Editorial (CAR 29:4)

Safeguarding children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The world has been rocked by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which has caused huge changes to all our lives. Entire populations have been socially isolated with daily life completely altered by the virus control measures implemented by governments. For children and young people the 'lockdown' has been particularly difficult [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED TEXT IS FOR THE MARGIN]; with many schools shut, children have been isolated from friends and peer networks, their routines disrupted, social lives and support opportunities considerably restricted and they have been required to stay at home with their families for an extended length of time. There have been a number of reports highlighting children and young people's vulnerabilities during the period of lockdown, including mental health difficulties (Young Minds, 2020), an increase in calls to Childline (Simpson, 2020), increased exposure to online abuse (Internet Watch Foundation, 2020) and risk of harm from violence in the home between adults (Bradbury Jones *et al.*, 2020; Chandan *et al.*, 2020; Green *et al.*, 2020; Peterman *et al*., 2020; UN Women, 2020). At the same time, issues such as redeployment and reduced face-to-face contacts with families have raised concern among some professionals that children's needs would be missed. For front-line practitioners, the COVID-19 pandemic has required children's health, welfare, education and safeguarding services to be adapted and delivered very differently (Ferguson et al, 2020). As we are writing this Editorial for *Child Abuse Review*, the UK has entered a period of recovery and restoration of services; essentially this involves getting public services up and running again for the population, and returning aspects of services as much as possible to business as usual. However, all four countries are tackling this differently and social distancing measures and the shielding of vulnerable groups continues. As the lockdown restrictions are eased, *Child Abuse Review* has put out a call for papers reflecting on professionals' understanding and learning from response to COVID-19, across public sector and third sector organisations. We very much hope that you will join and contribute to this important discussion.

The first two papers in this issue focus on how domestic violence perpetrators continue to use coercive control against their children post separation from their partners [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED TEXT IS FOR THE MARGIN], this is particularly important given the lockdown and reports of increased incidence of domestic violence. The first paper by Emma Katz from Liverpool Hope University and colleagues from the University of Lapland, Finland (2020) draws on a qualitative meta-synthesis of two data sets of qualitative interviews conducted with children and young people in the UK and in Finland. The UK data set comprised interviews with 15 children and young people (5 males and 9 females, aged 10–20 years) with past experience of domestic violence and the Finnish data set comprised 14 interviews (3 males and 11 females, aged 4–21 years). The datasets were initially analysed separately using thematic analysis and then combined using Aguirre and Bolton's (2014) qualitative meta-synthesis approach. The paper provides important knowledge about how children and young people can experience coercive control from their fathers post-separation. This combined data set offers an insight into the tactics fathers and father figures use to exert coercive control from children's perspectives. Three important themes are discussed in the paper including: 'dangerous fathering' where children are made to feel frightened and unsafe by threats, intimidation, violence and/or stalking; 'admiral' fathering described in the children's narratives as 'their father/father figure playing the roles of a caring, indulgent, concerned and/or vulnerable-victim father' (Katz *et al.*, 2020, p. XXX); and omnipresent fathering in which children experienced a fearful mental and emotional state.

This paper shows from children's own accounts how they may be harmed by non-physical abusive tactics and behaviours and reinforces the need, as Thompson-Walsh *et al.* (2018) have previously described, for thorough and ongoing assessment post-separation of fathers who have a history of domestic violence when decisions are made about their involvement in contact and parenting. Katz *et al.* (2020, p. XXX) conclude their paper by stressing the need for agencies to develop much more robust responses to fathers perpetrating coercive control and to identify and support children and young people 'as direct victims/survivors of coercive control' and prioritise 'their rights to be free of this abuse'.

The Continuing Professional Development (CPD) piece in this issue by Stephanie Holt (2020) from The University of Dublin, Trinity College also focusses on domestic abuse and post-separation contact. This important paper reflects on the quality of post-separation contact arrangements for children and their mothers in situations where there has been a history of domestic violence and raises questions about whether decisions made about post-separation contact are founded on sound evidence. Holt (2020) highlights the risks of significant harm facilitated through the process of separation and in post-separation agreements and argues strongly for professionals to recognise what the reality of contact

with abusive fathers can sometimes be like for children. She draws on discussions which took place at an International Symposium held in London in 2017 which sought to identify best practices around post-separation arrangements for children when dealing with allegations of domestic abuse in family law proceedings. Holt (2020, p. XXX) argues that evidence emerging from the Symposium highlighted 'three powerful' yet 'problematic assumptions' influencing a strident international 'pro-contact discourse'. She describes these 'problematic assumptions' as follows:

> 'It is believed that contact is almost always in the child's best interest; secondly that the abusive history ends with separation and thirdly that children's participation in the decision-making process is harmful.' (Holt, 2020, p. XXX)

Holt (2020) argues that if professionals accept these assumptions without criticism then children's needs will not be kept paramount. This CPD piece highlights the importance of children's right to be listened to and heard and that they should be fully involved in expressing their wishes and experiences about post-separation contact. Holt (2020, p. xxx) demands that:

> 'practice, policy and research challenge the assumption that contact is inevitably in the child's best interests as this may clash heavily with the culture of safety and protection at the heart of interventions designed to meet the needs of women and children experiencing domestic abuse.'

The third paper in this issue is by Sharon Vincent and colleagues (2020) from Northumbria University and reports on interviews with experts involved in UK child abuse inquiries to seek their perceptions about the aims and outcomes of public inquiries. Public inquiries are major reviews organised by governments and conducted to investigate matters of serious public interest and concern, including child abuse and neglect. This study draws on a thematic analysis of the proceedings of a four-day expert summit held in Scotland in 2017 and interviews with 16 key informants who had significant involvement in current or previous child abuse inquiries or practices reviews. The findings of this study are quite significant and reveal that summit and interview participants felt that the three main functions of inquiries 'learning lessons and prevention; finding out what happened/establishing the truth; and justice' were not always compatible and not always achieved (Vincent *et al.*, 2020, p. XXX). Participants talked about 'inquiry fatigue' with often predictable findings and, while noting that <u>public inquiries can raise public awareness about child abuse, there is little evidence of their effectiveness</u> [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED TEXT IS FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. 'Public inquiries can raise public awareness about child abuse, [yet] there is little evidence of their effectiveness]. Vincent *et al*.'s (2020) paper also points to disagreement among participants about whether public inquiries are 'appropriate forum[s] for hearing victims' and survivors' voices'. The authors noted that:

> ‘participants in both phases of this study felt that victims should be at the centre of any process to investigate child abuse and they should be able to talk about the effects that abuse had on their lives not just about what happened to them at the time.’ (Vincent *et al.*, 2020, p. XXX)

Concerns were also expressed about whether victims received appropriate support or counselling both during and following an inquiry, particularly if they preferred not to provide evidence. The paper discusses possible alternatives to public inquiries including the option of a small team of people who understand child abuse and neglect leading an investigation, or the research-focused model of investigation used in some of the Nordic countries. Vincent *et al*. (2020, p. XXX) highlight the need to ensure public enquiries are conducted ‘efficiently and effectively’ to reduce costs and ensure that learning does have an impact on practice. They remind readers that:

> ‘inquiries are only once source of evidence about what is happening in child protection practice and cases where things have gone wrong should be considered alongside evidence from the large number of cases where children are well protected.’ (Vincent *et al.*, 2020, p. XXX)

Our next paper by Yanyan Ni and colleagues (2020) from University College London and Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China, reports on research which was conducted to examine the effects of different types of child maltreatment on adolescents' emotional and behavioural problems. Data were also collected from one parent of each participant and were reported in an earlier article (Ni *et al.*, 2018), this paper provides the young people's perspectives. The study involved young people aged 10–16 years in two urban and rural schools from Zhejiang Province in China, who were invited to complete a questionnaire survey distributed through the schools. The survey content was informed by a literature review, two existing validated measures of maltreatment, the Conflicts Tactics Scale Parent–Child (CTSPC) and the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version (ICAST-C), with emotional and behavioural problems being assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). In total, 791 completed questionnaires were received.

Prevalence of different forms of maltreatment during the past year identified high levels of child maltreatment in home settings, with 37.7 per cent of children experiencing physical maltreatment, 47.5 per cent emotional maltreatment, 49.4 per cent reported witnessing domestic violence and 20.9 per cent of young people reporting more than three types of maltreatment. Only 26 per cent of the participants reported no maltreatment. Data analysis using multinomial logistic regression found that emotional abuse in the adolescents was consistently associated with both behavioural and emotional problems [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED TEXT IS FOR THE MARGIN], after adjustments

for exposure to other abuse and socio-economic factors. The study showed that severe physical abuse (which included being 'beaten up', choked to prevent breathing, and threatened with a knife) 'showed the strongest association with behavioural problems', while for adolescents witnessing domestic abuse alone was not associated with behavioural/emotional problems (Ni *et al.*, 2020, p. XXX). The authors found that, 'The effect size of emotional maltreatment was greater for girls, while physical maltreatment and non-contact punishment has greater effects among boys' (p. xxx). Study results also showed that an increase in the number of maltreatment types 'had a cumulative negative effect on child emotional and behavioural problems' (p. xxx). The authors argue that with such high levels of child maltreatment in family homes causing considerable behavioural and emotional harms to young people, that there is a need for widespread national education campaigns and programmes for parents and the introduction of a formal child protection system in the country.

The fifth paper in this issue is a study by Siobhan Murphy (2020) from the University of Southern Denmark, Odense and colleagues from London, Coleraine and Copenhagen, who also studied the effects of different types of child maltreatment on psychiatric outcomes. The study is part of a larger project exploring risk factors and outcomes of different types of abuse and neglect. Participants (4718) were randomly selected by the Danish Centre for Social Research using the total birth cohort of children born in 1984 in Denmark. Structured interviews (administered in the home or via telephone) were conducted with 2980 participants and these data were supplemented with linked administrative data from the Danish health and social registers. In total, 411 participants (13.8%) reported child maltreatment, 'of which 9.7 per cent were classed as emotionally abused, 2.0 per cent sexually abused and 2.1 per cent experienced co-occurring forms of abuse' (Murphy *et al.*, 2020, p. xxx). The most common disorders were substance misuse (9.7%), mood disorder (4.1%), stress-related and adjustment disorder (3.6%) and major depressive disorder (intermittent) (3.1%). The multivariate analysis showed that all maltreatment types 'were associated with psychiatric outcomes independent of other forms of adversity and parental history of psychiatric conditions' (p. xxx). The study also examined comorbidity among the maltreatment sub-groups which revealed that 'substantial number of individuals with psychiatric conditions had more than one diagnosis' (p. xxx). The authors thus conclude from these high rates of comorbidity 'that maltreated children experience a complex symptom profile that requires more tailored treatment interventions that are developmentally appropriate' (p. xxx). They argue that an early intervention approach that adopt this approach this 'may offset the risk trajectory for co-occurring psychiatric conditions' (p. xxx).

Our next paper in this issue is a very interesting Short Report by Carolina Øverlien (2020) from the Norwegian Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, Oslo, and Stockholm University. This paper returns to the subject of domestic violence and reports on a survey conducted with the 46

domestic violence refuges across Norway to look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children living in refuges. In the paper Øverlien outlines how refuges play a key role in Norwegian society. The anonymous survey was distributed at the beginning of April 2020 to obtain an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the virus control measures implemented across the country on victims of domestic violence and abuse. The survey achieved a 100 per cent response rate and highlighted that children were the group that refuge staff (83%) were most concerned about. Refuge staff were both concerned about children living in households with domestic violence, and also children living in the refuges but not receiving the support that they needed due to the pandemic. For children living outside the refuge staff were particularly concerned that violence 'would remain undisclosed, as contact between adults outside of the family and the abused child has been so dramatically reduced' (Øverlien, 2020, p. XXX). This concern was exacerbated as schools and daycare centres were also closed and for many children living with abuse and domestic violence 'school represents normality and a zone free from the abusive parent' (p. XXX). Also 43 per cent of the respondents reported that their clients believed that having children in the home during the day increased the risks for violence and abuse. Øverlien (2020) concludes by stressing the need for vigilance among health, social care and education staff in identifying the negative consequences of the pandemic when children start returning to services. She also highlights the significant resource requirements of institutions including domestic violence refuges and services for children and young people 'particularly those who provide safety and support to children living with domestic violence and abuse' who need to 'find new and creative ways to reach children and young people living in vulnerable situations'(p. xxx).

Our final paper in this issue is a continuing professional development paper by Ben Donagh (2020) submitted to *Child Abuse Review*'s call for papers reflecting on practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on his experiences as an operational manager of two specialist children's services his informative paper reflects on the practices of specialist services delivering support to children and young people in households experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Both the pieces by Øverlien (2020) and Donagh (2020) provide important insights into how specialist services have been working with children and young people living in situations of domestic violence [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED TEXT IS FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. 'Important insights into how specialist services have been working with children and young people living in situations of domestic violence [during the COVID-19 pandemic]']. Donagh (2020) also emphasises in his piece the impact on professionals who have continued to work and provide remote support to children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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