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A photograph showing a child's feet in dark sandals. The child is holding a pacifier in their right hand. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter.

Improving services for children affected by domestic abuse

Edited by Stephanie Waddell and Donna Molloy

April 2021

This paper draws on work we have carried out over the course of the year, designed to inform an ongoing programme for EIF focused on improving the support available to children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse. We have looked at the current state of the evidence base through a review of systematic reviews and a call for evidence, at the barriers to evaluation through a brief literature review and interviews with academic and sector experts, and at the nature of current systems and practice through in-depth qualitative work in four local places.

This paper was first published in April 2021. © 2021

The editors would like to thank the EIF team for their work on this paper and the research that has informed it: Grace Freeman, Shaun Liverpool, Tom McBride, Danny McGrath, Dr Ian Moore, James Mulcahy, Laura Stock, Hannah Wilson.

The authors would also like to thank Dr Emma Howarth, Elaine Fulton and Robyn Tulloch for their comments and support.

At the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) we champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of all children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

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Early Intervention Foundation
10 Salamanca Place
London SE1 7HB

W: www.EIF.org.uk
E: info@eif.org.uk
T: @TheEIFoundation
P: +44 (0)20 3542 2481

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Domestic abuse is devastating for children. The impacts can be wide-ranging and long-lasting.

We know that children who have experienced domestic abuse are significantly more likely to experience abuse in their own adult relationships, to misuse drugs or alcohol, and to have lower levels of wellbeing.¹ The impact on children and young people's mental health can be profound. Children who live with domestic abuse are more likely to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder,² depression,³ and emotional and behavioural difficulties.⁴

Domestic abuse is common.

Around one in five children in the UK experience domestic abuse during their childhood.⁵ There is emerging evidence that Covid-19 has made the situation worse for many children. Between March and December last year, during and following the first lockdown, the average number of calls each month to the NSPCC Helpline about domestic abuse increased by more than 50%.⁶ Late last year, we estimated that over 15,000 children could suffer domestic abuse over the two-week Christmas period alone.⁷

The Domestic Abuse Bill going through parliament recognises children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right. This is a step forward, but the challenge now is to make sure that every child who experiences the trauma of domestic abuse, or who is at risk of experiencing this trauma, gets the support that they need, when they need it. Our work this year throws the enormity of this task into stark relief.

We are calling on the government to invest strategically and for the long term to tackle this pervasive and highly damaging problem.

We must Close unacceptable gaps in the evidence of what works

“To date, there has been very little robust impact evaluation of programmes or practices in the UK.”

One of the major barriers to improving services is that we know very little about what works to support children who have experienced or who are at risk of experiencing domestic abuse. Having access to evidence about what works, for whom and in what circumstances is a critical part of making good commissioning or funding decisions.

To date, there has been very little robust impact evaluation of programmes or practices in the UK. Our evidence review identified more than 100 programmes designed to support children affected by domestic abuse. However, less than a third of these had been evaluated – and of those that had, many suffered from methodological weaknesses, including poor study design and small sample sizes.

There is also an over-reliance on qualitative evidence. Although this is a vital part of understanding victims’ lived experiences, it does not, on its own, allow us to be confident that the support has had its desired impact.

There are many factors lying behind this lack of robust evaluation, some of which relate to challenges inherent to how evaluations are designed and run. There are two in particular that require urgent attention, consensus and investment to resolve.

First, the appropriateness of randomised control trials – or RCTs – is contentious, both within the domestic abuse field and in relation to support for vulnerable children more generally. These methods have been challenged on ethical grounds, given that the study design requires a comparison group of children who do not receive the support or intervention. There are also practical concerns, that these methodologies impose an additional burden on an already-struggling system.⁸

These are valid and important concerns. There are, however, routes to testing effectiveness that don’t result in services being



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withheld from children, and making greater use of experimental methods in order to establish a clearer picture of the impact of services in this territory is important. Experimental methods provide us with the best way to establish causality and to know which interventions work. We need to make progress in evaluating promising interventions, and interventions that are already widely-used in the UK, so we can support children affected by domestic abuse with services that have been shown to make a difference.

Second, there is no consensus around the most relevant and appropriate way to measure programme or practice outcomes. This variability significantly hampers attempts to compare different interventions in terms of their effectiveness, or to synthesise evidence from multiple studies in order

to draw out lessons for those working in the sector.⁹ The current work being led by [University College London](#) and funded by the [National Institute for Health Research](#) to develop a common set of outcomes takes a vital step towards greater consistency in measurement approaches. Importantly, this work involves survivors, practitioners, commissioners and policy makers to ensure that the outcomes selected reflect the priorities of different stakeholder groups.

We must Address local system barriers to evaluating the impact of services

“Local authority funding for more holistic support for children and young people, including prevention activity or longer-term therapeutic support, is often short-term and vulnerable to cuts. The difficulties of evaluation in this context cannot be overstated.”

At the local level, there is a complex set of challenges that impact on the consistency and appropriateness of domestic abuse services across the UK, and on our ability to develop an understanding of what works.

Local authority funding constraints and uncertainties remain a major challenge to the provision of local services. Across the country, directors of children’s services are trying to balance budgets and find ways to rationalise services, retaining the most effective support offer possible for children and families within these constraints. In this context, domestic abuse services tend to focus on crisis support and reducing the immediate risk of harm. Local authority funding for more holistic support for children and young people, including prevention activity or longer-term therapeutic support, is often short-term and vulnerable to cuts. Many of these services are provided by the voluntary and community sector and are propped

up by piecemeal, short-term funding from a range of sources, leaving them in a precarious position.

‘When we get money, we absolutely use every penny of that. We throw it at projects, then the money disappears and you no longer have access to that project. So it feels like this sort of continual wave, where you might have a little bit of a product, then it goes, then you might have a bit.’

- SERVICE MANAGER & LOCAL AREA FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

This challenging funding context means that demand for support commonly outstrips capacity and there is a great deal of uncertainty about what services are available from one year to the next. This squeeze has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There are longstanding gaps in provision, including in relation to the availability



of prevention services, long-term therapeutic support, support for babies and very young children, direct access provision for children where parents are not themselves engaging with support, and culturally specific interventions for minority groups. In dealing with limited and stretched services, practitioners have told us that they are forced to take a 'something is better than nothing' approach to referring children for support, for example, by looking for services with no waiting list or with fewer limitations on access. While practitioners recognise the importance of carefully matching a child's needs to the support most likely to make a difference, the reality in local services is very different, and this careful matching is often seen as an unrealistic ambition.

'You're often just trying to send the child to wherever you think there might be someone who can pick them up pretty quickly, if I'm honest.'

- EARLY HELP PRACTITIONER & LOCAL AREA FOCUS
GROUP PARTICIPANT

The difficulties of evaluation in this context cannot be overstated. Underfunded voluntary sector or community-run organisations obviously have limited resources, and most are a long way from being able to carry out robust impact evaluations. Specialist domestic abuse interventions are also often very responsive to local contexts, which means they are adaptive and individualised in terms of the support they offer. The nature of these highly varied services, and their approaches to working with children, need to be understood and defined before they can be evaluated further. Understanding contextual influences on the way an intervention is implemented and achieves outcomes must be a key aim of an evaluation.

Building the evidence base and progressing towards impact evaluation will require central investment and a new infrastructure of support and advice.

We must

Invest over the long term to enhance support for children affected by domestic abuse

“Developing this much-needed understanding of what works within such a complex and challenging context requires a sustained focus and national investment.”

If the provisions of the Domestic Abuse Bill are going to result in tangible change for children and young people affected by domestic abuse, the government needs to grip these longstanding systemic challenges, including by ensuring that local authorities have the funding they need to be able to commission support services strategically and sustainably.

The ‘what works?’ challenge is very significant within this. Local commissioners, funders and service providers are hampered by the lack of evidence about what is effective, for whom, and in what circumstances. At the same time, multiple system challenges thwart efforts to generate evidence and insight at a local level.

Government has a vital role to play here. Developing this much-needed understanding of what works within such a complex and challenging context requires a sustained focus and national investment. The government is rightly turning its focus to the prevention of violence against women and girls. It’s crucial that children affected by domestic abuse are considered as a priority within that agenda. We are calling on the government to invest in a new, strategic cross-departmental fund dedicated to improving our collective knowledge of what works to support children who are victims of domestic abuse and to supporting the use of this knowledge within both national policy and local systems. While this fund must have a strong focus on the needs of children, clearly it will also need to address the impact on adult victims and work with perpetrators in order to be effective.

This fund must support more and higher quality evaluation of domestic abuse services. It should invest straight away in robust evaluation of the most promising, widely delivered interventions and



“We are calling on the government to invest through the spending review in strategic, sustained action to address the highly prevalent problem of domestic abuse and the terrible impact that it has on children.

practices. These evaluations should look at what works, for which groups, under what conditions.

The fund should also support the sector to reach consensus on a set of standardised outcomes, including outcomes specifically relating to children’s wellbeing, and to use these outcomes in services, measuring progress with validated and reliable measurement tools.

However, the fund should also respond to the current reality in local systems. It should, for example, build capacity to evaluate small-scale, local interventions, including community-level provision. It should actively support the evaluation of services designed to support minority groups, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and ensure that the voice of child

and adult victims is heard as part of evaluations that it funds. Crucially, the fund should invest in evaluation of practice-based and system-level approaches, as well as specific interventions.

Beyond enabling more and higher quality evaluation, this fund should also seek to expand and improve our understanding of effective domestic abuse support. It should have a focus on understanding victims’ lived experience, and on further research into the risk and protective factors associated with domestic abuse. In doing so, it should be responsive and seek to answer the questions that local commissioners, practitioners and children or families themselves have, and consider ways to involve them actively in strategic decisions relating to the fund, and in research through co-design or co-creation.



We are calling on the government to invest through the spending review in strategic, sustained action to address the highly prevalent problem of domestic abuse and the terrible impact that it has on children. It is critical that this investment has a sharp focus on evaluation and learning, as a route to driving up the quality and maximising the impact of early intervention to reduce the incidence and impact of domestic abuse, and of the kind of long-term support for child and adult victims that can help them to recover and go on to lead happy and healthy lives.

Summary

Investing to enhance support for children affected by domestic abuse

We call on government to establish a long-term, cross-departmental fund dedicated to improving knowledge of what works to support child and adult victims of domestic abuse by:

- » Investing in robust evaluation of promising and widely-used interventions
- » Supporting consensus on a standard set of outcomes, and greater consistency in impact measurement approaches
- » Building capacity to evaluate small-scale local interventions
- » Supporting evaluation of support for minority groups
- » Investing in the use of evaluation data to support professional practice and system improvement
- » Expanding research into domestic abuse services beyond evaluating impact, including research on victims' experiences, risk and protective factors, and the priorities of service users and local decision-makers.

Notes

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 - 6 See NSPCC, 'Calls to NSPCC about children living in violent homes rise by over 50% as we urge government to support all children': <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2021/calls-to-nspcc-about-children-living-in-violent-homes-rise-by-over-50-as-we-urge-government-to-support-all-children/>
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