

Multi-Agency Responses to Children Who Are Victims of Domestic Abuse January 2025

Introduction

This audit evaluates multi-agency responses to children (including unborn) up to age 7 who are victims of domestic abuse. It aligns with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which recognises children as victims in their own right. The audit was completed as part of the partnership Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) that took place in January 2025.

The audit found some excellent examples of work with children and their families, with clear evidence that the work has had and continues to have positive impacts on children and their families. The risk of domestic abuse has been reduced for children who have also received excellent support from their allocated workers from across the partnership. Support has been considered systemically, bringing together the children's family and social support networks in order to maintain safety when agencies no longer need to be involved. For those children who continue to be at risk of domestic abuse, legal advice is being sought in order to ensure safety, demonstrating that, while the strengths-based practice model is used and evidenced, practitioners are also able to recognise and competently respond to risk.

The audit has established some areas of development for all partners and, as per the usual NYSCP processes, this audit report will be shared with the Practice and Learning Sub-Group, who will manage the recommendations to ensure they are worked through in order to further strengthen frontline practice in this important safeguarding area.

Context

Domestic abuse is a common feature in child protection cases, and children often experience it both directly and indirectly. The Children's Commissioner's data shows that children living in households with domestic abuse often face multiple overlapping risks, including parental mental health issues and substance misuse. Children under 7 are particularly vulnerable due to their developmental stage. Exposure to domestic abuse can result in:

- **Emotional and psychological trauma:** Even witnessing abuse can cause anxiety, fear, confusion, and long-term emotional distress.
- **Developmental delays:** Chronic stress can impair brain development, affecting learning, memory, and emotional regulation.
- **Physical harm:** Young children may be injured while caught in violent incidents or neglected due to parental distress.

- **Disrupted attachment:** Abuse can interfere with a child's ability to form secure attachments, especially if the primary caregiver is also a victim.
- **Behavioural issues:** Children may exhibit aggression, withdrawal, or regression (e.g., bedwetting, speech delays).

Risks Specific to This Age Group

- **Pre-verbal children** cannot articulate their experiences, making it harder for professionals to detect harm.
- **Unborn babies** are affected by maternal stress, which can lead to low birth weight, premature birth, or developmental issues.
- Dependence on caregivers means that any disruption in caregiving due to abuse can have immediate and lasting effects.

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Areas of Good Practice

- **Voice of the Child:** Strong efforts to capture children's and unborn babies' perspectives using creative tools and observations.
- **Professional Curiosity:** Practitioners demonstrated attentiveness to subtle signs and cumulative risks.
- **Support for Children:** Trauma-informed care, therapeutic interventions, and school-based support were evident.
- **Information Sharing:** Effective collaboration across health, education, and probation services.
- **Early Intervention:** Timely referrals and antenatal assessments were common.
- **Cross-Cutting Themes:** ICON and Safe Sleep campaigns were well embedded.
- **Operation Encompass:** Prompt safeguarding actions following notifications to schools.
- **Clares' Law:** Appropriate use of the Domestic Violence Disclose Scheme (DVDS).

Areas for Development

- **Father Engagement:** Male caregivers' voices were less consistently captured.
- **Record Keeping:** Inconsistent demographic data and relationship links in some records.
- **"Voice" of Unborn Children:** How best to reflect on the 'voice' of unborn children in case records.
- **IT Systems:** Complexities in IT systems hinder information sharing and sharing perspectives.
- **Perpetrator Work:** Limited evidence of risk work completed with male perpetrators of domestic abuse.
- **Neurodiversity:** Understanding of needs and support for neurodiverse parents.
- **School Holidays:** Increased domestic abuse incidents during and in the lead up to breaks.

Recommendations

1. Improve Record Keeping

- Ensure full names, correct spellings, and accurate demographic details are recorded.
- Clearly identify all adults and children involved, including cultural and ethnic identity. E.g. not referring to people as 'partner/ ex-partner')

2. Enhance Information Gathering

- During assessments, ask about both parents' medical, mental health, and substance use histories.
- Share relevant information with partners to support early intervention.

3. Promote Professional Curiosity

- Continue promoting the #AskMe campaign and Professional Curiosity Practice Guidance

4. Capture and the "Voice" of the Child

- Develop and share a toolkit to help practitioners capture the voice of all children, including unborn and non-verbal children.
- Include non-verbal cues and behaviours in assessments.

5. Clarify Health System Roles

- Improve understanding of the health service structure in North Yorkshire to ensure relevant professionals are included in meetings.

6. Support Neurodiverse Parents

- Explore how neurodiversity affects parenting and tailor support accordingly.
- Include this topic in future training and planning.

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7. Expand Operation Encompass Training

- Identify and train all education settings not yet involved in Operation Encompass.
- Explore the expansion of Op Encompass through Early Years Settings.

8. Address Holiday-Related Risks

- Recognise increased domestic abuse risks during school holidays.
- Launch campaigns and map community support available during these periods.

Actions and recommendations will be reviewed as part of the NYSCP Subgroup meetings

Questions for Reflection

- How well do we capture the voice of unborn and non-verbal children?
- Are we consistently engaging all significant adults, including fathers?
- Do our records accurately reflect family dynamics and risks?
- How can we better support neurodiverse parents?
- Are we prepared for increased risks during school holidays?

What to do now

- Consider the questions for reflection in your team meetings or when being professionally curious about a young person or family you are working with.
- Familiarise yourself with the additional resources and information.
- Share your learning and the key messages with your colleagues.
- Share and promote the #AskMe campaign

Further partnership Audits and Safeguarding Reviews can be accessed [here](#).

Resources and Further Information

- [Domestic Abuse Practice Guidance – Including Domestic Abuse Strategy](#)
- [#AskMe Campaign](#)
- [Home - ICON Cope](#)
- [Professional Curiosity Practice Guidance](#)
- [Good Practice Supporting the Voice of the Child](#) (NB: Voice of the Child Toolkit currently in development)
- [Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme](#) (also known as Clare's Law)
- [MARAC and MATAC Domestic Abuse meetings](#)
- [Operation Encompass](#)
- [Children of Parents with Learning Disabilities](#)
- [Children of Parents with Mental Health Problems](#)

All NYSCP practice guidance can be accessed [here](#).