

Women's Aid feedback on Our Children's Plan template and explainer

October 2026

Women's Aid is a national, feminist organisation working to prevent and address the impact of domestic violence and abuse (hereafter DVA) including coercive control, in Ireland since 1974.

We do this by advocating, influencing, training, and campaigning for effective responses to reduce the scale and impact of domestic violence and abuse on women and children in Ireland and providing high quality, specialised, integrated, support services. More information on Women's Aid is available on our website www.womensaid.ie.

Women's Aid welcomes the development of Our Children's Plan parenting template, which provides a useful and clear model for separating parents wishing to develop a child-focused plan. The template is simple and easy to use, yet adaptable to each family's circumstances.

Women's Aid would like to make the following observations:

- The plan will be very useful for parents who want and can adopt a cooperative approach to parenting after separation and who want and can communicate with each other in a respectful way. Therefore, this template is not appropriate for parents separating where there is domestic abuse including coercive control and the plan rightly states so clearly on page 2 and signpost to alwayswhere.ie for further support. This provides further links to support organisations and agencies.

However, there is no clear information on what a person experiencing domestic violence and abuse (DVA) including coercive control should do **instead** of this parenting plan and where to look for help in relation to custody, access and maintenance in this context specifically, nor is there any explanation of DVA including coercive control.

Women's Aid recommends that information on recognising if one is experiencing DVA including coercive control, is provided in the Plan or in the Explainer (in this case there should be a link in the Plan to the information in the Explainer).

Moreover, practical information on legal supports relating to Children's Matters (custody, access and maintenance) in a DVA/CC context should be linked to the Plan and Explainer, so as to provide an alternative for parents in this situation. This could include information on Legal Aid, other legal options and specialist court support.

- Regardless of the above disclaimer, some victims of DVA will end up using this template, either because they have not identified the abuse as such, because they are coerced or manipulated into using it or because the abuse starts or escalates after separation. So, a parent may have used this plan template and then finds that the resulting plan is not safe for them.

It should be mentioned that if DVA becomes a concern after the parenting plan is made, this invalidates the plan and the parent should not feel bound by it.

- References to right of the child to have relationship with both parents are made both in the Plan and Explainer, and while Women's Aid agrees with this in general, where abuse is present this right is subject to the safety of the child and other family members. **Therefore, the right to the child to have a relationship with both parents needs to be clearly qualified against the need for safety, this could be included in the DVA explanation suggested above.**
- Dispute resolution: It is well acknowledged that mediation and other ADR tools are not appropriate where there is DVA including coercive control. On page 29 of the Plan, it is stated that parents agree to first try to solve any dispute themselves, then through mediation and that the courts will be a last resource "unless there are concerns for the safety and welfare of the children or either parent".

Parents should not commit to first try to solve the issue themselves or mediation where there is DVA therefore **Women's Aid suggests moving the phrase "Unless there are concerns for the safety or welfare of the children or of either parent" to the top of this section, so it applies to all of it and not just to using courts as last resort. It is also important to mention again that mediation is not recommended in these cases.**

- In relation Maintenance and Parenting Plans (Custody & access), it should be noted in the Plan or Explainer that it may be useful for parents to get legal advice, even when they are making private arrangements and they do not intend to go to court, so as to ensure they are aware of their rights and that agreements are fair.

- In relation to children being heard “free of parents influence and manipulation”, in situation of DVA children often are influenced and manipulated to express views in line with the abusive parent (or they are not heard when they do not), therefore the best interest of the child needs to be considered here, noting it does not always coincide with the child’s view.
- Plan page 8: Women’s Aid believes that parents should be communicating respectfully at all times, so we suggest changing...

“We agree to communicate in a respectful manner with each other in front of our children.”

to

“We agree to communicate in a respectful manner with each other **particularly** in front of our children.”

- Explainer, Page 2 Child’s best interest Figure: Women’s Aid suggests that Child’s protection and Safety should not be represented as one of many equal factors, but as the overriding one.
- Explainer, Page 7, neutral location for pick-ups and drop offs: Women’s Aid suggests noting here that if there are concerns about conflict turning into abuse, specialist supports can be contacted to make a safety plan for pick-ups/drop-offs.
- Explainer, Pages 19-20 Telling children about separation/supporting them: a dedicated resource needs to be developed about how to tell children about separation and support them when the separation occurs in the context of DVA, which could be quite different from the scenarios described here; such resource once developed may not need to be included here but it should at least be referred and linked to.

ENDS