

## **We can't afford to abandon the children who are suffering from domestic violence**

Posted on December 7, 2009

**We need the political courage to co-ordinate a proper system of protection for children at risk of domestic violence, instead of haemorrhaging public money as we 'mop up' after the event, says Diana Barran\* .**

In the same week that the national debate has questioned the merits of 'teaching five year olds about domestic abuse', I spent a day with 24 specialist domestic abuse midwives and health visitors. Half of their positions had been created as a result of a child being killed as a result of domestic abuse. So whether or not we want our children to 'hear about' domestic abuse in the classroom, we have no choice but to respond to the reality that our children are living with it, and dying with it, at home.

Last week also saw the publication of Safety in Numbers, the largest and most comprehensive report into domestic abuse services to be commissioned in the UK. Over a two year period, the cases of 2500 women and 3600 children typically experiencing very serious levels of domestic abuse who accessed support from an independent domestic violence advisor were examined. Over 80 per cent of the women in this study suffered multiple forms of abuse: physical, sexual, stalking and harassment. Some of the findings are particularly shocking in relation to children. The majority of children were of primary school age or below, many of whom may have lived with nothing other than violence and abuse since birth. In over a quarter of cases, mothers feared that their children would be directly harmed and in 11 per cent of cases, representing nearly 400 children, there had been direct threats to kill a child by the abuser. In 40 per cent of cases there was conflict over child contact arrangements.

The study also highlighted children living with multiple sources of adversity. In up to 50 per cent of cases, the perpetrators of abuse had mental health, alcohol and other substance misuse problems as well as an existing criminal record. Is this an environment that will produce healthy and happy children?

Crucially, the study shows us a way forward. Two thirds of the women who received intensive support from an independent domestic violence advisor reported that all forms of abuse had ceased. Direct conflict over child contact halved as did direct threats to harm children and threats to kill them. This support from the IDVA for the parent is vital, literally, in reducing the risk of direct harm to children.

We estimate that there are over 100,000 victims and 200,000 children who are experiencing severe domestic abuse. Progress has been made in identifying the adult victim and offering effective support through IDVAs and other services. All too often, we still fail to identify children as victims in their own right. The study shows that IDVAs represent a point at which children who are exposed to domestic abuse can be identified. They can work with the non-abusing parent, co-ordinating the efforts of many agencies to reduce risks to both adult and children, so allowing them to live safely in their homes.

Policy makers need to have the vision to take the following steps. IDVA services need to be commissioned to provide about 1250 IDVAs nationally- a cost of £50 million. There are currently an estimated 500 practicing today. They need to be linked in more effectively with those services working directly with children so that the child's risks and needs are addressed. We also need to provide specialist support for children to address the longer term psychological impacts of the abuse that they have suffered. The cost of providing an IDVA to support a victim is about £500- a tiny fraction of the costs involved in addressing injuries, mental health problems, child protection concerns or the court process.

We have the evidence, the skilled professionals and the commitment to make a lasting impact on the lives of thousands of children, who today bear the cost of abuse in silence. We need the political courage and vision to make this a reality and to stop us haemorrhaging public money as we 'mop up' after the event. I hope that in five years time, if I am lucky enough to spend another day with a group of domestic abuse nurses, that none of them will have been appointed as the result of the death of a child.

**Diana Barran**  
**Director, CAADA**