

Making visible the invisible [youngest] victims of domestic violence and abuse

Across the globe, health and safety measures to protect against Covid 19, involving lockdown, cocooning and restriction of movement, have led to unintended consequences for those in our communities for whom home is not a safe haven- where staying at home can unthinkably be more dangerous than the virus itself. Recorded and reported spikes in calls to helplines from (largely) women experiencing domestic violence has led to calls for concerns for the measures that were designed to keep victims safe – yet our understanding of who those victims are needs a sharp reality check. Why? Because less visible or rather invisible are the children in these families, who are not only victims in their own right but are also powerless. For too long, children have remained on the periphery of our focus on and understanding of domestic violence – mistakenly seen as passive by-standers in what has traditionally been understood as an adult problem. Children see and hear much more than adults may like to believe. The myth of children sleeping through violent incidents during the night or having no knowledge of the abuse occurring in the home needs to be quashed.

What do we know about how children experience living with domestic violence?

Children who live in homes and in families where there is domestic violence and abuse tell us that they are no more immune to its impact than they are to Covid 19. Living front and centre in the firing line of domestic violence, children see, hear and live with this abuse, with terror, anxiety and fear becoming part of their daily functioning. Children's accounts tell us that police, teachers, support workers, friends and family members are all important in helping them cope with and recover from this experience... that their coping and recovery relies heavily on the safety and sanctity of school – on the buffering support of grandparents and extended family- on the resilient power of friendship - the cushioning routine and regularity of sport and the interventions and support of professionals who listen and understand.

These safety nets, these safe zones in the life of a child who lives with domestic violence have been removed during this lock-down period. Movement restrictions, unemployment, home schooling, perhaps increased alcohol and drug use, all combine to make for a very stressful home environment for a child and even more so if one of their primary carers is a perpetrator of abuse.

Earlier this week, Ryan Tubridy opened his daily radio show by inviting commentary on a story line in Coronation Street on domestic violence. Yet again this storyline focused on the all too familiar typecast situation involving violence and abuse between two adults – a male perpetrator and a female victim. Yet again we question why these story lines generally do not contain children – a missed opportunity to highlight the youngest, most vulnerable victims in a family experience of domestic violence.

As if responding to our questions raised above, adult callers to Tubridy's show on Tuesday, reflected on their own childhood experiences of living with domestic abuse, how they learned pretty quickly how to please and not get in the way; how to avoid injury and equally how to take it when it meant their mother was spared; how in adulthood some experienced their own abusive relationships, concerned for their own children who they feared would grow up to be what one contributor termed 'a perpetual legacy to domestic violence', where power, control and abuse become a normal part of relationships . Tubridy referred to the damaging power of 'gas lighting psychological violence' or coercive control, that underlies and dominates every fibre of the child's developmental pathway through childhood. Many children may not relate their experience to domestic violence until perhaps a professional has helped them to name what was happening as abuse in their home. In order for us to begin to address the toxic impact that living with domestic violence has on children, we need to start by seeing them and hearing them, naming their experiences as abusive and making visible the oft invisibility of those experiences.

Like Covid 19, domestic violence and abuse respects no boundaries – geographical, religious, class or culture. Also like Covid 19 however, it impacts more severely on those most vulnerable. That includes children, who not only hear it, see it, and experience the consequences of it, but are also actively managing their own safety and those of their mothers and siblings. And so, as our country begins to emerge from lockdown while the world focuses on finding a vaccine to protect against the pandemic that is Covid 19, please remember that childhood is not a vaccine against the harm and hurt that is symptomatic of domestic violence.

Dr Stephanie Holt is an Associate Professor and Head of School, and Dr Ruth Elliffe is a Teaching Fellow, School of Social Work & Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.