

Cath Hunter explores the devastating impact that domestic violence can have on young children, and suggests steps practitioners can take to support those affected by it in their care...

omestic violence can be defined as the physical, sexual or emotional abuse inflicted on a man or woman by their partner or ex-partner. Children who grow up in a family where there is domestic violence learn powerful lessons about the use of control, intimidation and force in relationships. They learn that aggression is part of everyday life and that it is acceptable to shout at and hit other people. This can make it very confusing and difficult when children are in nursery settings where this behaviour is not seen as acceptable. Children who live with domestic violence may not experience positive relationships being modelled as they may have one parent who is the controlling aggressor and the other parent who is the terrified victim. This can make it hard for either parent to be consistently physically or emotionally available for the child, resulting in the family being a very frightening place at times.

Children can experience domestic violence in a variety of ways. They may hear it or see it, and may get caught in the middle of it in an attempt to stop it happening. Children are completely dependent on the adults around them to protect them and keep them safe, and if this does not happen, it can have a significant impact on them.

The child's response

It is extremely distressing for children to see or hear their parents being physically and verbally abusive to each other. It threatens their sense of security and the stability that is usually found within the family. Children may react in different ways to living with domestic violence, depending on their age and the external support available to them. They may feel that they are to blame. Between the ages of two and three years-old, children develop 'magical thinking', where they feel all powerful and that everything that happens is down to them. For example, "If I hadn't been naughty then daddy wouldn't be cross and wouldn't have hit mummy". The child's physical, emotional and social development can be affected in several ways. This can include irritability, sleep problems, emotional distress, fear of being alone, immature behaviour, and problems with toilet training.

Children may find it difficult to make friends easily due to confusion over what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. They may become quiet and withdrawn or become loud and fidgety with poor concentration. They may feel angry, confused, anxious, insecure and frightened. This may result in them having nightmares, needing lots of comfort and reassurance and having more tantrums or regressing to an earlier stage of development, such as thumb sucking or soiling. They may also become aggressive to other adults and children.

Some children may find separations difficult and become more clingy and anxious about being away from their parent, sometimes for fear of what may happen to the parent in their Responding to domestic violence

FIVE POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO REMEMBER...

- Try to avoid making loud and sudden movements if possible.
- Use a gentle voice and tone at all times, especially when dealing with behaviour to reduce fear for the child.
- Offer reassurance and support throughout the day.
- Be sensitive to any changes in the child's behaviour.
- Remember how terrifying the situation is for the child.



absence. They may become protective towards younger children or younger siblings, for example, asking to see their younger sister who is in the baby room at nursery. They may have language and cognitive development delays due to the fear and distress they are living with, resulting in them finding it more difficult to express themselves and understand their feelings.

Children who are exposed to violence in the home experience so much added emotional stress that it may harm the development of their brains. At an early age, a child's brain is becoming 'hard-wired' for later physical and emotional functioning. If children are not provided with help from an adult to work through feelings of rage and distress and offered soothing and comfort, they can develop poor stress regulatory systems themselves. This can result in them finding it difficult to manage their own feelings as they get older and find them overwhelming and unmanageable.

The child's needs

Children have the right to an environment that is safe and secure. They need practitioners who

CASE STUDY:

James, aged three

James regularly saw his dad hit his mum, and he was often aggressive to the other children in nursery, snatching toys and pushing them off the bikes if he wanted a turn. The nursery staff set up a 'being kind' chart for him and talked to him about the kind behaviour he could use. They rewarded him with praise and a sticker on his chart and his jumper when he managed this. This built his confidence and friendships, which had both been deteriorating previously, along with helping him to practise a different type of behaviour.

can provide them with love, care and support. They need to understand that hitting people and hurting others is not OK. It can be helpful to say, "In nursery we don't hit people, we are kind to each other", so they are clear about what is expected of them. Children need the opportunity to learn that there are other ways to deal with angry, frustrating and upsetting feelings rather than lashing out with your fist or your voice.

How can practitioners help?

Practitioners can provide a calm and reassuring environment for the child and be aware of situations that may be difficult for them. For example, a child may be scared of loud noises during music activities. It can help to sit them near or with you to provide extra support should it be needed. They may act out the domestic violence situation in their play, and it is important to remember the child's experience is 'normal' to them and respond by allowing them to continue if appropriate or directing them to another activity such as helping you with a job. Provide opportunities for them to be in a caring role with a doll or other child to activate good feelings about themselves and show them how to nurture.

A predictable and consistent routine so children know what to expect can help them to feel safe and secure, and provide lots of praise, encouragement and reassurance of any changes that occur. Try to accept the changes in their behaviour where possible, for example, if they refuse to have their daytime sleep or are more restless. Encourage them to have a transitional object to make them feel safe and secure, and allow them to choose one from nursery if they don't bring one from home.

It is crucial to offer support and signpost parents to external agencies if appropriate, so parents feel supported rather than judged by you. If you respond in this way, they are more likely to share information about the situation with you. Remember, too, that practitioners who are concerned that a child may be living with domestic violence must report their concerns, as with any child protection issue.