

# After domestic abuse: children's perspectives on contact with fathers

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## Author

This briefing was written by Fiona Morrison, from her MSc project, and edited by Fran Wasoff and Jennifer Flueckiger.

# After domestic abuse: children's perspectives on contact with fathers

Contact between children and their fathers following parental separation is a sensitive and controversial subject. This is especially so where there has been a history of domestic abuse before parental separation. This briefing outlines the findings of a Master's thesis that aimed to gain children's perspectives on this issue.

## Key Points

- Children were acutely aware of the domestic abuse that had occurred and of the impact it had on their and their mother's relationships with their father, even when they had not been physically abused themselves
- Children reported a mix of feelings towards their father including anger and sadness about his violence and the loss of a father figure. The overwhelming emotion they reported was intense fear towards their father
- Fear dominated the children's considerations about contact with their fathers
- Those fears included fear of kidnapping or abduction, fear of further abuse by their fathers and fear of their fathers' anger. Children considered their and their mothers' safety to be the most important factors when making decisions about contact with fathers who had been abusive
- Children felt that 'forcing' them to have unwanted contact with their father would have a detrimental affect on them
- Children felt that they should make a significant contribution to decisions relating to contact with their fathers. They felt their opinions were important, as it was their lives about which decisions were being made

## Background

Domestic abuse is a controversial social issue that in recent decades has received significant attention. This has led to a greater awareness that children are often witness to and subject to domestic abuse and of the damaging consequences domestic abuse can have for children (Mullender et al 2002).

Child contact following parental separation and the outcomes it has for children is a related area for policy debate (Wasoff 2007). Research shows that while contact between children and their non-resident parents is generally beneficial to children, it does not result in positive outcomes in all cases.

Levels of parental conflict, the quality of the child's relationship with non-resident parent before separation, and the wellbeing of the resident parent are reported as key determinants of whether contact is positive for children.

Of most interest from these studies is the finding that children should want contact with a non-resident parent for outcomes to be positive (Hunt 2003, Hunt and Roberts 2004, Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 provide the legal framework for contact decisions.

The Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 has the potential to strengthen how courts make contact decisions where there is a history of domestic abuse. Section 24 of the Act ensures that when a court is considering the welfare of the child in relation to contact, they must consider the need to protect the child from any abuse or risk of abuse which might affect the child.

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 establishes the principle that a child's best interests must determine welfare decisions made about children. However, critics have argued that courts and social service professionals do not always fully consider the impact of domestic abuse on children and the continuing risk that contact may pose to children and their mothers (Mullender et al 2002, Kelly and Mullender 2000).

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 also requires that children are consulted about important decisions that affect them. However, there has been relatively little research evidence so far about children's perspectives of contact with their fathers where there has been domestic abuse, and how their views have been taken into account in reaching decisions about contact.

## The study

The main aim of the research was to get the views of children who have experienced domestic abuse about contact with their fathers following parental separation. In particular it aimed to:

- explore the feelings that children have towards their fathers
- understand the relationships that they have with their fathers
- explore their attitudes to and preferences for contact with fathers

This qualitative study involved 11 children aged between 8 and 14 years from Women's Aid refuge support services. All respondents had experienced domestic abuse in which their fathers were the perpetrators. All respondents had had contact with their fathers following parental separation, although not all were currently having contact with their fathers.

## Findings

The children provided frank and detailed accounts of their relationships with their fathers and how they felt about having contact with them. As with other research (eg Mullender et al 2002), children had an acute awareness about the domestic abuse that had taken place in their families. They had a sophisticated understanding about the dynamics of their own and their mothers' relationships with their fathers. In particular, they gave graphic accounts of violence to which they and their mothers had been subjected.

He was giving my mum the abuse by like pulling her hair and smacking her off doors and stuff. (girl, 12)

One time my dad had a knife out. I came down when he was taken to prison for the night. I came down and there was a dent in the floor where he flung the couch and there was a knife on the other couch. (boy, 10)

## Fear

Children reported a mix of conflicting and, at times, extreme feelings towards their fathers. They reporting feeling sad about their fathers' violence, missing them, feeling angry with them and being relieved that they no longer lived with them. The strongest emotion that children reported was fear. This dominated their feelings about their fathers and was expressed in a number of ways and for a number of reasons, including kidnap, further abuse and dealing with their father's anger.

### Kidnapping and abduction

Children were afraid their fathers would kidnap or abduct them. Contact was seen to provide fathers with an opportunity to 'steal children from their mum'. It is unclear whether this fear stems from threats made by the perpetrators or for other reasons. Regardless of its origin,

it was a significant fear that was shared by many of the children interviewed, as these two examples show.

Well I don't know cos sometimes it starts off like that [contact with a father] and then they'll hold them hostage and want custody of them. (boy, 12)

...feeling all nervous an' that. And saying that I don't want to see him. And the reason why he'd be saying that is cos his dad might not give him back to his mum. (girl, 11)

Unsurprisingly such fears affected the contact that children wanted to have with their fathers. They described the conditions that would be necessary for them to feel safe enough to have contact with their father.

... where there are CCTV cameras or guards. Something where someone could see what was happening, like going swimming there's a lifeguard to see what's happening. Something safe even if it was dangerous like parachute jumping or bungee jumping there would have to be someone there to watch us. Not just for the safety but because he might try and steal them. (boy, 9)

### Further abuse by their father

Contact with fathers was seen to be a means for their fathers to continue to be involved in their mother's lives and continue to abuse them. This finding is consistent with other studies where contact was found to provide the perpetrator the greatest opportunity for post-separation violence.

The children reported feeling anxious before contact with their fathers. They described being unable to sleep the night before contact and having 'a sore belly' or 'sore head'. All of the children reported concerns that a perpetrator of domestic abuse would use contact as an occasion for further abuse, either of their mothers or themselves.

### Their father's anger

Children worried that their parents' separation and the circumstances that led up to it would cause their fathers to be angry with them. Reasons for their fathers' anger included children reporting domestic abuse to social workers or because children lived with their mother, not with their father.

With these fears came a strong sense of their own responsibility for protecting their mothers, which caused them to feel anxious and guilty.

Cos I kind of don't actually look forward to the visits and stuff cos...I'm scared I'm going to slip up and say something that I amn't meant to say. (girl, 13)

Some described occasions where they had previously intervened to stop their fathers from assaulting their mothers or where they sought help to prevent abuse.

... I could have got him off her cos I've done it before when I jumped off behind and got him at the sides.

(boy, 9)

This kind of experience had repercussions for the relationships that children wanted to have with their fathers.

## Losing a father

Along with children's feelings of fear towards their fathers, they all expressed some sadness and loss about their fathers. Even if they were happier not to be living with their father and in some cases no longer having any contact with him, they still expressed a sense of loss. Regardless of his behaviour, most felt (to some degree) a bond with him.

There's practically nothing good about him except from he's my dad. (boy, 9)

These feelings of loss seemed to be concerned with an ideal conception of what a father 'should' or 'could' be like, rather than their own lived experience of their fathers. They described occasions where their fathers had failed to attend contact visits and occasions where they did not keep promises.

[I feel] quite sad cos we can only get to see him once a week and he doesn't turn up, cos he doesn't like doing it with social workers. (girl, 12)

I feel happy cos I don't see my dad again. He phoned at Christmas and Easter and said he'd get a lawyer and get us, but he never turned up. (girl, 11)

For some respondents the loss of their father was made worse by the stigma about not having a father from peers.

## Having contact with a violent parent

Overall the children interviewed were ambivalent about having contact with their fathers. One respondent expressed a desire to have contact, six reported they were unsure and four reported that they did not want to have any contact with their father.

Children described what they thought was important when thinking about contact with a violent parent following parental separation.

### Safety is paramount

Safety was identified as the paramount consideration when deciding if a child should have contact. They said that if a child was afraid of a parent or if one parent was afraid of the other parent, then contact was not positive.

Children did not rule out contact entirely. Some thought that if their fathers had 'changed', and had stopped being abusive, then contact was something that could be considered.

However they were not convinced that their fathers would stop being abusive. Some worried that their fathers would

form new relationships and begin to abuse their new partners. Others did not understand why their father chose to be violent so were unsure what would cause him to stop. Children were clear about what they thought motivated their fathers' violent behaviour, as in these examples.

Because if somebody's violent they can always go and get help, like anger management an' that to get stopped .... But sometimes it's their will power and they don't want to stop. (girl, 13)

And there's no point in him trying to be something he's not, cos he's just this aggressive beast thing... Cos they'll say I'm going to change, people say that all the time and it doesn't work....If you've always been violent you can't just stop, cos that makes you feel good cos it makes you feel big and strong. (girl, 12)

Some children spoke about how their father had previously promised to change however after a period of time or once he had 'got what he wanted', he reverted back to being abusive.

People can just say and try and buy you, they can say I've changed but they are lying an' they just want you to go back so they can do it again. An' they know they'll keep on going back. (boy, 13)

Yeah they lie to stop people going to court to get them charged an' that. (boy, 10)

## Making decisions about contact

Children felt that they should make a significant contribution to decisions relating to contact with their fathers. They felt their opinions were important, as it was their lives about which decisions were being made.

One respondent was particularly frustrated that their opinion was not considered because of their age. Another child felt that their contribution to decision making could make them safer.

Respondents felt that 'forcing' a child or young person to have contact with their father when they did not want to would have a detrimental affect on them.

## Policy implications

- It is essential that children's voices are taken into consideration when issues of contact are being considered
- The Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 ensures that courts consider whether contact is in a child's best interest where there has been a history of domestic abuse. Monitoring will be necessary to determine how well professionals implement this Act, how well the courts understand the impact that unsafe contact arrangements can have and how well legal and social services professionals listen to children's views about contact