



The Impact of Post-Separation Abuse on Children

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It is often assumed that domestic abuse stops after a couple separate. In fact it may continue or intensify. Leaving an abusive partner is often the most dangerous time for victims and their children, with many domestic homicides occurring during or shortly after separation (Department of Justice, 2024). Despite the relationship ending, abusers can continue to exert control, often using children to harm and manipulate their ex-partners (Beeble et al., 2007). This is particularly pertinent when negotiating contact/residency arrangements through the Family Courts. The belief that both parents' involvement is in the child's best interest, known as the pro-contact approach, is a key driver in decision making in the Family Court system. Unfortunately, this premise often enables the abusive parent to manipulate the system, maintaining control over the other parent and child.

Such manipulation can include making false claims about the other parent's behaviour and undermining the victim's credibility which, in some cases, can lead to children being placed with the abusive parent (Birchall and Choudhry, 2022). Children caught in these situations may face significant psychological and emotional challenges, with research showing that both witnessing and directly experiencing abuse can severely impact a child's mental health and behaviour (McLaughlin et al., 2012). However, the extent of this impact is often underestimated, with current literature only beginning to recognise the direct victimisation of children in these cases.

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings (DACP) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 represented a landmark reform in Northern Ireland's approach to domestic abuse. For the first time, it explicitly recognised the significant harm caused to children who witness, or are otherwise exposed to, abuse within the home. While this does not yet constitute formal recognition of children as direct victims of domestic abuse when the violence is between adults, Section 8 of the Act (the Child Aggravator Clause) marked an important shift. It required courts to consider the presence of and impact on a child when determining the seriousness of an offence, acknowledging that exposure to abuse can have lasting psychological and developmental consequences.

In England and Wales, officers from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) are responsible for representing children's interests and determining their wishes and feelings during contact and residence proceedings. While Northern Ireland does not yet have an equivalent dedicated service, similar responsibilities are carried out by Children's Court Officers, who perform a comparable role within the Family Court system. In addition, ongoing work commissioned by the Commissioner for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland is exploring children's experiences within Family Courts, particularly regarding how their voices are heard and represented by court officers and guardians.

This Policy Brief examines the effects of post-separation abuse on children, using the example of interviews undertaken between 2020 and 2023, with 17 service users of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland. Full details of the research are available elsewhere – see Millar et al. (2025). All participants had experienced domestic abuse in their previous relationship and had undergone child contact/residence proceedings within the Family Court. Six key themes emerged from these interviews.

Enduring sense of loss

A central theme across all interviews was the pervasive sense of loss. Such losses included the absence of a supportive father figure, weakened bonds between children and their mothers, and the breakdown of sibling and extended family relationships. Many children yearned for a reliable and nurturing father but were consistently let down by his absence or erratic behaviour, leading to feelings of abandonment, confusion, and anger. This strain often extended to the mother-child relationship, with children believing their fathers' manipulative claims and blaming their mothers for the lack of contact. Mothers expressed concern over what fathers were “putting in the child's head” and how they may be “directing them how to behave”, reflecting the very real fear of losing control over their children's upbringing due to fathers' ongoing efforts to undermine maternal authority. The use of “parental alienation” claims in court further strained mother-child relationships and sometimes led to mothers losing custody of their child.

Preferential parenting

Several participants reported that their ex-partners engaged in preferential parenting, favouring one child over another and often excluding the “less vulnerable” child from contact entirely. This favouritism created tension and confusion among siblings, as children struggled to understand why their father showed interest in some but not others. Mothers believed this

behaviour was a way for fathers to further hurt and exert control post-separation, causing additional stress for the mothers and children.

Neglect

After fighting for contact, fathers were often reported as unable or unwilling to adequately care for their children during court-ordered visits. Basic needs, such as providing adequate food, sleep or hygiene, were sometimes neglected. Some mothers believed this neglect was deliberate, aimed at causing distress to both the children and them. Fathers were also reported to neglect administering necessary medications, placing the children's health at risk. In some cases, fathers provided underage children with alcohol, drugs and/or cigarettes. This behaviour reflected a broader pattern of using children to maintain control, cause stress and continue abuse.

Psychoemotional impacts

Ongoing contact with abusive fathers often caused significant psychological and emotional harm to children, manifesting in anxiety, nightmares, bedwetting, and even suicidal ideation. Mothers also experienced emotional suffering, feeling helpless and retraumatised by their children's pain. The pro-contact approach, which often enforces interactions with abusive parents, only worsened these issues, particularly when fathers manipulated their children. Unpredictable and sporadic contact heightened distress, leading to confusion, insecurity, and emotional instability. Mothers were deeply concerned about potential long-term psychological challenges, such as emotional “dissociation”, where children would appear numb or emotionless before and after visits with their fathers. This emotional disconnection often carried into adulthood, with some mothers reporting their now-adult children were emotionally unavailable and normalised abusive behaviour in their own intimate relationships.

And so, it continues...

Participants described how children exposed to abuse often copied their fathers' abusive behaviours, including verbal aggression and physical violence. These learned behaviours sometimes escalated into direct aggression toward their mothers. Instances of "dysregulation" and aggressive outbursts were also common, especially during court-mandated contact handovers, with children "shouting and throwing things" before visits.

When contact is not in the child's best interests

Participants shared that their children were often manipulated and abused by their fathers during custody periods. Fathers were reported to mislead children about the reasons for the separation, blaming the mother or the child for the breakup and threatening abandonment if they misbehaved. This manipulation created fear and guilt, further preventing the children from disclosing abuse. Children living with their fathers, especially those court-ordered as resident parents, also endured severe abuse and intimidation, including physical violence and neglect by the fathers and their new partners. A common sentiment expressed by all participants was that "[the courts] actually need to put children first" and understand that abusive ex-partners are not automatically "good fathers".

Discussion

This Policy Brief highlights the impact of post-separation abuse and unravels the many ways in which children are victims of it. Mothers reported that their children continued to experience post-separation abuse, including neglect, physical violence, and/or coercive control, leading to heightened psychological and emotional distress. This ongoing abuse contributed to a profound sense of loss for the children: loss of childhood, their identity as a child, 'normal' sibling relations and family life. Continued exposure to abuse, even

post-separation, contributed to severe mental health issues in children, including depression and suicidal thoughts. These experiences left lasting emotional and psychological scars, with mothers of now-adult children reporting a lasting effect on their interpersonal relationships and overall wellbeing.

Children exposed to ongoing abuse often became targets of manipulation and coercive control, and their behaviours, including aggression towards siblings and parents, reflected this abusive environment. The abuse had a ripple effect, having negative impacts on sibling and other relationships, with increased aggression and emotional difficulties observed.

Participants felt that reports of abuse were often minimised or overlooked by judicial and social care officials, in favour of maintaining the pro-contact approach. This Policy Brief supports previous research indicating that pre-separation abuse frequently leads to continued post-separation abuse and that the courts' pro-contact approach can intensify the suffering of mothers and children (Mullender et al., 2002). Legal institutions were criticised for failing to recognise unsafe situations during child contact arrangements, often seemingly disregarding the children's opinions and exacerbating the trauma (Thiara and Humphreys, 2017).

This Policy Brief emphasises a gap in understanding the full effects of post-separation abuse on sibling dynamics and suggests that children in such situations often experience significant upheaval, forced relocations and disrupted peer relationships. Overall, this underscores a systemic failure to protect children from ongoing abuse by seemingly prioritising contact arrangements with abusive parents. It further highlights the urgent need for a more child-centred approach in legal decisions and greater awareness of the long-term impacts of domestic abuse on children.

Recommendations

- The Family Courts must implement comprehensive assessments of post-separation abuse and its impact on children before determining custody and visitation arrangements.
- Mandatory training for legal professionals (including Court Children's Officers) to recognise the signs of post-separation abuse and coercive control, and their effects on children.
- A specialised therapeutic service to provide support for children who have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse.
- Improved communication and coordination between social services, the courts, and mental health professionals.
- Protocols that ensure children are given a voice in residency and contact decisions.
- Stricter guidelines for visitation and contact arrangements when there is a history of abuse.
- Consistent monitoring and evaluation of training, protocols and their implementation with the goal of safeguarding children.

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