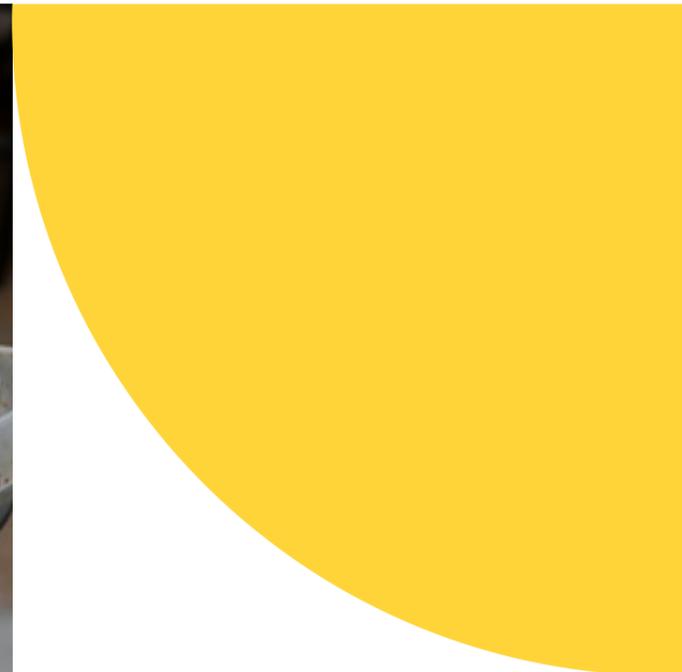


How do Children who live with domestic abuse view, understand, and experience the idea of home?

Department of sociology research briefing

Dr Kirsten Ellen Hall





Qualitative Interviews took place with:

16

16 professionals from a range of housing, domestic abuse & children's services including both managers and practitioners.

13

13 adult survivors who lived with domestic abuse in childhood. There were 3 men and 10 women aged between 17 and 55yrs.

11

11 of the survivors independently fled their families as young adults due to domestic abuse. This is significant as these experiences of fleeing by young people are not widely researched.

How do Children who live with domestic abuse view, understand, and experience the idea of home?

The recent Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 recognised that children who see, hear or experience domestic abuse, are victims of domestic abuse. There is a wealth of research about the detrimental impacts of domestic abuse on children. These include emotional impacts such as sadness, guilt, shame, loss; behavioural problems such as anger or alcohol abuse; mental health issues; and impacts on education. More recently research has focussed on

highlighting children's awareness and knowledge of domestic abuse, and the actions/agency taken by children to mitigate harm. However, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of children's day to day lives within a context of domestic abuse as an all-encompassing pattern of behaviour. By conducting research through the lens of 'home', unique insights into some of these experiences have been uncovered.

Key Messages about Home

- The presence of domestic abuse creates 'what is not a home', an anti-home.
- Children living with domestic abuse live with constant fear and danger.
- Children living with domestic abuse are likely to be suffering from direct abuse towards themselves.
- Children can have a positive experience of alternative homes such as extended family or friends' houses.

“My Mam's house is not my home”

Rachael



“ I’d look back on my family home and it’s like having been in A&E for 16 years in the middle of the night, everything is too bright, I’m too tired and anxious and I can’t get comfortable ”

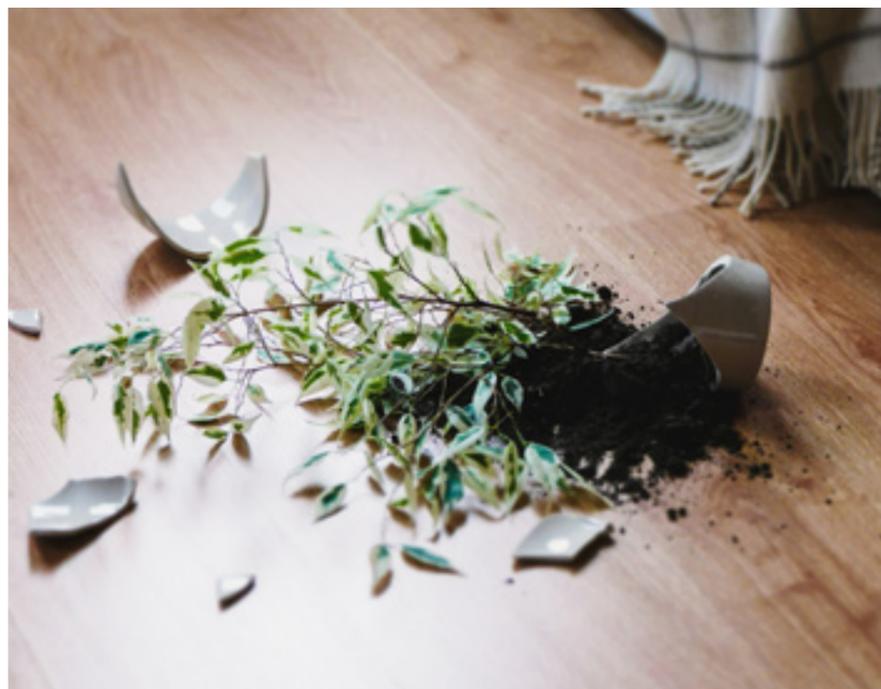
Mandy

Key Messages about what children know and do

- Professionals highlighted how children look to their parents for permission to say things or have their parents actively dispute children’s version of events.
- Professionals admitted that children were often denied a voice in formal processes such as admission to refuge or housing applications.
- Children make deliberate decisions to disclose to agencies such as the police and social care because of a desire for action to be taken.
- Children often act in situations where there is a significant lack of intervention from all adults around them, what this research terms a ‘vacuum of responsibility’.

“ So, me and my twin brother made a plan that he would go with my dad and I would go with my mum, so they went along... because remember, we were scared in case like my mum would drink and fall and hurt herself, and my dad would do the same... I think that happened when we were about 12, that we made that decision ”

Jemma



“ And some of them have become mini adults and little carers at the age of 8, 9 or 10 ”

Refuge Manager

Key Messages about how children experience coercive control

- Children are prevented from socialising with friends.
- Children implicitly know that certain things are not allowed such as having friends over. The home itself appears to retain the perpetrator’s gaze, whether present or not.
- Children have hobbies and interests sabotaged by excessive input from perpetrators.
- Perpetrators control older children in the same way they control intimate partners.



Key Messages about resilience

- Quiet children who do not display anger or other outward facing behaviours are viewed as resilient, and professionals recognise that there are few services for these children who appear to be coping.
- Children use academic achievement as a way of ‘burying’ or ‘rising above’ the domestic abuse they are experiencing at home which creates an external impression of resilience and maturity.
- Alternative interpretations of ‘resilient’ behaviours by survivors of childhood domestic abuse are that they are a ‘performance’, and/ or they are occurring as a result of restrictions placed on socialising and engaging with activities. Resilient children are experiencing coercive control.

“ It’s, I don’t know how I can explain it, it’s like being in a prison ”

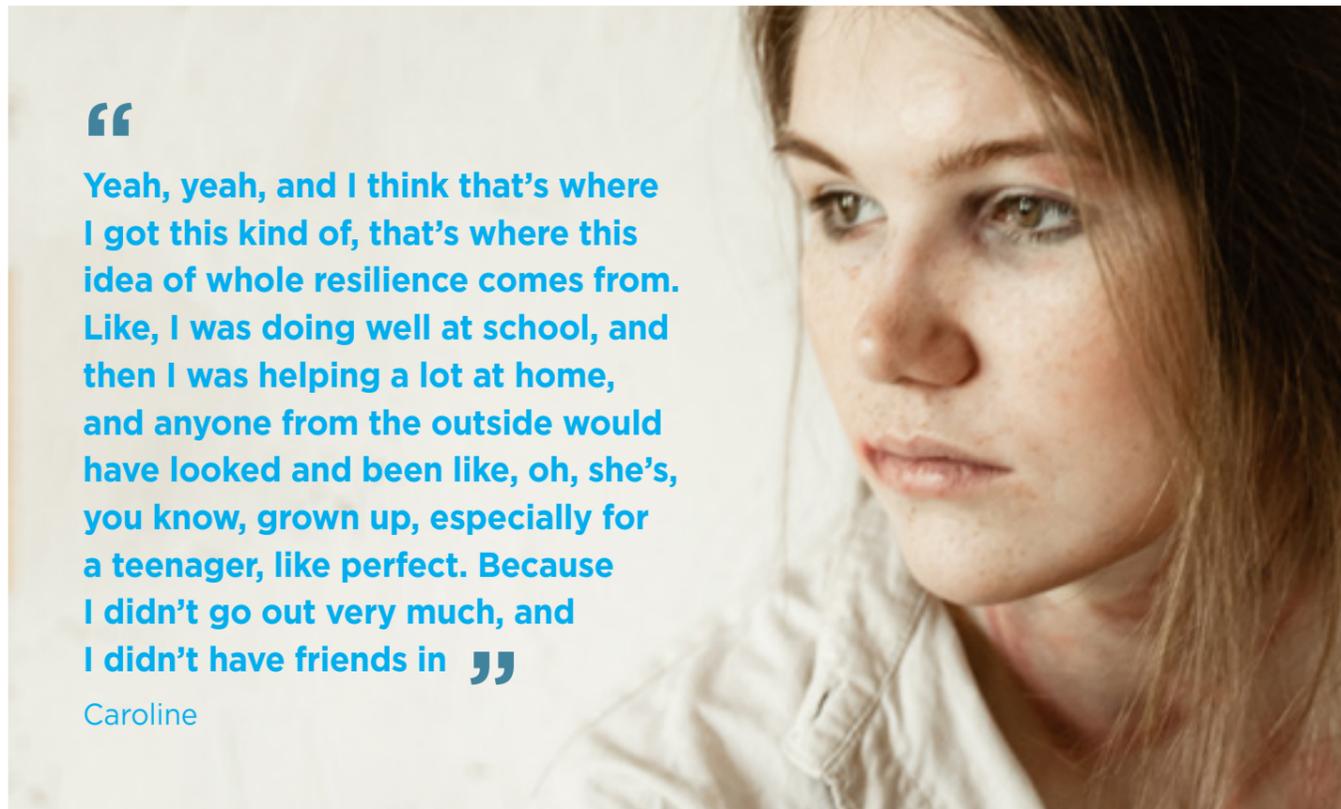
Michael

“ I’d just be very quiet, maybe watch a bit of telly and then my dad would come home, and everything would revolve, essentially everything revolved around him whether he was there or not ”

Emily

Key Messages about housing and social security provision

- Universal Credit has problematic elements for women living with and fleeing domestic abuse including: all benefit entitlement being paid in one lump sum to the perpetrator, increased claiming commitments necessary for payment, increased use of sanctions, and a 5-week delay for payment.
- Community Care Grants which were paid for setting up home, and Crisis Loans for people in immediate financial need, have been removed which has increased the need for charitable assistance by women who have fled domestic abuse.
- Increased restrictions on access to Council choice-based letting schemes and the ability of Local Authorities to discharge duty through private lets which have caused greater difficulties for women living with and/or fleeing domestic abuse.
- This research uses the term ‘choice deficit’ to characterise the trend away from monetary allocation and towards charitable resources for example foodbanks. The choice deficit creates stigma and ‘othering’, can influence decisions to leave domestic abuse, and replicates the power dynamics of domestic abuse. This research showed children suffer the stigma of the deficit as much as adults, for example, having ill-fitting school uniform with the wrong the name on it.



“

Yeah, yeah, and I think that's where I got this kind of, that's where this idea of whole resilience comes from. Like, I was doing well at school, and then I was helping a lot at home, and anyone from the outside would have looked and been like, oh, she's, you know, grown up, especially for a teenager, like perfect. Because I didn't go out very much, and I didn't have friends in ”

Caroline

Key Messages about the future

- The effects of living with domestic abuse in childhood can echo into adulthood for example experiencing depression, problems with intimate relationships, feeling a lack of emotional security, self-harm, and, crucially, still living with a feeling of 'waiting for something to happen'
- Home creation in adulthood can be a complex process when domestic abuse has been present in childhood
- Changes to social security provision and difficulties in accessing stable and secure housing makes home creation difficult for many people in society currently.

“

It really fucks you up when you're older, it does it really fucks you up ”

Rachael

Key Recommendation

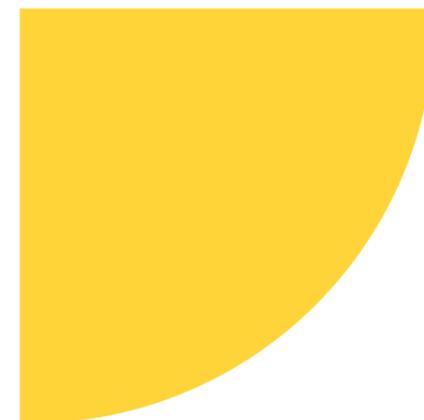
- All children identified as victims of domestic abuse should be offered appropriate services as standard

It's all Connected

- Housing and welfare changes make it harder for women to exit situations of domestic abuse/ remain exited from domestic abuse, therefore, more children could be living with domestic abuse for longer
- Experiencing domestic abuse in childhood makes it harder to create home in adulthood
- Home is hard to find for increasing numbers of the people in the current economic, cultural, environmental, and political context.

So, the idea of having somewhere permanent never seemed, like, realistic, do you know what I mean? It was always ... Everything was ... I always felt like I was on the verge of disaster or catastrophe

Thomas



“

If a woman had rent arrears previously with domestic violence - and they've all got rent arrears cos either the man's drinking them, drugs - as long as they made steps to pay the arrears and got a card and say, 'I'd like to start paying £5 a week' they didn't hold it against them but now what they're doing is if they've got more than £200 rent arrears they'll be offered a management let so they won't actually be able to go on to the housing list and bid, they'll be offered a one off property and that's a bit worrying ”

Independent Living Worker



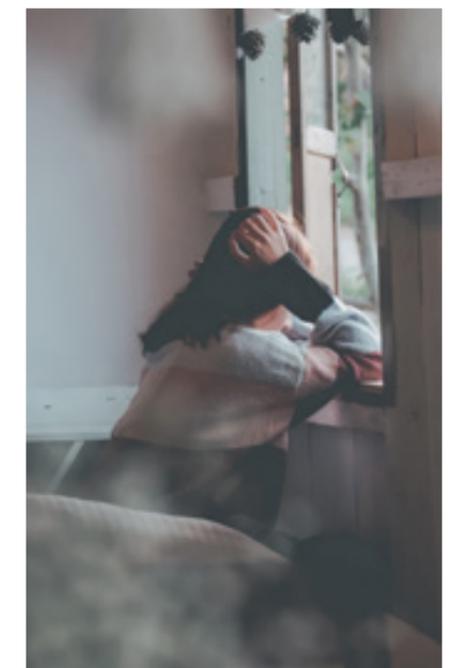
Further Recommendations

- Children should have easy access to trusted adults through a range of services offering holistic support and consistent personnel.
- 'Alternative 'homes' for children should be created in different settings, for example, school, community gardens and creative safe spaces
- Housing policy should prioritise home creation. Resources should be organised to create more collective, inclusive and accessible experiences of stability and permanence, in relation to home and wider community
- Resilience and positive adaptations from trauma should be recognised as dependent on social, economic and political factors not individuals
- Monetary grants and benefits should be restored
- Specialist support and accommodation should be made available for young adults fleeing domestic abuse in their families

“

But now they don't (give you money), they come and measure your home and give you the carpet... ”

Refuge Manager



“

What we were doing was, we were kind of performing happiness in order to make Dad OK...it was so internalised, you know, it was so normalized ”

Emily

Contact Us

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