

# The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children experiencing domestic abuse

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Women's Aid 2022

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## Introduction

At Women’s Aid we know that “one in seven children and young people under the age of 18 will have lived with domestic violence at some point in their childhood.” (Radford et al, 2011). We also know that domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people that can last into adulthood. The initial Women’s Aid Covid-19 survey of April 2020 showed an already concerning picture of the impact of Covid-19 and the public safety precautions brought in to manage the pandemic on those who experience domestic abuse, including children.

Life under the spotlight of the pandemic has enabled us to see with shocking clarity the reality of life for children who experience domestic abuse, and the profound impact it has on them, every single day.

There is no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all of us, across all aspects of our lives; children are no exception to this. Women’s Aid has been working with victims-survivors of domestic abuse over the course of the pandemic to support those whose experiences have continued and / or worsened as a result of Covid-19, its associated restrictions and the opportunities these have provided for perpetrators to exert abuse. As our report *A Perfect Storm* shows, only four months into the Covid-19 pandemic “*child survivors’ experiences of abuse [had] got worse*”. Many children experienced lockdown in homes where they were more likely to experience abuse due to being ‘locked down’ with the perpetrator. For some, child contact arrangements were used to further abuse and placed children at risk of further harm.

Unfortunately the results of our survey carried out one year on from the start of the pandemic tell us that this trend has continued for many children. After over a year of

lockdowns, closed schools, tiering of restrictions depending on where you are in the country, virtual appointments, and changes to rules and laws as a direct result of the pandemic, Women’s Aid is now sharing the longer-term impact that this pandemic has had, and continues to have, on children living in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

146 of our 283 survey respondents with children under 18 have shared with us how the Covid-19 pandemic has further impacted upon them and their children. Our survey respondents were all female, from a range of age groups and parts of the country. The stories of these children, and the abuse they witness or experience, need to be told. They help us to see, and state, clearly, what changes are needed to bring about an end to domestic abuse against women and children.

For more information on the effects of domestic abuse on children and to find support for child victims-survivors please consult our Survivor’s Handbook or Women’s Aid.

## Findings

### Children’s experience of abuse worsened during the pandemic

This survey sought to better understand the different elements of the pandemic that, especially when combined, led to an overall negative impact on children. We asked;

*“During the pandemic, how were your child/ren’s experiences affected by domestic abuse?”*

Tragically but unsurprisingly, of the survivors with children under 18, 66.4% of these shared that the pandemic made their children’s experiences of domestic abuse worse.

It is also of note that whilst 12.3% of respondents felt the pandemic had not worsened their children’s experiences, all respondents stated that they were experiencing abuse, so whilst their children’s experiences might not be worse we also know that they are not good to begin with.

Table 1: Did the pandemic make your child/ren’s experiences worse?

Response	% of 146 respondents (number)
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Yes	66.4% (97)
No	12.3% (18)
Unsure	15.1% (22)

*“There has been no escape for the children or myself. As much as I’ve tried to hide things, the children pick up when I’m anxious or when I’ve had to call the police and put them in a room watching TV. The more I have been exposed to abuse the more my time is taken from the children. It’s been horrendous.”*

Overall, our survey shows that prolonged exposure to abuse, increased or exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions, has had a negative impact on the children of our survey respondents. Abuse in these instances means children experiencing direct abuse (abuse experienced by them or their mum) and / or indirect abuse (the consequences of abuse - missing school, becoming homeless as a result of abuse).

Significantly, 56.8% of respondents said that children witnessed more abuse directed at their mother and 31.5% had more abuse directed towards them throughout the year. Access to support and mental health conditions were also directly and negatively impacted upon during this time.

**Table 2: During the pandemic, how were your child/ren’s experiences affected by domestic abuse?**

<b>Response</b>	<b>% of 146 respondents (number)</b>
Children’s access to support services reduced	21.9% (31)
Children witnessed more abuse directed at the respondent	56.8% (83)
Children experienced more abuse directed at them	31.5% (46)
Children’s mental health was affected by abuse in the household increasing	41.1% (60)

Other (please specify)	21.9% (31)
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Just over a fifth (21.9%) of respondents answered this difficult question with “other”. The variation in responses, and the significant proportion of respondents who answered with ‘other’ highlights how complex this issue is. This complexity is why a “one-size fits all” approach to childcare and child protection, especially within the context of a pandemic, will never be able to put the needs and safety of the child/ren first.

More positively some victim-survivors and their children experienced reprieve as a result of the pandemic and lockdowns, usually as a result of children no longer having to live or spend as much time with the perpetrators of their abuse; *“my son has thrived not having to live under the same roof as his abusive father.”*

*“They seemed to enjoy the calm that existed in them not having to visit him regularly. He had been verbally abusive on several occasions just before the first lockdown and they were terrified of a re-occurrence. They opened up a lot more about past experiences and how they had felt. This was only possible because he was no longer living with us. They also learned a few new skills, such as cooking, fixing things, painting, gardening and practical day-to-day stuff. Our abuse was more limited by the pandemic.”*

These more positive experiences were sadly only the case for a minority of survey respondents. For many others, the impact of abuse during lockdown did not reduce and the lockdowns and restrictions meant they had to spend more time with their abuser:

*“Due to not being at school he was around his abuser more and his friends less. He became very anxious.”*

*“Our son had to have contact all the way through [...] Then was emotionally mentally abused when he disclosed to safeguarding organisations what had happened to him at his dads. Culminating in physical abuse/violence because he didn't tell everyone he was lying...”*

As a direct impact of this abuse during lockdown children were also made homeless, as two of our survey respondents told us; “they [their children] were made homeless.”

## Children experienced increased levels of domestic abuse at home

Women’s Aid knows that child/ren are not just witnesses to domestic abuse when it happens in their home, they experience it in a very real way which has a lasting impact on them; they are therefore also victims-survivors themselves (Mullender et al, 2002). Years of research shows that all children witnessing domestic abuse are being

emotionally abused, and this is now recognised as 'significant harm' in recent legislation (Radford et al, 2011). The 2021 Domestic Abuse Act also recognises children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right. This survey shows us that the impact of Covid-19 and related restrictions has exacerbated the abuse of many victims-survivors and this includes children.

As shown above, in Table 2, 56.8% (83 out of 146) of respondents shared that their child/ren had witnessed more abuse aimed at the victim-survivor during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. We saw in [A Perfect Storm](#) that just over half of the 32 survivors (17) said their children had witnessed more abuse towards them (survivor). It is clear now that this wasn't a lockdown anomaly - the results of this survey, which has a larger sample and asked questions relating to a whole year of the pandemic, show that children have continued to witness more abuse. We know that regardless of whether there is physical abuse enacted towards children, domestic abuse has a significant and very negative impact on them.

One survivor talked about the domestic abuse her children experienced, sharing in her response that *"...they saw me get screamed at and pushed and have [a] cupboard pushed on top of me and witnessed him slice his own throat and smash his head into walls and hit himself in the face but thanks to me getting away from him they are happy and settled [...]."*

Women's Aid knows that in the majority of families where there are children, and where abuse is being perpetrated, the children will experience this in a very real way, and will often hear it or see it taking place. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, when children were not at school, clubs, or out socialising, this was more likely. Respondents talked about the impact on their child/ren ; *"this was when they heard abuse. My eldest has also found it extremely hard to access help[...]"*

For some victim-survivors the experience of their child/ren witnessing more abuse, during the pandemic meant they sought formal intervention. *"My daughter witnessed some abuse but then the police stepped in and prevented contact."*

Even where children weren't the direct targets of abuse, the impact on the victim-survivor was experienced by her children too; *"the abuse I suffered affected my physical and mental health, having an indirect impact on my ability to care for the children, I wasn't as much fun as I otherwise would have been, had little energy to play with them etc."*

## Children had more abuse directed towards them

As shown in Table 2, 31.5% of victim-survivors explained that their child/ren had had more abuse directed at them in the first year of the pandemic. Again, this was also

reflected initially in the April 2020 survey report [A Perfect Storm](#). This means almost a third of all children living in environments where abuse is or was taking place had more abuse directed towards them specifically. It wasn't just that what they witnessed increased abuse aimed at the adult survivor; it was abuse targeting them directly that increased too.

*"He got more violent which is why I finally left. He started man-handling our son who is [age], and one day he punched the door when he was on the other side...I left the next day. It was really frightening. He singled the oldest one out and totally favoured and spoilt the younger one who was [age]. It was horrible to see. Really scary. My son said he was scared of him on numerous occasions[...] The oldest one mentioned the pandemic experience just this last weekend, "Daddy didn't like me in lockdown did he, he really liked [sibling]". I'm trying to get him help but its really hard, he's doing [support programme] at school but I can't afford to access any private help and I don't want to make a big thing about it and take him out of school, it seems like school is the best and safest place for him to be right now until life gets back to normal more generally."*

## School closures and the impact on children

A major change in the lives of children as a result of Covid-19 was the closure of schools and the requirement to home-school as an isolation measure to "help us to break the chain of transmission, and [...] save lives" in the face of spreading Covid-19 infections and variants (Public Health England, 2020). This was with the exception of children of "key-workers" and "at risk/vulnerable" children, who were allowed to attend in person teaching (Department of Education, 2020). Other measures brought in included wearing face coverings in schools, limiting class sizes to "bubbles" for improved tracing, and ensuring good ventilation in schools (Department of Education, 2021). All of these measures have led to children across the country struggling with feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, loneliness and anxiety, even before we consider the impact on children who were and are also experiencing domestic abuse in the home.

Our survey found that not all respondents were impacted further by abuse connected to education and home-schooling, because their child/ren were not of school age. However, of the 146 respondents with child/ren under 18, the majority 107 (73.3%) did have "one or more children who were home-schooled" in this timeframe. 30.8% of this 107 indicated that the abuse witnessed and experienced did not have any impact on home-schooling but unfortunately, as shown in table 3 below, this was not the case for everyone. Abusers' behaviours and abuse did extend and relate to education and home-schooling, and ranged from coercive control and threatening behaviour, to even destroying equipment child/ren needed to complete their home-schooling.

Table 3: What effect did abuse in your household have on home-schooling for your children?

Response	% of 107 respondents (number)
Child/ren fear of abuse made home-schooling more difficult	26.2% (28)
You were unable to participate in home-schooling children as a result of abuse	19.6% (21)
Abuser destroyed or withheld equipment you needed to home-school	4.7% (5)

Fear of abuse made home-schooling more difficult in 26.2% of survey respondents' experiences; 21 of these 28 respondents explained that they and their child/ren lived with an abuser for some or all of the time during the first year of the pandemic. A fifth of children were unable to participate in home-schooling as a result of abuse:

*"[He] shouted and bullied the children into giving him their passwords and then interfered in their school accounts - he said it was to help and monitor their work and didn't listen or respect them when they said it was making things more difficult for them to work [...] His behaviour and attitudes towards home-schooling had our teenage children in tears many times during lockdown."*

*"He controlled every aspect of home-schooling with unrealistic expectations of myself and the children. He expected me to do it all (and work full time) while he just set the rules."*

*"Criticised and controlled what was done. Made the children upset when they were working. Critical of them. Set an unreasonable schedule."*

As explained in [A Perfect Storm](#), "we already know that women are more likely to take on caring roles at home" (ONS, 2013). Therefore, even for those who were not living with the abuser, home-schooling presented its own challenges of perpetuating misogyny, gender stereotypes, and the continued gendering of caregiving.

*"Due to court ordered shared care, my daughter received next to no support / encouragement with home learning whilst in her father's care. This added further pressure on me to constantly play catch up with her to keep her level of education consistent. In turn*



*this put strain on our relationship as "mummy is always making me do schoolwork, we don't have fun anymore [...]"*

*"I found it difficult to juggle a full time job, home schooling, police and social worker visits [...] and child custody hearings and multiple occasions of withholding child support[...]."*

## Access to support reduced

Every statutory service, agency and system has been affected by Covid-19; the way things are run, processed, handled and the time these things take have all been impacted upon. This includes systems and bodies that play a role in keeping children safe and providing support to victim-survivors of domestic abuse as well as child survivors. Our survey questions did not specifically focus on the impact on any one particular system, but many respondents cited issues across various support and protection services including the criminal justice system and family courts, which impacted on the support they and their children could access. Issues such as delays to processes, changes from in-person to virtual assessments and meetings, and not being involved in decisions made about them, were all cited as things that have had a negative impact on the children of victims-survivors.

In many ways, the victim-survivors that responded to our survey shared that the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions exacerbated existing problems within a court system that was already failing many victim-survivors of domestic abuse.

*"Family courts - no understanding of the mental health impact - Circuit judge stopped my daughter from being seen again by CAMHS - he said that I had manipulated the CAMHS & GP. My daughter has anxiety, OCD & is frightened of her father."*

The restrictions prevented many in person meetings and assessments from taking place which left some children at greater risk. *"My child was not observed at home by CAFCASS or Children's Services and the court made a decision based on the words of a scared and manipulated nine year old."*

Other support structures and sources were also affected; *"they have not been able to access counselling services or courses and support groups that were helping them get over the abuse they have suffered or witnessed."*

The impact of these changes and restrictions will go far beyond the lifetime of the pandemic alone. Family court decisions made during Covid-19 or lack of access to proper support or assessments by Children's Services will impact on children victim-survivors will have a lasting impact.

Children were far from immune from the isolation everyone experienced as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. The closures of sports and social clubs, the banning of social activities and the limiting of social interactions to sole households meant many children lost their safe spaces away from their traumatic home life, including those they may have accessed support through in school and other education settings. *"The children were affected by less access to support and sources of well-being (e.g sport clubs)."* All of this, unsurprisingly, has had a profound impact on the mental health of children who experience abuse.

### Negative impact on children's mental health

Unsurprisingly these experiences, traumas, and exposure to ongoing and increased abuse during a global pandemic are already impacting negatively on the mental health of children. 41.1% of our respondents believe that their "children's mental health was affected by abuse in the household increasing" during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example through increased contact with the abuser; *"the children's mental health was affected by the abuser being around in the house more."*

Experiencing domestic abuse and sometimes subsequent formal interventions has affected many children victims-survivors; *"[name] has had to cope with me trying to cope with abuse and numerous police visits to homes. Witnessing safety devices being fitted to home and the thoughts about why his mum allowed this to happen."*

For some children their experiences triggered extreme mental ill-health that caused risk to life. *"My daughter is severely traumatised. She was near suicide last summer. Now after 3 months of therapy and 6 months away from abuser she's slowly stabilising."*

As noted above, reduced access to services and social settings, and the isolation this has led to, caused loneliness and a breakdown of coping mechanisms for many young victims-survivors; *"Limited access to friends for my 18 year old has been very tough as she relies on friends for support at that age. We have accessed private counselling."*

We know from [The Survivor's Handbook](#) that mirroring abuse experienced in their childhood home is a possibility for children; this was reported in our survey findings and illustrates the impact of the increase in abuse during the pandemic; *"[my child] started copying behaviour, therefore hitting me and shouting when upset, couldn't escape to pre-school as it was closed and lost out on a lot of childhood things, was stuck indoors with the abuse happening."*

One respondent spoke of a relatively positive journey through the Covid-19 restrictions due to being away from their abuser. We also know from previous research that

alongside the mental health impacts of direct abuse many victim-survivors develop further anxieties related to what might happen to their children. It seems however that as a result of the reprieve of abuse as a direct link to Covid-19 restrictions they have been able to begin their recovery; *"overall my mental health of depression is so much better, anxiety is better overall too."*

The same respondent is also acutely aware of the impact the pandemic and exposure to abuse during this time is having and may continue to have on their children; *"I am more worried about how this will affect my children as they become young adults."*

## Conclusion

As [A Perfect Storm](#) showed "the impact [of abuse] is not limited to survivors." Covid-19 led directly to; a reduction in access to formal in person support services for children to access, the requirement for many to home-school, furlough and unemployment, delays and changes to family court processes, and social isolation due to Covid-19 restrictions. These changes have been difficult for many people and families, especially for those children experiencing and exposed to domestic abuse as perpetrators found increased opportunity to abuse in these contexts.

All three Women's Aid surveys into the impact of Covid-19 on victim-survivors and specifically the two that focused on the experiences of children showed that many victim-survivors and their children experienced lockdowns in homes where they were more exposed to abuse, and child contact arrangements were used to further abuse (A Perfect Storm, 2020). For many the pandemic has placed children at a higher risk of increased harm.

The stark increase in the amount of abuse children experienced, alongside a reduction in the support structures and safety nets designed to protect them and their families, makes for sombre reading. Change is needed, now, to protect children from the harm of domestic abuse.

As we work towards "living with Covid-19" Women's Aid will work to ensure support for children experiencing abuse and denied support as a result of the pandemic becomes a priority for the government. Support services will need to be prepared for what is to come; the findings from this survey show the reality of living with domestic abuse for children starkly and highlight clearly how children living through abuse now, alongside the pandemic and its aftermath, will be dealing with the impact of all this, for years to come.

## References and links

For more information on the questions asked in our survey and the demographics of our survey respondents please see [\(overall One Year On report\)](#).

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