

# Links between Domestic Abuse and speech, language and communication needs

Briefing note – September 2021

## The issue

People with speech, language and communication needs are at increased risk of domestic abuse. They may be actively targeted by perpetrators, because of the difficulties they face in understanding and explaining what has happened to them, and may face barriers to asking for help and accessing the support available.

Public Health England's Disability and domestic abuse – risk, impacts and response (2015) reported that disabled people – including those with communication needs – experience disproportionately higher rates of domestic abuse more severely and for longer periods of time.

Speech, language and communication needs are domestic abuse risk factors in their own right. They are also highly prevalent – often hidden and unidentified – within some other vulnerabilities and domestic abuse risk factors. These include mental health, substance misuse, literacy difficulties, learning disability, brain injury, neurodiversity, cognitive issues, and homelessness.

Speech, language and communication needs can result from lifelong or acquired conditions and for children and young people they may be part of a special educational need or disability.

Tackling domestic abuse is of course not only about supporting victims, but also preventing perpetrators. In order to address the behaviour of the perpetrator, it is vital that any speech, language and communication needs that they may have are properly identified and treated.

## Findings from research

1. Experiencing and/or witnessing domestic abuse can also have a huge impact on children and young people's speech, language and communication development. This can impact their education, relationships outside the home, employment prospects and mental health and wellbeing. Research has shown that children whose mothers experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) during the child's first four years had poorer language skills in middle childhood than children whose mothers did not experience IPV. Research conducted by Refuge indicated that children's development in the pre-school years is significantly affected by domestic violence, particularly speech and language development." (Conway, L. J., Cook, F., Cahir, P., Brown, S., Reilly, S., Gartland, D., Mensah, F., & Giallo, R., 2021; Refuge, 2004).
2. Research conducted by domestic violence charity Refuge has found that pre-school children exposed to domestic violence are likely to be at risk of developing significant speech and language problems and showed a significant difference in hearing and speech development. (Refuge, 2005)
3. Evidence shows that domestic violence can impact on children's educational attainment and children who have experienced domestic violence can have difficulty with expressive language which can impact on cognitive development, especially reading and writing. (Cobos-Cali, M. et al. 2018)
4. Maltreated children are likely to have poor language and social communication skills. (Van de Kolk, B., 2015) and Language and social skills in maltreated children can be poor, but may be improved with changes in environment and additional support. (Lum, J.A.G. et al, 2018)
5. Evidence has found that flashbacks and chronic stress shut down language areas and language skills may be diminished or lost in the longer term. (Yehuda, N., 2016)
6. High-risk young people, such as those who are subject to child protection orders because of suspected or confirmed maltreatment, face an elevated risk of communication needs. (Snow, P.C. et al., 2012)
7. Evidence suggests that children in abusive or neglectful situations are likely to develop insecure attachment to their caregivers which can lead to difficulties in social communication, reduced language skills, an impaired ability to feel and express emotions, and a limited vocabulary for thoughts and feelings. (Sadiq F.A. et al., 2012; Beeghly, M. and Cicchetti, D., 1994; Barlow, J. and Schrader McMillan, A., 2010; Lemche, E. et al., 2004)

