



Children's Social Care guide to keeping families safe from domestic abuse throughout the COVID-19 emergency

Introduction

This guidance is for professionals working in children's social care including Children's Social Workers, Family Practitioners and Early Help teams during the COVID-19 crisis.

The virus poses a significant threat to the health and safety of frontline staff and families are being told to stay at home and stay alert. This creates an extremely challenging operating climate for safeguarding children and families.

It is vital for managers and staff to continuously risk assess their actions and refer to existing Public Health England [advice when implementing this guidance](#). Any time practitioners are undertaking home visits every step possible must be taken to mitigate the health risk posed to them.

This is echoed in the guidance issued by the [Department for Education guidance](#) (section *Children's Social Care*.) More information about supporting staff during this time can be found in the additional resources section.

How to use this guide

In this document we refer to survivors, victims and perpetrators of abuse who are the (step)mothers and (step)fathers, children, young people and extended family members you will be working with.

The guide is structured around the following areas:

- Coordination and multi-agency working
- Risk assessment and risk management
- Safety planning
- Children and young people
- Forced Marriage, 'honour'-based violence and abuse
- Perpetrators
- Child or adolescent to parent violence and abuse

There is an appendix with a list of resources, links and additional reading which might be useful to you. This contains a list of helplines for both adult and child victims and those perpetrating abuse.

Domestic Abuse

Victims of domestic abuse are telling us they are frightened about how the COVID-19 restrictions are increasing the risk to themselves and their children¹. Their most common concerns are fear of the perpetrator of abuse and the impact of this and lockdown on their mental health.

¹<https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20at%20Home%20survivor%20survey%20results%20.pdf>

Every year, over two million adults in the UK and one in five children are impacted by domestic abuse. It can be experienced by anyone, irrespective of demographics such as age or gender, and some people will find it more challenging to seek support or access services².

Coordination and multi-agency working

Opportunities for speaking to each family and individual members of the family separately will be reduced in this period. For very good reason, families may be anxious about professionals coming into their home, potentially bringing the virus with them – a coordinated response can minimise this.

Working together with the domestic abuse sector is vital to safeguard children and families. All services we have talked to are still in operation, most have changed the way they provide support moving successfully to virtual, online meeting spaces or telephone support.

Identify ways in which you can creatively work together to jointly support families. Find out how local domestic abuse services have adapted their support – for adult and child victims and those perpetrating abuse – and how you and the families you work with can utilise the support they offer.

Work closely with local police to understand their strategy for managing arrests and contact with perpetrators who present with symptoms of COVID-19 or who have stated they are in self isolation due to symptoms. The police have provided reassurance that families will not receive fines or penalties where breaking the guidelines is motivated by keeping safe. Listen to this [podcast with DCC Louisa Rolfe](#) on how the police are responding to domestic abuse during the pandemic.

Decisions about how to continue working with families regarding domestic abuse should be made on a case by case basis, and never in isolation. Seek input from specialists; many of them will be able to offer guidance for professionals even if they aren't supporting the family themselves.

Use your Marac (likely to be operating virtually), MASH daily triage discussions, specialist services etc to make multi agency decisions and identify how you can work together, utilising all resources available to best support families.

Operation Encompass remains operational in your area. They have set up a Teachers' Helpline available to schools nationally during the COVID-19 period to provide free and confidential guidance to teachers following an Operation Encompass call (meaning the police have attended a domestic abuse incident at the child's home). The helpline provides school staff with immediate, confidential support to meet the needs of their vulnerable children.

We worked with survivors to create [SafeLives Multi-agency Values and Principles](#) to help organisations work more effectively together, to better engage individuals and families and improve their experience of working with services. We encourage professionals to consider these values and principles through every aspect of their coordinated response, and to place the people we serve at the

Accessing victims at risk of 'honour-based' violence: it is now more important than ever to think about creative ways of accessing victims by a means of discreet contact as potential multiple family perpetrators will be closely watching.

heart of all we do.

Karma Nirvana's helpline has noted a 38% decrease from police and children's services referrals to their national helpline and this has everything to do with the isolation of victims during lockdown. If you have concerns, consider how you can gain access through means of discreet contact for example: school online, GP practice, a medical appointment, friends, creating safe passwords to ensure the victims knows how to ask for help if someone is listening. Once you gain access ask the victim what works best for them and how to end a call quickly should they need to abruptly leave.

² <https://safelives.org.uk/knowledge-hub/spotlights>

Risk assessment and risk management

Social work practitioners and domestic abuse services should work together to review risk and safety plans, discuss contingency plans for children and families and how they will cope during the COVID-19 crisis.

Practitioners should ask clear questions (when safe to do so) that enable all family members to share information that highlights changes in risk and to share any concerns. Take all concerns seriously and think about how this affects risk and safety.

Focussing on physical violence alone is not an accurate way to assess whether there is domestic abuse taking place in the family home. Being aware of coercive controlling behaviour is important when working with families. Pay attention to the fear, control and the impact of the abuse. More guidance on coercive control can be found [here](#).

In your role to safeguard children, take time to review each of their cases and the risk posed to all who could be impacted. Think about who may be impacted beyond the immediate family, including but not limited to; other known partners/ex-partners, children living apart from the perpetrator, older relatives who may be vulnerable to pressure from the perpetrator.

Factors to consider include (but are not limited to):

- Increased time at home
- Less opportunity to leave
- Dependence on the perpetrator as their carer
- Increased time in close proximity to the person causing harm
- Lack of external observation
- Increased emotional and financial stress.
- Increased isolation
- Reduced family and social support
- Risk from multiple perpetrators of abuse
- Increased risk of debilitating illness
- Changes to substance use, be that increased or decreased access.
- Changes to/pressure on mental health

Safety Planning

Give clear messages about the help available for example:

- The instruction to stay at home does not apply to you if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse
- Refuges are still open if families need to flee, the police will still attend an address and use all the powers normally available to them to intervene and protect.
- Local services are still open and able to help.

Safety planning needs to be creative and flexible and focus on the basics such as establishing opportunities for safe communication between vulnerable families, involving specialist domestic abuse services and referring to Marac as relevant. Increasing the involvement of key agencies will keep these families in sight and provide opportunities for support and intervention. See our [safety planning guidance](#) for further guidance and information.

Share information with schools through the appropriate channels. Encourage school staff to proactively seek opportunities to interact with families. School staff should be curious and pay attention to any behavioural changes or differences in how children present and ensure they talk to children/parents about this, following their usual safeguarding protocols if they have concerns.

Children and Young People

Older children and young people are at risk of abuse within their own relationships, as well as being victims and experiencing harm from domestic abuse in their homes. The SafeLives [Dash risk](#)

assessment checklist for use with young people aged 13-18 will help you identify risks they are exposed to. This may be wider than domestic abuse and include child sexual exploitation and abuse, 'honour'-based violence and abuse, gang violence and county lines.

Domestic abuse services told us they were struggling to make contact with young people, so **we asked young people's practitioners and young people themselves** what they thought some of the issues and challenges are right now, and some ideas on ways practitioners can engage with young people.

Identify the children and young people on your caseloads where CSE is a known or potential risk and work with the police and support services (such as domestic abuse services) to create targeted plans of support for victims and 'disrupt' plans for perpetrators.

Forced marriage, 'honour'-based violence and abuse (HBV) and female genital mutilation (FGM)
All of these issues are at higher risk of occurring due to decreased visibility of children during lockdown.

Lockdown for victims of forced marriages and 'honour'-based abuse means increased family and community surveillance, reducing even further the opportunity for victims to report, especially as the schools are no longer the 'eyes and ears.'

Karma Nirvana's helpline has seen an increase of calls from victims including a 200% increase in contacts where lockdown has increased risk – including of marriages on Skype, enhanced control of tech devices and imminent forced marriages after lockdown.

Once restrictions lift, the lag between increased movement/travel and the point at which schools reopen could create a gap in which children may be taken overseas before it can be prevented. If you are concerned someone is at risk of a forced marriage or has been forced into a marriage, please see the resources section for more guidance and information on Karma Nirvana's helpline.

If you are concerned someone is at risk of a forced marriage or has been forced into a marriage. Apply for an emergency **Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO)** with the support of your Local Authority and/or police. This order can help prevent a future marriage, ensure the victim remains in the country and give you greater access to the victim if you name this as part of a condition of the order.

Child Contact

Child contact arrangements or disputes present a particularly risky environment for victims of domestic abuse and their children. The Government's guidance states that children *can* continue to travel between their separated parents. However, this does not mean that they must. For example, relevant factors would include whether anyone in the family has underlying health issues or is medically vulnerable, whether handover would increase the risk to a parent, whether there are other factors known to often co-occur with domestic abuse such as alcohol/substance misuse.

Victims and survivors of domestic abuse may find it particularly difficult to make a decision about child contact; often they are managing pressure, coercion and threats from their abusive ex-partner while feeling anxious about complying with court orders or expectations from practitioners. Practitioners can lessen this burden by talking to parents about the issues, helping them to weigh up the options and make a decision based on safety. See the additional resources for more information.

People perpetrating abuse

It is important to recognise that any genuine and well-founded concern about the virus also presents a tool for those perpetrating abuse to further isolate victims of domestic abuse and distance them from support. People experiencing domestic abuse have reduced autonomy and live with a high, credible threat of harm from the perpetrator. They may be prevented from giving, or feel too frightened to give, access to their home to Social Workers and others. Considering this, and recording observations in case notes, can help build a picture of the control and risk a victim of domestic abuse is enduring.

Perpetrators of abuse should be targeted and visible within the plans and strategies created to keep families safe.

There will be changes in services for perpetrators of abuse e.g. behavioural change groups. Most have stopped face to face work with some being able to offer virtual sessions instead and we have received feedback from some that these are working well. See the [Respect COVID-19 website](#) for information.

Remember that children and young people may be living in households with multiple perpetrators being the people who they're meant to be closest to: mother, father, uncles, siblings are involved in abuses of arranging marriages, coercive controlling behaviour and ensuring punishment of those who seek help.

Child or adolescent to parent violence

Child or adolescent to parent abuse isn't legally defined, but it's increasingly recognised as a form of abuse by a child or young person using abusive behaviours towards a parent or carer. It often involves coercive control and the adult being in fear of the young person. Child to parent violence is receiving increased attention, with people now asking how quarantining and isolation are impacting this group of families. Please see our [Covid-19 webpage](#) for a number of resources that can help professionals responding to child and adolescent to parent violence.

Appendix: Helplines and useful websites

SafeLives has a dedicated [COVID-19 webpage](#) with resources for professionals and families experiencing domestic abuse which is regularly updated. We are offering opportunities for virtual support through our [Community Platform](#). Please join to access free webinars, blogs and to network with thousands of other professionals across the UK.

National domestic abuse services and helplines

- England: Freephone 24h National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge on **0808 2000 247**, or visit www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
- Scotland: 24 hour Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline: **0800 027 1234**
- Northern Ireland: 24 hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline: **0808 802 1414**
- Wales: 24 hour Life Fear Free Helpline **0808 80 10 800**.
- Galop: [National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline](#): **0800 999 5428**
- [Men's Advice Line](#): **0808 801 0327**
- [Respect](#) helpline (for anyone worried about their own behaviour): **0808 802 0321**
- [Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#) (national stalking helpline) **0808 802 0300**
- [Forced Marriage Unit](#) **020 7008 0151**
- Victim Support National 24 hour Supportline: **0808 1689 111**
- The NSPCC Helpline for parents, families and professionals: **0808 800 5000**. Also available 24 hours a day by email – help@nspcc.org.uk - or through its [online reporting form](#).
- Childline: 0800 1111 or [access to online counsellors](#)
- Karma Nirvana (**0800 5 999 247**) for professionals to jointly risk assess and provide guidance to protect victims. They also provide online and helpline support for victims whose support will be enhanced by call handlers with knowledge of the issues impacted by honour systems.
- Operation Encompass Teachers' Helpline provides school staff with immediate and confidential support to meet the needs of their vulnerable children. 8.00am – 11.00am Monday to Friday: 0845 646 0890

Websites and useful guides:

NB: Accessing information online needs to be done safely. Advise victims to delete browser history or use 'private browsing' as a way to hide your searches.

- [Women's Aid guide to private browsing](#)
- [Guide to technology safety](#)
- [Making a safety plan](#), Women's Aid
- [The Survivor's Handbook](#), Women's Aid
- [Guidance on economic abuse during COVID-19](#), Surviving Economic Abuse
- [Karma Nirvana](#)
- [Chayn](#), online support and guidance for victims and survivors of abuse

- If you are concerned someone is at risk of a forced marriage or has been forced into a marriage. Apply for an emergency **Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO)** with the support of your Local Authority and/or police. This order can help prevent a future marriage, ensure the victim remains in the country and give you greater access to the victim if you name this as part of a condition of the order.

Additional resources for parents, children and young people

- West Sussex Connect kindly provided a **Parent Pack** full of useful ideas for activities to do with children, links to educational resources, advice for helping children to talk about their worries.
- Rights of Women have produced **guidance on COVID-19 and child contact arrangements**.
- Domestic abuse charity Splitz have produced a guide for parents **encouraging healthy contact**.
- The Scottish Courts have guidance on **child contact orders** and you can read the Scottish Government's guidance on **childcare provision** for key workers.
- Children and young people can access support through **The Hide Out, Young Minds, Child Line**.
- Free resources for children on the **Monkey Bob website** (thanks My Cheshire Without Abuse)

Other useful websites:

- **SafeLives** has produced guidance for employers.
- **Barnardo's has created a Coronavirus Advice Hub**
- Government **Coronavirus guidance: vulnerable children and young people**.
- **Respect guidance for working with perpetrators of domestic abuse**
- **Social Work England** information and advice for Social Workers.
- **Staying Safe: A guide for victims and survivors of domestic abuse**
- **The Department for Education guidance** for local authorities on children's social care.
- **Local Government Association guidance for children's services, education and schools**
- Free **online community platform** – join over 2,000 members enjoying access to webinars, blogs, and opportunities to network.
- We offer a range of **training packages** for Children's Social Care. Please email training@safelives.org.uk to discuss options.

With thanks to

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