



“Are they shouting because of me?”

Voices of children living in households with domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental health issues

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Introduction from the Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield



“They hate the problem, they love the parent” - support worker

Much of the research into the impact on children of living in households with domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental health is from the perspective of adults – with limited insights from children themselves. We wanted to hear directly from children what it was like to live in these households.

Children spoke openly to us about their daily lives – how it affected their emotional wellbeing, school life and relationships with friends, and the ways in which they attempted to cope. They told us about living with high levels of tension and unpredictability at home, about situations that could explode at any time and of an evolving sense of shame as they began to understand that the chaos and neglect that they took for granted wasn’t the same for all children. Children often said they had to find ways to cope which meant that they had to grow up too quickly. For all this, they knew that the alternative without their parent would be painful and often went to great lengths not to tell others for fear of being separated.

Despite the problems at home and the impact it had on them, they were also very clear about how much they loved and trusted their parents. Torn between loyalty and love, and the need to seek help, these children were extremely brave in talking about their family life so frankly, and we thank them.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Longfield." Below the signature is a simple horizontal line.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children’s Commissioner for England

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Section 1: Day-to-Day Life

Many children who had previously lived with both parents, or with a parent and their partner, were now adjusting to living just with their mum and siblings or with other relatives or in foster care.

“I didn't want to go into care, I felt like I was leaving, everybody was saying to me, oh, move on, be happy, not move on and forget about your mum but just try to be happy but I thought if I did that I would be leaving my mum behind, so that's why I didn't want to but then now I just think to myself, what's the point? It's better I try and do well for myself than just be upset.” – 14 year old girl

Some had to move out of home, sometimes only temporarily, and live with extended family, with consequent disruption to school and friendships.

“All these arguments and fights happen and then when my mum contacts the police, one time we had to move into another place and I absolutely hated it, it was horrible and I used to cry and wish I could go back home.” – 10 year old girl

“We had to move and go to [a different city] to a refuge, the home was horrible, the people looked at us. I hated the social worker because she sent us there and I hated my mum. I lost my school, friends and grandparents. I have everything back now – why did we go? [Mother's boyfriend] should have gone!” – 11 year old girl

“Things would be smashed, there'd be holes in the wall and my dad was quite unpredictable in what he would do and, yeah, it just wasn't right. And we were, the plan ideally would have been for him to move out, because there's obviously more of us than him but he refused that so my mum had to take it into her own hands and that's why we moved.” – 16 year old boy

Children commonly spoke of parents drinking, to the point of being aggressive, shouting and swearing, and passing out. This often went hand in hand with drug use. Where parents were taking drugs, children often talked about other adults being in the house, particularly in the evenings. While some spoke of physical violence, the majority talked about verbal abuse directed at their mum from either their dad or from their mum's current partner.

Although most children did not refer directly to mental health issues, some did speak about their mum or dad being depressed at times. However, many did not make the connection between the depression and their parent's substance misuse.

For professionals the interplay between domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health in households is clear, yet some issues, such as alcohol abuse and mental health need, can be hard to identify and take time to tease out.

“Maybe it's hidden and it's not until you get to know the family a little bit more that you realise and start getting some details of things but often there's definitely one or more parent with substance misuse, drink, drugs, not definitely with a perpetrator but definitely, within the parents there's alcohol or substance misuse, and then I think a symptom of that is sometimes mental health, depression, anxiety, social agoraphobia, lots of maybe undiagnosed mental health problems, and the same for the child, ADHD, conduct disorders things like that.” – Support worker

“Parents, domestic abuse and additional complexity, substance misuse, mental health. The other thing that we see a lot of is learning disabilities... more often than not undiagnosed. That seems to sit there alongside the domestic abuse as well, we’ve seen that a lot in the case work.” – Support worker

While most children recognised incidences of domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health at home, some – particularly younger children – showed limited understanding of them.

Even where children were aware, problems at home were so common the situation became normalised.

“It’s not like it ever hit me hard that I had a problem with it because I was born around it, it was quite normal. But I guess as I got older I started to understand that it wasn’t normal, because I think my mum knew that this place wasn’t safe so I’d go to friends’ houses a lot, I – and I think that’s when I started to know it wasn’t normal when I saw other peoples’ houses, how their parents were, what their home looked like. So I felt a bit weird about it but, yeah, I don’t know how I dealt with it, I just sort of tried to carry on with normal life.” – 16 year old boy

“Well I didn’t see a problem. Because obviously I’ve been living with her, what wait, how long was I living with mum, 12 years. Obviously there’s been our ups and downs, but I didn’t really notice there was a big problem.” – 12 year old boy

“I mean I couldn’t understand it – like I kinda thought maybe this is something that some other people go through as well – like this is just a normal thing – like people drink, stuff like this happens so I kinda took it upon myself that stuff happens that I can’t do anything about I’m only 11/12 – however old I was – there’s nothing I can really do.” – 16 year old girl

For other children, the problems at home were only too obvious. They yearned for normality, for the safety and security that other children had, and felt powerless to help.

“You just see all these little kids walking around with their parents, holding their parents’ hands and stuff. I often envied them because I wished that I had that. I wanted attention from my parents sometimes... I just wanted to experience what it was like to walk home holding my mum or dad’s hand and them just asking me, how was your day? What did you do at school? Come and sit outside, do you need help with your homework and stuff like that. I never got that and I know it seems weird to talk about basic things that you would expect little kids to get but I didn’t feel like I got that attention.” – 15 year old girl

“There’s not much I could do, I was pretty young... I couldn’t do anything.” – 16 year old boy

“He [Dad] shouts at mummy a lot as well. It made me feel sad. I couldn’t do anything because they were just shouting over me and [sisters]. When we was trying to say we’re upset, they said, they just kept, carried on shouting.” – 8 year old girl

“I wanted to defend her, but I couldn’t because I was really small.” – 11 year old girl

“My mum and her boyfriend were, like, in the living room downstairs... and I could hear like, screaming and objects being thrown... and then like, I went downstairs and obviously I was like, traumatised and everything... and then... I just didn’t know what to do and if like, I was older, I could’ve like, done something. If I was like, a different age then, I could’ve like... done something...

not like, get in between them, but I could've called like the police or something.” – 14 year old girl

Children retreated to their bedroom, often with their siblings, when things escalated at night. Many tried to sleep to block out the noise. Children also spoke about their sleep being disturbed, particularly through parents drunkenly shouting or banging on the walls. There were interruptions to their daily routines – for example, being locked out of the house because a parent had passed out after drinking too much, or staying in the library or going to bed very early in order to avoid a parent.

“It’s when he’s like knocked out on the floor and you’re locked outside your house. That’s when it’s like ten out of ten bad. If your mum’s somewhere like, I don’t know, doctor’s appointment, shopping... and you come home from school, you’re only in what year six, and your siblings still haven’t come back from school either, so you’re just standing there, buzzing, buzzing, knocking on the door for someone to open the door. And usually when the curtain’s open, you can look through, you just see him on the floor, so you’d have to sit there and wait.” – 14 year old girl

Children often did not have a safe space to relax in.

“I was having my own problems at school as well as at home – so it’s kind of like there was nowhere I could really go to feel relaxed, feel comfortable – because I was on edge everywhere I went – so stress levels were just rising and my anxiety was rising as well.” – 16 year old girl

It was not uncommon for mothers to have to call the police to deal with the behaviour of the father or stepfather – often, they were arrested.

“I guess it was like a mixture of ambulance and police. There were loads of police always knocking on my door and stuff. I don’t think much of it because I was so used to it, so every time it’d happen, it was almost interesting to see what would happen now, would something change. You always think if something happens, to me now, if something happens, it’s like a wake up call. You always think, oh maybe this might be a wake up call so it’s almost interesting just to sit back and watch. If you don’t, what’s the word, if you don’t involve with a situation, you just sit back and watch how it unfolds, yeah, it’s more interesting, it’s less real.” – 14 year old girl

The instability and unpredictability of life at home led to confusion and anxiety.

“It’s so unpredictable, it’s just that, because you don’t know what’s going to happen, when it’s going to happen, why it’s going to happen. [It’s] not every day because for example you, we’ve dealt with an argument and then after a few days another argument occurs but in that gap is when it’s all right, I guess, but you’re still scared because you don’t know when it’s going to happen.” – 10 year old girl

“Definitely [it can be confusing] because I don’t know what I’m going to get next – she can be sad and not speaking or anything, then she can be lively and stuff then I don’t what is she going to be next, angry? I don’t know what is to come next.” – 16 year old girl

Children emphasised that what they hated was the ‘problem’ the parent faced (such as substance misuse, anger issues, or mental health problems) and not the parent themselves. Children were very passionate about how much they loved their parents and expressed an overwhelming sense of loyalty and care.

“Me and my mum have a really good relationship, we have a really special bond that can never be broken, no matter how long, how far away she is from me, it will never be broken. And when I don't see her for so long I see her and because I have love for my mum I just forgive her, I would never hold it, a grudge against her.” – 14 year old girl

“That was tough, I'm not going to lie, that was quite hard for me, because it's weird, he was a good person, I guess, but he just had the problem and I was quite sad to go even though I definitely should have. So I found it quite tough to say goodbye because I knew I wasn't going to see him, I just felt sorry for him coming home alone, I don't know.” – 16 year old boy

It was common for children to say that they rarely did things together as a family, take part in activities or hang out with friends when things were not good at home. This might be because of a lack of money, having household chores and responsibilities, not wanting to leave siblings home alone, or because parents had other priorities.

Despite this, children were keen to stress the more positive times when mum or dad would not be drinking or taking drugs. They spoke about going out to the park, playing games, watching TV together and having a laugh.

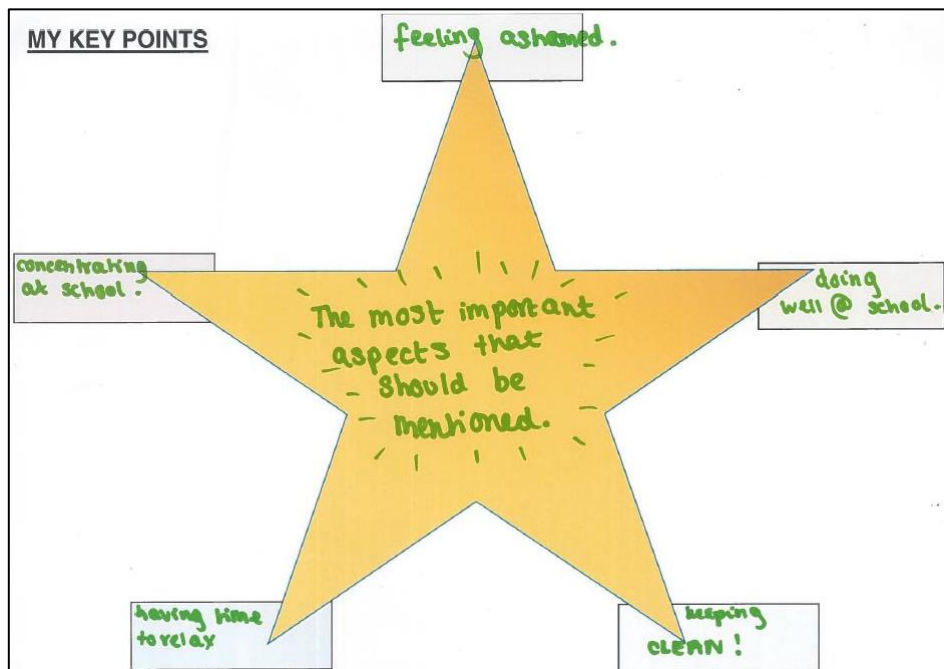
“He was completely different, chilled, relaxed, watch TV, calm, laughing, joking, he was pretty much like a father when he's not drunk but when he is, it's completely opposite to that again it's, he is crazy, he's just shouting, there's no sense of control and he forgets that he has children, that he forgets that we're there watching him in his state.” – 19 year old girl

“Just a normal average day to day mum...you wouldn't expect to have that other side to her.” – 16 year old girl

Section 2: Impact

Children spoke about how their experiences at home had affected them, and it was evident that even siblings could be affected very differently by the same family events.

They also made it clear that the experiences and consequences of social care being involved in their lives could be just as traumatic and impactful as the domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and parental mental health problems.



Pictured above; a child's views on what they thought were the most important things for the Children's Commissioner to know about when thinking about the experiences of children living in these households

Emotional well-being and mental health

Children spoke about experiencing a wide range of emotions because of what was happening at home. They described feeling very sad, low and depressed, getting upset and angry, feeling lonely, scared and anxious, or ashamed and embarrassed.

"I felt alone because my sister was only 3 years old." – 11 year old girl

"[When my mum is depressed] I'm used to it but, I don't really know, it brings down my mood." – 12 year old boy

I was angry, so angry. I was like, how could you? I mean, obviously, he would forget things after drinking but it was like how can you just forget what you're doing? How can you not take it in – all the damage you're doing? I'd get really angry at myself, I'd get angry at teachers, I would get angry at students in the school." – 15 year old girl

"I might be feeling ashamed perhaps, a loss of self – esteem and I might be feeling angry too. Normally an argument is like, I'm not doing good enough or you've got nothing good about

yourself and I feel ashamed, it makes me feel like I am no one, I'm good at nothing. it's basically not that much confidence left because when I'm being called something nasty like dumb then it makes me lose my confidence" – 10 year old girl

Some talked about feeling guilty and responsible for their parent's behaviour and wellbeing. This also related to nervousness about what might happen if they told anyone about what was going on at home. Some of them felt responsible for the problems at home.

"In my head I kind of blamed myself – I shouldn't have spoken about it – and it was my fault – with all these people coming and asking questions." – 16 year old girl

"It's a tense environment as the police is coming and then even though my dad does all these things I'm still really, I feel quite sorry for him, that he has to go through all this even though it is his fault but I just feel so guilty afterwards." – 10 year old girl

"I felt guilty sometimes when I defended my mum and he got more violent" – 11 year old girl

"She's the youngest [referring to her sister] so I think at that age as well she was quite confused because obviously if you're hearing your parents shout every single night then obviously you're quite confused because you start to blame on yourself, are they shouting because of me, is this the reason?" – 15 year old girl

The constant worry over what was happening at home, left children anxious, depressed, isolated, sleepless and sometimes self – harming. Many had developed eating disorders.

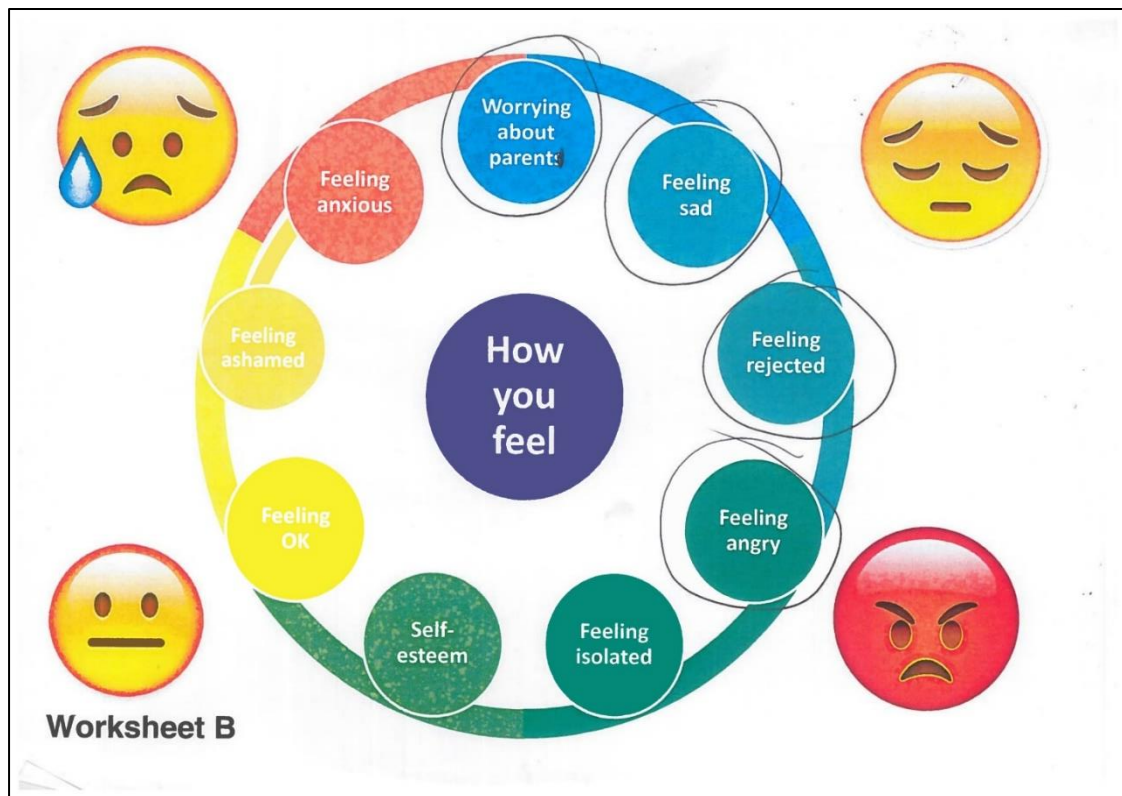
"I knew that I was depressed. And I was just like, that's normal, a lot of people have depression and anxiety, especially seeing as I'm going through this at home, I just expected it. But then it slowly kind of just got worse and worse. I would be bedridden for a lot of the time, I wouldn't go out on weekends, and I'd just stay home. The only time I'd get up was to go to the bathroom. Sometimes I wouldn't eat... I was self-harming and stuff and yes, I was doing harmful things to myself." – 15 year old girl

"I was sad and scared. I cried a lot. I had nightmares. I didn't sleep." – 11 year old girl

"When I was 13 I was like really stressed, and having a lot of anxiety. I was self – harming myself, and I was trying to commit suicide and stuff... and then again, either last year or year before, I was causing myself to throw up so I was diagnosed with bulimia – and that was due to stress and not feeling confident in myself – and not feeling happy with anything that was going on – Yeah I think that was the two major things I have ever done to myself to try and cope." – 16 year old girl

"If something's happened at home quite recently, like, say, my mum and dad having an argument and I'm, if someone says something about their family, then that, my family, goes to my head and then I'll be thinking about my family then it'll be like I'll stop having fun and relaxing and I'll go and sit down and just think about it, and then it'll take quite a good half an hour to stop thinking about it." – 13 year old boy

"I don't always see the best in things, because I would always get let down. My expectations aren't that high now." – 14 year old girl



Pictured above; a child's view on what impact their home life had on their emotions

Behaviour

Children, particularly boys, did speak about 'acting out', getting into trouble at school, and sometimes bullying other children – however they were often unable to connect this with what was going on at home.

"I actually did yeah [bully another child], in year six, I got in trouble for that, but I think that was mainly, I don't know, that had nothing to do with home... In secondary school and primary school I'd get in trouble. I think even if I didn't have a problem there's always, be, it would still be the same, it was just from messing about in class and stuff and nothing crazy." – 16 year old boy

"[How do you think other children saw you] He's hyper, sometimes violent – when I get violent." – 13 year old boy

The services working with these families said the parents were behaving as their own parents had done, and now the children were in danger of repeating the cycle.

“Nine times out of ten when you look back over a parent's history, they will be in the same cycle that either their mum or their dad was.” – Support worker

Some children replicated similar violent behaviour, both in and outside of the home, and became involved in criminality. For teenage girls, there was a greater tendency for them to get involved in abusive relationships. Some children were determined to break the cycle and let their own future children have a better childhood; yet worried that they wouldn't be able to do it.

“If he can't express himself and say stuff and I'm related to him, I'm his daughter, then maybe I can't be able to do that.” – 15 year old girl

“I think I wouldn't do what my mum did. I wouldn't want to put my kids, my future kids in that position where they feel like they can't speak, they feel like they can't do this... I don't want my kids to go through having to experience what it's like to have an abusive dad, basically I don't want my kids to experience what I experienced because, as a mother figure, you should be there for your kids.” – 15 year old girl

Relationship with family and friends

The disruption of going into foster care, or a parent dying, or moving in with granny, affected children's relationships with their family.

“I think it was different because my relationship with my brothers and sisters was different... cos I guess I wasn't living with them, and I didn't have as much contact, so then I would like, I think it was difficult, like in the way I tried to fit in.” – 14 year old girl

“I haven't even heard from my mum, the last time I heard from... my mum didn't even wish me happy birthday on my previous birthday.” – 14 year old girl

“Well we started going to a place that offered help with, for people in my situation to see their family in a big room, so there would be a bunch of kids and me seeing parents but they need to be under supervision and my dad wouldn't cooperate with that sometimes, he wouldn't want to go. Because he, I think he thought we were being a bit unfair or something.” – 16 year old boy

In talking about friendship, children spoke about how they felt uncomfortable having their friends over to their home, being embarrassed and afraid of what their friends might think or how their parents would behave. This could make them feel isolated and alone.

“It was very rare for friends to come over, it would be mostly me going to friend's houses. Just messy, stinky, dad being home for a start, that's not something you want to show my friends, yeah... I was quite scared about people seeing where I live... Definitely [felt isolated] in primary school yeah, in primary school I guess just because I couldn't have friends over and stuff, but then I didn't have a normal home life and that.” – 16 year old boy

Living in these households often resulted in neglect. Sometimes children went to school dirty in unclean clothes. Practitioners spoke of children often being bullied as a result of their appearance, which led to very low self – esteem.

“We would get hungry and we wouldn't be clean.” – 8 year old girl

Caring responsibilities

Children not only had to take care of themselves but take care of their siblings and parents as well. They had to protect younger siblings from what was happening in the household, and take care of their basic needs (such as feeding them or getting them ready for school). As a result, they felt they grew up too fast.

"We was doing stuff of our own, and she [mum] wanted us to help her clean or either get our dinner eaten." – 8 year old girl

"I had to take over from mum if she was tired or something happened... I used to cook a lot. Not so much for me and mum, usually just for me, but I did make it, mum did make me dinner on occasion, I don't know three or four times a week, but the rest of the times I would make my own." – 12 year old boy

"I feel ahead of my time. I'm probably 61, honestly I feel very old. Since I was young, I've always felt different. I feel like my maturity levels are really high compared to people my age. I don't know if it's because of the environment I've been in and what's happened to me or if it's just me, my brain, I have no idea." – 16 year old girl

"I don't want them [siblings] to go through anything that I have been through because like I mean if you were to see through everything that I have been through, it's been tough, and I wouldn't wish that on any child at all – so I wouldn't want them to go through or feel like how I've been feeling so I just try to shield them and protect them from this happening to them as much as I can – but there's only so much that I can do." – 16 year old girl

"If I was with my mum now I feel like it would be so much easier, I feel like I could actually help her. There's nobody there to help my mum because she shot my family down a bit. So I feel like I could help her, that's what I've been trying, I've been saying this for so long, there's nobody to help my mum, my mum's not going to listen to social services, my mum would listen to me... She can't really do that [take care of] for me right now and I, that's OK, I'm OK with it, I'm OK." – 14 year old girl

"Because of everything that was happening I kinda had to grow up quite quickly, so most of the stuff people did at my age I didn't really do as much so like having the time to go out with friends and stuff like that wasn't really an option – because I was helping out with chores and I was helping my siblings – and because I didn't want to leave my siblings alone because I didn't know what would happen so I kind of stayed at home most of the time. I don't really relax – I was always like tense – and with hobbies – they have kind of faded away – anything that I liked kinda just left." – 16 year old girl

Some frustrations were also expressed by children about the responsibilities they had to take on, which they did not see other children their age having to shoulder.

"I felt obviously like a grown up so I'd be part of those things. And I didn't feel weird at all but at the same time it felt like, oh, why am I the one to do it, like I hardly ever see anyone else or any other child of my age dealing with things like that. It should just be the parents. Why isn't my dad doing anything... I just don't understand why do I have to be that person?" – 19 year old girl

School

Children spoke about how things at home had impacted on life at school. They missed school, were unable to get homework done, misbehaved in order to get the teachers' attention, and ended up in trouble. Many said they couldn't concentrate at school because they were anxious and worried. Some said their parents' drunken behaviour kept them awake at night. One child specifically reflected on how they would do less well at school when things were difficult at home, and do a lot better when things were more settled.

"Well I did miss school, I didn't miss it as in emotionally miss it, I mean I literally missed school, a lot of it." – 12 year old boy

"[Missed school because] sometimes she [mum] would have drunk beer, and sometimes she was like, she had chest infections and stuff." – 8 year old girl

"I wasn't very clever in primary school, I remember being in a kind of a special needs class in Year 6, because I was doing my SATs and I think they were worried I wasn't going to do well, I wasn't performing very well. And in Year 7 I was in a lower set and now I'm in the top set and now is when everything's pretty normal." – 16 year old boy

While for some children, school was a much needed relief from home, for others, the relative structure and strict boundaries of the school day was hard to cope with, and teachers didn't always understand.

"Yeah, every day, at the moment my homework was set, because I'm just that type of person, I like to get things done as soon as possible so I just did that, just done... With me, I would step away, I would take the step down, if I knew I had my GCSE exams coming up I would make sure they're done, I'm that, just that type of person. I would go and sit there, sit that exam because if I do well for myself and build a future for myself and have a good foundation and I have money I can help my mum." – 14 year old girl

"I think that's the main reason I wasn't as sad as I could have been, I was being at school, seeing friends, it would be at the back of my head but I forget about it for a bit. It's six and half hours a day when I'm not at home, with friends and stuff." – 16 year old boy

"I think that's just the main thing why I stayed at school. It was in a way a place for me to escape." – 16 year old

"Teachers want me out of the lesson because they think that I'm just going to be naughty all the time. Teachers need to probably put more effort in for kids like ones who have problems with family, because if, say, a child's having problems at home, like Mum and Dad have had an argument, then you're going to be a little bit down and the teachers, they're not really bothered, they're just going to treat you the same and be like, well, end of the day, you're in my lesson and you still need to keep your behaviour the same, but like I say, I were in a bit of a strop mood and sir shouts at me, I'll probably shout back and then I'll get done, and then that'll affect my home and stuff like that as well." – 13 year old boy

Feeling safe

Children spoke about not feeling safe at home or feeling very uncomfortable or scared about being home alone with one of their parents.

"If they, my parents, are fighting then I normally go with my brother and hide upstairs and we don't feel very safe in that environment where something is going on downstairs, we're not very aware of what's happening. You can hear my mum crying, my dad shouting and screaming and sometimes you can hear whacks of my mum being hit and when my dad eventually goes to work we come downstairs knowing it's quite safe, seeing my mum in tears and having bruises all over herself." - 10 year old girl

"I did not feel safe. I was worried my mum would get hurt." – 11 year old girl

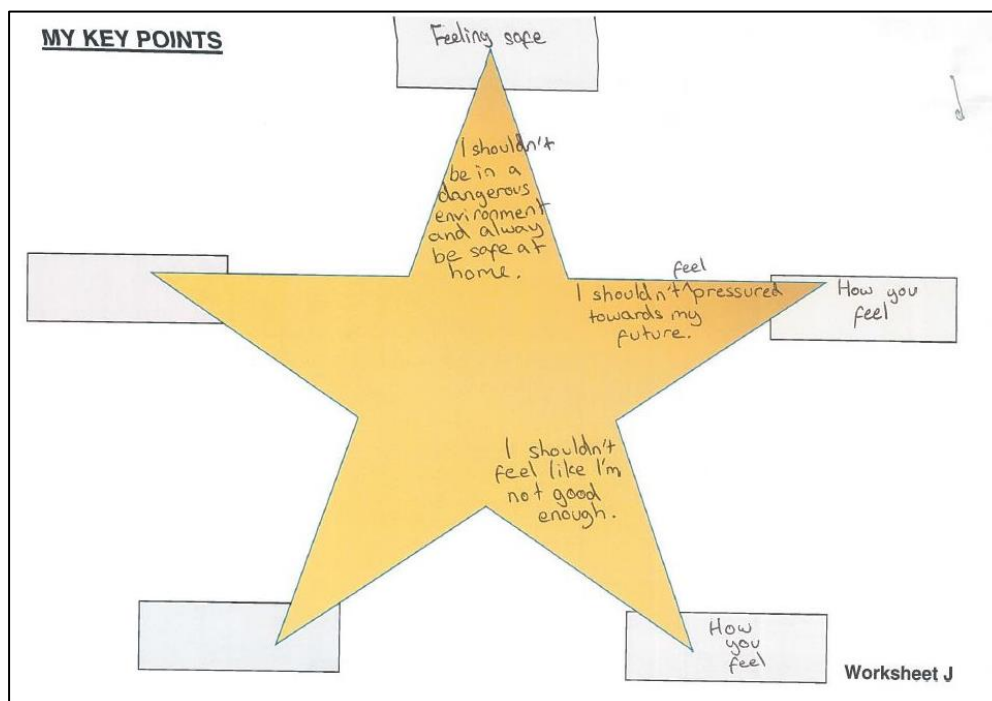
"I sometimes did feel safe with mummy and sometimes I didn't. Because there was safe people and unsafe people [in the house], and I didn't like when mummy was ill, and she was drinking. Because she was ill and sometimes she would shout at us." – 8 year old girl

"[I was] just scared to be home alone with him. I remember if my mum would say oh me and your brother and sister are just going to go out shopping, I'd get a bit scared of that because I don't know, I knew he wouldn't be normal, I didn't like being home alone with him." – 16 year old boy

Others were very adamant that no matter what was going at home, they had never felt unsafe. For some, the love and trust they had for their parent enabled them to minimise the risk being placed on them by living in these households. Some children expressed frustration at being told (often by social services) that it was not safe to be alone and in the care of a parent, despite feeling very safe with them.

'At the time I was a bit younger but, so I didn't think there was really any danger, even now I would still trust my mum with my life. My mum, even though she's addicted to drugs and everything, I know she would never, my mum, she's the type of person, she would never let anybody hurt us, she would protect us, so, but, so even now I know my mum would never, she wouldn't intentionally put me in danger, put me and my siblings in danger.' – 14 year old girl

"Yeah, I feel safe with my mum, my mum would never do anything to, intentionally, to put us in danger, she may have done things that could have caused danger but she, there was never a time you're putting us in danger, she's taking a risk to put us in danger. Yeah, I did, that's what I'm trying to say, they don't listen to me. Everything I just said, now, this has been my point I've been trying to say to everybody for the longest time, for over two years now, so." – 14 year old girl



Pictured above; a child's views on what they thought were the most important things for the Children's Commissioner to know about when thinking about the experiences of children living in these households

Section 3: How do they cope?

Children would cope by avoiding particular situations, delaying going home, relying on siblings, and retreating to their bedrooms.

"I knew what to do when he was drinking. Just stay in a different room...it helped." – 11 year old girl

TV and music, and in particular YouTube, were spoken about as good ways to switch off, get away from what was going on around them, and relax.

"Music and TV are good because I can be 'spaced out' and family will not notice. I like YouTube, its very relaxing," – 11 year old girl

"I feel like listening to music gets a bit of anger out. Say I'm in an angry mood and I can play a calm song." – 13 year old boy

"I like to listen to music because music is a way for you to get away from everything, I love music." – 14 year old boy

"My mum would take her TV from her room; put it in our room so we would be distracted." – 15 year old girl

A few of the children mentioned reading as a coping strategy. They saw it as a way to escape into another world, where you could pretend you were somewhere different for a while.

Children also spoke about how taking part in a sports club or afterschool activity could be a helpful coping strategy. Being active could be fun and help them take their mind off things at home. One child also commented on how activities, such as sport or video games, or going out with friends, was a useful way for him to release negative feelings and emotions. When he was not able to do these things then it felt like all the negative energy would build up inside of him.

"[I cope] by distracting myself, so like through sport, through activities revolved around school." – 14 year old girl

"If I don't go out, say, I've been naughty at school one day, I get grounded or I'm not allowed on my PlayStation, I'm not allowed to go out or anything, then I'm keeping all my energy in when I'm inside, so on the next day, when I'm outside at school, then I feel like all my energy's just going to burst out in school." – 13 year old boy

Finally, children spoke about the importance of pets as a source of unconditional love and support.

"I love dogs and they don't tell me what to do, they just love me." – 11 year old girl

"Her [the cat] being there helped so much, you don't even understand. We were kind of going

through the same thing, she had really bad trust issues... But I think, with getting a cat, I was able to connect with her in a way because she, because she doesn't like it when people give her too much attention and that's what I don't like either. So I think when we got the cat and when we first got her she was really shy, she would stay in our bedroom only. She would only come out when she needed to. So I related to her because I would only stay in my bedroom, I would only go out when I needed to, like the bathroom or to go get food. It felt like, even though she's a cat, it just felt like, OK, she's experiencing what I'm experiencing, she's experienced what it's like to be nervous, have anxiety about certain things, because she has really bad anxiety when she goes out. She's afraid that if she goes out the window, someone's going to close the window by accident and that's happened so many times to her. And I think I can relate to that, if I go out and then come back, if I go outside, I think my biggest fear is going outside and coming back home and not feeling wanted. So I think that I can relate with her because when, if she does go outside and we end up locking her out by accident, she feels unwanted. And, because she's already been to several homes, obviously during the summer we have to give her away to someone to look after for a period of time if we go on holiday. And I think she gets scared and nervous and annoyed when we leave her alone." – 15 year old girl

Section 4: Talking about life at home

Children acknowledged that talking about what was happening at home could really help them process their thoughts and feelings, manage their emotions and behaviour, and lead to the whole family getting the support that is needed.

“I had spoken about it, and it was good that I spoke about it, because in my head I kinda blamed myself like I shouldn’t have spoken about it and it was my fault with all these people coming and asking questions, but after a while I kinda said to myself, this is not your fault, like you’ve said it and now they are going to get the help they need.” – 16 year old girl

“I think as a teenager, yes it’s hard to speak about your emotions. But I think that if you know that you need help yourself and if you know that you’re struggling at home or at school or something, speak to someone that you know you can trust, even if that’s your best friend or cousin, mum, dad, auntie, uncle, the best way, the best way in getting help is to speak about it.” – 15 year girl

What stopped children from speaking out?

Children often become experts at hiding what is happening at home.

“Don’t be telling anyone...whatever happens in the house stays in the house.” – 11 year old girl

Most children said they didn’t want to talk about what life was like at home. This was for a number of reasons but namely fear, anxiety, embarrassment and a lack of trust in others.

“No we [siblings] never really spoke about it. And because it used to happen in the evening time and stuff like that, it would be brushed over by the next morning. So it was kinda like no one really talked about it, so I never really thought the need to say something or tell someone.” – 16 year old girl

“They [family members] would find a way to avoid it... like avoid the questions and everything. So I found it hard to talk to my sister about it, I found it hard to talk to like, my grandma.” – 14 year old girl

“Like I have really bad trust issues, really, really bad trust issues. I won’t trust someone unless I’ve known them for an extended period of time.” – 15 year old girl

“If I think about what’s been happening from the beginning with all that, I don’t know what will happen with the words that I say and where it will go so it takes me a long time to trust someone now, a lot more. I think with anyone – because they don’t have to be a professional to then decide to take your information and give it to a professional – it can be anyone that your speak to.” – 16 year old girl

When children did tell professionals or other adults, it often rebounded on them, damaging relationships at home. Parents or siblings could get very angry and upset, and blame the child for any of the consequences. This could be traumatic and isolating. These accounts emphasise not only the devastating impact that domestic abuse, parental mental health and parental substance misuse

can have, but also the process of making a disclosure to a professional or adult. It is important to remember this, particularly within a system where the burden in terms of identifying children and young people living in these households lies on a child or young people making disclosures.

Some of them in turn were angry with their siblings who had asked somebody for help.

"I was so angry at her [sister]. I was just like, bringing this person in, why did you say anything? We don't really need that much help, we're used to it and stuff like that. I was angry, upset and confused. I was just like, why would you say anything? You're going to get us in trouble, stuff like that." – 15 year old girl

"My mum was so angry with me, I've never seen her so angry. She was just like, at first I was angry with her as well because she kept saying, oh you're just embarrassing your family and stuff like that, for doing all of this." – 15 year old girl

Children's reluctance to talk about problems at home, particularly with professionals, was often from fear of getting their family into trouble, being taken into care, or getting in trouble themselves with family.

"I know social services are...they're not my friend, so when I was speaking to them I was very careful about what I was saying....they do what they think is in their best interest but they don't understand what the impact is on the poor child or the mum, the dad....the amount of times I've asked can you please try and help my mum." – 14 year old girl

"I know that I would get afraid that, if I said something, then he would come and hit me, he would come and say stuff to me if I said anything. So I think it was just mainly out of fear of being touched or verbally abused or something like that." – 15 year old girl

Sometimes this was driven directly by parents warning them about what might happen and instructing them not to speak to anyone. For others this fear was influenced by the views of family and friends or story lines in television programmes.

"When I first talked to either my teacher or my social worker then my dad usually finds out and then he [says] why did you say that? So then I feel like, is this what you want, me not to tell anyone anything? So then sometimes it pulls me back from saying anything." – X year old girl

"I feel like a lot of people feel like that, when they want to speak out but they feel like oh my god this is like going to mean like I'm not going to see my parents again, they're going to be taken away from me, I'm going to go into foster care." – 16 year old girl

Children also spoke of feeling embarrassed about home life and thought others would judge them, creating a stigma about them and their family.

"I didn't want everyone knowing." – 16 year old girl

"Teachers, no, I thought I was almost embarrassed to talk about it, I didn't want them to know what was happening in my life, something private and personal... also I didn't have any confidence. Probably never had that confidence to speak about it." – 19 year old girl

Some also had come to accept that this was their life and that there was nothing they could do about it, so there was no need to speak about it.

“Towards the end you just get so numb...You’re just, it’s like you accept it. I learnt to accept it, if this is going to be my life then there’s no point in me complaining about it if I can’t do anything about it. So, I might as well just carry on. I’ve never been one to get really hurt over things. I just, towards the end I just accepted it.” – 14 year old girl

Some children said they could speak to their friends about what was going on at home but more often as a way to distract themselves and avoid going home, not to talk to about what was happening. Some said they might speak to a friend, but only if they were very close and knew they could trust them completely, or if it was a friend that might be able to relate to what they were going through.

“I talk to one of my closest friends about it. But I’ll be careful like who I tell things to, and then, yeah. She’s been one of my closest friends ever since the beginning of secondary.” – 14 year old girl

Equally, others said it was not something they felt they could turn to their friends about. Reasons given included because they did not think their friends could relate to their problems at home, they would be too young to understand or unable to offer useful advice.

“I spoke to some friends about it. And they kind of tried to help but at the same time its like they are the same age as me, they can only give me enough help as much as an 11 or 12 year old can, which is not much. It felt good in some ways but in other ways it was kinda like they can’t relate to how I feel because they’re not in that situation – from the perspective that I can see it from their lives are complete opposite – so it’s kinda like they have the better side of what I should have as well” – 16 year old girl

What helped children talk about life at home?

Despite what was happening at home, children saw family as most trustworthy in speaking about how they felt. Some children said it was useful speaking to a sibling because they were going through the same thing so would understand.

“Well, I don't really, I quite enjoy, well, not enjoy but I quite feel comfortable talking to... my brother because normally he feels the same way too so then, yeah.” – 10 year old girl

“When my mum and dad have an argument it can make me feel a bit low, and then I’ll talk to my step mum and get it off my chest, and then I’ll be a bit better and then I’ll just go out and try to forget about it. I like to talk to my mum. I’ve always spoken to my mum about stuff. [Also] my aunty, my gran. I just feel like I can trust my family, mind you I couldn’t trust anyone else, really.” – 13 year old boy

“My siblings I think, I was with them a lot. They’re annoyingly funny, so same way they can annoy me I can just find something to make me laugh through that, so kind of just laughed through that.” – 16 year old girl

“What also does make the situation better is and what I'm grateful for is when I'm with my siblings.” – 14 year old girl

School can also be a safe environment where children are able to build relationships with professionals over time and make an assessment as to who they can trust. Children said it was easier to speak to adults you were more comfortable with and have known for a long time. In particular, some children cited learning mentors at school as being easy to talk to. Practitioners also said that in their experience younger children, outside of the home, were most likely to turn to teachers or other support staff at school. More vulnerable and quieter children were seen as being those most likely to turn to staff they knew well at school.

“Well, if something's happened and it's in mind and then it affects me, when I'm learning then I go to my teacher and say I need to have a time out and then after she would come to me when I'm ready and then we'd discuss it... It does help. Because then it feels like there's a weight lifted off your back, it feels a bit better, knowing that you've just told someone.” – 10 year old girl

“Within the school environment, because they're there every day, it's a safe space, they're seeing adults, they're analysing adults, they're watching them every day, and they're picking the ones who to trust, who they like. And I think within school, that contained environment, means that because they're seeing them every day, that then they can take a step to talk.” – support worker

Section 6: Experience of support

All of the children spoke about them and their family having current or previous contact with social services, which for some had been prompted through police call outs or school intervening. However, some children questioned why their parents had been reluctant to seek and accept offers of help.

“I think I was starting to get to a point where I was fed up...I was tired...at least...mum was trying to do something to help – I thought that would be enough to convince him that if she was doing it that he should do it himself but it clearly did not work.” – 16 year old girl

“I wish my mum had gotten help earlier. She knew that she needed help, she knew that we were in trouble and it’s just the fact that she didn’t speak to anyone about, she didn’t go to social services or anything. She didn’t go to Holly and just be like, look, I need help at home with my kids and my husband. Obviously at that age you don’t know what to do, my age, you don’t know what to do.” – 15 year old girl

For many previous support had been centred on addressing parental need, and whilst family work may have been provided, there had been limited support for the child as part of this. As a result some were surprised that services, like those we spoke to for this research, were directly aimed at supporting children.

“I thought you were just another health person to solve him but then when you came, and then you were talking just to us, to help us, I was like, in a way relieved and also, how would you say, like, I was surprised too there were people out there who just focus on the children.” – 19 year old girl

“When you [reference to practitioner] sounded determined to change something, it was refreshing, you was helping, you don’t feel like you’re the only one dealing with it, as well as your siblings.” – 14 year old girl

All of the children were known to children’s services and some had received other services such as educational support, CAMHS as well as services being delivered to parents/families for issues within the household.

“It’s like we, through that quest to find out what’s happening, we almost put more pressure on a child. It’s not about hearing a child. It’s not about spending time with them, finding about what they like doing, doing things that they like doing, being with them. It’s about asking them questions. It’s question, question, question, tick box, write down our answers. And it feels like they’re assaulted through this information, and then we expect them to go then and be a normal child.” – support worker

Methodology

We wanted to hear the first – hand views and experiences of children growing up in households where there is domestic abuse, parent substance misuse and parent mental health problems. We recruited children by collaborating with services who work directly with children living in these households. Further criteria used for the selection of services included ensuring the services worked in different geographic locations and that they had the necessary expertise and the infrastructure to assess whether children were able to safely participate in the research and could support the participants before, during and after the research.

The views of children were gathered using individual interviews. Topic guides were developed that aimed to combine structure with flexibility. Key topics were covered in each interview – but the probes under each topic were guided by what the participant had to say. Visual tools were also used to gather the views of children.

Considerable sensitivity is needed in talking to children about these issues and ensuring children feel comfortable discussing their experiences is paramount. Due to the short time frame of this research and the sensitive nature of the questions, the Children’s Commissioner felt it would be more appropriate for the practitioners working with the children to facilitate these discussions. They would have the child’s trust and have already established a rapport, as well as insight into the support needs for the children, all of which are essential for having these conversations on this issue. The researchers provided practitioners with a topic guide, information sheets, accompanying tools to use, and consent forms. Researchers also conducted interviews with the practitioners in order to further understand children’s experiences. All interview was recorded and transcribed.

15 children were interviewed in total across the three geographic areas that each of the services worked in. The tables below outline the gender and age breakdown within the sample. The table below highlights that many more females felt able to take part in this research.

Gender

Male	Female
4	11

Age

Ages 6 – 11	Ages 12 – 15	Ages 16 – 17	Ages 18-19
5	5	2	1

Ethics

Children living in households where there is domestic abuse, parent substance abuse and/ or parent mental health problems may be reticent about speaking about their experiences, particularly because of the stigma often attached to such experiences. For this reason it is very important that all information, with certain specific exceptions, remained confidential.

We redacted the name of each research participant, and any information that could lead to them being identified. The name was replaced by a cipher in any notes, transcripts or analytical framework. The published report does not name or provide any identifying information of any child who took part.

Prior to fieldwork commencing we had discussions with service sites to map out what support they had in place for research participants and how that would be accessed.

Information sheets for children were provided which explained the purpose of the study and how their views would be used. This also provided the opportunity to discuss any ethical or safeguarding concerns. Children were also asked to sign consent forms, confirming their understanding of their participation and use of the information gathered. Reassurance of confidentiality was also given; however, children were also notified that if they said anything that indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm then this information would need to be shared. All children that took part consented to the public use of their responses.



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