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Editorial

Violence and abuse in children's lives

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As this issue of *Child Abuse Review* goes to press there are a number of important issues concerning children and young people's harm reaching the news in the UK, including the Children's Society's report on adolescent neglect - '*Troubled Teens*' (Raws, 2016) which has highlighted the links between parenting and teenage neglect. In addition, widespread allegations of historical child sexual abuse in football are emerging [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] after the NSPCC, supported by the Football Association, set up a new helpline for footballers to report abuse. This highlights the vulnerabilities of young players participating in organised sport and as Sidebotham has previously underlined there is a need for

'a shift in public awareness of, and professional responses to, the risks posed [in organised sport], with more robust systems to enable children and young people to participate safely without fear of physical, emotional or sexual harassment or abuse.' (2015: 391)

Child Abuse Review has previously published studies on abuse and childhood harm in sport (see for example, Stafford *et al.*, 2013; and Rhind *et al.*, 2015).

Domestic violence and abuse

The papers within our first issue of 2017 are largely concerned with abuse in the home environment and focus on the impact of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) on children's lives. *Domestic abuse and safeguarding children* was the subject of our Special Issue in 2015, when our Guest Editors Cathy Humphreys and Caroline Bradbury-Jones outlined seven key principles from the literature relating to focus, response and intervention (Humphreys and Bradbury-Jones, 2015). As a major public health and social care issue, there is now considerable awareness of the evidence that exposure to domestic violence is always harmful to children [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. Children can be harmed emotionally, by the controlling and coercive

behaviours associated with DVA which may be just as damaging (if not more so) than incidents involving physical violence (Katz, 2016).

The first paper of the issue by Christine Jones and colleagues (2016) from Scotland, describes a mapping review of UK child protection research. This work was undertaken with a view to developing a typology of all UK empirical research published between January 2010 and December 2014 and to use this typology to describe the features of research conducted during this period. This informative paper reports on the types of abuse and neglect examined in published research, the substantive topics and the research designs employed, with a view to informing future research agendas. A key finding of the review was that a substantial proportion of the empirical research focused on the general subject of child maltreatment, with fewer studies focussing on maltreatment types such as bullying or exposure to domestic abuse. While the research studies employed a range of designs, the most common were those categorised as qualitative, which accounted for a third of the publications.

Jones and colleagues (2016) identified eleven categories of substantive topics for the child protection research they reviewed, albeit acknowledging the difficulties involved in this aspect of the research. They found that

‘the nature of consequences or outcomes in adulthood was the most frequently researched substantive topic in the academic literature (21%), followed by system or practice responses (14%), attitudes and beliefs (11%), and the nature of consequences or outcomes in childhood (11%)’ (Jones *et al.*, 2016, p. x).

Jones *et al.* (2016, p. x) noted the ‘disproportionate emphasis on some topics in comparison to others’, with many more studies focussing on the consequences or outcomes of child abuse and neglect in adulthood than studies examining the consequences of abuse in childhood. There was also less emphasis on research focussing on interventions intended to prevent child maltreatment. These authors highlight the ‘lack of methodological diversity in the field’ (Jones *et al.*, 2016, p. x) and suggest that there is a need for more research employing RCT designs to examine the effectiveness of interventions [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN].

Taking forward this focus on interventions, William Turner and colleagues (2016) in our second paper in this issue, report on a well conducted systematic review to seek out evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to improve the response of professionals to DVA survivors and their children. Twenty-one studies met the research inclusion criteria: 18 pre-post intervention surveys and three randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The interventions included were directed at a range

of professionals including nurses, social workers physicians and teachers. Turner *et al.* (2016) found good evidence that training interventions improved knowledge, attitudes towards DVA and clinical competence up to a year after delivery. However, there was less evidence around system-level interventions, which aimed to change practices at an organisational level, as well as increase inter-organisational collaboration. Drawing on the evidence from this review, Turner *et al.* (2016) suggest that effective interventions included

‘an added experiential or post-training discussion component (alongside the didactic component), incorporating ‘booster’ sessions at regular intervals after the end of training, advocating and promoting access to local DVA agencies or other professionals with specific DVA expertise, and... drawing from a clear and well-articulated protocol for intervention.’ (p. X)

Yet only one of the studies included measured outcomes for parents and children, and as Turner *et al.* (2016) conclude,

‘there remains uncertainty about whether these training and system change interventions improve outcomes for parents and children. Those outcomes need to be measured in future evaluations of interventions addressing the needs of children exposed to DVA, as do potential moderators of intervention effects in the form of child, programme, and contextual characteristics. Such evidence is a necessary precursor to assessing programmes’ cost-effectiveness.’ (p. X)

The next paper in this issue by Sue Peckover and Bernice Golding (2016) addresses the important issue of multiagency working in cases of domestic abuse. Their paper reports upon the learning that emerged from a development project led by WomenCentre in nine local authorities in the North of England to facilitate improvements in multiagency working in domestic abuse and safeguarding children. Peckover and Golding (2016) describe an evaluative research study which examined the work of the project, drawing on data from an analysis of case mapping and project reports, and data from 24 semi-structured telephone interviews with a range of professionals and managers from women’s support services, children’s health and social care services, probation and the police, and members of the WomenCentre team. These authors draw attention to the complexity involved in multiagency working with families experiencing domestic abuse. Case mapping identified differences in how professionals understand domestic abuse cases, particularly in relation to ‘risk’ and how women and children’s safety was considered. Peckover and Golding (2016, p. x) found in the project evaluation that a lack of single agency accountability meant that responses were often fragmented [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. They found that ‘too often domestic abuse is subsumed by other competing priorities or concerns, either organisationally or within families/cases’ (Peckover and Golding, 2016, p. x). These authors conclude

that there is still much work to be done around “professional practice and responses” to ensure that multiagency working is safe for victims of domestic abuse (Peckover and Golding, 2016, p.x).

Young people and intimate partner violence

In our next paper Nina Åkerlund and Linn Sandberg (2016) from Sweden report on a study examining the experiences of older children exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV), with a particular focus on the role of children’s social networks. This paper set out to examine how older children describe both their own responses when exposed to IPV and the responses of the adults around them in their social network. The data were collected as part of a larger study of children and young people living in rural areas witnessing violence at home and draw on interviews with ten children (6 girls and 4 boys) aged 11-19 years, who were recruited from social services and through a local treatment programme for abused women and their children. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006); Åkerlund and Sandberg (2016) then adopted an interesting approach using three main cases as ‘core narratives’ to illustrate the major themes. Their analysis of children’s narratives found that the children responded in a variety of ways to situations of IPV [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] as previous research has found. The paper illustrates that responses were highly interactional and that the ways children responded affected how the adults around them responded. Åkerlund and Sandberg’s (2016, p. X) analysis showed that ‘children who position themselves, and are positioned, as competent and adult-like do not receive immediate support and protection’ and may not be regarded as a vulnerable victim; ‘whereas children who are perceived as vulnerable and positioned as incompetent to make decisions about their own lives receive adults’ preferred support’, yet their own agency may be overlooked. The research findings also suggested that there are children who are positioned as both competent and vulnerable, which appears to be related to their ability to disclose and communicate their needs. Åkerlund and Sandberg (2016, p. X) highlight the implications for practice emerging from their research and in particular the need for professionals, ‘to assess to what extent networks can be utilised to support children exposed to IPV’, the importance of maintaining balance between children’s need for protection and their rights to influence and agency, and recognising that their individual needs are likely to vary over time.

Mothers’ agency in protecting their children from violence

The final paper in this issue by Kendra Nixon and colleagues (2016) from Canada challenges the notion of abused women failing to protect their children [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED

WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] and presents the findings of a qualitative study of 18 abused mothers. The women who participated in the study, fourteen of whom self-identified as Aboriginal, were recruited from a women's resource centre and a crisis shelter. Half the women lived in Winnipeg and the other half were from a remote northern community. All were mothers and their children were aged between 6 months and 17 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis and grounded theory techniques. All participants had experienced physical violence by male partners; eleven had sustained serious injuries and eleven stated that their children had witnessed the violence, with three children being directly assaulted and six women reporting that their children had tried to intervene during the violence. Through the qualitative findings presented in the paper Nixon *et al.* (2016) show how the abused women not only engage in acts and behaviours to protect their children from immediate physical violence, 'but also to mitigate the potential emotional harms of exposure to violence and to prevent children from continuing violence in their own future relationships' (p. X).

Mothers' protective acts including physically separating the children from the abuser, teaching the children a safety plan or a secret code word in case of a violent situation, adopting different ways to pre-empt violence, avoiding fights/confrontation, accessing informal supports such as family members, neighbours and community members or more formal supports such as calling the police or going to a shelter. As well as trying to protect their children from immediate threats of violence Nixon *et al.* (2016) also describe how mothers in their study 'also tried to mitigate the emotional harm caused by witnessing violence' (p. X). Nixon *et al.* (2016) conclude their paper by making the cases that 'by simply asking mothers how they protect their children, professionals send a powerful message about the expertise that these mothers have in ensuring their children's wellbeing' (p. X). These researchers stress the need for professionals to support abused women in their parenting [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN], by exploring 'their strengths and protective capacities' and preserving women's self-esteem and self-efficacy. This, the authors argue, will result in better outcomes for children.

The training update in this issue - *Trafficking, Exploitation and Modern Slavery e-learning* course by virtual College - is reviewed by Patricia Hynes (2017), whose comprehensive analysis suggests that this CPD online training is a good place for a broad range of professionals to begin to learn about the complex issue of 'trafficking' and safeguarding responses. This issue concludes with three book reviews: Karl Huntbach (2017) reviews *Children as Co-Researchers: The Need for Protection*, an edited text by Caroline Bradbury-Jones, which provides a very thoughtful and clear approach to working with children involved in research studies; Tamsin Cottis (2017) reviews J. Warner's

powerful text on *The Emotional Politics of Social Work and Child Protection*; and Phil Milner (2017) reviews *Children Behind Bars: Why the Abuse of Child Imprisonment Must End* by Carolyne Willow.

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