'right' story.
- Learned to speak to an audience?

## *Ali*

- The production of a version of the family history that is authorised and stable
- Variability in the story is seen as untrustworthy

# Children as agents

- strategic behavior to de-escalate violence

# Children as agents

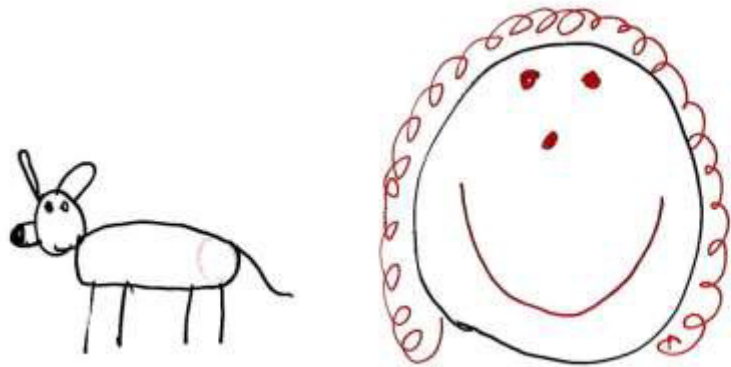
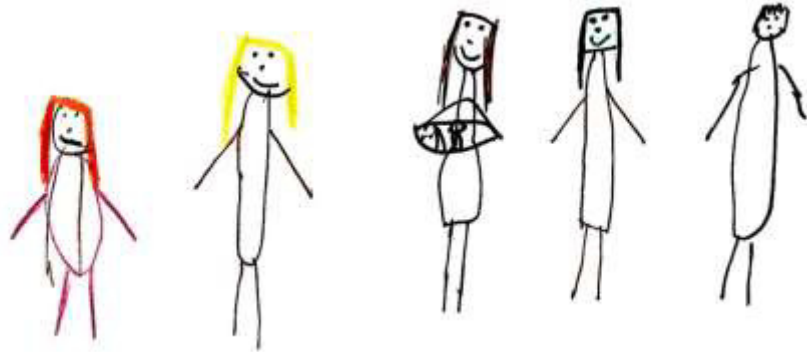
- Abusive partners also try to involve children in hurting their adult victim – either emotionally or physically.
- He is actively positioned as informant by the abusive partner, who tries to enrol Ben in the abuse of his mother, by getting him to lie about the argument.
- For Ben, this incident enables him to construct an alternate view of the abusive partner, shifting him from being a ‘nice guy’ to a ‘really bad person’.
- This extract is not the narrative of a passive witness or victim. He is an active participant both in the production of the abuse and the abuse narrative, and in building his own understanding of what happened.

# Children as agents

- Young people also reported their own active involvement in managing the abuse, through disclosure and help seeking.
- Independent and deliberate action to intervene in the violent situation,
- She removed herself from the home where the violence was taking place
- She identifies that she and her mother need support and intervention, and as an active subject and agent, seeks out assistance from others.
- Not the actions of a passive witness

# Emotion and subjectivity

*Nancy – the youngest and the  
scaredest*



Nancy, 10 years old



# Emotion and subjectivity

- Sense of difference, positioning through emotional self-labelling, as a way of managing family relationships and producing a positive sense of self
- Her more positive self identity, rooted in being 'the scariest' enables her to separate herself from violent, aggressive and loud family members. She constitutes herself as 'different' through this emotional self-positioning.
- Complex emotion work

# Emotion, embodiment, subjectivity

- 'Managing emotion' here is complex – not accessible to skills based strategies like 'anger management'.
- Embodied emotionality, the fear of getting 'bigger', older - Growing up is framed here as growing violent
- Staying 'small' and 'scared' enables her to disidentify from perceived family characteristics of violence and aggression
- Being 'the smallest and the scarest' is a powerful subject position that protects her from the perceived inevitability of growing up to be violent
- BUT here she expresses a fear that, despite this she will 'start fighting' as she gets stronger and bigger and more able to stand up for herself.
- Subjectivity emerges from, and is immanent within interconnections of embodied social practice, and language (Blackman et al 2008) (other modes of self-expression – meaning making, symbol)

# The girl with the isolated heart

- protecting her heart from others to avoid the risk of being hurt
- Avoids sharing experiences, emotions and thoughts to avoid the judgment of others, and pain



# Comfort and Self Soothing

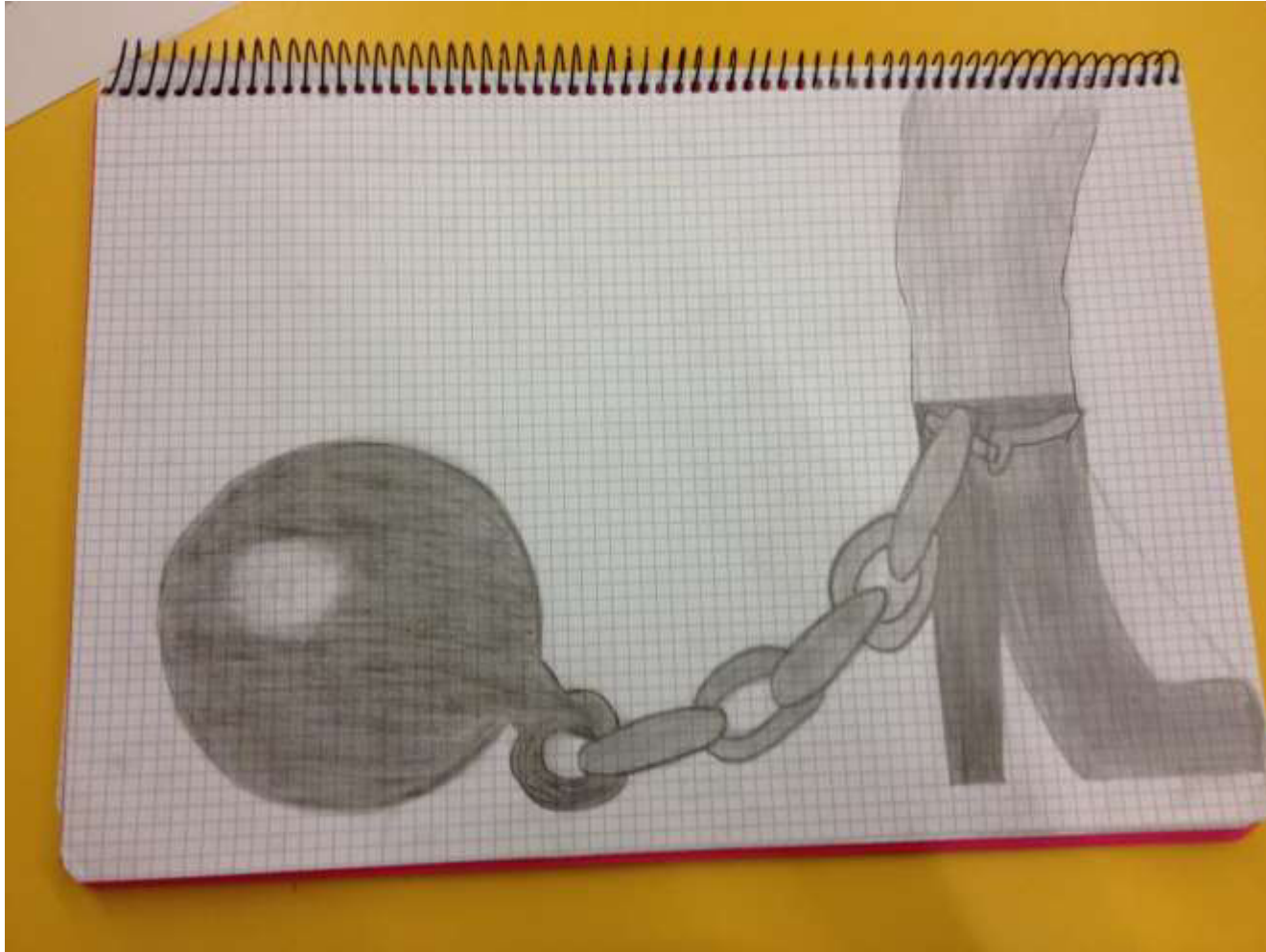
- Comfort blankets, self soothing, relationality



# Paradoxical Resilience



# Paradoxical resilience



- Even though the past is painful, it makes you stronger.

# Service responses

- Several young people noted that, while police did respond to calls for help, the response was sometimes ineffective.
- Rachel reports that her expectation of police response is very low, leaving her feeling fearful of the consequences and impotent to do anything about them.
- She found her father's arrests 'nerve racking', not because he was being punished, but rather because she expected him to be released quickly, and that he would interpret the release as a ratification of his own actions.
- On the one hand, she has called the police, and sees their immediate response as important in terms of keeping her and her family safe.
- On the other hand, she does not feel she can exert her own need for a more satisfactory solution on the police, nor can she rely on them to follow through on that promise of keeping her safe.
- Risk of being seen as 'responsible' for calling the police.
- The experience of the children we interviewed does not bear up a strong sense that policing functions as an effective safety net for them.
- Further, as a witness, positioned as 'collateral damage' in domestic violence, Rachel has no legal recourse in her own right. She is not perceived as the victim.

# Service responses – feeling unheard

- The responding officer discounted the child's account
- Frustration for children of not being heard or being



# Service responses

Emma: No, because the time that I did talk about it was when we did get the help but I talked to a teacher thinking I'd be able to trust her and she went straight to the headmaster and all the stuff started going on where the headmaster like threatened my mum saying, "If you don't sort this out, we'll ring child services," and all that stuff, my mum could have had us taken off her 'cause of that. ....((Erm)) I can't remember what I said, I think I said something like, I think I had like a bruise on me or something and I told a friend what happened [Int: Yeah], and she made me tell this teacher and then that's how it started, just 'cause I talked about a little bruise that I had on my arm.

... Int: So what did you get from that, so you'd told your story and then what?

Emma: I did get a bit of hassle of people 'cause they found out as well, just normal people in my Year (at school) ... but, I talked to her about it and then she started telling other people and then that's how it got round the school kids and I had a lot of problems because of that. They was like, "Haha, your stepdad hates you," ((mock nasty tone)) and all this stuff

# Service responses

*Paul: Yeah, cause we stopped talking to ((social worker)) because she told our dad stuff we'd said. And he got very mad.*

*Int: why is it important to you to keep things private?*

*George: Well, cause then other people won't know and they won't get angry about things that you said about them.*

# Service responses: Taking children's perspectives seriously?

- Inappropriate adult responses, that fail to take seriously the impact of difficult family life on children

# Children as victims of domestic violence?

- Most domestic violence legislation and policy represents domestic violence and abuse as something that occurs between two adults in an intimate partnership.
- For example, The UK Home Office provides a clear definition of domestic violence as:
  - “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.” (Home Office, 2013 p. 2).
- Children are absent *as victims* from such legal definitions.

# More than 'collateral damage'

- Children are described as 'witnesses' to domestic violence or 'exposed to domestic abuse'
- This results in a framing of children as living with abuse, affected by it, but not as its ***direct victims***.
- They are positioned as 'collateral damage' to adult violence.

# More than 'witnesses' to violence

- When we talk to children about domestic violence, it is clear that it is not something they 'witness' from a distance
- Passive framing
- To genuinely help children deal with and recover from domestic violence, we need a policy framework that sees children both as victims and as active beings, making sense of and working with their experiences of domestic violence (Mullender et al., 2003; Overlien & Hydén, 2009; Carolina Øverlien, 2011)
- Legislative frameworks that do not recognise the real impact of domestic violence on children, and that do not take into account children's capacity for meaning-making in adverse situations and agency in relation to them are inadequate to support children who have experienced domestic violence.

- Services for young people remain largely a 'bolt on' to existing domestic violence services, with many children not receiving any specialist support after experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and only 9% of children who have experienced domestic violence in the UK have access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for mid to long term support (CAADA, 2014b).

# More than witnesses to violence

- The historical definition restricts our legal understanding of domestic violence to intimate relationships, predominantly in adult dyads.
- The implication of this framing of domestic violence is to reproduce, discursively, conditions in which children are only ever positioned as 'collateral damage' in the policing and management of domestic violence.
- Children are not recognised in policy or in criminal law as direct *victims* of domestic violence. If they are discussed at all in domestic violence policy, it is as witnesses or as 'also affected'.
- This is at odds with the well-established and still growing body of evidence that indicates how damaging domestic violence is to children and young people, and is rooted in an old fashioned understanding that domestic violence is primarily about violent interactions in the dyad and not the intimate family relational structure of violence psychological abuse and control.
- It is important to recognize, both legally and in work with families affected by domestic violence, that the exercise of power in abusive and controlling relational dynamics can be troubling and distressing for children.



# More than witnesses

- The importance of placing children's experiences on the agenda in our responses to domestic violence
- the 'victim' in domestic violence is not just the adult in the intimate dyad; it is also any children within the household who are affected by the violence, either directly or indirectly.
- A shift to recognize children as equal victims in the crime of domestic violence and abuse has two important implications
  - it requires that we listen to children who experience domestic violence and abuse,
  - and it creates space to recognize their own creative and agentic strategies in response to abuse and control within the family.
- It opens a different discursive space in which the child is recognized as being as important as the adult antagonists in our responses to domestic violence and abuse.

# When we make space for children to speak....

Listening to children carefully, paying attention to their experiences, not telling them how they should feel, but allowing them to **explore how they feel** - these kinds of things enable children to feel validated and valued. The children's self report suggests that they feel better in themselves, they feel more confident, more able to speak about their experiences, less likely to keep things secret.

Further children reported that talking about their experiences in a supportive environment enlarged their sense of a positive possible future, and increased their sense of aspiration.

Providing a non-judgemental space helped young people also to work through the difficulties they experienced with interpersonal relationships. It also enabled participants to talk through relationships with the violence parent, and find ways of re-framing that relationship.

# Conclusions

- Young people are not passive witnesses to DV. They are reflexive, meaning making, and agentic in their experiences of their family
- Their emotional life in relation to DV is complex and multifaceted
- Accounts of their experiences are multi-layered and the emotional nature of their experience is not written 'on the surface'.
- Children have been silenced historically by insufficiently responsive professional practice and legal frameworks
- It is surely time that this changed?

# Finding us



UNARS website [www.unars.co.uk](http://www.unars.co.uk)



On twitter: <https://twitter.com/JaneEMCallaghan>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/428946693916205/?fref=ts>

