What children who live with domestic violence and abuse say about their Dads: Findings from Irish research.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

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Holt (2009) *The Contact Conundrum: Children’s Experience of Post-Separation Contact with Domestically Abusive fathers.* PhD, TCD. [PSC]


Holt, Kirwan & Ngo (?)Does it work or does it last: Groupwork with Mothers and Children who have experienced domestic violence, Journal of Group Work. GWR

Murphy & Holt (2013) *Evaluation of Pilot Child Contact Centre*, Barnardos/One Family. CCCE

Overview of Presentation

• Situating the present state of knowledge – international and Irish

• Findings from research in Ireland which has focused on children’s experiences of living with domestic violence locating that experience in the context of our understanding of ‘coercive control’;

• Addressing the paradox of post-separation father involvement – what children say about PSC with their dads and their involvement in the decision-making process

• Moving forward – keeping the lens of inquiry on abusive men as fathers.
Domestic Violence has been recognised as a key indicator for child abuse and neglect

The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Abuse on Children


- Child Abuse
- Developmental Issues
- Multiple Adversities
- Parenting Capacity
- Post-Separation Contact
‘Relationship’ with Father

EMOTIONAL/RELATIONAL ABSENCE

+/ABUSIVE FATHER PRESENCE
My ‘relationship’ with my Dad? I don’t have one….I feel like I am a pebble at the bottom of a stream and my Dad is this angry stream bashing me against all the other pebbles. Sara 13 (CCCE, 2013)
‘I felt that I had a neon sign that told everyone what was going on in my family… I felt I wasn't on the same wavelength as people...I thought that they were all happy families or whatever and I was kind of like the outcast’

– Young Person (17), *Listen to Me!* 2006
Impact: Fear

I used to hide under my bed all week. I used to make a little place out of it with all my teddies. He ...always used to buy teddies for us...and I used to store them under my bed and any time I felt sad or when they were screaming and roaring down in the kitchen ....... ’

He shouts and curses and calls my Mum really, really mean names. I would say ‘stop Dad’, but he doesn’t listen.

Rachel (11) Contact Study, 2009
IMPACT: LOSS

‘Anyone can have a father but he is not my Dad’? Leah (12) PSC 2009
A ‘Proper’ Dad…

‘To be a ‘proper’ dad, he doesn’t have to bring us anywhere, he doesn’t have to spend anything, we just wouldn’t have to feel awkward around him, we could actually talk to him, just being in the same room as him and not being all tense and awkward.’ (Eva, 16)

‘Yeah, like that ‘first conversation’ awkward silence.’ (Leah, 12)

Contact Study, 2009
If you could change anything what would that be?

I would shave his head, [to] change something inside him…change the program in his head? I’d make him nicer…he’d give us money and be nicer to us. But still not live with us. We’d still see him, every week on Saturdays. [He’d] give us money and go to see us more.

Cathy (9) Contact Study, 2009
LIVING WITH COERCIVE CONTROL
....you[re] just getting over what happened before and then it hits you again and you feel...you're like spinning the whole time. If it's not happening, you're waiting for it to happen. When it's happening it's almost a relief because, here it is, what I'm waiting for. And then when it's not happening you're waiting for it again.

– Young Adult 18+ *Listen to Me!* 2006
He was so volatile.. that was probably the worst of it that I didn’t know would he abuse me. With dad in a lot of ways, it was the threat of what might happen because you never knew exactly what would happen with dad.

Colette (24) Contact Study, 2009
What responsibility do men have for responsible fathering?

Neglect of fathers in research on dv – substantial body of knowledge on perpetrators, it rarely conceptualises them as fathers (Stanley, 2011)

ARE ABUSIVE MEN ‘GOOD ENOUGH’ FATHERS?

– RAKIL (2006: 198)
WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

• Less likely to be involved

• More Controlling & Authoritarian

• Less Likely to allow Freedom of Expression

• Difficulty empathising with child

• Bancroft & Silverman (2002)
Abusive Men As Fathers  
(Harne, 2004)

Fathers often said they cared about or ‘loved’ their children but rarely considered the impacts of their violence or abuse or how this might affect children’s views of them.

Perceived children as ‘their’ possessions.

Some fathers described very young children as ‘provoking’ violence and intimidation because they were demanding attention or ‘annoying’ them.  
(Harne, 2004)
Childhoods characterised by absent, distant or abusive fathers

Struggled to accept responsibility for their behaviour with very limited insight into the impact it had and was having on their children.
What do Children say about PSC and their relationships with their fathers?

Unreliability & Unpredictability
- Sometimes he makes up an excuse and then he doesn’t see us...so we’re just hanging around for ages waiting. Cathy (9)

Inflexible and Rigid Arrangements
- Sometimes even when I am really upset and need to talk to her, Dad won’t let me. Ciara (9)

Apathy & Frustration
- He just acted like we weren’t there. Eva (16)
Abusive fathers not engaging with services

*He’s beyond the law, no one can make him do anything* Kate (13)

Complex Relationships

*Lots of the time I really, really, hate him, but at the end of the day, he is still my Dad.*
Rachel (11)

*I’d give him a million chances* Cathy (9)

*I’m fed up waiting for him to be a Dad* Leah (12)
Physically punitive:

He’s just bold…he’ll hit ya Sean (7)

But not physically close

He just doesn’t care at all Ciara (9)

Fathering capacity

He can hardly take care of himself – how can he take care of us too? Kate (13)
WHY IS CONTACT RARELY IF EVER DENIED?

IS THE PRACTICE OF DECISION MAKING EVIDENCE INFORMED?
Prevailing pro-contact discourse

- **Universal assumptions**
  - Abuse ends with separation
  - Parental Alienation Syndrome

- Contact is in the child's best interest
- Father absence more harmful than abusive father presence

- Participation in decision-making process harms children
How do children understand separation & divorce?

▶ They separated ‘cos of the fighting and shouting and nasty bad behaviour….but it’s still the same, maybe even worse..he just lives somewhere else now. *Robbie (8)* PSC 2009

▶ *Mum was sad…crying all the time.* *Victoria (4)* SHE 2015
How do they understand contact?

» It seemed kinda exciting at first, like what you see on those American sitcoms...seeing your Dad every Saturday....that’s till you realise it’s the same crap crammed into one day a week! Looking back, they (social workers) should have given it a trial run, cos you don’t know what you want or if it’s gonna work till you try it. How could I have known what ‘contact’ I wanted or how could they have known what would ‘work’? Jane (17) PSC
What do children say about blame, responsibility and solutions?

He [Dad] should go to anger management and they [parents] should both just behave...kids are always being told to behave, why can’t adults behave?

Robbie (8) PSC

Daddy hit Mom on the head – bang!

Victoria (4) SHE
What do children say about consultation?

I think the social workers got a statement off me and Amy once or twice to say we didn’t want to see him but [that] didn’t do much [good]. I think it was a female Judge, she said ‘I can’t physically make you go, you know but you kind of do have to see him’.

Shelley (16) PSC
A Voice or a Choice......

▶ Them (Contact Centre) making the decision that it wasn’t safe for me to see my Dad made it easier for me. I knew that they weren’t just ‘listening’ to me, that they had actually heard me and that made me feel very safe. I’m not sure I could have made that decision myself...I don’t think I should have to. Sara 13. CCCE
I don’t really believe in fathers, like I think they’re a bit useless but that’s just because of our experience but maybe some of them could be, you know, ok, and they should be investigated properly, and have proper detailed statements from children whether or not they want to see them, instead of assuming it was good for ya and you’d miss out otherwise. They thought we were missing out...but how can you miss something if you never rightly had it.. I’ve never had it so I can’t miss it. It’s not rocket science...if anyone had really bothered to listen they could have figured it out pretty quickly, but their starting point was all wrong. Eva (16) PSC
One size fits all?
Can abusive men be ‘good enough’ fathers?
Focus on the reality of men’s behaviour and not the rhetoric of involved fathering

- Engaging men – absent present – invisible practices
- Children Living with domestic violence!
- Throw caution (assumptions) to the wind and instead...
- Listen to what children are ‘actually’ saying!
Don’t assume you know ‘what is good for me’ without asking me. Don’t assume you ‘know me’ without getting to know me. And for God’s sake if I manage to tell you what’s wrong with me, please listen to what I have to say, don’t interpret it, just listen.

– Eva, 16. PSC, 2009
Selected References


Thank you

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