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Centre for Research on Families and Relationships • Briefing 72 • September 2014

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Authors and acknowledgements

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This research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

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Strengthening mother-child relationships as part of domestic violence recovery

Although domestic violence is harmful, recoveries from abuse are possible (Humphreys et al 2006, 2011). Recovery, for women (as individuals and as mothers) and their children, is a key concern for practitioners working with victims/survivors.

This study identifies five main reasons why mother-child relationships were (or were not) detrimentally affected by domestic violence. It specifies key factors that assisted mothers and children to overcome the harmful impacts and move forward positively with their lives.

Fifteen mothers and fifteen children were interviewed as part of this PhD study. All had past experiences of domestic violence. Nine of the children were female and six were male, with an age range of 10-20 years old. The perpetrator was the children's father in 12 of the 15 families, and the mother's partner in the remaining 3 families. As 80% of the interviewed families had been separated from the perpetrator/father for 3-10 years, the study was able to explore longer-term patterns of recovery. The families interviewed were mainly current or former service-users of voluntary sector organisations such as Women's Aid, and were mostly recruited through those services.

Background

Domestic violence is understood to involve an on-going pattern of coercive control (Stark 2007) that 'is interwoven through time

and intimate space into [women's and children's] daily lives' (Morris 2009: 417). Perpetrators/fathers frequently undermine mother-child relationships as part of their abuse (Morris 2009; Humphreys et al 2006) in an attempt to reduce supportiveness between mothers and children and make them both weaker. Maintaining strong mother-child relationships in the context of domestic violence is therefore often difficult. However, it can be vital to survival and recovery. Much research suggests that strong and supportive mother-child relationships may be an important protective factor in helping mothers and children to survive and recover from domestic violence (Semaan et al 2013; Mullender et al 2002).

In response, public sector and voluntary organisations such as Women's Aid and the NSPCC are beginning to develop joint mother-child programmes (Humphreys et al 2011). These include the Cedar (Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery) programme in Scotland (Sharp et al 2011), and the Community Group Programme in England (Nolas et al 2012). These programmes run joint and parallel sessions with groups of mothers and children. They recognise that children and mothers escaping from domestic violence may have strained relationships with one another, and aim to help mothers and children to connect positively with each other as they move forward from their experiences.

Key points

- The findings from this study suggest that children play an active and important role in both resisting abuse and promoting their own and their mother's recovery.
- Mothers and children often supported one another in a range of subtle, everyday ways while living with perpetrators/fathers. Children and mothers reported that simply being able to spend enjoyable time together had helped to counteract the harms caused by perpetrators/fathers' abuse.
- The behaviour of perpetrators/fathers had the most impact on mother-child relationships. Behaviours which severely undermined mother-child relationships included: alternating between hostility and indulgence towards the children; saying negative things to the children about their mother, preventing the mother and children from spending time together; and controlling the mother's time and movement.
- Mothers and children may be seen as 'promoters' of each other's recoveries. Some of the mother-child relationships that had been strained and distant in the immediate aftermath of domestic violence had transformed into positive, mutually supportive relationships, with appropriate support.
- Appropriate professional supports had often been pivotal to these transformations. Families who did not receive effective supports in their recovery were more likely to experience negative life-circumstances such as long-term mental health problems and unemployment.
- The children and mothers who developed strong and supportive relationships with each other in the aftermath of domestic violence generally spoke about them in highly positive terms, often describing with happiness how they helped, supported and cared for one another.

Findings

Perpetrators/fathers' behaviours influenced levels of closeness and distance between mothers and children

The relationships between mothers and children in the study ranged from very close to very distant during the domestic violence. The five factors that influenced the extent of this closeness/distance were:

- The perpetrator/father's relationship with, and treatment of, the children
- The perpetrator/father's attitude towards the mother-child relationship
- The types of domestic violence committed by the perpetrator/father
- The effects of the domestic violence on the mother
- The children's level of understanding about the domestic violence

Relationships between mothers and children tended to become particularly distant and strained when:

- The perpetrator/father was inconsistent in his parenting, alternating between hostility and indulgence as part of the overall pattern of abuse
- The perpetrator/father actively undermined the mother-child relationship, for example by saying negative things to the children about their mother, or preventing the mother and children from spending time together
- The perpetrator/father used less physical violence and was abusive in more ambiguous and confusing ways, such as by perpetrating emotional, psychological, sexual or financial abuse, and by controlling time and movement
- The perpetrator/father's behaviour had a severe, negative impact on the mother in ways that undermined her ability to connect with her children
- The children had low levels of understanding about the domestic violence

Closeness as a mutual protective factor

Mothers and children were often able to maintain stronger, more supportive relationships with one another in cases where perpetrators/fathers were less interested in directly undermining the mother-child relationship.

Supportiveness between children and mothers was not limited to talking about, or protecting each other from, domestic violence. It also involved the creation of time and space to be together in normal, positive ways. As one mother described:

On those days when we were alone and he was out, we would snuggle up on the sofa and watch a film together. We always emotionally supported each other then.

(Ruby, mother)

However, when mother-child relationships were heavily undermined by perpetrators/fathers, those positive supports were prevented:

He wouldn't allow me and my daughter to build a relationship. He wanted me to just do the basic caring for the children...But there was no fun, no playtime allowed.

(Marie, mother)

Both mothers and children said that stronger mother-child relationships were helpful, and stated that they had a positive impact on their well-being that offset some of the harmful impacts of perpetrators/fathers' abuse.

“ Understanding how mothers and children can be supported to overcome the harmful experiences of domestic abuse is vital to their recovery and to the development of effective services ”

Nancy Lombard, Co-founder of the Scottish Gender Based Violence Research Network and CRFR Associate Director

Mothers and children supporting one another's post-separation recoveries

A significant finding of the study is the extent to which children and mothers could act as 'recovery-promoters' for each other after escaping domestic violence (Katz forthcoming). On a day-to-day basis, it was mothers and children who were on the 'frontline' of assisting each other's recoveries. As part of their daily lives, many reassured one another about the past, present and future, rebuilt each other's confidence and self-esteem, and assisted one another to understand the past and overcome its emotional/behavioural impacts:

When my daughter Zoe's getting upset about her dad, we'll just sit and I'll stroke her hair and she just cries and lets it all out. I help her get it all out in a safe environment.

(Lauren, mother)

When I think Mum's worrying about the past, I make her cups of tea and sit with her and talk about everyday things, and it's just nice. (Grace, aged 14)

We encourage each other – “You can do it”, and we try to bump each other's confidence up, you know, which is important. (Eloise, mother)

For these families, such actions often reinforced and enhanced the professional supports they had already engaged with, thereby extending the impacts of the supports long after the family's case had been closed.

Barriers to post-separation recovery

After separating from perpetrators/fathers, mothers and children were faced with the challenging process of recovery. Several obstacles to recovery were identified by the mothers and children:

- Post-separation harassment, threats, stalking and violence from the perpetrator/father
- The children continuing to be distressed and harmed by the abusive parenting of the perpetrator/father, usually during contact visits
- The mother and children lacking a safe place to live where they felt secure and settled
- Inappropriate interventions by professionals that left the mother and children inadequately protected or supported

As two of the children interviewed described:

He used to bring some other men and try and break into the house, and me and my brothers feared for our lives because he used to smack on the doors and I used to hide. (Vince, aged 13)

We used to go to our dad's every weekend [contact having been court-ordered]. He'd say 'oh your mum makes me cry, your mum makes me do this stuff'...He blamed her and us for everything...My sister Zoe would be off school most Mondays because she felt so ill. She'd be on the sofa being held by Mum and crying. (Grace, aged 14)

Children and mothers reported that while those obstacles persisted, the negative impacts of the domestic violence continued to accrue. Often it was only once those obstacles diminished that mothers and children were emotionally able to begin recovering properly:

He used to come round and bang on the door and be abusive on the telephone... Since he hasn't been around it's been better. I sat down with my daughter and said: 'something's happened that was wrong; what he did was wrong'...[Now] our communication is better than it was before. (Kimberley, mother)

Problems arising from barriers to post-separation recovery

It is important to note that, where professional help could provide a pathway to recovery, a lack of intervention or inappropriate intervention often led to problems. The families in the study who had not received appropriate supports were experiencing many negative consequences, including long-term mental health problems and unemployment:

I have flashbacks like post-traumatic stress, and I feel so bad that I allowed that man to put our child through what he did...I've attempted suicide because of what [the perpetrator/father has] done to me over the years...I think if I didn't still have my depression then [my son] John and I would have moved on a lot further. (Eloise, mother)

Enabling post-separation recovery

Professional supports assisted the recoveries of the children and mothers in the study when professionals sensitively and non-judgementally:

- Strengthened mothers' and children's mental health in the aftermath of the domestic violence, by helping them to understand and manage their feelings
- Worked with families to help overcome any behavioural problems that children had developed as a result of their experiences, such as being withdrawn or aggressive
- Supported mothers and children to understand that the domestic violence was not their fault – and, in the case of children, that it was not the fault of their mother – as well to understand what abusive behaviour is, and how to recognise it
- Addressed parenting issues and increased mothers' parenting confidence
- Addressed negative communication patterns that mothers and children had developed during the domestic violence, such as arguing frequently or barely speaking
- Promoted constructive communication and the sharing of feelings between children and mothers

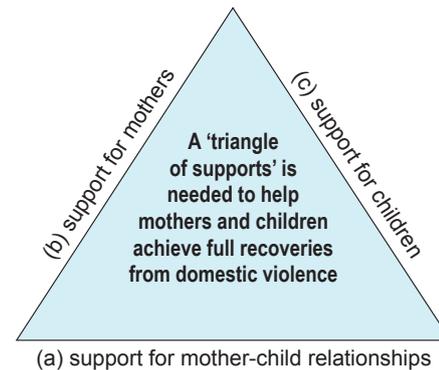
Families who had received effective supports described their transformational effects:

It's just a lot happier, calmer... Going to the NSPCC's ['DART'] programme has helped us come to terms with it... They're being kids and I'm being a mum now. (Isobel, mother)

My daughter's doing better at school now...She used to have behaviour problems but she's really calmed down now...A Women's Aid worker went into their school and worked with her on ways of dealing with her emotions... She's just a different child. (Bella, mother)

I didn't used to talk to Mum that much...That wasn't so good. This woman at the refuge helped me and Mum to talk more. Now, when I get upset, Mum and I sit down and talk about what's happened. (Angel, aged 12)

Based on the results of this study, a triangle of supports can be identified, illustrating how mothers and children may be helped to achieve full recoveries. This triangle consists of supports for: (a) mother-child relationships, as well as for; (b) mothers and; (c) children as individuals.



Recommendations for practice

1. Services and policies need to recognise the link between perpetrators/fathers' domestic violence and their fathering. Perpetrators/fathers frequently abuse both children and mothers in order to gain overall domination of the household, and children are often harmed by perpetrators/fathers' negative parenting practices. Services should hold perpetrators/fathers accountable for their actions, and identify domestic abuse as a parenting issue.
2. For the children and mothers in this study, harassment, violence and abusive parenting by perpetrators/fathers continued to be a problem even after separation. Service interventions need to account, therefore, for the fact that separation does not necessarily guarantee the safety of children and mothers or the start of their recoveries.
3. Children's and mothers' recoveries are assisted when they are quickly provided with somewhere suitable to live where they can feel settled and safe. Services should prioritise providing housing to mothers and children who are escaping from domestic violence.
4. Mothers' and children's existing or potential abilities to promote each other's recoveries in appropriate and effective ways should be widely recognised, encouraged and developed by professionals.
5. It is effective and efficient to invest resources into professional supports that promote stronger mother-child relationships. Programmes that build and strengthen mother-child relationships as part of domestic violence recovery, such as Cedar, should be receiving more sustainable funding and be made more widely available. This investment may produce a self-sustaining upward spiral of recovery, with wider long-term benefits.