

# Responding to Domestic Violence

## Research Summary

Domestic violence against women is widespread but mainly hidden. As a result, the number of children who live in households where their mothers are abused by their partners, or harassed by ex-partners, is large but unknown. This research shows that rather than suffering in silence as previously believed, children often display remarkable coping strategies and want to be heard and involved in service responses (where safe), but agencies rarely consult them. Their views are largely ignored.



## Impact

The groundbreaking study on domestic violence, from the ESRC's Children 5-16 Research Programme, was carried out by key domestic violence experts led by Professor Audrey Mullender. It has shaped government policy and had a direct impact on the lives of mothers and children.

The research was published as an influential book, *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*, and a book in young people's own words, *Don't hit my Mum*. It underpinned further research on ways mothers (and others) can help children recover from living with violence in the home, resulting in the publication of good practice materials by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Professor Mullender's report for the Home Office, entitled *Tackling Domestic Violence: providing support for children who have witnessed domestic violence*, drew out from the research good practice recommendations for professionals working with children.

The research has informed debates about legal reforms to childcare legislation, which resulted in amendments to the Children Act 1989. An amendment that came into effect in 2005 updated the definition of harm as including the impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another". This amendment had the effect of strengthening the case for significant harm through domestic violence.

The study also influenced policy initiatives and frameworks, such as the Department for Children, Schools and Families' programmes Every Child Matters, and has been a mainstay of children's work in women's refuges and other third sector initiatives with women and children who have lived with abuse.

Government ministers are now considering adding domestic violence lessons to the National Curriculum in schools, following Professor Mullender's recommendation.

The findings have informed the design and delivery of support provided to children and young people by local government authorities and charities including Women's Aid and Alcohol Concern.

For instance, London Councils – which represents all 32 London boroughs, the City of London, the Metropolitan Police Authority and the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority – have used the research in its guidelines for service providers.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence, set up by the government in 2001 to improve social care services for adults and children, has also included the findings in its literature.

The study has provided the basis for educational materials used in direct work with mothers and children, for example the *Aid Education Toolkit - Expect Respect* produced by Women's Aid, the national charity working to end violence against women and children.



## Further Information

**L 129-25-1037**

**Children's needs, coping strategies and understanding of woman**

<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/ViewAwardPage.aspx?awardnumber=L129251037>

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## Key Findings

- While only a third of mothers who have lived with domestic violence thought their children were aware of the violence, all the children knew it was happening.
- Children of all ages were quite active in how they responded to and coped with the violence, sometimes with understanding and initiative well beyond their age.
- Most kept themselves away from the violence, with few of the children intervening directly. Many got involved by calling the police or getting neighbours and friends to do so.
- Older children demonstrated greater understanding that it is hard to leave domestic violence and were sometimes instrumental in helping their mothers understand that staying with an abuser was not necessarily best for their children's well being.
- The effects on children who had experienced domestic violence ranged from continued fear and a feeling of displacement after they had moved to a safe place, to nightmares and, for some, difficulties at school.
- 84 per cent secondary students and 52 per cent of primary students wanted lessons on domestic violence in school to understand why it happened and what to do.
- Boys demonstrated less awareness than girls, especially as they got older.
- Both sexes condone violence more readily than one might expect.
- Children who had lived with violence were more likely to understand that it was the fault of the abuser and could usefully be involved in the development of learning materials.
- Schools based awareness-raising from an early age is essential to ensure boys understand the issues before their attitudes begin to harden at the age of 11.
- Young people should be involved (where safe) by agencies in finding solutions in individual cases.

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