



Cafcass Cymru

Impact On Children Of Experiencing Domestic Abuse



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Contents

The Child's Experience	1
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and resilience: risk and protective factors for mental illness throughout life.	3
Assessing Impact	6
Direct Work With Children	9
In My Shoes: Young People's Experience of Domestic Abuse	10
Impact on Parenting Capacity	11
Resilience.....	12
Helpful Resources	13
References.....	14

Impact on Children of Experiencing Domestic Abuse

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The Child's Experience

At the heart of every court report concerning issues of child contact should be the child's experience. Understanding the complexity of cases involving domestic abuse helps practitioners focus on the impact it can have on children, who should be considered equally as the victim. When living with domestic abuse and the trauma it can cause, children will be affected in different ways.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 refers to the impairment suffered by children who are exposed to or witness domestic abuse when defining significant harm, but research from Callaghan (2015) indicates that children experience domestic abuse not just as witnesses but as victims. Domestic abuse creates a distressing, stressful and harmful environment, and the long-term consequences of this trauma can stretch into adulthood.

General Principle re Domestic Abuse in Practice Direction 12J: Child Contact Arrangements and Contact Orders: Domestic Abuse (Ministry of Justice, 2017)

Domestic abuse is harmful to children, and / or puts children at risk of harm, whether they are subjected to domestic abuse, or witness one of their parents being violent or abusive to the other parent, or live in a home in which domestic abuse is perpetrated (even if the child is too young to be conscious of the behaviour). Children may suffer direct physical, psychological and / or emotional harm from living with domestic abuse and may also suffer harm indirectly where the domestic abuse impairs the parenting capacity of either or both of their parents.

Children's responses to living with domestic abuse may vary according to age and stage of development.

- The ways in which children are affected may differ. For example, babies living with domestic violence appear to be subject to higher levels of ill health, poorer sleeping habits and excessive crying, along with disrupted attachment patterns.
- Children of pre-school age tend to be the age group who show most behavioural disturbance such as bed wetting, sleep disturbances and eating difficulties and are particularly vulnerable to blaming themselves for the adult violence.
- Older children are more likely to show the effects of the disruption in their lives through under performance at school, poorly developed social networks, self-harm, running away and engagement in anti-social behaviour.

(Humphreys and Houghton, 2008)

It is important to note that children within sibling groups may react and respond differently; in addition the individual child's uniqueness should be considered along with the individual needs of any children within a sibling group.

Research has started to focus on the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children’s brain development. There is emerging evidence that young children who have experienced domestic abuse score lower on cognitive measures even when allowing for mother’s IQ, the child’s weight at birth, birth complications, the quality of intellectual stimulation at home and gender.

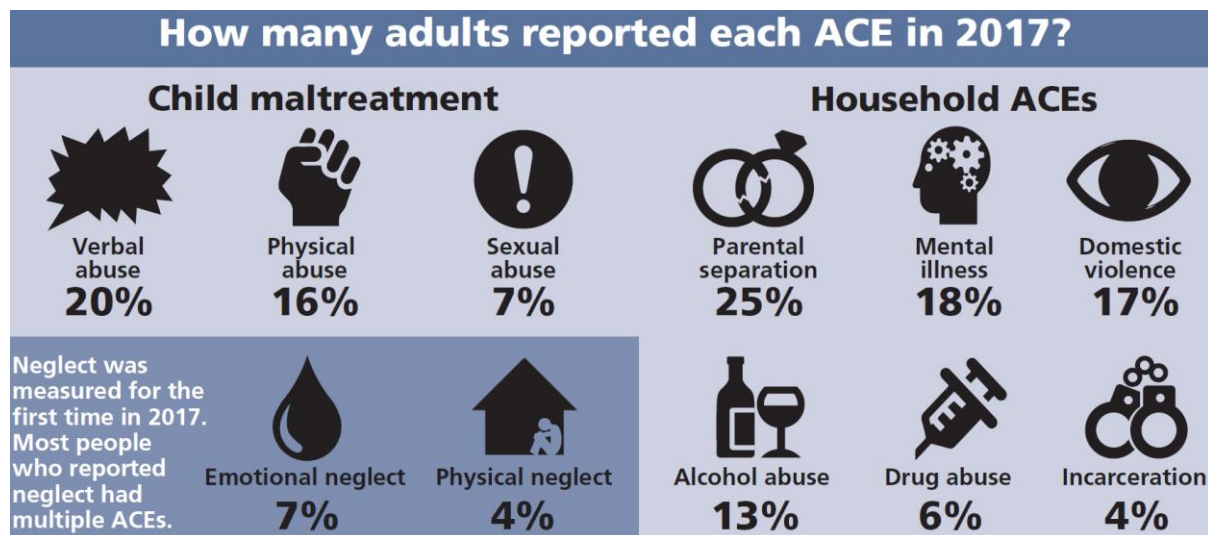
Exposure to domestic abuse particularly in the first two years of life appears to be especially harmful. (*Enlow et al, 2012*)
 Whilst children are pre-programmed to respond to stressful situations, such as hunger, meeting new people or dealing with new experiences, it is clear that some stressors are more harmful than others. The strong and prolonged activation of the individual child’s stress management system results in toxic stress.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and resilience: risk and protective factors for mental illness throughout life.

Taken from [Welsh Adverse Childhood Experience \(ACE\) and Resilience Study](#)

Resilience is the ability to overcome serious hardship. Factors that support resilience include personal skills, positive relationships, community support and cultural connections.

The Welsh ACE and Resilience Survey asked approximately 2500 adults (aged 18 – 69) about a range of such resilience resources as children and adults, their exposure to 11 ACEs and their physical and mental health.

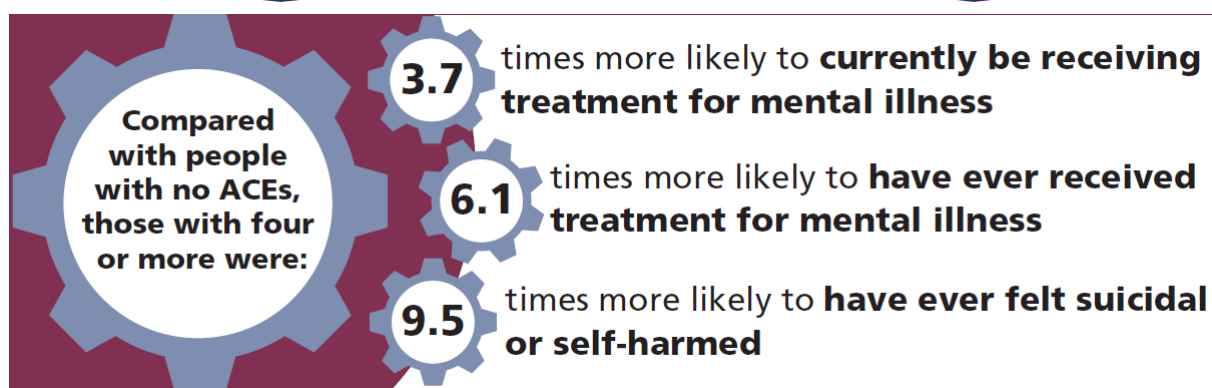


**For every 100 adults in Wales,
50 had at least one ACE and 14 had four or more**



**1 in 3 adults reported having ever
been treated for a mental illness**

**ACEs substantially increased
risks of mental illness**



In situations where a child's stress levels are high, such as in situations of domestic abuse, persistent elevations of stress hormones and altered levels of key brain chemicals produce an internal physiological state that disrupts the structure of the developing brain and can lead to difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. As a result, children who experience toxic stress in early childhood may develop a lifetime of greater susceptibility to stress-related physical illnesses (such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes) as well as mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse) (*National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007*). They also are more likely to exhibit health damaging behaviours, such as smoking and adult lifestyles, such as drug taking, that undermine well-being and subsequently lead to earlier death (*Brown et al 2009*).

Key Point:

Children living with domestic abuse do not become 'used to it' or feel the impact less acutely. It is the duration of the exposure to abuse that can cause the most harm. (*English 2003 in Stanley 2011*)

**Gender
Note:**

Witnessing parental violence in the pre-school years predicted externalising problems in boys at age 16; for girls it predicted internalising problems at age 16. Experiencing domestic abuse in early childhood leaves a legacy that appears during adolescent years, especially in boys.

In predicting behaviour problems, in contrast, it was found that the strongest predictor was a climate of violence, chaos and disruption in the home, perhaps especially in the early years.
(Stroufe et al 2005)



Assessing Impact

It is important to understand how the child has perceived and internalised their experiences and not to attribute harm only to the nature of the abuse. For example, situational couple or separation instigated abuse may have occurred with minimum frequency but caused significant trauma. Although the most pervasive and long lasting effects of domestic abuse are likely to be as living with coercive control, there may also be significant impact from witnessing an incident or several frightening incidents over time.

Children's Experiences of Coercive Control

Children are impacted by the controlling circumstances in which they find themselves. The psychological abuse and the sense of constant fear that is associated with coercive control is a regular feature of their lives and they creatively and consciously take steps to manage their experiences and utilise strategies that work for them to minimise damage. It is important to note that coercive and controlling behaviour can continue and also manifest itself post separation. It needs to be acknowledged that the family court can, at times, be used by perpetrators as an extension of coercive and controlling behaviour. The Duluth Model 'Post-Separation' wheel¹, shows ways in which coercive and controlling behaviour can be used post-separation.

Practice Point²

Child contact can often be used as a means to further control the adult victim, so it is essential that professionals understand the intent of perpetrators throughout the process. Thiara and Gill (2012) highlight how the initiation of contact proceedings can be used to continue to control the family. In one example from Callaghan et al (2015) the perpetrator would continuously move contact dates to coincide with days when the children were due to visit extended family members. For example, the perpetrator would pick Sundays for contact, as that was the day the children were due to see their maternal grandmother. The daughter described the perpetrator's intent as being to disrupt contact with her wider family and inconvenience the non-abusive parent. She described the frequent formal and informal changes to contact as the perpetrator 'messing my mum about'. Her non-abusive parent 'didn't have a choice' because the perpetrator would go back to court if she disagreed. This type of behaviour prevents children's ability to maintain other important relationships also. Coy et al (2012) argue that courts should determine the intent of the parent seeking contact and consider whether it is to continue a pattern of coercive control.

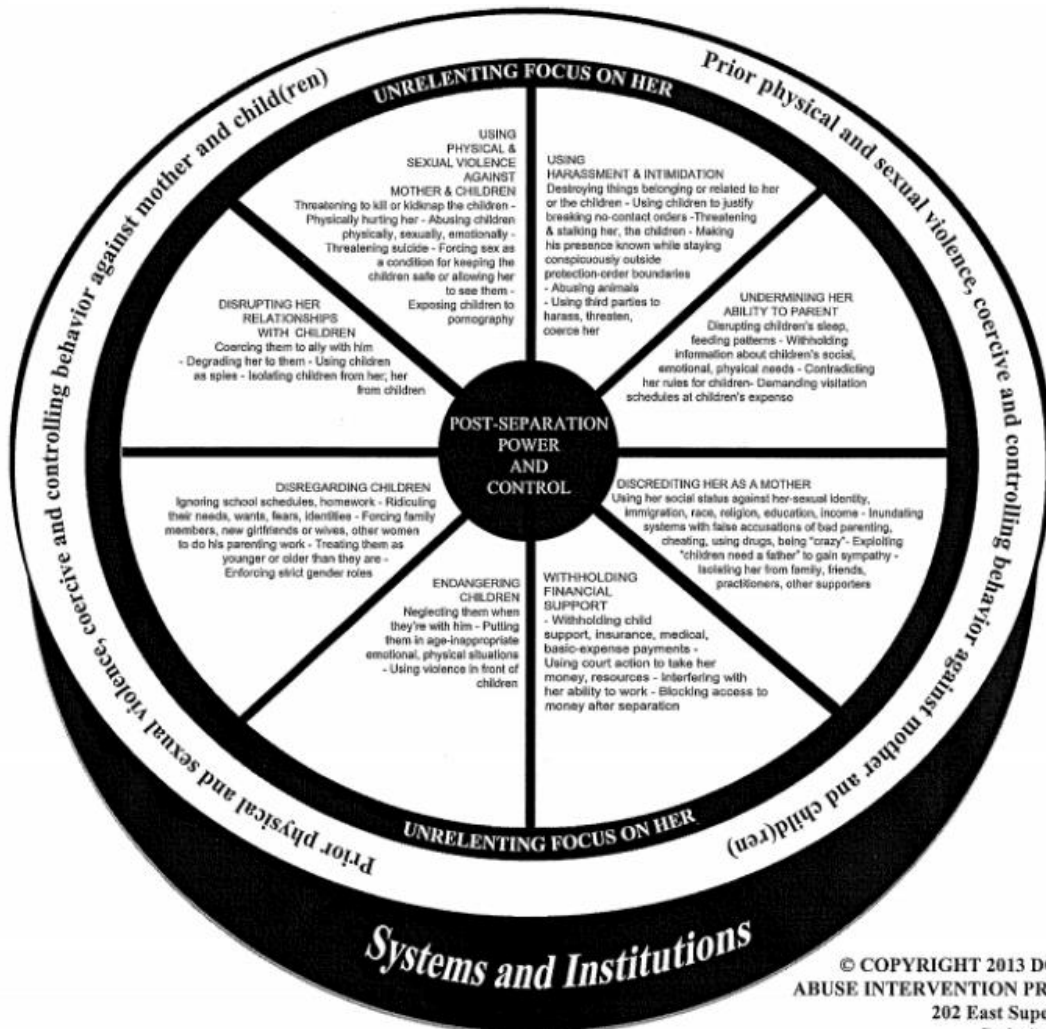
¹ <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Using-Children-Wheel.pdf>

² McLeod, D (2018), Coercive control: Impacts on children and young people in the family environment, Research in Practice SafeLives commissioned literature review pp.35

Post Separation Power and Control Wheel

The Duluth Model: Post Separation Power and Control Wheel:

<https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Using-Children-Wheel.pdf>



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Far from passive witnesses, they are not 'exposed' to violence and abuse, rather, they live with it and experience it directly just as adults do. In addition, they respond to violence and coercive control as creative agents, able to adapt and change to meet their adverse experiences and manage them. Children who have experienced coercive control are likely to experience similar impacts as adult victims, they are likely to suffer from limited opportunities to choose, to feel free and to develop a sense of independence and competence (Katz, 2016). There is key evidence in addition to that outlined by Katz (ibid) that controlling behaviour has the effect of cutting children off from the external resources which could help them build resilience.

Callaghan et al (2015) presented the effects described by the children they interviewed which included constrained use of space within the home and constrained self-expression. Children constraining their own behaviour defined children's experience of coercive control,

learning to manage what they said and done 'to prevent themselves from being too visible, too loud, too noticeable' in order to protect themselves from the perpetrator.

Constraining their behaviour is a clear coping strategy employed by many children as a way of creating safety. It is therefore important that this hyper vigilance is noted as a clear impact of coercive control at home and professionals consider how this increased vigilance and constraint may affect a child's wellbeing.

Practice Note: taken from D McLeod *Coercive Control: Impacts On Children And Young People In The Family Environment*³

A common feature in terms of children's experience of coercive control within the family is their experience of being used as a pawn by the perpetrator. As Bancroft and Silverman (2002) explained in their study, even seemingly positive behaviour from the perpetrator may in fact arise from the perpetrator's view of the child as a 'trophy' or instrument in the control of the victim. It is therefore understandable within this context that children will be used as pawns. Callaghan et al (2015) found examples of abusive partners trying to involve children in hurting the adult victim, either emotionally or physically, or encouraging children to act as an informant about the non-abusive parent. Thiara and Gill (2012) also report examples of perpetrators encouraging children to hit their mother.

One child, who was encouraged to lie about an argument to undermine the non-abusive parent, discussed how this changed his view of the perpetrator from being a 'nice guy' to a 'really bad person' (Callaghan et al, 2015). This shows how aware children are of being used as a pawn to further control their non-abusive parent. In a separate example, one boy discussed how the perpetrator would use information and knowledge he provided to control the victim. This included information about who the victim had spoken to or where she had been.



³ McLeod, D (2018), *Coercive control: Impacts on children and young people in the family environment*, Research in Practice SafeLives commissioned literature review pp.27

Direct Work With Children

The effects of living with domestic abuse are often more complex than the issues practitioners are able to observe on the surface or children are able to express. When interviewing a child about their experiences it is important to support and encourage them through their responses rather than leading them. Technology such as smartphone or tablet apps can be useful to help build a rapport with the child, while worksheets and colouring can be used with children of all ages to help them relax.

Asking questions can only reveal so much, but the right questions can make children feel comfortable talking about their experiences and allow the practitioner to understand their point of view. The questions might include:

- Who is in your family?
- Who are you least close to?
- Who makes you feel safe in your family?
- Are there some things which happen in your family which are scary?
- What do you do when scary things happen?
- What do you think needs to change to make things better at home?
- How do you think you can change things?
- What can other people do to change things?

Direct quotes from the child in answer to your questions can be powerful when writing a report and making a recommendation to the court. Practitioners should also consider how the child should be supported once the interview is finished.

I'd always hesitate of what I would say...even if I said "Hello", I'd always think before like, is he just going to shut me out? Is he going to respond in a nice way, or be angry or anything like that? I'd always think ahead of what I was saying.

Child's quote (Callaghan et al. 2015)

[Top Tips for working with children and young people affected by domestic abuse \(https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/10917/\)](https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/download/10917/)



In My Shoes: Young People's Experience of Domestic Abuse

The following quotes are children's experiences of domestic abuse. We would like to extend our thanks to Welsh Women's Aid for sharing these with us.

"I felt angry and frustrated, upset, annoyed and every time I used to come home. I used to just stay in my room and whenever mum shouted at me I used to hurt her a lot."

(Survivor, 11)

"[Before attending group] I was a lot more upset and worried about my mental health and my wellbeing, [now] I'm not as worried how bad my problems are."

(Survivor, 12)

"[Relationships have] got better – everything because now I feel that people listen about what's happened with Daddy."

(Survivor, 10)

"[My relationship with mum] is a lot better, because they [Social Services] listened and helped us."

(Survivor, 11)

The following quotes from children have been taken from Dr Emma Katz's *Surviving Together: Domestic Violence and Mother-Child Relationships (2015)*⁴.

'When Mum was giving me attention he'd tell her to go over to him so she'd have to leave me to play by myself.'

(Shannon, aged 10)

John (aged 20): '...He'd take out the power because in the hall we've got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that's it - you've got no power...'

'Well, some days he would be out, and me and Mum would watch a movie and have some time together [which he wouldn't let us do when he was at home]. I used to help cook tea with my mum because I enjoy cooking so we'd, like, help each other.'

(Katie, aged 12)

'When he had a tantrum and went off to the pub then I'd just comfort Mum and hug her and she'd hug me as well.'

(Shannon, aged 10)

'When we were locked in the house and Mum was upset I would hug her and tell her it was going to be okay.'

(Roxie, aged 11)

⁴ <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/28456/1/FINAL%20Katz%20Thesis%2010.02.2015.pdf>

Impact on Parenting Capacity

Perpetrators can undermine victims' parenting ability, making them feel like they are not a good enough parent. Lapeirre (2010) states 'men's attacks on mothering and mother-child relationships are central to their exercise of control and domination'. This behaviour is central to coercive control and is an indicator of risk and abuse, specifically if there is evidence that the child is hostile toward the victimised parent (usually the mother). Radford and Hester (2006) explain that women experiencing domestic abuse can lose confidence in their parenting ability and capacity, leaving them feeling as though they have little left to give as a parent.

Children can be directly involved in coercive and controlling activities i.e. undermining the non-abusive parent's role as a parent. These include isolation, blackmailing, monitoring activities, stalking and can be used in other ways by abusers to minimise, legitimise and justify violent behaviour.

(Johnson 2009, Stark 2007)

Radford et al (2011) add that perpetrators often attempt to damage children's respect for their parent (usually mother), prevent the parent (usually mothers) from being able to provide consistent routines for their children and attempt to turn the children against her. Constraining the amount of parenting time is also a common tactic which prevents attachments and limits natural engagement.

Victims will often try to act as the protective parent by attempting to limit the damage to the children. This is normally in two ways:

1. Protection as an act to stop physical violence being perpetrated on their children by their partner.
2. Protection as a constant process they engage in to create an environment that is free of violence and provided some form of stability or normality for their children, often placating the perpetrator to prevent an attack.



Resilience

Every analysis of a child's unique situation and set of circumstances, should include the inclusion of the resilience potential for that individual child. It is important to balance harm with protective factors and offset strengths against the adversity experienced. Katz (2016)⁵ explained that children can find ways to maintain as normal a life as possible, this includes finding strategies to keep and protect the 'mother-child' relationship.

Discussions of resilience are typically framed with reference to risk, vulnerability and protective factors. It is the complex interplay of these factors over time that determines children's outcomes.

Devaney (2015) differentiates between two models of 'coping' that children use within the context of domestic abuse:

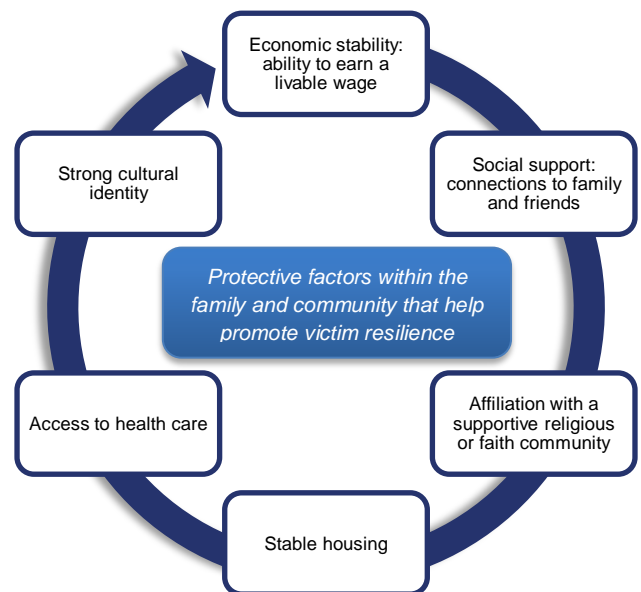
› <i>Emotional-focused coping</i>	› <i>Problem-focused coping</i>
Managing and reducing stress, such as a child withdrawing from violent episodes and distracting themselves by listening to music or playing with toys.	Changing the problematic situation – for example, by attempting to intervene physically, by distracting the violent parent or summoning help.

Masten et al (1990) identified three types of resilience in children:

1. Children who do not succumb to adversities, despite their high-risk status, for example babies of low birth weight.
2. Children who develop coping strategies in situations of chronic stress, for example the children of drug-using or alcoholic parents.
3. Children who have suffered extreme trauma, for example through disasters, sudden loss of a close relative, or abuse and who have recovered and prospered.

Resilient children, therefore, are those who resist adversity, manage to cope with uncertainty and are able to recover successfully from trauma.

Exposure to domestic abuse can have lasting effects on children and adolescents. Not all young people are affected in the same way; some children are resilient, able to heal and go on to thrive. Various risk and protective factors within the child, family and community can impact the ways in which children and young people process and understand the exposure to abuse. (Edelson 2004)



⁵ Katz E (2016) 'Beyond the physical incident model: How children living with domestic violence are harmed by and resist regimes of coercive control'. *Child Abuse Review* 25 (1) 46-59.

Helpful Resources

Title	Source	Link
Impact Of Domestic Abuse On Children By Developmental Level (pdf)	CAADA Family Intervention Projects' (FIPS') Training Programme ©CAADA 2009	https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/documents/crime-prevention-and-emergencies/domestic-abuse/resources/child-safety-resources/impact-of-domestic-abuse-on-children-by-developmental-level.pdf
Cedar Network (Children Experience Domestic Abuse Recovery)	-	www.cedarnetwork.org.uk
Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children (pdf)	Unicef	https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf
UK says no more: Effects of domestic abuse on children	-	https://uksaysnomore.org/effects-of-domestic-abuse-on-children/
Welsh Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and Resilience Study: Sources of resilience and their moderating relationships with harms from adverse childhood experiences (Report 1 Mental Illness)	Public Health Wales	https://documents.hf.wales.gov.uk/id:A24670954/document/versions/published
Coercive control: Impacts on children and young people in the family environment	Research In Practice	https://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/research-reviews-and-summaries/coercive-control-impacts-on-children-and-young-people-in-the-family-environment-literature-review-2018/

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