

**Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence,
Mullender, A., Hague, Iman, U., Kelly, L., Malos, E., and Regan, L. (2002)
Sage Publications £17.99 Paperback**

This book summarises the research findings of a recent study of children. Phase one of the study, involved the interviewing of 1,395 school children, aged 8-16 years from the general population. The aim was to ascertain children's general understanding and perceptions of domestic violence. Phase two of the study involved interviewing 54 children (from 25 families) who had lived with domestic violence, 24 mothers who had experienced domestic violence and 14 professionals working in the domestic violence field.

The children were drawn from contrasting parts of the country, both in socio-economic terms and in relation to urban/ rural differences. The themes for the interviews with the general population of children from phase one were: whether children saw domestic violence as affecting them, who they saw as responsible for domestic violence and, what should be done in response. The aim of phase two of the study was to learn how children have coped and what would be the most helpful response, thus the researchers did not consider the children as passive victims but as people who should be listened to. The concept of researching *with* children rather than researching *about* children is central here. The children appear to have been regarded as competent and reflexive in reporting their own experiences and in this sense this piece of research has given children a voice. The researchers attempted to sample children who were no longer living in danger so as not to endanger them further.

From phase one of the general interviewing they found that just under 30 per cent of the children knew of someone who had experienced domestic violence. This is a high figure which adds weight to the argument for providing (more) information to school children about domestic violence. There were also depressingly traditional attitudes revealed by teenage boys towards relationships and an endemic tolerance of violence by boys in the general population. These children thought that adults should intervene more effectively to stop domestic violence and indicated that young people turn more readily to their friends than to adults for support.

From phase two of the interviews with children who had witnessed domestic violence much of what we already know was confirmed. Over one-third of the young people talked about over-hearing or witnessing abuse. The older children had had more experience of abuse but also had more knowledge and resources to draw upon. Children did not feel safe after parental separation and there was a strong message that society is not doing enough to control the behaviour of perpetrators. Informal supports were most helpful to children followed by specialist domestic violence services. Relationships between children and their mothers were focused upon and it is clear that little work has been done in this area in the past. Six of the children in the study did not feel safe and a third only felt safe as long as they were not found by the perpetrators. The book finishes with messages for both policy and practice for schools, the police, family courts /the legal profession, parents, mothers living with abuse and social services.

This book offers accessible and interesting reading. It is well written as one would expect from these authors. It is particularly useful for practitioners in the field and whilst it confirms a lot of what we already know or perhaps thought we knew, it also raises a lot of questions. The first chapter entitled, 'Children in Their Own Issue: A Shift of Approach' is particularly interesting, noting that much of the previous research has been about adults interpretations of children's lives and that theories of childhood have been constructed by adult observers.

This research does seem to be truly child- centred, which leads into many other complexities, for example with regard to issues of consent, but is nevertheless thought-provoking. As the authors point out, many of the children who have been most affected by domestic violence will still not be heard because they may have been too damaged to feel able to take part in such a study or because their mothers may feel too vulnerable to allow their children to participate. Overall there are a lot of pointers for the way forward in terms of both policy and practice. This is likely to become a seminal text. Several particular sentences in the conclusion were particularly powerful and haunting:

It is a dreadful thing not to be able to guarantee a child safety, not from a context of war or unrest but from just one man who has held sway in a household where he has typically committed repeated criminal acts and has thus given the authorities ample opportunity to intervene and control him

May there never be another 17 year old girl who can say to us of their whole childhood: 'I had no one to talk to'.

(p.230-231)

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