



Ongoing effects of child contact arrangements in cases of domestic abuse

A small qualitative study in Scotland identified that child contact arrangements between women who had experienced domestic abuse and the perpetrator were a source of further physical and mental abuse after separation, with negative consequences for the wellbeing of the children.

Overview:

- A qualitative study in Scotland found that children of women who had experienced domestic abuse were exposed to further parental domestic abuse and conflict through contact arrangements with their fathers after their parents had separated.
- The possibility of ongoing domestic abuse and its effects on children should be considered in assessments of child contact arrangements.

Background: Domestic violence and abuse is defined as any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between people aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality ([Home Office 2015](#)). This includes psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse.

Children and young people who are exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk of experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse and of developing emotional and behavioural problems ([Holt et al. 2008](#)).

Parents who divorce or separate may need a court order (a 'child arrangements order') to agree where their children will live, when they will spend time with each parent and who will pay child maintenance ([Children and Families Act 2014](#)).

In cases where adults or children have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, domestic abuse or violence, family courts must ensure that child arrangements orders protect the safety and wellbeing of the child and the parent with whom the child is living, and do not expose them to the risk of further harm ([Lord Chief Justice 2014](#)). In particular, the court must be satisfied that any contact ordered with a parent who has perpetrated violence or abuse is safe and in the best interests of the child.

Current advice: NICE guidance on [domestic violence and abuse](#) recommends that health and social care staff should be trained to recognise the indicators of domestic violence and abuse, and



understand how it affects children and young people. Staff should also be trained and confident to discuss domestic violence and abuse with children and young people who are affected by or experiencing it directly.

Specialist domestic violence and abuse services for children and young people should address the emotional, psychological and physical harms arising from a child or young person being affected by domestic violence and abuse, as well as their safety.

The NICE pathway on [domestic violence and abuse](#) brings together all related NICE guidance and associated products on the area in a set of interactive topic-based diagrams.

New evidence: A qualitative study by [Morrison \(2015\)](#) interviewed women who had experienced domestic abuse and their children to assess the effects of child contact arrangements with their non-resident fathers after the relationship had ended.

Mothers who had experienced domestic abuse and their children were recruited from statutory and voluntary domestic abuse support services in Scotland. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 mothers and 18 children (ages 8–14 years). At the time of interview, 13 of the 16 families had court-ordered child contact arrangements. The remaining 3 had contact that was arranged out of court.

Some mothers continued to experience physical violence when fathers picked up or returned children from contact visits. Other mothers reported emotional abuse and harassment linked to contact visits, such as the father shouting and swearing at them at contact handovers. These episodes of physical and mental abuse were routinely witnessed by the children, who described them negatively.

In terms of the contact visits themselves, both mothers and children described how fathers spoke negatively about and denigrated the mothers during contact visits. This experience was described as distressing by children.

Children were often exposed to ongoing conflicts during visits as a result of being used as messengers between parents. Messages from fathers to mothers included information about changes to future contact visits, information related to ongoing parental disputes (such as over finances) and threats.

Two mothers suspected that their children had been sexually abused by their fathers during contact visits. Three children described being physically abused during visits and the majority described emotional abuse.

Limitations of this study include that the study recruited only mothers who used domestic abuse services and who had spoken openly about their abuse. In addition, all the interviews were conducted and analysed by a single researcher.

Commentary by Professor Jo Aldridge, Professor of Social Policy and Criminology, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University:

“This is an important qualitative study that contributes new evidence and knowledge to current understanding about domestic violence and its impact on women and their children.

“A key message from the study is that current practices relating to contact arrangements between children and their fathers after parental separation often prioritise the need for contact over appropriate considerations of risks to children (and their mothers) of ongoing contact with abusive fathers. Evidence from the research points clearly to the fact that domestic abuse often continues after parental separation and may even escalate at the point of child contact with fathers.

“The author makes a number of important recommendations based on evidence from the study (some of which are also supported in findings from other research studies on domestic violence and child contact). One is that abusive fathers should be ‘held accountable’ for their abusive behaviour before contact arrangements are put in place. The author argues that consideration must also be given to the space and time needed for mothers and their children to recover from

past abuse from former partners before decisions about child contact arrangements are made.

“Although this study makes an important contribution to the field of domestic violence and child contact arrangements, more research is needed on this important topic that includes larger samples of parents and children. However, in order to fully protect children from harm, or further harm, as a consequence of domestic violence, questions need to be asked about current practices in child contact arrangements and also decisions that are made about ‘the best interests of the child’.”

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