

Key Messages

Children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are at increased levels of risk as a result of lockdown measures. They are recognised in [Scottish Government guidance](#) as a vulnerable group who may need to attend school in person during lockdown.

At least one child in every class will have experience of domestic abuse.

One in 5 children in the UK will have experienced domestic abuse by the time they reach 18.

Definition

Domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviour that instils fear and is used by abusers to maintain control. It includes any pattern of controlling, bullying, threatening or violent behaviour towards a partner or ex-partner.

It is disproportionately perpetrated by men and experienced by women. It is a form of gender-based violence which has its roots in the systemic gender inequality in society.

It can be present in LGBTIQ relationships.

Children and young people can experience domestic abuse directly from the abuser, indirectly via the abuse of their non-abusing parent, or in their own intimate relationships.

It can take place anywhere, including online.

Separation from abusers does not deliver safety; harm can continue and intensify through post-separation surveillance and manipulation of child contact orders.

Child Impact

Domestic abuse is one of the most common reasons for children being placed on the child protection register. There is an overlap with child physical and sexual abuse.

Abuse does not have to be, and often is not, physically violent: abusers commonly use isolation, emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse, intimidation and the threat of physical violence to control children.

Domestic abuse violates children's rights.

It can negatively impact the development of emotional regulation and can lead to impaired social relationships.

It is linked to increased risk of internalising and externalising problems and post traumatic stress.

Key supportive adults, safe spaces and community support all play a significant role in reducing these risks.

Role of the adults in schools, early learning and childcare, and community learning and development settings

- Education settings are often the only place children and young people experiencing domestic abuse can feel safe.
- A listening, trusted adult can make it easier for a child to disclose abuse.
- Education practitioners can challenge gender-based violence by promoting an ethos and culture of equality throughout the curriculum and the whole school experience.
- Harmful norms and stereotypes need to be challenged and healthy, positive and supportive relationships need to be promoted.
- Awareness raising of domestic abuse with staff, families and learners is important.
- Everyone in the education setting needs to be able to identify gender-based violence when it happens and support those involved in collaboration with partners.

Resources are available [here](#).

Scotland's Domestic abuse and Forced Marriage 24 hour helpline 0800 027 1234

Context

As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown measures, women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are at increased levels of risk.¹ Domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviour that instils fear and is used by abusers to maintain control. Measures taken to address the pandemic, including lockdown, closure of schools, working from home and reductions in the work of courts, provide additional tools for abusers to exercise that control. This increases the risk to abused adults and children, removing opportunities for them to seek help and support both from their own networks and from specialist services.

For children and young people living with an abuser, lockdown and social distancing measures mean they are likely to have to spend prolonged periods of time at home with their abuser, making it more difficult to engage with remote learning, call helplines or find support from family or friends. Prior to lockdown, Women's Aid groups in Scotland were supporting around 350 children and young people per day and a significant proportion of local Women's Aid's direct support for children and young people took place in school.

For many children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, the school, early learning and childcare, or community learning and development setting, may be the only place they feel safe. Even in a remote learning or blended learning context, teachers and other school staff such as homelink workers, or youth workers, can still provide lifelines to these children and young people. This information sheet outlines the nature of domestic abuse, the impact, indicators of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse and how to respond to potential cases of domestic abuse.

What is Domestic Abuse?

The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018² identifies domestic abuse as a pattern of behaviour that instils fear and is used by abusers to maintain control. It includes any pattern of controlling, bullying, threatening or violent behaviour towards a partner or ex-partner including psychological and emotional abuse; this includes what is commonly known as 'coercive control'.

Domestic abuse is disproportionately perpetrated by men and experienced by women³. The UN identifies that domestic abuse, along with other forms of gender-based violence, is a form of gender discrimination and "one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated."⁴

Behaviours constituting domestic abuse can include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, isolating the survivor from family and friends, monitoring and regulating the survivor's activities, controlling their money and/or activities, depriving them from their freedom of action, frightening, humiliating or degrading them, among other things.⁵

Prevalence

The police recorded 60,641 incidents of domestic abuse in Scotland in 2018-19⁶. We know, however, that most cases of domestic abuse go unreported and the figures we have do not reveal the true extent of the problem⁷. Where gender was recorded, four out of five victims were women. One in 5 children in the UK will have experienced domestic abuse by the time they reach 18⁸. **At least one child in every Primary 1 classroom will have lived with the impact of domestic abuse their whole lives.**⁹

The experience of domestic abuse for children and young people

Domestic abuse can profoundly disrupt a child's environment, undermining their stability and damaging their physical, mental and emotional health¹⁰.

Children who have lived with domestic abuse were previously described as witnesses, but they are more accurately described as experiencing domestic abuse¹¹. Whether or not the abuse is physical or emotional, in plain sight or behind closed doors, children are extremely aware of and are impacted by the abusive actions of the perpetrator. The actions of the abuser impacts family life in many ways.

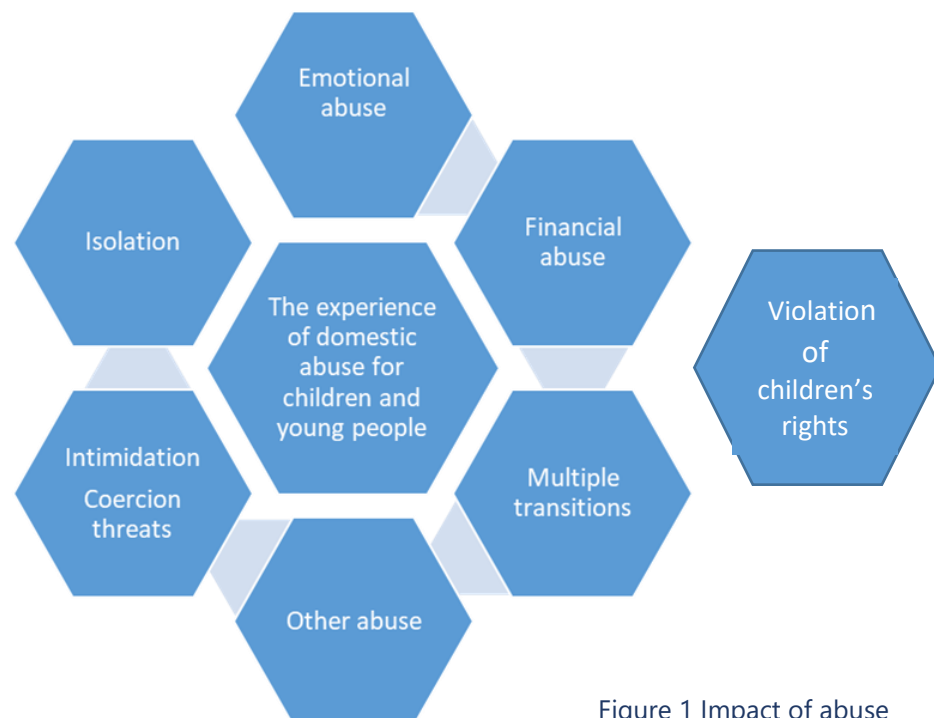


Figure 1 Impact of abuse

Isolation The abuser may prevent the children spending time with their non-abusive parent, visiting friends and relatives, going on days out or participating in clubs or after-hours activities at school¹². The isolation imposed on children can reduce their opportunities to build relationships with trusted adults outside the home.

Emotional abuse This can include name calling, demeaning or shaming comments. It might be pressurising the child to join in the abuse of the parent/caregiver or to keep frightening secrets. The actions of the perpetrator can lead children and young people to live in a heightened state of fear and anxiety, walking on eggshells in case action or inaction triggers further abuse.

Financial abuse This might mean that, even in a home with a reasonable income, the abused partner and child may experience poverty, for example being refused access to funds to buy basic needs such as sanitary products or clothing. Money might be used to control behaviour.

Multiple transitions Children and young people will often have to move home and schools to escape abuse and there may be several changes of accommodation needed with all the related upheaval involved. As well as interrupted learning, this can lead to loss of support networks and social isolation.

Other abuse Children who experience domestic abuse are at higher risk of experiencing multiple forms of abuse¹³. There is an overlap between domestic abuse and child physical and sexual abuse. Domestic abuse is one of the most common reasons for children being placed on the child protection register and was present in almost two-thirds of significant case reviews in Scotland of children who have died.¹⁴

Intimidation, coercion and threats Abusers can build fear through abusive acts or threats of these towards their partner, other loved ones or a pet. It may be a 'look' that warns children that abuse is about to escalate. The abuser might threaten children with punishment if they defend their parent or speak to others about what is happening at home.

There is often an **escalation of abuse** when the abused parent tries to leave their abuser, a period in which the abused partner and children are at heightened risk of physical violence and domestic homicide. Manipulation and abuse can continue to be experienced through contact arrangements following parental separation.

Children's Rights Experiencing domestic abuse violates children's rights¹⁵. There may be rules imposed on when they can speak or act and they may be denied the right to play, be involved in decisions affecting them and the right to live safe from violence.

The impact of domestic abuse for children and young people

Children can be harmed by domestic abuse even when they are not witnessing or subjected to direct abuse themselves. While it is thought that all children and young people will be affected, the level of impact varies, even amongst those from the same family. Impact can depend on a range of factors such as the frequency, severity and length of abuse and the ability of the non-abusive parent to provide parenting support in these very difficult situations. Research suggests that serial witnessing of abuse and exposure to multiple types of abuse is particularly harmful.

The impacts described below and in [Appendix 1](#) are risks rather than the inevitable nature of harm. Key supportive adults, safe spaces and community support all play a significant role in reducing these risks. Positive parenting by the non-abused parent (incredibly difficult when an abuser is undermining their partner) has been associated with decreased child trauma symptoms and increased child social competence and positive youth development¹⁶. Many children and young people recover well when they are in a safe and secure environment.

A wide range of effects on children have been identified¹⁷ including; feelings of fear, powerlessness, depression or sadness; impaired social relations; impact on the child's identity, educational achievement, extended family relationships and parental relationships and anger, very often displayed as aggressive behaviour.

In terms of mental wellbeing¹⁸, experiencing domestic abuse as a child is associated with increased internalizing and externalizing difficulties, posttraumatic stress, difficulties in emotion regulation, and high separation distress. There are some indications of gendered differences with boys more external in their responses and girls more likely to internalise their responses¹⁹ but evidence is mixed²⁰.

Children and young people's physical health can also be impacted, for example, they are at increased risk of obesity and asthma and often present with bodily complaints such as stomach aches.

[Appendix 1](#)²¹ illustrates impact by developmental stage. Impact can of course be cumulative depending on the developmental impact on each stage of a child's life.

Signs of Domestic Abuse in school, early learning and childcare or community learning and development settings

There are some common signs^{22 23} to look out for in children that are potential indicators of experience of domestic abuse. This is obviously more difficult during remote learning but check-ins with learners or families may raise potential concerns.

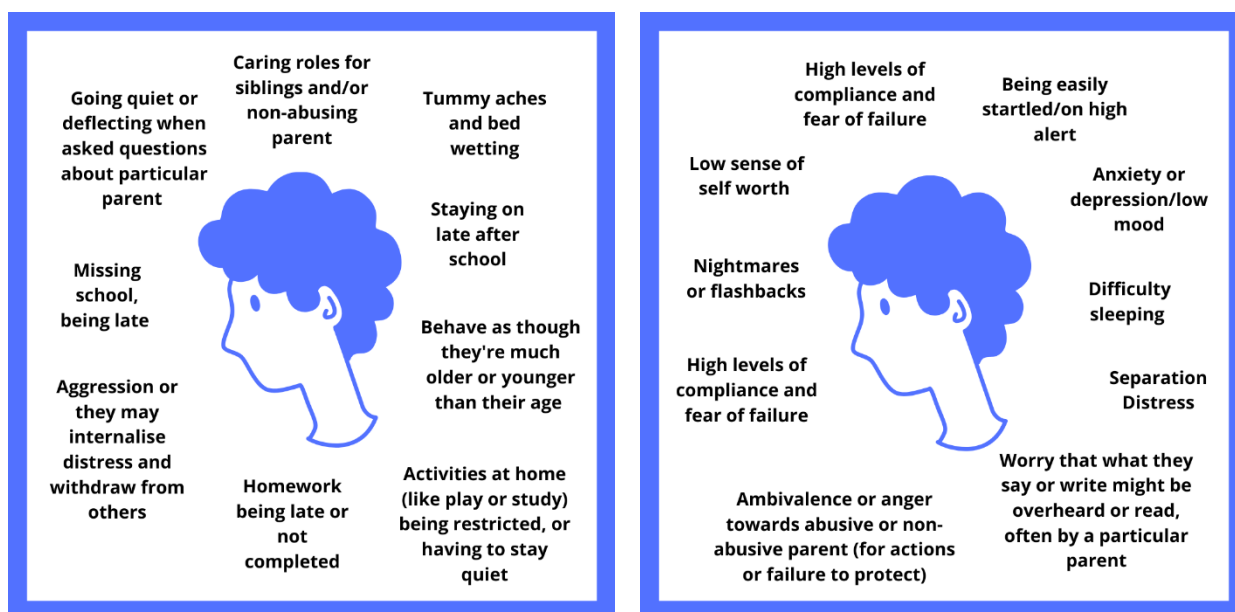


Figure 2 and 3 Signs of abuse

In terms of the parents or carers, you may see one partner speaking for the other, one appearing more dominant and controlling of the other, regular calls to notify of absences, non-attendance at parents meetings and school events.

Staff need to consider domestic abuse as one possible explanation for the signs listed above but be aware that these could also signal other issues for the learner.

Domestic abuse in teenage relationships

It is important to acknowledge that domestic abuse can and does occur in young people's own relationships. The term domestic abuse itself is unlikely to be one that young people will identify with, even if it is happening to them, given the myths and stereotypes that continue to exist around it. The need for awareness raising and education is therefore more important than ever.

Levels of abuse in teenage relationships are difficult to gauge and it is an area under researched in the UK. Scottish Government figures for 2018-19 show that 6% of all reported cases of domestic abuse in Scotland involve young people under 18 years either as victims or accused.

An NSPCC survey (2009)²⁴ explored abuse in young people's relationships. They found that of those young people in relationships:

- **75% of girls and 50% of boys experienced emotional abuse of some form**
- **25% of girls and 18% of boys experienced physical abuse**
- **33% of girls and 16% of boys experienced sexual abuse**

The picture for girls was particularly worrying with one in six reporting some form of severe abuse from a partner.

In a Safe Lives study²⁵ of 183 victims aged under 18 years old that case workers were supporting, two thirds were deemed to be 'high risk', that is, those deemed to be at risk of serious harm or death.

Abuse within teenage relationships can include all the areas discussed within adult abuse but might also include behaviours such as sexting, requesting or sharing of images, sharing of pornography, sexual coercion and grooming.

The NSPCC reports highlights the importance of having discussions with young people about relationships and abusive behaviour. Such behaviours are often considered 'normal' within their relationships and offering a safe space to explore their experiences and the potential harms, supports young people to identify them as unacceptable and unhealthy. This further highlights the need for relationships and abuse to be included in the curriculum.

The role of the adults in schools, early learning and childcare, and community learning and development settings

Education settings have a unique opportunity, not only to identify and support children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse, but also to challenge some of the root causes, by promoting positive and healthy relationships and challenging gender inequality. Children and young people will have different needs when they are living with domestic abuse and, later, when they recover from their experiences of domestic abuse. There will be variations in the levels of support required. Early support is crucial, as this can help to mitigate the long-term impact of domestic abuse and help improve outcomes for children across education, development, health and relationships.

Supporting children and their families affected by domestic abuse requires; a curriculum and culture that promotes positive relationships and respect; staff who are trained and aware (including non-teaching staff)²⁶ and clear safeguarding policies and guidance. Strong partnerships with local specialist domestic abuse services, not only facilitate professional learning opportunities, they can ensure joined up support for children and young people. Schools are in fact the main place where specialist

domestic abuse services support learners. Contact details for specialist domestic abuse services can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

Professional Learning Health and wellbeing is the responsibility of all. To properly address domestic abuse, the professional development of all educators is fundamental. It not only helps practitioners to understand the dynamics of abusive relationships, it helps them to identify families at risk and learn how best to support them and their education. Consider making contact with local Violence against Women partners for delivery of relevant and current professional learning.

Safeguarding policies and guidance Local safeguarding protocols and procedures should always be followed, and particular care taken around the sharing of information to ensure the perpetrator does not get access to details that could put the safety of the abused adult and their children at risk.

Schools and other settings must prioritise the safety of the abused adult and children when taking any action regarding domestic abuse, including when communicating with them in regards to concerns. Perpetrators routinely intercept communications to the abused adult and children and can use any suggestion of abuse to further isolate or justify harm to their victims. Safeguarding plans should reflect these considerations. Details of **how to respond if a child or young person discloses domestic abuse** are listed on the next page.

Supportive ethos Practitioners with a good understanding of the challenges faced by children and young people experiencing domestic abuse and the potential impacts will be better able to provide a supportive and empathetic environment. They will be aware that homework may not be completed because there are few quiet private spaces in a refuge, that attendance may be poor because children are staying home to protect family members or that there are gaps in learning from missing school or moving to places of safety. Understanding and recognition of need can inform planning and support.

Many abused children and young people will **not** be identified by staff. It is therefore crucial that schools, early learning and childcare, and community learning and development settings offer nurturing, trauma informed responses to all their learners.

Participation of children and young people The views of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse are needed to help shape the decisions and planning related to their lives. They also have a valuable role to play in developing a whole school response to gender-based violence of which domestic abuse is one manifestation.

Awareness raising for learners In Curriculum for Excellence, learners are taught how to keep themselves safe and what to do when they don't feel safe. As well as helping them to recognise any abuse in their own lives, young people often turn to their peers for support, therefore understanding what a friend is going through and where to get

help is important for all learners. Including this awareness raising in the curriculum, through Health and Wellbeing, Personal Social Education (PSE) or Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenting (RSHP) programmes, ensures co-ordinated and age and stage appropriate learning. Identifying peer support programmes and buddying schemes can be helpful to provide structure and safeguarding around peer support.

Responding to disclosures of domestic abuse

If a child talks to you about domestic abuse it's important, where possible, to speak to the child in a safe, quiet and comfortable environment away from distractions and interruptions¹. They have likely chosen you because they trust you and feel safe telling you.

It is important to follow your establishments safeguarding and child protection procedures.

- Listen carefully to what they are saying.
- Let them know they've done the right thing by telling you.
- Do not promise to keep it a secret.
- Stay calm but express your concern for them and convey that you are taking what they are saying seriously.
- Be kind, caring and friendly.
- Reflect to them what you are hearing them say, and the feelings being expressed. Do not ask 'leading' questions or become an investigator.
- Be non-judgemental and tell them it's not their fault.
- Do tell them they are not alone, that many women and children experience domestic abuse.
- Explain what you'll do next, ensuring the child's views are sought on what is safe for them and their family.
- Follow your establishments safeguarding and child protection procedures as soon as possible.
- Reassure the child that there are places and people that can help.
- Let the child know that you will keep them informed at every stage about what you and your establishment are doing, in consultation with them about the safest way to do this.
- Do not confront the alleged abuser. This could be dangerous for the non-abusive parent and children.

Ensuing plans, including safety plans, following a child protection meeting may include offering the child a space in a Hub if required.

Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy

Longer term, schools, early learning and childcare, and community learning and development settings are ideally placed to address primary prevention and challenge inequalities and social norms that contribute to violence against women and children.

In line with World Health Organisation policy²⁷, Equally Safe (2016)²⁸ is Scotland's strategy for the prevention and eradication of violence against women and girls. It sets out priority areas for collaborative working towards a Scotland 'where women and girls live free from all forms of violence and abuse – and the attitudes that help perpetuate them.'

The 2017 Equally Safe delivery plan²⁹ set out several key priorities actions where education settings can play a crucial role including:

- Raising awareness of gender-based violence and abuse
- Challenging gender stereotypes and norms
- Recognising and addressing unconscious bias and gender stereotyping
- Delivering relationships, sexual health and parenting and addressing safe and healthy relationships and consent
- Developing a whole school approach to addressing gender-based violence

Equally Safe is supported by and links to several key education policies including Curriculum for Excellence, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework, Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2 and can be supported through a children's rights perspective.

A whole school approach to ending gender based violence

The whole school approach³⁰ is one that promotes an ethos and culture of equality throughout the curriculum and the whole school. Not only will this help tackle the roots causes of gender-based violence but will also support a climate where young people and families experiencing abuse are more likely to come forward and ask for help.

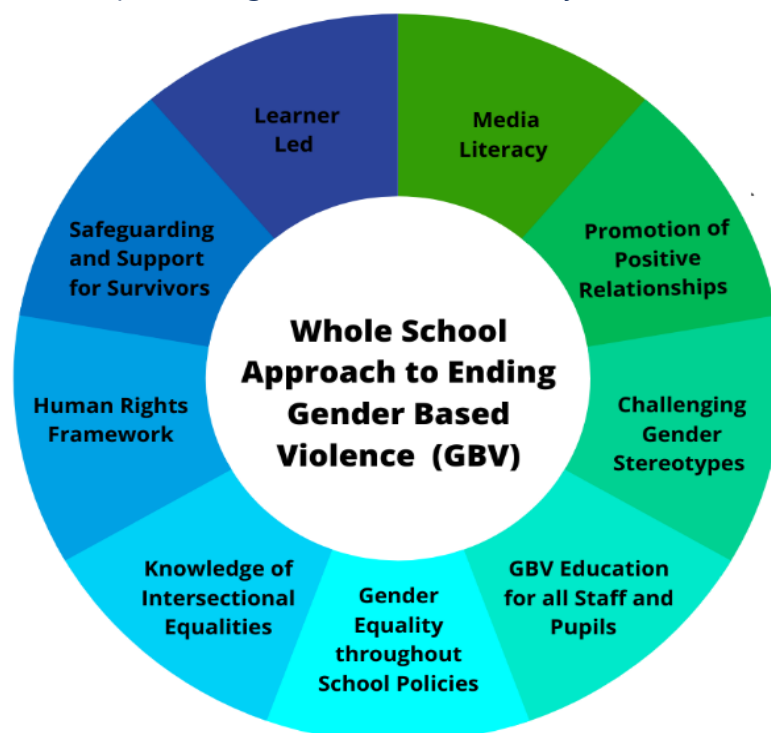


Figure 4 Whole school approach to ending gender-based violence

A range of programmes and resources to support a whole setting approach are listed below.

<p><u>Recognising and realising children’s rights</u></p> <p><u>Recognising and Realising Children's Rights in Youth Work</u></p>	<p>These professional learning resource help improve practitioners' knowledge, understanding and application of the UNCRC in school and youth work settings and support improvement.</p>
<p><u>Improving Gender Balance 3-18</u></p>	<p>Resources challenging gender stereotypes, addressing unconscious bias, improving gender balance in subject uptake and learner pathways and promoting whole establishment approaches to equality are available here.</p>
<p><u>Mentors in Violence Prevention</u></p>	<p>Secondary school peer mentoring programme that gives young people the chance to explore and challenge the attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms that underpin gender-based violence.</p>
<p><u>Relationships, Sexual Health & Parenting</u></p>	<p>The national resource for relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education for children and young people.</p>
<p><u>Equally Safe at School</u></p>	<p>Rape Crisis Scotland pilot of a whole school approach to preventing gender-based violence in schools in partnership with Zero Tolerance.</p>
<p><u>Gender 10</u></p>	<p>Toolkit providing guidance and practical examples of how to use a whole school approach to embed gender equality into school policy, ethos and the curriculum (primary school example).</p>
<p><u>Key messages for Young People on Healthy Relationships and Consent</u></p>	<p>A resource for professionals which aims to help them support young people in their understanding of healthy relationships and consent.</p>
<p><u>Health and wellbeing responsibility of all: making the links making it work</u></p>	<p>This resource demonstrates how responsibility for all can be enacted to ensure the safety of children and young people.</p>
<p><u>Health and wellbeing at the heart of transitions</u></p>	<p>This paper underlines the relational approaches at the heart of wellbeing as learners transition to blended learning.</p>

Table 2 Education resources

Signposting/resources

A [wakelet](#) has been created to support our signposting/resources which has links to numerous websites and videos which supports this briefing paper. It is easy to use and you can quickly navigate to different sites from the one area.

If you have experienced domestic abuse and would like information and support please visit this [website](#) or call Scotland's Domestic abuse and Forced Marriage 24 hour helpline 0800 027 1234.

This briefing has been developed by Education Scotland in collaboration with [Scottish Women's Aid](#).
June 2020

Coronavirus
(COVID-19)

References

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- ³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-scotland-2018-2019-statistics/pages/11/>
- ⁴ [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women \(2017\) General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19](#)
- ⁵ <https://www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/news/news/7-things-to-know-about-scotlands-new-domestic-abuse-law/>
- ⁶ [Scottish Government \(2020\) 'Domestic abuse: statistics 2018-2019'](#)
- ⁷ [Scottish Government and COSLA \(2008\) National Domestic Abuse Delivery Plan for Children and Young People](#)
- ⁸ [Scottish Government and COSLA \(2018\) 'Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy to eradicate violence against women'](#)
- ⁹ [Save the Children \(2006\) 'Safe Learning: How to support the educational needs of children and young people affected by domestic violence.'](#)
- ¹⁰ [Scottish Government \(2014\) 'The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland'](#)
- ¹¹ [Victim's Commissioner \(2020\) 'Children's experience of domestic abuse and criminality: A literature review'](#)
- ¹² [Katz, E \(2016\) Beyond the physical incident model: how children living with domestic violence are harmed by and resist regimes of coercive control. Child Abuse Review, 25\(1\), pp.46-59](#)
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- ¹⁴ [SASW \(2020\) Domestic abuse and child welfare: a practice guide for social workers](#)
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- ²³ <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/impact-on-children-and-young-people/>
- ²⁴ [NSPCC 2009 Barter et al, 'Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships'](#)
- ²⁵ <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20Insights%20factsheet%20-%20teenage%20victims%20of%20domestic%20abuse.pdf>
- ²⁶ [Save the Children \(2006\) 'Safe Learning: How to support the educational needs of children and young people affected by domestic violence.'](#)
- ²⁷ https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/IPV-SV.pdf?ua=1
- ²⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-prevent-eradicate-violence-against-women-girls/>
- ²⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-delivery-plan-scotlands-strategy-prevent-violence-against-women/>
- ³⁰ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/EVAW-Coalition-Schools-Guide.pdf>

Appendix 1

Impact by developmental stage

<p>Pre-birth and infancy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most children (64%) who are exposed to domestic abuse will experience it from the first year of life• heightened risk of foetal death, prematurity and low birth weight• Maternal distress in pregnancy can affect development of a secure attachment with child• Maternal symptoms of trauma are also present in the infant• By 24 months toddlers show evidence of cortisol dysregulation (cortisone is a stress hormone)• Toddlers have twice the likelihood of asthma• Increased likelihood of crying often, difficulty separating from caregiver and hard to soothe
<p>3-6 years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Domestic abuse disrupts the development of self-regulation skills• A dysregulated child may be aggressive to siblings/peers/authority figures• Posttraumatic stress symptoms, for example nightmares or flashbacks, are present in upwards of 50% of children exposed to domestic abuse.• Risk of heightened heart rate and cortisol response patterns• Increased likelihood of early onset obesity and heightened risk for asthma• Verbal ability and memory may be affected
<p>6-12 years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social relationships can be affected: difficulty developing and maintaining friendships; in higher conflict with close friends; resistance to interacting with others; displaying or the focus of bullying behaviours• More rigid views on gender roles and greater acceptability of violence• Intrusive thoughts about the domestic abuse/ impact on concentration• Higher levels of depression, anger, anxiety and mood swings at different ages• On high alert• Executive functioning is impacted which reflects difficulties with planning, prioritizing, organizing, and task completion• Increased likelihood of specific learning difficulties and poorer progress in language and mathematics• Linked to higher incidences of bedwetting and physical symptoms such as pain
<p>13-18 years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Higher absence rates• More physical complaints• Increased risk of obesity• Increased violence where violence was seen as a legitimate way to resolve conflict• Higher reports of anxiety and depression

Table 3 Developmental stages and impact of domestic abuse

Appendix 2

Local specialist domestic abuse services

There are 36 local Women's Aid organisations across Scotland, which provide practical and emotional support to women, children and young people who experience domestic abuse. The services offered by the local groups includes information, advocacy, counselling, outreach, follow-on support and temporary refuge accommodation.

For children and young people specifically, services on offer from your local Women's Aid group may include one-to-one emotional support, play/art therapy, group support, participation projects, outreach and temporary refuge accommodation. Get in touch with your local Women's Aid for advice and further information; you can find contact details [here](#).

Cedar (children experiencing domestic abuse recovery) is a therapeutic group work programme for children and young people aged 4-16 and their mothers who have experienced domestic abuse. Cedar is Scotland's leading evidence-based recovery programme, and its aim is to strengthen the relationship between children and mothers, allowing mums to support their children to recover from domestic abuse. Local Cedar Projects are based in local authorities, local Women's Aid organisations and other third-sector organisations. To find out if there is a Cedar Project in your area and to find out how to make a [referral](#), please visit the [Cedar website](#).

The specific support services available for children and young people across Scotland, as well as the organisation who provides them, may vary between local authority areas in response to different resources and needs. Your local multi-agency Violence Against Women Partnership will have information about support and resources available in your area as well as work taking place at a strategic level to improve outcomes for children and young people affected by domestic abuse. You can find out more information about the work of Violence Against Women Partnership [here](#). For the contact details of your local Violence Against Women Partnership Coordinator please contact vaw@improvementservice.org.uk.