



“At last there is
someone I can talk to”

Are children experiencing domestic abuse a vulnerable group?

A Handbook for Schools



Children are to be recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right in the new Domestic Abuse Bill.

When the Bill receives Royal Assent, the Government, organisations and professionals who come into contact with children will need to demonstrate the ways in which this recognition has changed and improved the services and support that are available for the children in their care.



"Children exposed¹ to domestic abuse are victims of child abuse"²

When considering the vulnerable groups of children within schools, we strongly recommend that children experiencing domestic abuse are recognised as part of this grouping.

We should view experiencing domestic abuse and our response as a society to this as a children's rights issue as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.³

Schools should carefully monitor and support the development of children's outcomes over time including but not limited to:

- Safeguarding
- Their emotional health and well being
- Their academic progress and attainment
- Their attendance
- Their behaviour and risk of exclusion

This document has been created by Operation Encompass in association with Psychology Associates and provides an overview of the rationale behind this recommendation and some simple yet effective ways of supporting children experiencing domestic abuse.

It may be helpful to read this in conjunction with the Recovery, Re-Introduction and Renewal Handbook, which was commissioned and funded by the DfE and working with the AEP, NASEN and Whole School SEND

¹ Please note that Operation Encompass uses the word 'experience' rather than 'exposed' or 'witness' to refer to a child who is living with domestic abuse

² Home Office Consultation and Response Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

³ UNCRC 1989

Covid-19 has seen an increase in the numbers of children experiencing domestic abuse and some of these may be children not previously known to schools.

Noticing, listening to and supporting these children is part of the professional duty of every teacher in every educational setting and forms part of a safeguarding response to Domestic Abuse:

Domestic abuse is the most prevalent risk affecting children in need, who receive statutory help and protection from children's social care.

These children have complex needs, and in school they do far worse than their peers⁴.

KCSIE 2020 states that: 'all school and college staff should be particularly alert to the potential need for early help for a child who:

Is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as drug and alcohol misuse, adult mental health issues and domestic abuse;'⁵

There is a wide range of research which clearly demonstrates the damage done to children, throughout their lifespan, when they experience Domestic Abuse in their life.^{6 7}

This damage can be caused at each and every stage of their lives, from conception onwards and, whilst the impact may change, develop and vary dependent upon the individual, the age of the child, and the nature and duration of the domestic abuse, the damage is very real.

Experiencing domestic abuse is recognised as an Adverse Childhood Experience⁸ (ACE) and as such, helping children to heal from this trauma is a crucial aspect of the work of all schools.⁹



4 Home Office: Response and Consultation Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

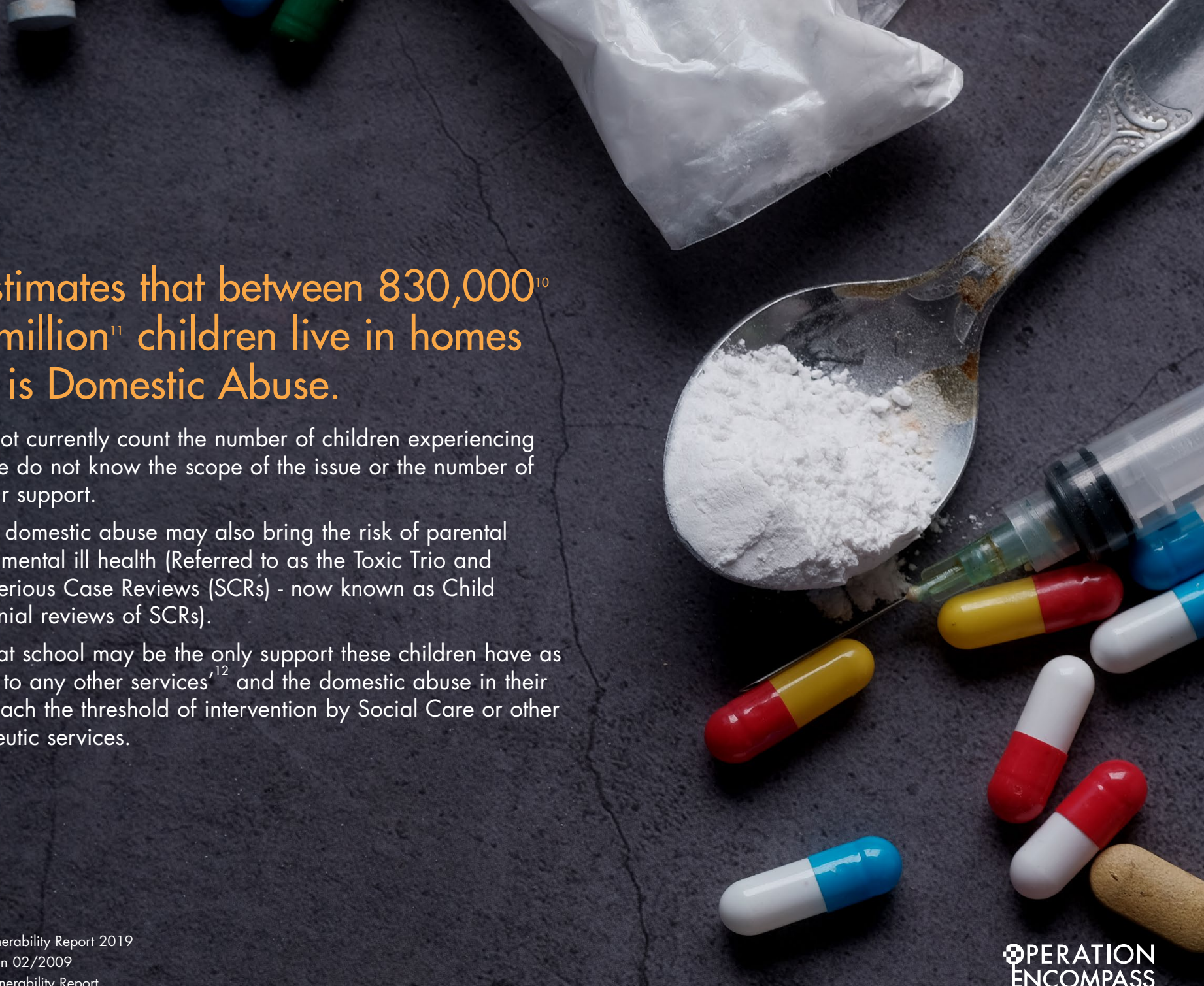
5 KCSIE 2020 Page 7

6 John-Devaney-Research-Review-The-Impact-of-Domestic-Violence-on-Children

7 Royal College of Psychiatrists Domestic Abuse and Violence: The impact on children and adolescents

8 Felitti and Anda

9 KCSIE 2020 Page 11



There are estimates that between 830,000¹⁰ and over a million¹¹ children live in homes where there is Domestic Abuse.

The Government do not currently count the number of children experiencing Domestic Abuse so we do not know the scope of the issue or the number of children who need our support.

Living in a home with domestic abuse may also bring the risk of parental substance abuse and mental ill health (Referred to as the Toxic Trio and referenced in many Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) - now known as Child practice and the triennial reviews of SCR).

It is acknowledged that school may be the only support these children have as 'many are not known to any other services'¹² and the domestic abuse in their home may well not reach the threshold of intervention by Social Care or other commissioned therapeutic services.

10 Children's Commissioner Vulnerability Report 2019

11 Home Office Statistical Bulletin 02/2009

12 Children's Commissioner :Vulnerability Report

In 'normal' times domestic abuse is an issue of epic scale. It exists in all strata of society, it is in every ethnic group, every age group, every make up of relationship and geographically in every part of our country and it exists in every continent across the world.

The pandemic and consequent lockdown has exacerbated this situation¹³. During the lockdown and subsequent school closures, every police force and domestic abuse charity has seen a rise in numbers of reports of Domestic Abuse; this increase in the number of incidents has occurred globally and was foreseen by all governments. For those working in schools it means that there were and are a greater number of children experiencing more frequent incidents of domestic abuse in their homes and children were experiencing this at the very time the support, nurture and understanding normally accessible in schools was not available. Schools were no longer a place of safety available to all children.¹⁴

'Movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home – particularly those children already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations..... The situation is aggravated by children's lack of access to school friends, teachers, social workers and the safe space and services that schools provide'¹⁵

Whilst there has always been a need for schools to identify and support children experiencing domestic abuse as one of their vulnerable groups, there is an even greater imperative to do so at this unprecedented time.

Economic stress and unemployment are very strong stressors at any point for perpetrators which can lead them to increase their abuse but the pandemic has made these worse for many of our families.



13 The Pandemic Paradox: The impact of Covid-19 on Domestic Abuse

14 [Operation Encompass Response to Covid-19](#)

15 WHO Leader's Statement April 2020



The seriousness of this should not be underestimated:

*'Everyone needs to recognise that children exposed to domestic abuse are victims of a crime. They do not need to be directly physically harmed, but suffer when they are exposed to domestic abuse and live in an environment of fear and intimidation.'*¹⁶

Schools also can support children and families by being alert to the signs that domestic abuse may be occurring in a family: 'Schools and colleges can play a key role in preventing and detecting domestic abuse. They can make a difference by training their staff to spot the signs of domestic abuse in children, parents and colleagues so they know what to do if they have a concern and/or how to handle a disclosure.'¹⁷

The Joint Targeted Area Inspection 2017¹⁸ highlighted the need to:

Develop age-appropriate tools to understand the range of risks that children face;

Help schools support victims and families, particularly given the protective role education can play when the impact of domestic abuse is fully understood and taken into account.

¹⁶ Home Office: Response and Consultation Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

¹⁷ Home Office Domestic Abuse Statutory Draft Guidance 2020

¹⁸ JTAI 2017: The multi-agency response to children living with domestic abuse

A protective role involves linking our knowledge of domestic abuse as an ACE, to a school response to the needs of these children with a trauma informed approach that permeates the culture and ethos of the whole school:

“A trauma informed approach should be at the centre of all support provided to children and young people affected by domestic abuse. A strengths-based approach to recovery, building on ‘the resilient blocks in the child’s life’, has been shown to be effective in interventions for children.”¹⁹

We must also ensure that teaching about domestic abuse is a key aspect of all schools Relationships and Sex Education²⁰, and should start from educating the very youngest children about healthy relationships:

We recognise that if we want to change attitudes we need to engage with children at the earliest possible opportunity.

We know that exposure to domestic abuse can have a serious, lasting impact on children, with negative effects on their future behaviour and relationships. All children should be supported to understand that abuse is never acceptable²¹.

No child should ever experience the trauma caused by domestic abuse²²



19 Home Office Domestic Abuse Statutory Draft Guidance 2020

20 Operation Encompass working to break the cycle of Domestic Abuse

21 Home Office Response and Consultation Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

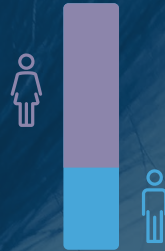
22 Home Office Response and Consultation Draft Domestic Abuse Bill

Some of the data around domestic abuse

Domestic Abuse is often not reported to the police so any figures we have are likely to be the tip of the iceberg and they give us only a partial picture.



One in five adult victims report their abuse to the police²³



In the year ending March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse in the last year²⁴ - 1.6 million women and 786,000 men



Research suggests that between 1 in 4 or 1 in 3²⁵ of children in the UK have experienced domestic abuse



Domestic Abuse is the most common factor at end of assessment for children in need, November 2020²⁶

²³ Crime in England and Wales 2015

²⁴ ONS survey ending March 2019

²⁵ Home Office Consultation and Response

²⁶ Department for Education Characteristics of Children in Need - November 2020

Children are at greater risk of direct harm if they live in a home where there is domestic abuse.

We should remember that there is no such thing as a typical victim, the abuse is nuanced and victims' responses to it are also nuanced.

Domestic Abuse still possesses a stigma and victims can feel embarrassed and ashamed and one of our roles in schools and that of other professionals is to make sure that the non-abusing parent understands that we will support them and their children, non-judgementally.



The Impact on Children

'We know domestic abuse can have a devastating, long-term impact on children.'

Growing up in a household of fear and intimidation can profoundly impact children's wellbeing and development, with lasting effects into adulthood. Children exposed to domestic abuse are more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties, do worse at school and experience domestic abuse in later life'.²⁷

But early intervention and a safe and secure nurturing relationship with at least one individual can disrupt that damage and can help a child develop resilience and enable healing to take place.²⁸

Early intervention has been proved to be more effective, less expensive and therefore more cost effective and to have an impact sooner than if we wait to intervene. 'The earlier we intervene, the less expensive, less intensive and more effective intervention is likely to be.'²⁹

27 Home Office Consultation and Response page 16

28 Centre on the Developing Child Harvard University

29 Dr Nadine Burke Harris 'The Deepest Well'



We have a responsibility to show professional curiosity especially when a child's behaviour changes:

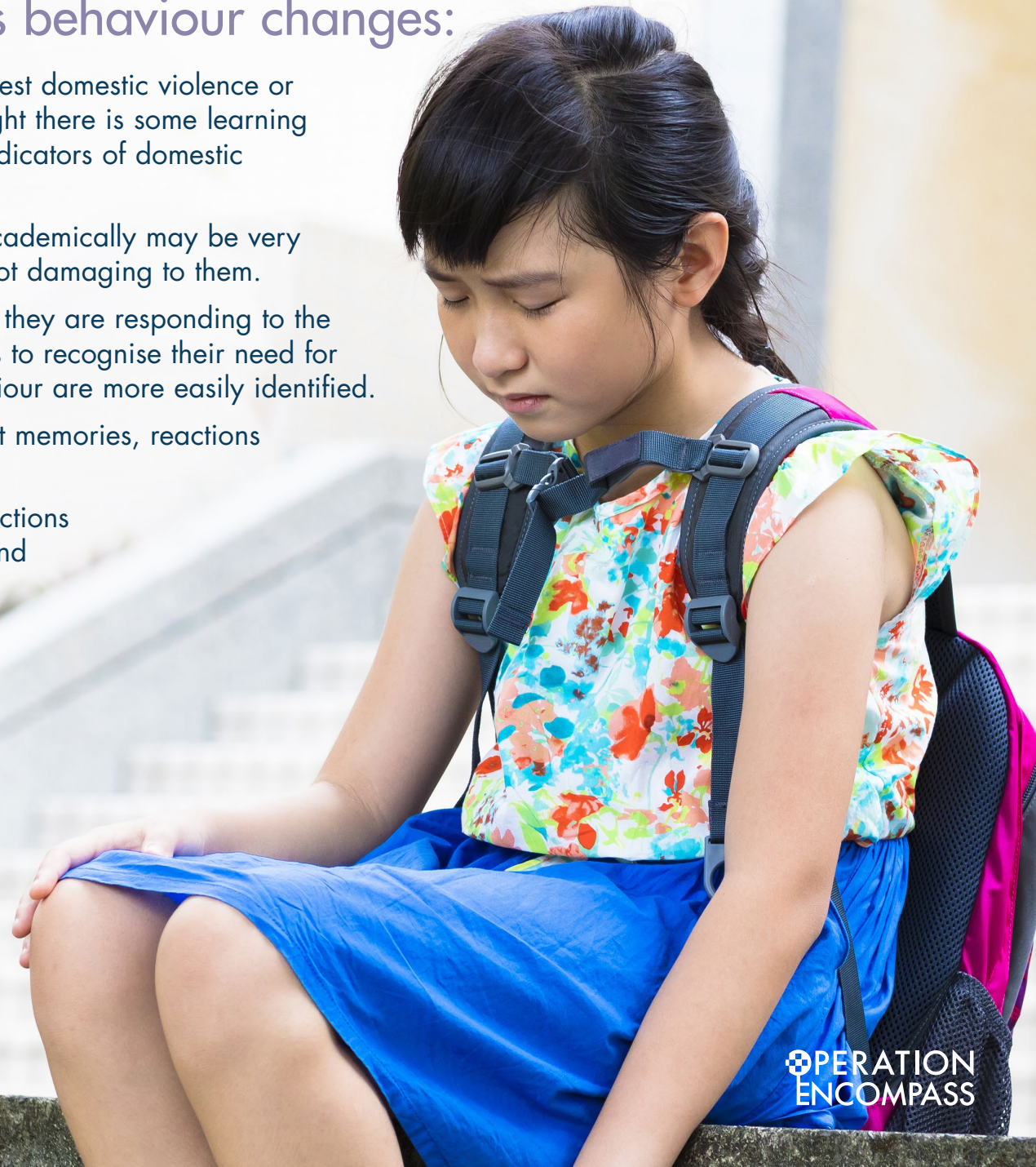
'XX's school was not aware of anything specifically to suggest domestic violence or abuse was happening within the family home. With hindsight there is some learning relating to changes of patterns of behaviour that may be indicators of domestic violence within families.³⁰

Some children are very quiet and studious in school and academically may be very successful. This does not mean that the domestic abuse is not damaging to them.

There are children whose needs can go unnoticed because they are responding to the trauma inwardly and this can therefore be harder for adults to recognise their need for support, whilst those children who show challenging behaviour are more easily identified.

Children in the same family may have dramatically different memories, reactions to and vantage points on shared experiences of the abuse.

Children do demonstrate agency and take many different actions to keep themselves, their siblings, the non-abusing parent and their pets as safe as possible.

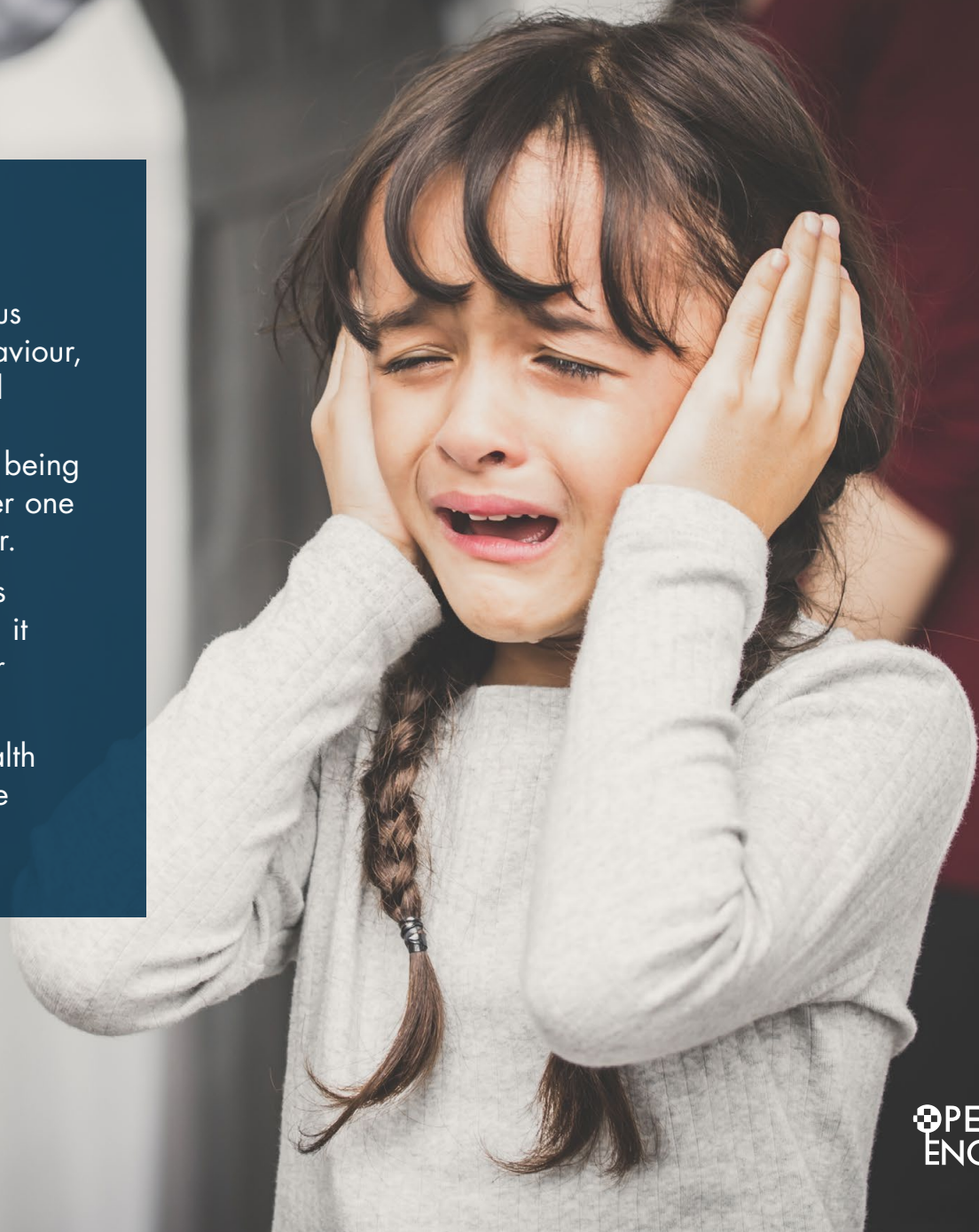


The impact can be severe

Implications for children are well researched and serious and can impact upon health, emotional wellbeing, behaviour, academic success, physical development and disrupted relationships. These children are often living a state of heightened anxiety and hyper vigilance with home not being a place of safety and security as it should be, but rather one of stress, trauma and a feeling of insecurity and danger.

Responses may be triggered by any and all of a child's senses and even they may not recognise these triggers; it could be the smell of a scent or aftershave, a particular noise or the taste of a food.

The link to the Toxic Trio, (Domestic Abuse, Mental Health and Substance Abuse) means that the experience of the child can be very toxic, damaging and life changing.





The impact can be long term

For those children where there is a negative impact upon academic performance, because of exclusion and absence from school and lack of ability to concentrate this can impact to poorer outcomes for employment in adulthood. These children are more likely to be involved in bullying as either a victim or perpetrator³¹

They are more likely to:

- show challenging behaviour which can lead to exclusion, be that fixed term or permanent and research shows that if a child is excluded from school by the age of 12, they are four times more, likely to end up in prison by the age of 22.³²
- have difficulty sleeping
- have difficulty forming healthy relationships as they grow up and this then means that they have less friends and relationships with supportive peers and adults. When they then experience future stressful situations, they have fewer people to support them through this.
- take part in risk taking behaviours which as they grow up may bring them to the notice of the police
- self-soothe using drugs and alcohol which again may bring them to the notice of the police
- grow up to be victims or perpetrators of domestic abuse themselves

31 Bullying in schools and exposure to domestic violence Anna Baldry

32 The University of Edinburgh Professor Susan McVie

When supporting our children in school we must remember that every behaviour is a communication and we must try to understand what the child is trying to convey to us.

There are the children where we know about the domestic abuse at home especially through participation in Operation Encompass.

There are the children where we suspect the domestic abuse at home.

Then there are the children where we have no idea about the domestic abuse but it is just as real.

The culture and ethos of our schools must support all three of these groups.

Professor Eamon McCrory explains:

“While the brain changes triggered by trauma can make it harder for a child to navigate and cope with everyday challenges, increasing the risk of mental health problems in the future, recovery is possible. We now know their brains adapt to help them cope. Relationships play a key role in that recovery, as they directly influence how the brain grows and develops. So parents, carers and professionals have a crucial role to play in promoting resilience. These relationships are at the heart of what drives positive change.”

In school we can provide those safe, secure, nurturing relationships as described above and make a difference to a child. That is why Operation Encompass was created.



To support those working with children experiencing Domestic Abuse **Operation Encompass** has created:

Free Online training about Domestic Abuse, the impact upon children and ways to support. Whilst created initially for Operation Encompass Key Adults this can be accessed by all from our website www.operationencompass.org

Free confidential advice line (see poster) staffed by Educational and Clinical Psychologists from Psychology Associates. By calling you can access free advice and guidance about how best to support children experiencing domestic abuse. You do not need to have received an Operation Encompass notification or indeed to be participating in Operation Encompass.

A range of videos to support teachers working with children in EYs, KS1-4 experiencing domestic abuse. These have been created by Educational and Clinical Psychologists: www.operationencompass.org and www.psychologyassociates.org.uk

A simple one-page poster Recovery and Resilience Planning resource for schools to use, created in partnership with Psychology Associates, considered as an 'aide memoire' to supporting children experiencing domestic abuse, trauma and adversity.



OPERATION ENCOMPASS

Are you concerned about a child or children in your school who are experiencing domestic abuse?

Would you like FREE advice and a professional dialogue with an Education Psychologist about how to best support them?

Call the Operation Encompass Teachers' Helpline

0204 513 9990

(Charged at local rate)

Monday to Friday 8.00am to 1.00pm

Funded by
Home Office
Department for Education

The areas on this Recovery and Resilience Planning sheet are interconnected and interdependent, a positive effect in one area will positively impact the other areas.

Relationships

Interpersonal contact between staff, children and families.

Loss of relational support is a significant threat to resilience.

- ✓ Time is needed throughout the school day to talk,
- ✓ play interact and engage in a shared activity.
- ✓ Observe and notice any changes in a child's behaviour and what this may be signalling.
- ✓ Ensure targeted and individual child and family needs are identified.
- ✓ Be kind and compassionate to others and yourself.

Engagement

Increased distractibility, day-dreaming, zoning out and irritability. Tiredness, apathy, disrupted sleep routines and loss of interest.

- ✓ We need to feel secure before we can focus
- ✓ and actively listen and engage.
- ✓ Accept the child is doing the best they can.
- ✓ Build on areas of interest in meaningful, practical
- ✓ and creative ways and elicit the child's views.
- ✓ Model curiosity and engagement alongside them.



Emotional Wellbeing

Bereavement and loss is at an unprecedented scale. Loss of tactile social interaction. Increased sense of isolation, rejection and heightened anxiety.

- ✓ Provide opportunities to connect with feelings
- ✓ that may be distressing and overwhelming.
- ✓ Fun and playfulness is protective to our
- ✓ threat-response system.
- ✓ Support emotion regulation and expression.
- ✓ We need to meet the emotional need before
- ✓ a child can effectively learn.

Learning

Social-emotional needs impact upon us cognitively. This can impede executive functioning and the capacity to focus, sustain attention, organise, plan and retain information.

- ✓ Establish routines, structure and predictability.
- ✓ Tailor the pace of learning and reduce
- ✓ cognitive load.
- ✓ Revisit earlier goals and interleave to test for
- ✓ mastery and retention.
- ✓ Build self-efficacy and a sense of achievement.



A child is seen from behind, standing in a field of tall grass. Their arms are raised high in the air, reaching towards a bright, glowing sunset sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden light that fills the scene. The child is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and dark shorts.

Our children need to experience safe, secure, nurturing relationships within a safe, secure and nurturing environment.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Operation Encompass website:

<https://www.operationencompass.org/>

Psychology Associates website:

<https://www.psychologyassociates.org.uk/>

<https://www.aep.org.uk/recovery-re-introduction-renewal/>

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu>