

3. Domestic Violence and Children



The majority of children living in a home where domestic violence is present are affected by the abuse. Children are victims of domestic violence both when directly targeted by the perpetrator of abuse and when witnessing the violence directed at their mother. Research has shown that there is a connection between domestic violence and child abuse and that witnessing the abuse is in itself a form of emotional abuse.¹

Children may witness domestic violence in many ways. For example, they may be in the same room and may even get caught in the middle of an incident in an effort to protect their mother. They may be in the next room or they may be forced to witness sexual abuse.

Children can also be directly abused by the same perpetrator inflicting abuse on their mother. While abuse of children is a huge issue in itself, in domestic violence situations, actual or threatened abuse of children is often used as a controlling mechanism over women.

The abuse of the mother and children often continues after separation, especially in the context of access visits and joint custody.

The types of abusive tactics used directly against children in domestic violence situations disclosed to the Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline in 2007 included:

- Locking children in a room for days with no food, water or toilet facilities
- Refusing children essential medication to 'teach them a lesson'
- Physical assault, threatening with knives and guns
- Abduction and threatened abduction
- Inappropriate stroking and touching of children

¹ Listening to Children: Children's Stories of Domestic Violence, Hogan, F. and O'Reilly M, Office of the Minister For Children, (2007)



All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights



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Impacts of Abuse on Children

Children can experience both short term and long term effects as a result of witnessing domestic violence. These can include²:

- Feeling guilty, angry, insecure and anxious
- Having difficulty sleeping and/or experiencing nightmares or flashbacks
- Bed wetting
- Having a lowered sense of self worth
- Experiencing difficulties in school

However, it is important to remember that some children may not exhibit any negative effects

² Abridged list taken from a Royal College of Psychiatrists Briefing (2004).

The stark facts about domestic violence and children in Ireland:

- In 2007, there were 1,889 specific incidents of child abuse disclosed to the Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline
- In an additional 3,491 calls it was directly disclosed that children were living with domestic violence against their mother
- In 2007, almost 3,000 children were accommodated in refuges around Ireland
- 64% of Irish women who experienced domestic violence reported that their children had witnessed the violence



*He used to say, 'I am going to kill you at night-time when you are all asleep'. I used to get very frightened. We had a lock on the bedroom doors in case he did what he said. He once made a hole with an axe in my sister's bedroom door. Then he used to look through the hole. **Mona, aged 8.***

*He'll be out of the house four years in September. There was an awful lot of domestic violence. We were all in bed that morning and I heard mammy screaming and shouting downstairs. I didn't think it was that bad until I saw it. She was all covered in blood and there were clumps of her hair all over the place and the baby was crying. He said to us that mammy was a whore and that she was making him leave. **Catherine, aged 13.***

