

Information leaflet

Domestic violence

Many children living with a special guardian will have experienced some form of domestic violence or abuse. Exposure to domestic abuse can be as damaging for a young person as experiencing it first-hand.

Domestic violence includes psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse. It is more common than many people realise with one in four women in the UK and one in six men experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime. It can be an act or series of acts used to punish, humiliate, harm or frighten the victim.

How domestic violence and abuse affects children

A child who has experience of domestic violence may develop severe anxiety or trauma. They might form coping strategies to manage their feelings. They may be prone to triggers, meaning they might mistake a carer's actions for abusive behaviour and gravitate outside the home towards people who behave in coercive or inappropriate ways that are familiar to them.

Children can feel guilty because they think they have done something wrong. They can feel confused, as they still love the abusive parent but worry a great deal about how their parents and siblings are now managing without them.

Traumatic memories they have repressed while they were very young may result in them not being able to feel usual physical or emotional reactions. A child may not be able to recognise their body's reactions: if they have eaten, if they are hot or cold, or feel as if they do not have a conscience.

It is very important for special guardians to allow their child to express their feelings when they are ready and equally to acknowledge if they are not yet able to talk about it.

Special guardians should let the child know it is okay to feel anger and love towards someone at the same time, that they can dislike the behaviour but love the parent and this does not make them bad.

Special guardians have a key role in giving a child a second chance at learning what a healthy, safe and stable family feels like and if they have a partner, what a healthy relationship looks like.

Practical ways special guardians can help their child

- Special guardians should let the child know they will keep them safe. Stability, predictability and consistency are important. Children need authoritative, loving parenting and plenty of one-to-one time and affection.
- In many cases children will have no safe memories of physical contact so steps should be taken tentatively – but special guardians should not be afraid to display affection to their child.
- Special guardians should encourage openness. Their child needs to know they can speak to them about anything. Special guardians could leave jars around the house that the child can put their thoughts into or have regular family time when they check in with how everyone is feeling.
- Children need to hear from their carers that domestic violence and abuse is not okay and that they do not deserve to have this happen in their family. Carers should tell them that it is not their fault and that there is nothing they could have done to stop the violence.
- Special guardians should encourage their wider family not to discuss difficult family issues in front of the child.
- It may be hard for special guardians to hear their child speak about their experiences especially if the perpetrator is a relative or their own child. They should share their worries about this with another adult who they trust. This may in turn help them feel more comfortable about talking about it with the child.
- Special guardians can help their child regain a sense of control by finding areas in their lives where they can make plans and decisions and support them to take action. Making daily routines that provide structure and stability will also help address feelings of powerlessness.
- If a special guardian is in a relationship they should try to ensure they find time for their partner and nurture their relationship.
- Having a support system of wider family or friends will also help.

- In some cases a child who has experienced domestic violence may demonstrate sexualised behaviour such as repeatedly exposing their genitals. Special guardians should put boundaries in place, clearly explaining what is acceptable and what is not. If significant sexualised behaviour is displayed special guardians should contact their GP and ask for a referral to the local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Where to get help if you are in an abusive relationship

If a special guardian is in an abusive relationship they should be supported to accept that they are not to blame and to seek help and support. This might mean that they need to leave their home, ask the person causing them harm to leave or take legal action and they are likely to need help with deciding between and achieving these different options.

If a carer is unsafe at home they should be supported to try and leave and stay with friends or family, at a women's refuge or they can apply to your local authority for emergency housing. The housing charity Shelter offers further information about housing options for those in abusive relationships.

Key points

- Special guardians should allow their child to express their feelings when they are ready but acknowledge that this might take time.
- Carers have a key role in giving children a second chance at learning what a healthy, safe and stable family feels like.
- Special guardians need to let their child know that they will keep them safe. Stability, predictability and consistency are important.

Useful links

ADVA

www.new.devon.gov.uk

Tel: 0345 155 1074

This resource from Devon Against Domestic Violence and Abuse Partnership provides direct and useful ways to speak to your child about domestic violence and abuse

Men's Advice Line

www.mensadvice.org.uk

Tel: 0808 801 0327

The Men's Advice Line is a confidential helpline for male victims of domestic violence and abuse. They offer emotional support, practical advice, and information on a wide range of services for further help and support.



National Domestic Violence Helpline

www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 2000 247

This is a free helpline run in partnership with Women's Aid and Refuge. The helpline provides confidential support and information and can help women find safe, emergency accommodation in refuges across the UK.

NSPCC

www.nspcc.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 5000

Children's charity NSPCC is dedicated to preventing abuse and helping those affected to recover. The website provides advice on domestic abuse including signs and effects of domestic abuse, how you can protect children from domestic abuse and a guide to laws, policy and guidance.

Women's Aid

www.womensaid.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 2000 247

This campaigning federation of over 200 grassroots organisations has a directory of local domestic abuse and refuge services. This website provides a choice of resources to help women and young people. Women's Aid also has a website which offers support to children and teenagers who may be living in a home affected by domestic violence, or who may be in a violent relationship themselves.

Shelter

www.shelter.org.uk

Shelter provides advice, support and legal services for people struggling with housing or homelessness. The website gives practical advice on how to stay safe if you have to leave your home because of domestic abuse.

Young Minds

www.youngminds.org.uk

Parents Helpline: 0800 802 5544

Young Minds is a leading charity that provides information, advice and support for young people about their mental health and wellbeing. Their website includes information aimed at young people on how to deal with anger and abuse, and a parent's survival guide with tips for those worried about children that have experienced abuse.

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