

Dealing with the effects of domestic violence on pupils

Domestic violence can affect not only a pupil's sense of security and wellbeing, but also how they learn in school. Assistant Headteacher Debs Ward gives a DT's perspective on this complex issue, and also recommends ways that schools can pick up the pieces of the trauma and ensure learning continues to take place.

My first experience of domestic violence, as a new DT, was when a Year 2 child announced out of the blue, to his class teacher, that his mother had slept in his bed all night holding her phone 'in case Daddy started to hurt her again'. The disclosure was quite rightly passed on to me as the named person but, due to my inexperience at the time, I wasn't sure what to do with the information and what steps to take next.

A number of questions were running through my head – was the child at risk of being harmed? Was the disclosure deemed to be of a level of concern to refer to Children's Social Services? Is it a child protection issue? Should I speak directly to the child's mother? And if I did speak to the mother, would I be putting her, and her child, at risk of harm?

Putting safety first – making the referral

As I was uncertain of the best course of action that would ensure both the safety of the child and his mother, I decided to seek advice from the Children's Safeguarding and Reviewing Unit Consultation Service (in NI you could contact the Child Protection Support Service for School or your local Gateway Team)

When dealing with any concern about a child, no matter how uncertain you are of what to do, there are several steps that should always be taken:

- Keep a written record of concerns/disclosures, actions you have taken, names of people you have spoken to, advice you were given and your response to this advice. Sign and date the written record as this will provide a comprehensive paper trail should the courts become involved.
- If you feel that a child is at risk of significant harm, you must refer to Social Services Gateway Team without delay.
- If in any doubt, act!

For the great majority of disclosures made about domestic violence, the DT is advised to speak to the victim and offer support. It is important to plan carefully how you will reach the parent, what you need to say and what you can offer in terms of support for both them and their child. This may be through sign-posting the victim towards specialist agencies that can help with issues such as legal advice, emotional support or emergency accommodation.

However, offering this sort of help can be very tricky for a number of reasons, including being able to contact the victim without the knowledge of the perpetrator and, of course, the refusal of the victim to acknowledge that such abuse is taking place.

Again, it is of the utmost importance to record the steps you have taken and the responses that you encountered so that the school has a clear paper trail that can be kept for future reference and evidence.

Three ways to ensure pupils are kept safe in school

1. The school's policies and procedures for child protection should explicitly include issues around domestic violence. These policies should be given to all members of staff within the school.

2. Sharing information with staff is very important, but can be risky if the perpetrator were to find out confidential details. Staff should be clearly trained on how to receive, deal with and store confidential information, including the sharing of personal details such as addresses, parent contact details, etc

3. As DT, always liaise with the victim around collection of the child, changes in routine, court orders that are in place, and emergency procedures to follow should someone need to be contacted quickly.

Picking up the pieces – addressing the pupil's learning and emotional needs

As we all know, domestic violence is prevalent in homes across Britain and schools have to pick up the pieces each day for those children who have had their sense of safety, security and peace of mind torn away from them. For a child living within an abusive environment, learning can be a huge challenge as their thoughts are often consumed with so many things – including concerns about the safety of the abused parent. The lack of feeling safe and secure has many negative physical, emotional, social and behavioural effects, all of which make teaching these vulnerable children a challenge.

Provide practical, relevant training for staff

Research that went into Save the Children's 2006 report, *Safe Learning*, showed that 'education professionals are often unclear about the best way to address the needs of children and young people affected by domestic violence'. A school can help provide quality education for these children by training all their staff on both the impact of living with domestic violence and the effects on learning. The training should include:

- raising staff awareness of what domestic violence is, including the facts, the myths and the signs
- issues related to domestic violence, and the short- and long-term effects on children

- how to provide a supportive learning environment that considers the learning needs of children coping with domestic violence
- practical strategies that provide consistent and frequent positive encouragement, and support for this group of vulnerable children
- creating a classroom ethos where children are encouraged to talk about their wishes and feelings – this could be activity focused on either drawing or writing about what is happening and how they feel about it
- a list of questions staff can use if they suspect that a child is experiencing domestic violence
- the benefits of offering 1:1 time with a learning mentor (if possible), who can help reduce barriers to learning while forging a trusting and supportive point of contact.

Be a listening school

Most importantly, schools need to teach these vulnerable children about safe relationships, respect, personal safety and citizenship. It is therefore vital that a school has a comprehensive PDMU/LLW curriculum in place and an established whole school culture that is supportive, welcoming and clearly shouts out that it is a listening school.

Useful contacts and resources

You can reach the NSPCC National Child Protection Helpline on 0808 800 5000.

Safe Learning (2006) is a guide for educational professionals has been produced by Save the Children in conjunction with Women's Aid. It offers an insight into children's experiences of domestic violence and how these may affect their learning, and makes suggestions as to how educational professionals could respond in order to support children and minimise any disruption to their education.

www.thehideout.org.uk has a section for adults containing information, resources, and an educational toolkit that teachers and other professionals can draw upon to meet the educational needs of children and young people to prevent and respond to domestic violence

www.dartsscotland.org/curriculum – the website for Domestic Abuse Resources and Training for Schools in Scotland

There is a section within the NSPCC website that is dedicated to domestic abuse and includes guidance, practice resources, statistics and research.

Local numbers to keep handy

Find out and keep a record nearby of the phone numbers for your local:

- Child Protection Support Service for Schools
- Children's Social Services – Gateway Team
- Women's Aid – Training Team (can come and deliver to pupils and or staff)
- Education welfare service

Author details

Debs Ward Debs Ward is an assistant headteacher at Cottingley Village Primary School in Yorkshire. She is also the DT and has responsibility for the looked-after children in the school