**Children and young people living in domestic abuse environments**

In the majority of families where there are children, and where abuse is being perpetrated, the children will be aware of this, and will often hear it or see it going on.

Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people that can last into adulthood.

Domestic abuse services offer specialist emotional and practical support for children and young people affected by domestic abuse.

One in seven (14.2 per cent) children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic violence at some point in their childhood. (*Woman’s Aid 2017)*

Children can witness domestic abuse in a variety of ways:

* They may be in the same room and may get caught in the middle of an incident, perhaps in an effort to make the violence stop;
* They may be in another room but be able to hear the abuse or see their mother’s physical injuries following an incident of violence; or
* They may be forced to take part in verbally abusing the victim.

Children are completely dependent on the adults around them, and if they do not feel safe in their own homes, this can have many negative physical and emotional effects.

All children witnessing domestic violence are being emotionally abused, and this is now recognised that they may be at risk of ‘significant harm’ in recent legislation [1].

**Impact and effects of domestic abuse on children and young people**

Children will react in different ways to being brought up in a home with a abusive person.

Age, race, sex, culture, stage of development, and individual personality will all have an effect on a child’s responses.

Most children, however, will be affected in some way by tension or by witnessing arguments, distressing behaviour or assaults – even if they do not always show this. Children are at risk both physically and emotionally from domestic abuse, physically, by being ‘caught-up’ in an assault and emotionally from the impact of living day to day in an abusive household.

They may feel that they are to blame, or – like you – they may feel angry, guilty, insecure, alone, frightened, powerless, or confused. They may have ambivalent feelings, both towards the abuser, and towards the non-abusing parent.

These are some of the effects of domestic violence on children:

* They may become anxious or depressed
* They may have difficulty sleeping
* They may have nightmares or flashbacks
* They may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches
* They may start to wet their bed
* They may have temper tantrums
* They may behave as though they are much younger than they are
* They may have problems at school, or may start truanting
* They may become aggressive
* They may internalise their distress and withdraw from other people
* They may have a lowered sense of self-worth
* Older children may start to use alcohol or drugs
* They may begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves
* They may develop an eating disorder.

Abuse may also interfere with your children’s social relationships: they may feel unable to invite friends round (or may be prevented from doing so by the abuser) out of shame, fear, or concern about what their friends may see.

They may feel guilty, and think the abuse is their fault, or that they ought to be able to stop it in some way. There can be an impact on school attendance and achievement: some children will stay home in an attempt to protect their mother, or because they are frightened what may happen if they go out. Worry, disturbed sleep and lack of concentration can all affect school work.

**Enabling disclosure for children**

Children may be extremely fearful of the consequence of sharing family secrets with anyone and the possible impact on themselves and other family members. Their concerns may include:

* Feeling protective of their victim/protective parent;
* Feeling protective of their abusing parent;
* Being threatened by the abusing parent;
* Fearful of being taken into care;
* Fearful of losing their friends and school;
* Fearful of exposing the family to dishonour, shame or embarrassment;
* Naturally distrustful of strangers.

Professionals should not press the child for answers, instead:

* Listen and be prepared to believe what the child says;
* Reassure the child/ren that the abuse is not their fault, and it is not their responsibility to stop it from happening;

The professional should explain the limits and nature of confidentiality and his/her safeguarding responsibilities. For more information about confidentiality and sharing information,