

# Refuge assessment and intervention for pre-school children exposed to domestic violence, August 2005

Under 5s at significant risk from effects of domestic violence



For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.

This ground breaking project is the first study worldwide to examine pre-school responses to domestic violence within a refuge setting. The Refuge project identifies ways of assessing and supporting young children to overcome the effects of domestic violence.

**Note: there is an overrepresentation of children under five years of age growing up in homes where domestic violence occurs and yet very few services in the UK exist to support this group.**

## **Findings conclude that:**

- Exposure to violence or trauma, and the resultant persisting fear with which the young child lives, can alter the developing brain.
- Pre-school children were found to be at significant risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems and speech and language problems.
- 50% of children in this project met the criteria for post-traumatic stress (PTS). The most frequently reported PTS symptoms for pre-schoolers in this study included: trouble paying attention; regression in behaviours such as toileting and language; and separation anxiety.
- Under five year old responses while witnessing violence against their mothers, ranging from persistent crying, screaming or vomiting, to trying to protect their mothers, to no emotional reaction at all.
- 23% of the children intervened during the violent incidents, thus putting themselves at greater risk of physical harm.

## **Overall conclusion**

Early intervention and support for pre-school children experiencing domestic violence is currently neither recognised, nor is there adequate provision to help them overcome the effects of trauma.

Refuge believes that the government has a duty to protect pre-school children who are experiencing domestic violence. It is essential that the government invests in further research; disseminates best practice guidelines to 'educate' key providers; and commits adequate and sustainable funding to provide much-needed support services.

**Refuge is calling for government to recognise this under-represented group and ensure that under 5's are placed at the centre of all future domestic violence policies.**

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## Introduction

The work and research described in this summary has been undertaken within the children's services at Refuge over the last four years. The work has been carried out by Shanee Barraclough, Refuge pre-school specialist/research psychologist, with the support of colleagues at Refuge and funded by the Department of Health.

The research is ground-breaking worldwide. It is the first study to look in depth at pre-school responses to domestic violence within a refuge setting. This document summarises our forays into this area of work.

Participants in the present study included 38 women and 33 pre-school children (aged from 7 months to 4 years 11 months) resident at Refuge.

Data on children's development was available for 80 pre-school children resident at Refuge. This was compared to a group of 37 children in the community.

## Refuge

Refuge, a national domestic violence charity for women and children, is the UK's largest single provider of specialist accommodation and support, both emotional and practical, to women and children escaping domestic violence.

On any one day Refuge supports 900 women and children.

## Children and domestic violence

- At least 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence.
- In 90% of domestic violence incidents, children are in the same or the next room (British Crime Survey, 1992).
- In over 50% of known domestic violence cases, children were also directly abused – NSPCC (1997) found a 55% overlap; Farmer & Owen (1995) found 52% overlap.

## Key points from literature review

There is an overrepresentation of young children (i.e. under 5 years of age) growing up in homes where domestic violence occurs (Fantuzzo et al., 1997; Moffitt & Caspi, 1998; Gjelsvik, Verhoek-Oftedahl & Pearlman, 2003).

Very young children exposed to domestic violence represent a significant and challenging group because they are:

- Less able to talk about their violent experiences.
- More likely to be overwhelmed by exposure to violence.
- More at risk due to their increased proximity to and dependence upon their caregivers. (The Violence Study Group, 1994; Osofsky, 1996; Holden, 2003).

The first years of a child's life are a critical time for development, and any disruption, particularly one such as chronic violence, in the very place which needs to be safe and nurturing, is likely to have long term negative impacts. (Zeanah, 1994).

A growing body of evidence suggests that exposure to violence or trauma, and the resultant persisting fear with which the young child lives can alter the developing brain, which is particularly sensitive to stress (Perry, 1997).



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## Key findings from Refuge research

26 mothers completed the pre-school traumatic stress questionnaire (PTSQ).

### The violence:

- All children reported witnessing violence.
- Children showed a range of responses while witnessing abuse from crying, screaming or vomiting, to trying to protect their mothers, to no emotional reaction at all.
- 23% of the children whose mothers completed the questionnaire actually intervened during the violent events, thus putting themselves at greater risk of physical harm.

### Post traumatic stress (PTS):

The most common set of trauma symptoms experienced by pre-school children were new fears and aggression, with 92% of children reported to be experiencing at least one of these symptoms.

The most frequently reported symptoms were:

- Increased trouble paying attention.
- Regression in behaviours such as toileting and language.
- New separation anxiety whenever separated from their mother.
- Appearing jumpy and nervous were the next most frequently reported symptoms.
- 50% met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTS, based on the Zero to Three Diagnostic Classification criteria (Zeanah 1994).

### Emotional and behavioural difficulties:

Mothers of 16 children completed the child behaviour checklist (CBCL).

- 56% of the pre-school children as reported by their mothers to be in the borderline/clinical range of concern for problems on the CBCL.
- 50% reported to be borderline/clinical for internalising problems and 38% for externalising problems.
- 44% of children were reported to be in the borderline/clinical range for somatic complaints while 38% were of clinical concern for 'diagnostical and statistical manual, version 1V defined' anxiety problems.

### Development:

Comparisons between children's achievement in the Refuge play-centre and in the community show a significant difference in hearing and speech development. Children at Refuge were assessed as achieving significantly less within the area of hearing and speech (M=64%) than those in other community play settings (M=91%).

Living in a violent home, in an atmosphere of unpredictability and fear, is unlikely to be conducive to imitating and trying out new sounds and words. The use of language at home as a model may also play a significant part - nearly all women reporting constant shouting and verbal abuse from their partners. In this environment young children learn to be still, quiet and almost invisible in the belief they can prevent any harm coming to their mothers.

In some cases children's language development may also be indirectly affected due to the effects of depression in their mothers. Mothers who are depressed may be more withdrawn and less verbally interactive and stimulating with their children; depressed mothers tend to be less verbal, less positive, and less responsive to their children (Downey & Coyne, 1990 in Huth-Bocks et al., 2001).

### Refuge intervention

In recognition of these needs Refuge recommends:

- Individual support sessions for pre-school children.
- Individual child-mother focused support sessions for mothers.
- Empathy groups for pre-school children.



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## Summary and recommendations

No other UK studies have reported on trauma symptoms in pre-school children exposed to domestic violence, yet what international literature there is suggests that these children are potentially at great risk of negative, life-altering consequences. Results suggest that pre-school children who directly witness domestic violence are at significant risk of:

- Experiencing PTS.
- Internalising and externalising problems.
- Significant speech and language delay.

All children experiencing domestic violence should have priority access to speech and language therapy, young children's mental health services and early years education.

This project has begun to develop assessment tools and consistent criteria for understanding the effects of woman abuse on young children. Further commitment and funding are required to continue this much needed research in order to develop and disseminate Refuge's best practice guidelines for working with pre-school children.

Early intervention support for pre-school children may help reduce the risk of the development of aggressive and anti-social behaviour as the child matures. In 2004 the cost of domestic violence to the state, employers and victims was estimated at around £23 billion a year (Sylvia Walby, September 2004).

This figure is only the tip of the iceberg as it has not yet taken into account the impacts of domestic violence on children under five years old.

For too long children under five who experience domestic violence have gone unheard and unrecognised. These children need accessible support services, provided by people who are trained in and aware of the significant impact of domestic violence upon these young children. Only when the right funding to sustain trained child domestic violence professionals is in place will we see children being supported appropriately.

**Refuge believes that the government has a duty and responsibility to protect and support children under 5 growing up in violent homes.**

**Refuge is calling for government to recognise this under-represented group and ensure their needs are placed at the centre of all future domestic violence policies.**

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