

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: domestic abuse

This briefing uses insight from NSPCC helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions to highlight the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic.

June 2020

Key Statistics

Both Childline and the NSPCC helpline have seen an increase in the number of people worried about domestic abuse since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

- Between 23 March and 17 May 2020 the NSPCC helpline received 1,500 contacts about adults worried about the impact of domestic abuse on children. 58% of these contacts resulted in a referral being made to, or updated information being shared with, a local agency.
- In 40% of these contacts, the caller told us the domestic abuse had been going on for at least 6 months.
- We have seen an increase in the number of people contacting the NSPCC helpline about domestic abuse, rising from an average of around 140 contacts a

week earlier this year¹, to an average of around 185 contacts a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

- Between 23 March and 17 May 2020 Childline delivered over 500 counselling sessions to children and young people worried about domestic abuse.
- There has been an increase in the number of counselling sessions Childline has delivered about domestic abuse, rising from an average of around 50 a week earlier this year¹, compared to an average of around 65 a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

Recognising domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is any type of controlling, bullying, threatening or violent behaviour between people who are, or have been, in a relationship.

Adults are contacting the NSPCC helpline because they are worried about children who are experiencing domestic abuse in the family home. Children and young people are telling Childline about the impact of parental domestic abuse on them, but also that they are worried about the other family members who are being abused. Children, young people and adults are talking to us about physical and emotional domestic abuse, but also sexual domestic abuse, cultural violence, and coercive control such as limiting access to money and communications.

Domestic abuse – like all types of abuse – can be difficult to recognise and hard to talk about, so the statistics in this briefing should not be should read as an indicator of prevalence.

“The father is a bully and the family are scared of him. He has been abusive towards the mother in the past and threatens the mother with violence if challenged. I’m really worried about the child, can you please advise?”

NSPCC helpline

“I’m calling about my three children who live with their father. My ex has banned me from seeing them due to coronavirus – he says it’s not safe. My ex can be very manipulative and controlling at times - he’s always trying to

¹ For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government issued its stay at home guidance (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 17 May). See the methodology section for more details.

turn the kids against me, saying I'm the reason the family isn't together anymore. He also has a nasty temper on him and I worry it'll only get worse being cooped up indoors all day. I miss my children desperately but not sure what I can do."

Mother, NSPCC helpline

"I really need your help; my dad has been physically abusing my mum. He has an anger problem and it's getting out of hand. The smallest things make him angry and he starts shouting. I'm terrified of him and I've had enough, I can't take it anymore - please help me!"

Boy, aged 14, Childline

Impact of domestic abuse on children

Children and young people tell us about their experiences of living in households where there is domestic abuse. Some talk about the impact on their mental and physical wellbeing, as well as their behaviour, including: anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts; self-harming; eating disorders; nightmares or problems sleeping; drug or alcohol use; aggression; difficulty concentrating; tried or are thinking about running away from home.

Key Themes

Reduced access to support networks

Children who experience domestic abuse tell us that they are finding it harder to cope than usual, as sources of support that might previously have been available to them - friends, teachers, school counsellors, health visitors, sports clubs - have been reduced or cut off entirely. Now, more than ever, children are turning to Childline for emotional support and advice on how to keep themselves safe.

"My CAMHS appointments are now online, but it's not the same. I don't feel like I can talk to anyone"

Girl, aged 15, Childline

The closure, for most children, of nurseries and pre-schools has caused some adults to contact the NSPCC helpline because they are worried about a child who they think is at an increased risk of abuse at home.

Other adults have contacted the NSPCC helpline with concerns about domestic abuse because parents or carers with problems such as alcohol and/or substance dependence and mental health problems are not able to access their usual support.

A grandmother contacted the NSPCC helpline after her son-in law had displayed 'psychotic' behaviour towards her daughter and grandchildren, which she thought was being aggravated by the stress of being in lockdown. She became even more concerned after the local mental health team said that, due to lockdown, they could not provide their usual support.

A 13-year-old girl contacted Childline to talk about her dad's anger problems:

"Dad is sleeping in a separate room tonight to calm down. He's been in one of his angry moods again, throwing stuff everywhere and threatening to hurt mum with a towel. He's been like this for years, I'm kind of used to it now. Before lockdown happened, dad was seeing a counsellor for his anger problems. I'm pretty sure those meetings have stopped and I'm worried what he's gonna be like if lockdown carries on like this. I love my dad and don't want anything to happen to him, but I just needed to tell someone"

Girl, aged 13, Childline

Lockdown has brought domestic abuse into sharp focus

While some children have been experiencing domestic abuse for a number of years, other children told us how they've only become aware of domestic abuse since the stay at home measures, because the whole family has been in close proximity for extended periods. This was the case for one young boy who had recently discovered his mother was being physically abused by his step-dad; if he was in the room at the time, he would be told to turn around or leave the room.

"We should be allowed back to school now so my step-dad stops hitting mummy"

Boy, aged 10, Childline

With most adults now at home all day, people have become more aware of what's happening in neighbouring houses. Some people contacting the NSPCC helpline express their concerns about abusive relationships by describing parents fighting. One adult said that they'd been concerned for some time by 'aggressive shouting' and

'crashing noises' coming from a family next door, and that these concerns had been 'amplified' since lockdown:

"I used to only hear them late at night or first thing in the morning before I left for work – now I'm working from home, I realise it's happening throughout the day. I sometimes hear the toddler crying as the parents are fighting. It pains me to think the child is having to live like this – can you help?"

Neighbour, NSPCC helpline

Making it harder to speak out

Some children who are experiencing domestic abuse and made to feel unsafe at home spoke of their reluctance to speak out due to fears of making the situation worse, of being separated from their siblings and of not wanting family members to be prosecuted. Others told us they were worried that key workers, such as the police or children's services, might bring coronavirus into the family home.

"I really wish I was back living with my foster carers, but I'm stuck at my mum's place cos of the lockdown. My step-dad makes mum drink every night and I hear them shouting and throwing stuff at each other - it makes me so uncomfortable. I don't like being alone with my step-dad either – he tries to kiss me really hard on the neck and other private places. Last time it made a bruise. He said I'm not allowed to 'snitch' on him as everyone will be cross with me. I don't know what to do"

Girl, age unknown, Childline

"I could hear mum and dad shouting last night, and mum hit dad. There was blood on dad's face and it was horrible. I'm feeling scared and worried because I haven't seen him all day. Mum told me not to tell anyone - have I done the right thing?"

Boy, 9, Childline

Making it more difficult to leave

Adults experiencing domestic abuse at home have told us how coronavirus and the stay at home measures from government, have made any attempt to leave their home all but impossible. They told us they:

- worry about leaving children alone with their abusive partner, especially in cases where the behaviour had recently got worse
- worry about catching Covid-19 if they leave the house

- are recently unemployed and having to rely on their partner's income
- hope the abuse will stop once lockdown restrictions are eased.

"Mum says we can't use our 'emergency bags' until after coronavirus is over".

Girl, aged 13, Childline

Drinking during lockdown

Whilst talking about to us about domestic abuse, some adults and young people said that parents and carers were drinking more since the government's stay at home guidance, whilst others said the abuse was getting worse.

"I'm really scared of my dad, especially when he's been drinking. Sometimes he gets really angry and throws things at my mum. It's been getting worse since the coronavirus and I worry a lot. I have no idea what to do as I can't escape because of the lockdown."

Boy, 15, Childline

"Mummy lies that she is okay when she is not. Daddy hits mummy because mummy wouldn't give him money to get beers. Daddy tells me to go upstairs to my room but I can hear mummy crying and loud banging sounds. I am scared of daddy and I want daddy to stop hurting mummy."

Girl, 7, Childline

Exploiting fears about the coronavirus

Some of the adults and young people gave accounts of how the fear of coronavirus was being used to intimidate family members. One adult told the NSPCC helpline how a family member had threatened to **"breathe all over them"**. A young child contacted Childline in tears after hearing his father shout, **"We're all going to catch it anyway, so just deal with it!"**.

Others gave us examples of adults using coronavirus as an excuse to control family members such as not allowing partners to leave the home or seek employment; limiting their contact with family and friends; controlling their finances and monitoring their movements – all under the pretext of 'keeping them safe' from the virus.

"My ex-partner has taken my baby son away from me and I don't know what to do. He stormed into the house the other day saying he was going to take the baby for a few days – he said he wouldn't get to see

him 'til the summer cos of the lockdown. When I refused, he pushed me against the wall and took off with the baby and house keys. I've not heard from him since and I'm really worried about my baby's safety. My ex can be a bit rough when he handles him, and he sometimes tell him to "shut the **** up". I told my social worker what's happened and they're trying to locate him so I can get my baby back".

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Young people worried about others

Some young people contact Childline because they are worried about other family members who are experiencing domestic abuse.

"I want to be there for my granddad but because of the lockdown I am unable to visit him. My grandma is very controlling - she won't let him use the internet or a mobile phone, and all his money gets paid into her account. The whole family know what grandma is doing, but they're too afraid to tell on her. Since the lockdown, I'm becoming increasingly worried for his safety and I feel so sick. Please can you let me know what I can do to help?"

Girl, 16, Childline

Conclusion

As this briefing highlights, the restrictions on everyday life, imposed because of the coronavirus pandemic, are increasing the risk for some children who are experiencing domestic abuse in their homes. It can be more difficult for people to access to support and protection they need.

But in some cases, the stay at home rules have resulted in domestic abuse being recognised and reported, when it was previously hidden.

The NSPCC is calling on government to recognise the impact of domestic abuse on children and ensure that their welfare is taken into account when legislating around support for those experiencing domestic abuse.

Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact the NSPCC helpline and Childline, the counsellors record what they tell us.

The insight in this briefing is taken from those Helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions where the counsellors recorded that domestic abuse was talked about.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC and Childline. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and Helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

The time periods

The first time an adult mentioned coronavirus when contacting the NSPCC helpline was 6 January 2020. The first time a child mentioned coronavirus when contacting Childline was 10 January 2020.

For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government introduced its stay at home rules (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 17 May). We have used weekly averages to compare between the 2 time periods.

- The NSPCC helpline saw an increase from a weekly average of around 140 to around 185 contacts where domestic abuse was talked about, since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.
- Childline saw an increase from a weekly average of around 50 to around 65 counselling sessions where domestic abuse was talked about, since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

+ More ways to help you protect children



Visit **Childline** for information about coronavirus for children and young people.



Sign up to CASPAR to stay up-to-date with safeguarding and child protection legislation and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic
nspcc.org.uk/caspar



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection during coronavirus

