

# Not just Collateral Damage

The hidden impact of  
domestic abuse on children.

By Emma James,  
February 2020

Believe in  
children  
 Barnardo's





# Foreword

After nearly six years as Chief Executive of Barnardo's, one of the many things I've learnt is that some of the most serious challenges facing vulnerable children remain hidden in the shadows. I've always believed that it's our job to bring those challenges to light – so that the Government, the media, the public, and charities like us, have no choice but to take action.

While the impact of abuse carried out by adults on children – whether physical, emotional or sexual – is understood to have a devastating and often life-long impact, the same is not quite true of abuse towards a parent or carer, or abusive behaviour carried out by children under the age of 18.

Domestic abuse can happen in any relationship and any family. And we know that it can have a really significant impact on children, putting at risk their future wellbeing, their education, and their chance of forming happy, healthy relationships. Perhaps unsurprisingly, domestic abuse is the most common factor amongst children assessed as being 'in need' of support from local authority children's services in England.<sup>1</sup> Across Barnardo's 1,000+ services, we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of children we support who are known to have experienced domestic abuse either in their families or in their personal relationships. Over 76% of Barnardo's frontline workers recently said they have supported children, young people and/or parents who experienced domestic abuse over the last year (October 2018-19).<sup>2</sup>

It is striking that in much of the debate on domestic abuse, the impact on children and young people<sup>3</sup> is largely overlooked. This report is our attempt to address that. It is

based on the experiences of the children we support at Barnardo's and the expertise of those who work directly with them. It lays bare the evidence that living in an abusive household is hugely traumatic for children with significant costs to them personally and to society as a whole. Without the right support at an early stage, children in this situation are at risk of becoming trapped in a life-long cycle of violence. Yet despite this, we know that services for these children are patchy and under strain.

For all these reasons, I warmly welcome the new Government's decision to reintroduce the Domestic Abuse Bill, which should signal a step-change in how we tackle this horrific crime, and how we support victims – including children – who are affected. The Bill presents a unique opportunity, and we believe it needs to be amended to make sure all children affected by domestic abuse have access to the vital support they need to recover – whether they live in a refuge or in the family home.

We have to work together across central and local government, police, schools, charities and communities, to help these children recover from traumatic experiences and work towards a positive future.



**Javed Khan –  
Chief Executive**

1 DFE Children in need statistics [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/762527/Characteristics\\_of\\_children\\_in\\_need\\_2017-18.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762527/Characteristics_of_children_in_need_2017-18.pdf)

2 Children can both experience domestic abuse by living in family where it is present and/or experience it in their own personal relationships usually as teenagers.

3 This report uses the United Nations' definition of children and young people. The United Nations defines any individual under the age of 18 as a child. The UN also refers to those aged 15-24 as young people.



# Key Recommendations

Barnardo's recommends that in order to help prevent the cycle of abuse and better support children affected by domestic abuse, the Government should seek to strengthen the Domestic Abuse Bill so it directly addresses the impact of domestic abuse on children. We believe the following three amendments should be made to the Bill.

## Recommendation 1

**In order to improve protection and outcomes for children and young people affected by domestic abuse, we recommend that the Bill includes a statutory duty on public authorities to commission specialist domestic abuse support for all victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse.**

Support for victims of domestic abuse should be **universal**. The Government has committed to introduce a duty on local authorities to provide safe accommodation and support for victims and children in refuges (this followed a consultation by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). However, though a welcome step, a large number of victims and their children cannot be accommodated in this type of accommodation. It may not be appropriate for some victims to be housed in refuge. For example those with teenage boys; with complex needs including drug and alcohol abuse; those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; victims with disabilities who may need adapted accommodation as well as young victims under the age of 18. Indeed many survivors want to be

supported to stay safe in their own home – putting the onus on the perpetrator to leave and disrupt their life, rather than the victim who may need friends, family and community networks to recover from the abuse, while children may wish to stay in local schools and near to friends.

This specialist support must also extend specifically to young people in abusive intimate relationships – with the roll-out of Young People's Violence Advisers<sup>4</sup> across England in the same way that Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) provision has been.<sup>5</sup> SafeLives' Children's Insights data shows that less than half (45%) of young people in an abusive intimate relationship were known to children's social services.<sup>6</sup> Without being able to access specialist services, these young people are left at risk of further harm. Specialist support should also be available to young people exhibiting abusive behaviours in order to break the cycle before adulthood.

**We must avoid a 'two tier' system of support for victims – based on their type of accommodation or their age. Support for victims of domestic abuse should be universal and mandatory for local authorities.**

4 Young People's Violence Advisor – A SafeLives' evaluated and recommended role to support young people affected by domestic abuse – [YPVA role description](#)

5 The DfE funded the initial evaluation of YPVAs which showed that it was an effective intervention in securing victim's safety and wellbeing, there was not subsequent funding to train YPVAs and match-funding with Councils to ensure the model was rolled-out, unlike there was with IDVA provision

6 Safe Young Lives (2017), Young people and Domestic Abuse, Safe Lives

We therefore recommend that this duty to commission services for victims in refuges is widened to include:

- Statutory support for **all** victims and children affected by domestic abuse
- Statutory access to Young People's Violence Advisers
- Statutory quality assured perpetrator programmes.

Public authorities must be allocated sufficient, ring-fenced funds so they can fulfil this duty effectively, working in partnership with other local agencies, charities and communities.

### **Recommendation 2**

**We recommend that the Children Act and its associated statutory guidance be amended (through the Domestic Abuse Bill) to reference domestic abuse and coercive control (by name) as a key risk to children's health and wellbeing. It should also make clear that harm from exposure to domestic abuse is not limited to literally 'seeing or hearing' abuse.**

The Children Act 1989 is the key legislative framework for protecting vulnerable children. It is central to determining which children qualify for support from local authority children's services. The definition of significant harm in the Children Act 1989 was amended in 2002 to acknowledge the adverse effects of children's exposure to domestic violence. The Bill as amended defines harm to children caused by domestic abuse as: "the impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another."

However, this definition is too narrow, failing to recognise that living with

domestic abuse causes significant harm to children's immediate and longer term health, wellbeing and wider outcomes. It also fails to recognise the broader definition of domestic abuse in recent legislation. For instance, coercive control, which in addition to harming the victim, also harms children in the wider family (coercive or controlling behaviour within an intimate or family relationship was established as a criminal offence in the Serious Crime Act 2015, and came into force on 29 December 2015).

### **Recommendation 3**

**We recommend that the Domestic Abuse Bill explicitly recognises the impact of this crime on children.**

The new statutory definition of Domestic Abuse in the Bill rightly applies to abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone over 16 against someone over 16. This aligns with other relevant parts of the law and maintains a distinction in law with child abuse and also avoids unwelcome criminalisation of children. However, our report shows that under 16s are directly affected by abuse towards a parent or carer. Making this explicit on the face of the Bill will help ensure children's needs are fully reflected in policy and practice.

As frontline practitioners and professionals will adopt this definition and it will directly contribute to how they respond to domestic abuse, we recommend that the Bill's definition must recognise the experience of children.

**We hope the Government will amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to reflect our recommendations above.**



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**We would like to thank all the Barnardo's service managers and practitioners and the Committed to Ending Abuse team at HMP/YOI Polmont who helped with this report.**

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# Context

*“The impact of domestic abuse on children varies from physical injuries, through emotional abuse to developmental delay. It is hard to describe in a few sentences but the impact on children is significant, especially on the under 5s” Barnardo’s practitioner*

## a. Legislation

One of the most basic human rights principles is the right to live free from the threat of violence. Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), of which the UK was a founding signatory, guarantees this right to every child and obliges States to take appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of violence. Under the UNCRC a child is a person considered to be under the age of 18. Therefore wherever under-18s experience violence and abuse, this is a violation of a child’s human rights. The UN Committee on the Right of the Child has explicitly stated that ‘exposure to domestic violence’ is mental violence against the child under Article 19.<sup>7</sup>

In the UK, the Children Act 1989 is the key legislative framework for protecting vulnerable children. It is central to determining which children qualify for support from local authority children’s services. The definition of significant harm in the Children Act 1989 was amended in 2002 to acknowledge the adverse effects of children’s exposure to domestic abuse. It defines harm to children caused by domestic abuse as: *“the impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the*

*ill-treatment of another.”* However, this definition is **too narrow**, failing to recognise that living with domestic abuse causes significant harm to children’s immediate and long-term health, wellbeing and wider outcomes.

2019 saw the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Bill following a period of consultation. Although we welcome this focus on domestic abuse from the Government, what has become clear is that this Bill, as it stands, will not guarantee the provision of much needed support services for children and young people.

Therefore, we believe both the Domestic Abuse Bill and the Children Act 1989 must be amended to properly reflect both the prevalence of domestic abuse in vulnerable children’s lives and the profound impact it has.

**There is now an opportunity to link the prospective Domestic Abuse Bill to the Children Act and ensure that this definitive piece of legislation safeguarding children explicitly mentions domestic abuse and clarifies that children are victims of domestic abuse.**

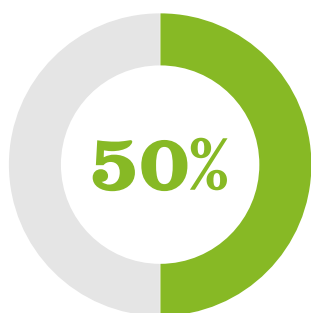
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<sup>7</sup> Article 19, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

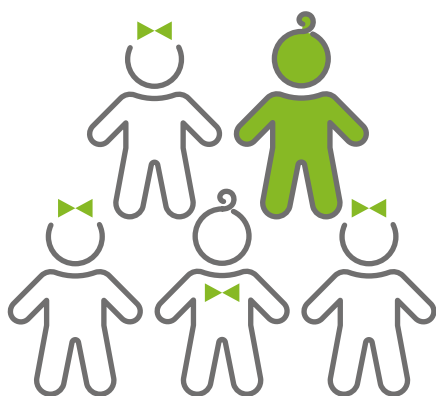




## b. Prevalence

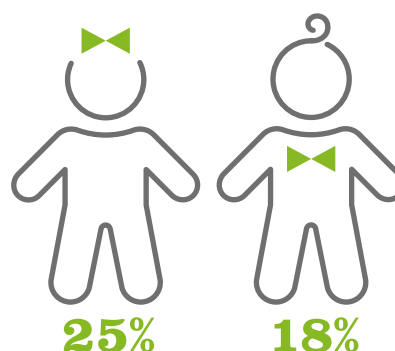


Domestic abuse is the most common factor amongst children considered to be ‘in need’ of support from local authority children’s social care, featuring in 50% of all assessments.<sup>8</sup>

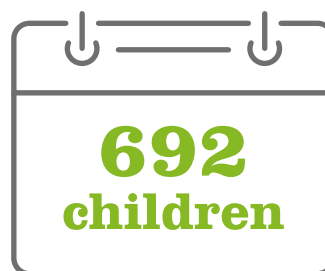


**1 in 5**

As many as 1 in 5 children in the UK are exposed to domestic abuse during childhood (under 18).<sup>9</sup>



Young people are the group most likely to be in an abusive relationship. A survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner.<sup>10</sup>



Analysis of Government’s children in need data from Action for Children in their recent report shows up to 692 children a day are assessed as being at risk of domestic violence in England.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education Children in need figures, 2018

<sup>9</sup> NSPCC statistics quoted in <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/children-affected-by-domestic-abuse-to-benefit-from-8-million-fund>

<sup>10</sup> [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

<sup>11</sup> ‘Patchy, Piecemeal and Precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse’, Action for Children, 2019.

## c. Estimated cost to the public purse

Victims of domestic abuse will often suffer from sustained physical and mental ill health and the abuse will also have long term dire social and economic consequences for them. They are more likely to be homeless and living in poverty and those from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds often suffer the worst and the most long-lasting abuse.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, the Home Office published the report ‘The economic and social costs of domestic abuse’.<sup>13</sup> The report estimated the cost of domestic abuse in England and

Wales for the year ending 31 March 2017 for the individuals directly affected, as well as wider society. They estimated that the social and economic cost for victims of domestic abuse in 2016/17 in England and Wales to be approximately £66 billion. The average unit cost of supporting a domestic abuse victim is calculated at £34,015. The largest element of domestic abuse cost is providing medical and therapeutic support to combat the physical and emotional harm suffered by the victims themselves (£47 billion), accounting for 71% of all estimated costs of domestic abuse.

It is important to note that when the Government calculated the costs of domestic abuse, they did not include costs related to the economic impact of domestic abuse on children as they cited difficulty in proving causality. Barnardo’s sees a clear link between living with domestic abuse and poor outcomes. Domestic abuse is one of the key adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that are associated with poor outcomes in adulthood.<sup>14</sup> **Without support, the costs to society and the public purse are significant and long-lasting.** Children who experience domestic abuse are more likely to become homeless and more likely to be sexually exploited. They are also at a much higher risk of offending.<sup>15</sup> The following sections detail just a few examples of the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children. All names within the case studies have been changed for the children’s and their families’ protection.



<sup>12</sup> [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

<sup>13</sup> ‘The economic and social costs of domestic abuse’ Home Office Report 2019, R.Oliver, B.Alexander, S.Roe, M.Walsny

<sup>14</sup> The CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Study was conducted between 1995-1997 and is one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect and later life health and well-being. The study found that a range of traumatic experiences that children can be exposed to whilst growing up, ranging from direct harm to the child, such as physical, verbal or sexual abuse, to those that affect the environment in which the child grows up, such as domestic abuse, parental mental illness or substance misuse impacts later life mental and physical health.

<sup>15</sup> Hester, M., 2007. Making an impact: children and domestic violence: a reader.



# The hidden impact on children and young people





## a. Mental Health

**“The biggest impact on the children we support is the psychological trauma domestic abuse brings and they battle to deal with it perhaps for the rest of their lives”** Barnardo’s practitioner

Children who are exposed to domestic abuse experience increased levels of fear, inhibition, anxiety and depression compared to their peers.<sup>16</sup> One study estimates that children who live in a household with domestic abuse are three times more likely than other children to have a conduct disorder.<sup>17</sup>

**Emerging evidence suggests that children living with domestic abuse are at a higher risk of poor health outcomes in adulthood.**

Children continue to experience mental and physical health problems as a result of exposure to domestic abuse both throughout their childhood and into adulthood. School-aged children experience poor self-esteem and low confidence and are more likely to experience guilt and shame about the abuse. One study found that over half of children (52%) had developed behavioural problems, over a third (39%) had difficulties adjusting at school and nearly two thirds (60%) felt responsible or to blame for negative events.<sup>18</sup> Studies also show that in adolescence, children and young people who have been exposed to domestic abuse can experience higher rates of interpersonal problems with other family members, and have an increased rate of risk taking

and anti-social behaviour, such as school truancy, early sexual activity, substance misuse, and delinquency.<sup>19</sup>



**Over 90% of Barnardo’s service practitioners who responded to a survey about domestic abuse reported that living with domestic abuse impacts children’s mental health.**<sup>20</sup>

Adverse childhood experiences in early childhood, such as experiencing domestic abuse, can also have a negative impact on later mental health. One study found that adults who had suffered four or more types of ACEs (which could include domestic abuse) were almost ten times more likely to have felt suicidal or self-harmed than those who had experienced none.<sup>21</sup>

16 Kitzmann KM, Gaylord NK, Holt AR, Kenny ED. (2003) Child witnesses to domestic violence: a meta-analytic review.)

17 Meltzer H, Doos L, Vostanis P, Ford T, Goodman R. (2018) The mental health of children who witness domestic violence. *American Psychological Association*.

18 SafeLives (2014), In plain sight: The evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse

19 Stiles MM, (2002). Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children. *American Family Physician*

20 Survey of 100 Barnardo’s service practitioners in England

21 Hughes K, Ford K, Davies AR, Homolova L, Bellis, MA. (2018), Sources of resilience and their moderating relationships with harms from adverse childhood experiences; Report 1: Mental Illness, Welsh Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and Resilience Study

## Case Study – Mental Health



Elsa was referred to a Barnardo's support service because her eldest son, Ben, was exhibiting challenging and angry behaviour. Ben's father had been physically abusive towards Elsa and Ben and his younger siblings had witnessed this violence. Ben was referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for further assessment for a possible neurodevelopmental disorder.

Following her referral to Barnardo's, Elsa is demonstrating each week how she is using strategies learnt in the programme to make the family home more positive. Most weeks her children have responded well to the new ideas. Elsa has found the group incredibly helpful and it has helped her to manage her emotions around the abuse she experienced. She has gained confidence over the duration of the programme, which is also reflected in her self-assessment scores, showing positive improvements in parenting confidence, knowledge and skills.

Elsa has also reported that Ben's behaviour has improved over the course of the programme and the strategies she has learnt have made things more positive at home. This intervention helped Elsa to make significant improvements and an assessment is no longer deemed necessary as a result. Elsa's own mental health and wellbeing has also improved as a result of the Barnardo's programme.





## b. Child Development

**“Children suffer from traumatic experiences and this has an impact on their brain development, causing delayed social skills and development in all areas” Barnardo’s practitioner talking about the impact of domestic abuse on children we support**

If the immediate impact of domestic abuse on children is often missed, the impact on children’s future development and behaviour is even more likely to be overlooked. Domestic abuse can have a severe impact on child development, particularly for very young children who are exposed to violence. Research suggests the impact on neurological development can manifest itself in poor health, poor sleeping habits, excessive screaming, and result in disrupted attachment between child and mother.<sup>22</sup> Exposure to domestic abuse in the early years can also lead to psycho-somatic complaints such as headaches and abdominal pain, regressive

behaviours, anxiety around strangers, crying and clingy behaviour, as well as ‘signs of terror’ manifested by yelling, irritability, hiding, and stuttering.<sup>23</sup>

Often, seeing, hearing and experiencing violence, or emotional, sexual and/or coercive control, will result in aggressive behaviours towards adult victims such as their mother, to their siblings and at school. Violent and criminal behaviours can be a way of the child expressing the trauma they have suffered. Research shows that children who have experienced domestic abuse are more likely to be excluded from school as the case study below illustrates.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> James M. (1994) Domestic violence as a form of child abuse: identification and prevention. *Australian Institute of Family Studies*

<sup>23</sup> Stiles MM, (2002). Witnessing Domestic Violence: The Effect on Children. *American Family Physician*.

<sup>24</sup> Hester, M., 2007. Making an impact: children and domestic violence: a reader.



## Case Study – Child Development



Jason was referred to Barnardo’s Orchard Mosaic by his doctor. He was exposed to domestic violence when he was younger and can often be verbally aggressive to his sister. His doctor advised he may benefit from counselling, to see how his exposure to domestic violence may have influenced him and his actions now.

At our initial meeting Jason also identified that he often felt the need to hit out as a result of anger and this impacted on his relationships at home and with his peers. He mentioned having memories of the domestic violence he had heard as a child, which he might like to explore further and also that sometimes they can affect his sleep in the form of nightmares. Jason said that currently his daily routine e.g. eating habits and attending school were unaffected, but in the past he had been suspended for aggressive behaviour in school.

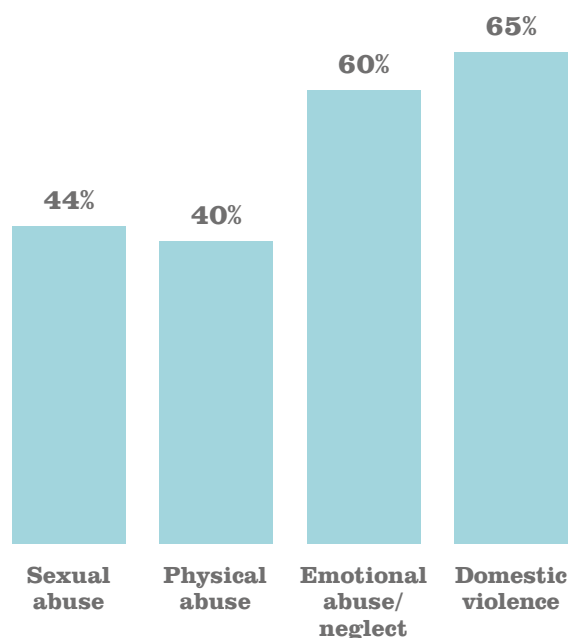


## c. Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Barnardo's has been supporting children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour since the early 1990s. Harmful sexual behaviour (or 'HSB') is defined as sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others and/or may be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. This is also sometimes called "peer on peer" abuse. HSB can include a wide range of behaviours – from sending a naked selfie to a friend, through to rape.

Although it was previously thought that children who display HSB were highly likely to have experienced sexual abuse, we now know these children are in fact likely to have suffered from a range of traumatic experiences, such as domestic abuse and neglect.<sup>25</sup> An analysis of 700 cases of HSB in the UK showed that two-thirds were known to have experienced at least one form of abuse or trauma, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, severe neglect, parental rejection, domestic violence and parental drug and alcohol abuse; half of the total sample had experienced a form of abuse other than sexual abuse.<sup>26</sup> In 2016, Barnardo's supported the Parliamentary Inquiry into Harmful Sexual Behaviour. The Inquiry examined how we respond to children who display harmful sexual behaviour. Evidence from the Inquiry found that experience of domestic abuse has particularly strong correlation with children displaying harmful behaviours.<sup>27</sup>

**Table showing the prevalence of domestic abuse within Barnardo's Taith Harmful Sexual Behaviour Service in Wales.<sup>28</sup>**



Barnardo's HSB service practitioners often cite the failure to provide early support for the trauma of experiencing domestic abuse as a significant factor in children and young people expressing such behaviours. One practitioner said about domestic abuse, "It is a contributory factor to the development of harmful sexual behaviour. It results in experiences of lasting childhood trauma". A number of Barnardo's practitioners reported that it is only when children and young people have been referred to our HSB services that the trauma of experiencing domestic abuse is tackled. **They feel that often, had there been earlier intervention to support these children, the harmful behaviours may not have manifested.**

<sup>25</sup> (Chaffin, Letourneau and Silovsky, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Simon Hackett, Exploring the relationship between neglect and Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Children and Young People, 2016

<sup>27</sup> Barnardo's, Now I know it was wrong: Report of the parliamentary inquiry into support and sanctions for children who display harmful sexual behaviour (Chaired by Nusrat Ghani MP), 2016

<sup>28</sup> Our Taith Harmful Sexual Behaviour service in Wales is an assessment and specialist intervention service for children and young people aged five to 21 years with harmful or problematic sexual behaviour.

## Case Study – Harmful Sexual behaviour



Jamie was referred to our Better Futures service when he was 13-years-old. The referral was made due to concerns that Jamie had attempted to engage a similar aged boy in sexual behaviour within the community on a number of occasions, for which the boy had made a complaint. Jamie was referred again three years later, by which time he had received a criminal conviction for sexual offences that had occurred when he was 14-years-old and he had been placed on the sex offender register.

Jamie had been known to local authority services from a young age. Both his father and stepfather were violent. Jamie experienced this and was physically harmed within this context. Jamie's father engaged him in pro-criminal activities from a young age and exposed him to inappropriate adults, who Jamie would later disclose sexually abused him. Jamie's mother suffered from mental health problems and there were ongoing concerns from professionals regarding her ability to parent to a good extent and to protect Jamie and his siblings.

By the time Jamie was re-referred to the service, there had been quite a number of further incidents of harmful sexual behaviour.

Jamie engaged in an assessment and a programme of intervention. He was found to be ready and willing to work on processing much of his early life experience and what these meant for him, in terms of his sexual and overall identity.



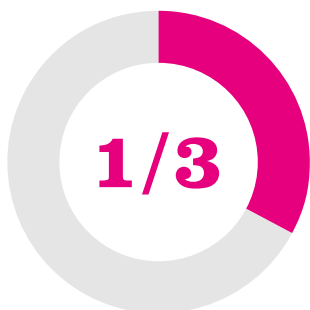


## d. The Impact on Future Cycles of Abuse

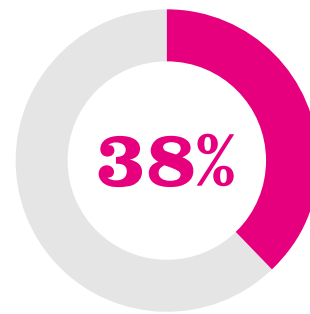
*“The young people we work with expect or believe they deserve or don’t recognise domestic abuse, and believe these relationships are normal”.*  
Barnardo’s practitioner

One of the most tragic effects of domestic abuse is its impact on the children who experience it and the future cycles of abuse they face. We know that not all children who experience domestic abuse go on to become abusers or further experience abuse in adulthood. Nevertheless, children who live in households where there is domestic abuse are more likely to be in abusive relationships when they are older, either as abusers or victims, or both, stuck in a cycle of abuse.<sup>29</sup>

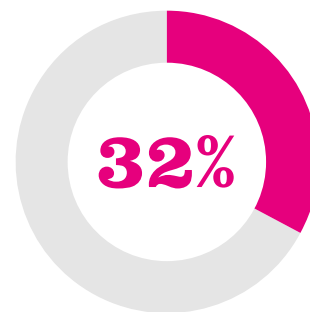
At Barnardo’s we see first-hand that living with domestic abuse all too often *does* have an impact on children and young people’s future relationships. We asked Barnardo’s services that work with young people aged 12- to 18-years-old, how many of them had worked with a young person displaying abusive behaviours within a peer relationship. They reported that:



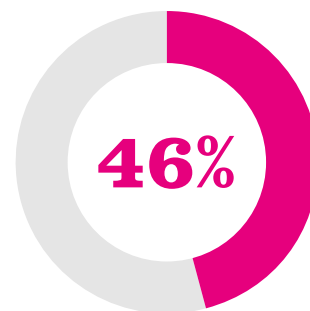
**One third had worked with a young person displaying abusive behaviours who was under 16.**



**38% had worked with 16-18 year olds who had experienced domestic abuse.**



**32% had worked with under 16s who had experienced domestic abuse.**



**46% said that they thought experience of domestic abuse was increasing among young people under 16.**

<sup>29</sup> UNICEF (2006) Behind Closed Doors: The impact of Domestic Violence on children

## Case Study – Being in an abusive relationship



Sophie had experienced domestic abuse in the home. Assessment tools were used to see where Sophie would need support. A key area for Sophie was gaining an understanding and closure on what she had experienced within the family home. Other areas highlighted by her assessment scores were how she could keep safe online, sexual health and how to increase her self-esteem.

A key issue for Sophie was recognising and avoiding unhealthy relationships. Sophie loved her father but hated him for what he had done. Completing these sessions with a therapeutic stance, allowed Sophie to gain an insight into what she had experienced, and gave her a chance to talk about the potential emotional and cognitive impact of these events. At the end of the programme she felt she had gained closure. Upon completion of the programme the assessment tools demonstrated that these sessions had made a positive impact and were helpful.

Sophie engaged with the programme well, and the support she was given was tailored to her specific needs. Sophie managed to gain a deeper understanding of her experiences, and how they are likely to have affected her, and began to gain closure. Sophie is now able to start moving forward and begin to raise her self-esteem and have high aspirations for her future relationships.



A practitioner from one of our domestic abuse services in Cornwall, which provides recovery and outreach to children aged 8-18 years old who have experienced domestic abuse, told us about some of the reasons they believe young people stay in abusive relationships.

***“It can be frustrating that so many of the young people they work with return to abusive relationships. Some of them are unable to return home because of abuse at home. Some are just desperate to be in a relationship. One girl said she returned to an abusive boyfriend because he just got back in her head. Another young girl she works with said ‘at least he doesn’t hit me as much as my last boyfriend did’.*”**

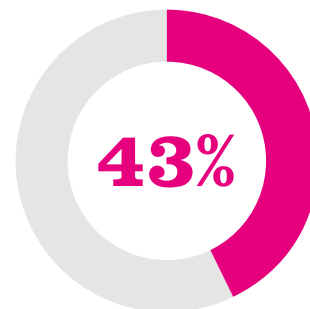
This practitioner estimates that around 50% of the 16-18 year olds who seek support from the service for their own personal relationship have experienced domestic abuse growing up. Many of the young people they support *“are caught between not being able to live at home or live with their boyfriend/girlfriend due to abuse, and without positive and loving environments at home being encouraged, children are staying with the abuser and not being able to have a sustainable income, education, or receive the support they need.”*

***“They need to feel self-worth and someone to believe in them. They need to understand that they deserve better, for example a support worker who understands the situation, someone who can be a positive role model”.*** Barnardo’s practitioner talking about how to support young people in abusive relationships

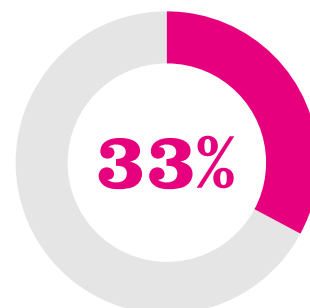
The following case study illustrates how our BeFree Service in Kent work with young people who have been in abusive relationships or who have been identified as having low self-esteem and are at risk of experiencing unhealthy relationships.

Experiencing domestic abuse in the home also impacts the propensity of children and young people to display abusive behaviour in their future intimate relationships.

We asked our services whether they had supported a young person displaying abusive behaviours within their intimate relationships:



**43% had worked with a young person displaying abusive behaviours within a relationship aged 16-18.**



**33% had worked with a young person displaying abusive behaviours within a relationship who was under 16.**

These behaviours included physical violence, coercive and controlling behaviour, sexual and emotional abuse. When asked why young people developed these behaviours, experiencing domestic abuse was a key indicator.



## Case Study – Abusive behaviour in an intimate relationship



**James grew up in an environment of violence and chaos. James discussed the violence that he witnessed between his biological parents. He disclosed physical and sexual abuse from his father and was able to identify this as huge contributor to the anger that manifests in him daily.**

**James has an extensive criminal record, but his most recent offence was a domestic charge of assault. James disclosed that he almost killed his partner in the attack and he was now keen to change these behaviours.**

**He self-referred following a domestic abuse session delivered in the hall. He identified his own controlling tendencies throughout the session and requested support in response to this. He engaged in 25 sessions due to complex issues and disclosures throughout support. Sessions surrounded understanding healthy/ unhealthy relationships, coping strategies, risks, and managing anger issues. He made a successful exit from support. He articulated that he was “a perpetrator of domestic violence” and how the support that the service offered has allowed him to “overcome the shame and make positive steps towards a healthy relationship in the future”.**



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## e. Youth Offending

*“An awful lot of young people in the youth offenders institute say they didn’t even know that the violence they lived with in their home was domestic abuse, it was such an ingrained part of their household”*

Domestic Abuse Practitioner, Polmont Young Offenders Institution, Scotland

There is growing evidence that experiencing domestic abuse as a child or young person can result in youth offending. The behavioural characteristics resulting from traumatic childhood experiences, such as domestic abuse, can ‘set children and young people on a difficult trajectory’ which can subsequently lead to offending.<sup>30</sup>

Barnardo’s works closely with the Polmont Youth Offending Institution in Scotland. The service was set up as a result of the large number of young people in Polmont being identified as having experienced domestic abuse. The service highlighted that approximately **80% of the young people** there had adverse childhood experiences, including experience of domestic abuse. For a large number of these young people, this is the first time they have disclosed or talked about the domestic abuse they have experienced. The majority will never have received support from specialist services.

A recent Local Government Association report highlighted that there is a growing evidence of a correlation between a child or young person experiencing ‘family violence’ within the family and subsequently participating in youth offending.<sup>31</sup>

Across our services, practitioners report supporting young people in abusive relationships who are also being coerced into criminal activity. Many of these young people have also experienced domestic abuse in their homes. One service reported that they are supporting three teenagers whose violent abusive relationships have turned to criminality. Their abusers, whom they consider to be ‘boyfriends’, have used coercive control and coercion to pressure them into becoming drug runners and dealers for them. Another reported an example of a 14-year old-girl in an abusive relationship. Her boyfriend has sexually abused and exploited her and she has been beaten and gang raped. She has also been coerced into criminality.

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30 Beyond Youth Custody (2014) YOUNG OFFENDERS AND TRAUMA: EXPERIENCE AND IMPACT - A PRACTITIONER’S GUIDE

31 Local Government Association (2018) The relationship between family violence and youth offending [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15%2034%20-%20The%20relationship%20between%20family%20violence%20and%20youth%20offending-V4\\_1.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/15%2034%20-%20The%20relationship%20between%20family%20violence%20and%20youth%20offending-V4_1.pdf) The report makes a distinction between ‘domestic violence’ and ‘family violence’. Whereas the definition of domestic violence in the UK only covers abusive, controlling and coercive behaviour ‘between those aged 16 or over’ and ‘excludes violence and abuse in relation to children under 16 years of age’, ‘family violence’ includes domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, sibling violence, violence against women and girls and elder abuse’.

## Case Study – Youth Offending



**Tammy grew up in an environment of domestic abuse, experiencing violence and psychological abuse between her biological parents. She disclosed growing up in a household where both parents misused substances. After her father left when Tammy was seven, her mother engaged in numerous unhealthy abusive relationships, she experienced neglect and social workers became heavily involved with the family. She turned to using unhealthy coping strategies, such as heroin, to cope with the feelings of rejection and abandonment throughout her life. At the age 13 she disclosed that she found her mother dead when she returned from her day at school.**

**This trauma led to anti-social behaviour, misuse of drugs, and assault to injury. She described her life as chaotic and was entering into relationships that were abusive and controlling. She described these relationships as “a carbon copy” of the unhealthy relationships she had witnessed as a child from her Mother.**

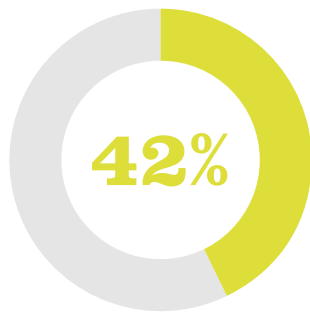
**She self-referred following a domestic abuse awareness session. During the initial assessment themes such as trust, anger and aggression were highlighted. She was able to articulate that a lot of her difficulties stem from her difficult traumatic childhood.**

**“The service has allowed me to believe in myself again. I don’t know what I would have done without the opportunity to speak about the stuff in my past”.**

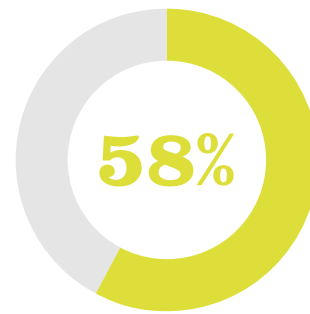




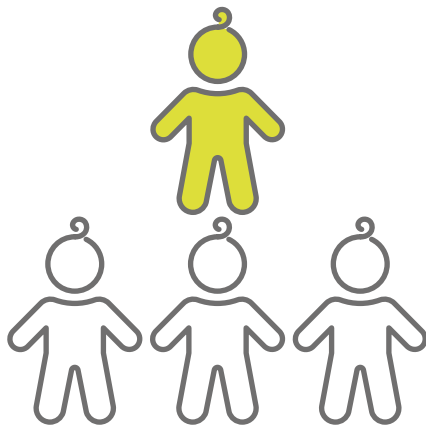
## Key facts on domestic abuse and young offenders



**42% of female young offenders experienced domestic violence in the family home.**<sup>32</sup>

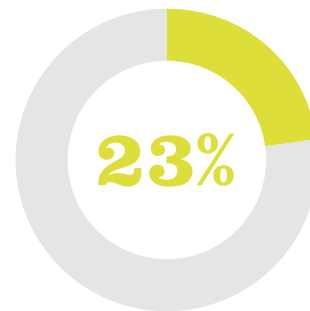


**Experiencing physical abuse as a child is correlated with an increase in the odds of becoming a serious, chronic juvenile offender of 58%.**<sup>34</sup>

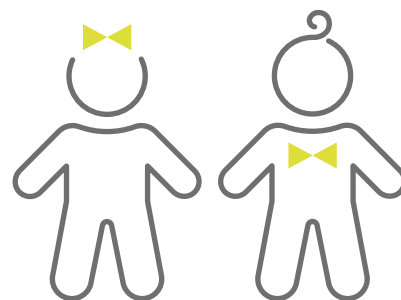


**1 in 4**

**One quarter of young male offenders (sentenced or on remand) had experienced domestic violence at home.**<sup>33</sup>



**Experience of household violence as a child is correlated with an 23% increase in the odds of becoming a serious, chronic juvenile offenders.**<sup>35</sup>



**40%**

**25%**

**25% of boys and 40% of girls in custody report suffering violence at home.**<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Safe Young Lives (2017), Young people and Domestic Abuse, Safe Lives

<sup>33</sup> Thames Valley Partnership *Links Between Domestic Violence and Gang Involvement* <http://www.thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/gangs-gldvp.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Fox, B.H., Perez, N., Cass, E., Baglivio, M.T. and Epps, N., 2015. *Trauma changes everything: Examining the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders*. 'Child Abuse & Neglect, 46', pp.163-173.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/BYC-Trauma-experience-and-impact-practitioners-guide.pdf>

# The landscape of current Domestic Abuse services

*“There is virtually no support for families once they are out of the violence. This means children and women don’t get support to process and deal with the trauma and emotions that are left once the perpetrator has left the house”* Barnardo’s practitioner

Domestic abuse services provide a range of support, including specialist children and young people services but the provision is patchy and underfunded.

Domestic abuse is the most common factor amongst children considered to be ‘in need’ of support from local authority children’s social care, featuring in **50%** of all assessments. Yet in May 2018 of 363 local specialist domestic abuse services throughout England, just over half (**197**) were **services that specifically supported the needs of children and young people.**<sup>37</sup> In addition, funding cuts have had a severe impact on domestic abuse services which are now struggling to cope with demand.<sup>38</sup>

In a 2019 report, Women’s Aid looked at the cost of fulfilling the previous Government’s commitment to delivering a statutory duty on local authorities to fund refuge services, alongside sustainable funding for wider specialist domestic abuse services. They estimated that a

minimum investment of £393 million a year is needed to provide life-saving specialist domestic abuse support for every survivor. This investment is just a fraction (less than 1%) of the £66 billion which the Government estimates domestic abuse costs the country each year, yet domestic violence services are not being funded properly.<sup>39</sup>

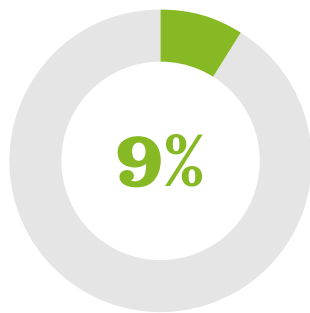
Barnardo’s own practitioners also report a lack of specialist support services for these extremely vulnerable and traumatised children and that it is also getting worse. Over 42% of our services reported that they had noticed changes in the availability of the provision of specialist support for domestic abuse in their area and this was usually an increase in waiting times and a reduction in the amount of support for children and young people.

The poor provision of mental health services is damaging young people’s future outcomes.

37 Women’s Aid Domestic Abuse Services <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-services/>

38 Ibid

39 ‘Funding specialist support for domestic abuse survivors’, Women’s Aid, 2019



**Research by Safe Lives<sup>40</sup> found that only 9% of children exposed to domestic abuse and in contact with local authority Children's Services were receiving support from (CAHMS).<sup>41</sup>**

We know that CAMHS thresholds are too high and the criteria for access are complex, with many providers excluding certain groups of children and young people on the basis that they should be accessing alternative support.<sup>42</sup> Analysis of CAMHS criteria has found, for example, that some

providers exclude children living in households where there are problems between the parents, including children exposed to domestic abuse.<sup>43</sup>

These children and families are expected to access alternative support, yet the same research revealed that a quarter of local authorities included in the research reported decommissioning or no longer providing alternative services related to young people's mental and emotional wellbeing. Some of these decommissioned services were supporting children living in a household with domestic abuse.<sup>44</sup> This means that some children and young people exposed to domestic abuse and experiencing poor mental health could be unable to access CAMHS and also have no alternative form of support available.

40 Formerly known as CAADA

41 SafeLives, (2014), In plain sight: The evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse, Safe lives Research Report. Available at: [http://www.safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/In\\_plain\\_sight\\_the\\_evidence\\_from\\_children\\_exposed\\_to\\_domestic\\_abuse.pdf](http://www.safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/In_plain_sight_the_evidence_from_children_exposed_to_domestic_abuse.pdf)

42 Education Policy Institute (2018). Access to children and young people's mental health services. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/access-to-camhs-2018>

43 Education Policy Institute (2018). Access to children and young people's mental health services.

44 Ibid



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# Breaking the cycles of Domestic Abuse

The impact of domestic abuse on children and young people is both immediate and lifelong and often leads to being a victim or an abuser in future relationships. However the trauma these children and young people face is compounded by the ineffective and inconsistent approach of early intervention support services.

Early interventions can break the cycle of domestic abuse and are far more cost effective than dealing with the consequences of future domestic abuse in adulthood. As we have seen, the potential future outcomes for children who experience domestic abuse range from poor mental health, school absence and additional academic support needs, to youth offending, criminality and addiction issues, and are undoubtedly more costly to treat later in life than providing early and comprehensive support to the children and young people affected.

All children and young people need to be able to access specialist, trauma informed domestic abuse support. This support must be available for those who are living in a household where there is domestic abuse and for those young people experiencing abuse within their intimate relationships. We now have an unprecedented opportunity to legislate to ensure the children and young people affected receive this much needed support in order to break the cycle of abuse.



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