

## A ChildLine Information Sheet

# Domestic violence

*“My parents argue a lot. Last night I came home, Dad was hitting Mum. It’s really upset me. When I tried to help, Dad told me to go away.” Amy, 12*

### What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is aggression or violence that happens in the home when a grown-up attacks or threatens another adult in the family. In most cases, the violence is carried out by a man against a woman, although not always.

Domestic violence can happen in any family and in all kinds of homes. In half of the cases of violence between adults, children get hurt too. Even when children do not see the violence happening, they often hear it. Children are often in the same or next room when the violence is going on. This can be extremely distressing and disturbing for them.

Domestic violence can mean lots of different things. These include:

- **physical abuse** – hurting someone by hitting, pushing or kicking
- **sexual abuse** – forcing or encouraging someone to take part in sexual behaviour in any way that makes them uncomfortable (see ChildLine’s fact sheet on Child Abuse)
- **emotional abuse** – saying things on purpose to frighten the other person or putting them down to make them feel bad. For example, constantly saying that someone is stupid or ugly
- **controlling behaviour** – preventing someone by force from acting freely. This can include keeping them from seeing relatives and friends, not letting them have a job or not letting them spend money

### The facts of domestic violence

Grown-ups and children should feel safe and secure in their homes. When domestic violence happens, home becomes a

frightening, unsafe place to live. Domestic violence is wrong and families do not have to put up with it.

- More than half a million incidents (635,000) of domestic violence are reported in England and Wales each year. Most victims are women, but domestic violence can happen to men too.
- In nine out of ten cases, children are in the same or next room when the violence is going on.
- In five out of ten cases when there is violence between adults, children get hurt too.
- One in four women experience domestic violence some time in their lives. Between six per cent and ten per cent of women experience domestic violence in any one year.
- Almost 2,000 children a year contact ChildLine due to problems of domestic violence.

### Domestic violence – how it affects children and young people:

#### 1. PHYSICAL ABUSE

*“Dad hits me and Mum most days. He’s always hit us. He doesn’t work and drinks all day. I want it to stop. I’m so unhappy. Dad says he will kill us if we leave.” Gerry, 12*

Above all, children living in a home where there is domestic violence are at risk of being hurt themselves. This may be because the violent person in the family hurts them on purpose. Sometimes though, children and young people get injured by accident when they try to help the person being attacked.

# Domestic violence

## 2. EMOTIONAL ABUSE

*"Me and my sister are scared. Our parents fight a lot and we fear they might split up. They fight when we're upstairs. They don't think we know what's going on, but we do." Mandy, 9*

Children and young people can be deeply upset and disturbed by domestic violence in their family, even if they are not physically hurt themselves. They may hear the fighting downstairs or even be in the same room when it is happening.

If other members of the family pretend nothing is wrong, it can make children feel worse about what is going on.

Domestic violence can also force children and young people to take sides and choose between their parents, even though they don't want to. Mum and dad are the two people children love most in the world. Seeing one hurt the other is extremely upsetting.

## 3. NEGLECT

*"Mum's always miserable. She never asks me how I am. She just sits in front of the telly all day. I could be dead for all she cares." Wayne, 13*

Many mothers continue to provide love and support when they are suffering domestic violence. But when a woman is beaten or constantly criticised, it can be difficult for her to be happy and for her to look after herself and her children. As a result, children living in homes where there is domestic violence can feel neglected and left to look after themselves. They can feel that no one takes an interest in them and that no one cares.

They may have to do household chores for themselves like cooking, washing clothes, and food shopping.

## 4. FEAR AND LOSS OF CONFIDENCE

*"I'm churned up inside. I'm so confused. When I tried to talk to my mum about being hurt, she told me not to be stupid and denied that anything was wrong. I want to leave home, but don't want to leave Mum alone. I'm drinking a lot." John, 18*

Children and young people react in different ways to being brought up in a

home with a violent partner. Most children are disturbed and upset by domestic violence. Some become angry and blame one or other of the adults involved. Others copy the violence and bully or hurt others.

Often, children and young people lose confidence. They feel guilty, ashamed, afraid, angry or embarrassed about what's happening in their home. They often try to cover up and do not tell people what's happening. It is the family "secret".

Domestic violence can make life very confusing for young people. They may feel that they have to look after the parent who is being hurt, even if it means putting themselves in danger. Also children and young people may feel so stressed that they can't concentrate on their school work or sleep well at night.

When there is domestic violence in the home, small children and babies may not understand what is going on, but they often display signs that they are unhappy and feeling insecure. They may be more demanding and get upset over little things. They may need more attention and cuddles. Children that don't wet the bed may start doing so, which can make them feel embarrassed or stupid.

### Is it my fault?

*"Dad sometimes hits Mum when he's angry. I think it might be my fault because I can never get things right with my dad." Natalie, 14*

If there is domestic violence in your home, you must always remember that it is **not** your fault. It is only the fault of the person who is violent. Do not feel ashamed or think you could have stopped the violence or nasty behaviour if you had behaved differently. The chances are that the person being violent would have done what they did anyway. Do not blame yourself.

### How can I stop the violence?

The only person who can stop the violence is the person who is doing it. If there is violence at home though, you can get help. There are things you can do to keep yourself, your brothers and sisters and your mum safe.

# Domestic violence

Here are some suggestions:

- keep yourself safe. Find a safe place – like a bedroom – where you can hide until the violence is over
- only help your mother (or whoever is being hurt) if it means you will not place yourself at risk
- talk to someone you like and trust, such as a teacher, a friend or your social worker (if you have one) about what's happening at home. They will listen to your problems and you can talk about what to do next. At ChildLine we know that friends can give a lot of help and support if you are worried about something
- call the police on **999 (Minicom 0800 112 999)**
- try to get your mum to seek help. Show her the phone numbers at the end of this information sheet
- call ChildLine on **0800 1111** or one of the helplines on this information sheet. Children living with domestic violence often tell ChildLine that they feel alone and that no one listens to them. Talking to a counsellor at ChildLine who listens and takes your problems seriously can help you feel less lonely. It can also give you the confidence to seek help if you want. At ChildLine, children talk at their own pace. We never force you to tell us anything. ChildLine is the free and confidential counselling service for any child or young person with any problem and is available 24 hours a day, every day

## What is a refuge?

*"Mum and I are in a refuge because Dad hits Mum. He hit her so bad she had to go to hospital. I now go to a new school. I can't keep in touch with old friends in case they tell Dad where I am." Terry, 9*

Refuges are houses in normal streets like other homes, but their addresses are only known by the people who live in them.

Women and children can go and live in one of these safe houses – or refuges – to get away from violence. Women and their children can stay at a refuge for any length of time – from one night to a year – until they can return home safely or move somewhere new.

Leaving home can give families a chance to have a new life without the violence. But it can bring some changes that are unsettling. Children and young people may be concerned that they won't be able to keep in touch with family members or old friends, or that they will have to go to a different school.

Groups like Women's Aid and Refuge (see back page) can tell you or your mum about refuges in your area.

Sometimes the police can force the violent person to leave the family home, so that the rest of the family can stay there. Some families get support from social services if they are having problems.

## I want the violence to stop, but I don't want Mum and Dad to split up. What can I do?

All children are troubled by domestic violence, but they may still love the person who is being violent. They worry that if they tell someone what is happening or seek help, then their parents will split up.

Some children and young people get very frustrated with the victim for being unable to stop the abuse. Or they may be afraid that they won't be able to escape the violence, even if they do leave the family home.

Parents need to sort out their problems for the violence to stop. Let them know how much it hurts you when they fight. They may not know how upset you are or even realise you know the violence is happening.

## Why does Mum stay at home?

*"Why doesn't Mum leave her boyfriend? She's not happy. When I asked her, she said I'm too young to understand."*  
Mark, 14

Many women do leave the person hurting them, but it takes a lot of courage. Lots of families live with abuse for many months or even years.

Women stay with abusive partners for many reasons. They may be too scared to leave. They may not have any money or anywhere to go. They may worry about taking their children out of school and moving to a new area. They may be so worn down by all that's happened and not have the strength to go. Children and

# Domestic violence

young people often do not understand this. As they get older, their confusion may change into anger and disgust.

You can help by trying to get your mum to call one of the numbers on this sheet.

## What is the law?

Domestic violence is a crime. Victims are protected by the law. The Government may also bring in new laws to protect families from violence. Contact one of the following organisations to find out more.

## Further information and advice

### Everyman Project

Counselling, support and advice for men who are violent or concerned about their violence, and anyone affected by that violence.

Tel: **020 7263 8884**

[www.everymanproject.co.uk](http://www.everymanproject.co.uk)

### Kiran – Asian Women's Aid

Advice, support, refuge and outreach help for Asian women and children.

Tel: **020 8558 1986**

[www.rdlogo.com/CWP/kawa/](http://www.rdlogo.com/CWP/kawa/)

### Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation

Tel: **0800 9171414**

[www.niwaf.org](http://www.niwaf.org)

### NSPCC

Child protection helpline for anyone in England, Wales, Northern Ireland or the Channel Islands concerned about the safety of a child. Asian language service also available.

Tel: **0808 800 5000**

Textphone: **0800 056 0566**

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

### Parentline Plus

UK-wide helpline for anyone caring for children and young people.

Tel: **0808 800 2222**

Textphone: **0800 783 6783**

[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

### Police

In an emergency call **999**, or Textphone **0800 112 999**

### Refuge

24-hour UK-wide domestic violence crisis line.

Tel: **0808 2000 247**

[www.refuge.org.uk/](http://www.refuge.org.uk/)

### Southall Black Sisters

Information and advice for black and Asian women on domestic violence and related issues.

Tel: **020 8571 9595**

[www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/](http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/)

### Scottish Women's Aid

Tel: **0800 027 1234**

[www.scottishwomensaid.co.uk](http://www.scottishwomensaid.co.uk)

### Welsh Women's Aid

Tel: **0808 8010800**

[www.welshwomensaid.org](http://www.welshwomensaid.org)

### Women's Aid Federation of England

England's national charity for women and children experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse in their homes. 24-hour domestic violence helpline.

Tel: **0808 2000 247**

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

## CONTACTING CHILDLINE

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on **0800 400 222**.

Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm  
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.

Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm  
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717.

**Please note** – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people's identities.

© NSPCC Nov 2007

