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**How the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issues of domestic violence and child abuse**

**Abstract:**

This paper explores the rise in domestic violence and child abuse recorded over the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this is likely to lead to poorer emotional, behavioural, and psychosocial outcomes for children. Research studies often explore the impact on children of both witnessing and experiencing domestic violence. In contrast, this paper focuses on these occurrences separately to identify the impact on children of both aspects of domestic violence. The government's response to the pandemic is also explored in relation to the topics covered in this article. In conclusion it is argued that there was an increase in domestic violence related deaths and a rise in children suffering from negative physical and mental health consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic, first declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, has had a significant impact on the lives of children globally (WHO, 2020). More than 168 million children have missed out on face-to-face teaching worldwide for almost a whole year, with over 1.6 billion learners affected at the peak of the pandemic in April 2020 (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). With lockdowns forcing people to stay at home, a major concern has been the affect this has on people living in abusive or dysfunctional family situations. To date, research has shown that this concern is justified. For example, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) experienced 31% more calls in May than before the pandemic (NSPCC, 2020).

The pandemic can be considered an adverse childhood experience (ACE) as children will need a high level of resilience (Glazzard, Potter and Stones, 2019) to get through the pandemic with as little negative impact on their mental health as possible. An adverse childhood experience (ACE) is a traumatic experience that a child goes through which will likely have an impact on them developmentally (Public Health Network Cymru, 2017). The

World Health Organisation [WHO] (2018) recognises abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence as ACEs, amongst other negative experiences and household dysfunction. A higher number of ACEs has consistently been shown to directly correlate with negative physical and psychological outcomes in adulthood (Felitti et al., 2019; Public Health Network Cymru, 2017; WHO, 2018). The pandemic may have resulted in children being exposed to increased levels of toxic stress, which contribute to making the situation an ACE. This could, in turn, result in possible negative implications for brain development and long-term cognitive abilities (Araújo et al., 2020). Furthermore, the measures put in place to control the virus have removed one of the vital factors to overcoming adversity in childhood. Engaging with people has been shown to increase the likelihood of children overcoming adversity (Masten et al., 1990), something which has not been possible for much of the pandemic. It was found that parents with children living at home had higher levels of stress regarding food security (Fancourt et al., 2020), this could result in not only being exposed to toxic stress but also could result in neglect as children may not be receiving sufficient nutrients. Due to the fact that ACEs have negative long-term effects, it is vital that any safeguarding concerns are raised promptly when a child's safety is at risk, as if issues are not investigated and acted upon as soon as they are noticed there could be more severe repercussions for the child's health and wellbeing. Hence safeguarding policies, such as Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018), being paramount when working with children and vulnerable people. The government needs to act as research suggests that the more ACEs a child has, the higher the prevalence of mental health conditions (Uddin et al, 2020).

The risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) may have increased since the start of the pandemic. This is due to risk factors such as social isolation and excessive alcohol consumption being more prevalent. The sale of alcohol in the UK rose significantly at the start of the first lockdown, breaking a trend of reduction in alcohol sales since 2016 (ONS, 2020). This may have contributed to the rise in domestic abuse as alcoholism is a major risk factor for becoming an abuser (Yu et al., 2019). Furthermore, since the start of the first lockdown a significant increase in levels of Universal Credit declarations were recorded (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020) as a result of many people losing their jobs or experiencing a significant drop in their income. Globally 100 million people are likely to fall

into extreme poverty due to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic (The World Bank, 2020). This is likely to increase children's vulnerability to violence as low socio-economic status appears to be a risk factor for domestic abuse (Riggs, Caulfield and Street, 2000). The potential vulnerability created by job losses could lead to the children in the family becoming poor adults and having poorer life outcomes than their wealthier counterparts. The Field report (Field, 2010) found that children who grew up in families from poorer backgrounds had poorer outcomes in various aspects of their lives, both cognitively and behaviourally. The government pledged to eradicate child poverty by 2020, which evidently did not come into fruition as 25% of children were in absolute poverty (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021).

Witnessing domestic violence has a detrimental effect on a child's health and wellbeing and the pandemic has exacerbated this, with almost 30% more children witnessing domestic violence than before the lockdown (Calvano et al., 2021). The Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe (2010) equates a child witnessing violence against their mother to psychological abuse. Meltzer et al. (2009) found a significant link between conduct disorders and witnessing domestic violence. Children exposed to marital hostility exhibit serious behaviour problems (Jouriles et al., 1989) at a rate of between 533-667% higher than those who have not been exposed to marital hostility (Wolfe et al., 1985). Children who witness domestic violence have been shown to have similar psychosocial outcomes to those who have been physically abused (Kitzmann et al., 2003). These studies show a clear and significant trend that witnessing domestic violence has a profound effect on a child's mental health. This issue worsened over lockdown, possibly due to the measures put in place by the UK government to prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing, self-isolation and urging people to work from home if possible. A survey conducted by Women's Aid (2020) found that many abusers were using lockdown as an opportunity to increase the severity of abuse due to the government orders to stay at home, thus eliminating chances for people to notice signs of abuse. This appears to support the hypothesis that lockdown measures had a direct impact on women and children already experiencing domestic abuse.

In the first three weeks of lockdown in the UK, the number of women killed by a partner, ex-partner or family member was the highest it has been in at least 11 years (Counting Dead Women Project, 2020). This was prior to the government announcing it would give an extra

two million pounds to domestic abuse helplines (BBC One, 2020). Some of the people killed by their abusers over those first few weeks of lockdown were parents, resulting in potential emotional trauma for the children as they have lost one parent possibly to the other. In such a case the convicted parent may also be considered a loss as the children will no longer be living with them. This raises an ethical issue as it appears that the government had not considered the effects going into lockdown would have on people living in an abusive situation, as they did not put any measures in place to help those people escape their abuser prior to a national lockdown being imposed. As incidents of abuse have risen since the pandemic began, it can be hypothetically predicted that this current generation of children will have poorer psychosocial outcomes than the previous generation. This could lead to more children in this generation becoming perpetrators or victims of domestic violence as children use their experience of relationships growing up to build relationships in later life, according to Bowlby's (1997) theory of developing an internal working model (IWM). This is the process by which children's early experiences shape their behaviour in later life.

Measures that have increased the severity of intimate partner violence (IPV) have had the same effect on child abuse. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC] (2020) published a document, shortly after the first lockdown in the UK was lifted, highlighting concerns over children's safety being compromised over the lockdown period, acknowledging the reduction in normal protective services. This disruption to vital services resulted in a decrease of almost 50% in referrals being made to children's social care services (Calkin, 2020), despite the NSPCC experiencing a surge of calls during the same period (NSPCC, 2020). Not only were children more vulnerable to physical abuse over lockdown, but also to online grooming as schooling moved largely online so children were spending more time on the internet, which left them vulnerable to internet predators (NSPCC, 2020).

The pandemic has introduced new stressors to parents' lives such as financial insecurity, having to care and possibly home-school their children full-time (while also working from home themselves), and possibly death of family members, whilst exacerbating existing stressors. Calvano et al. (2021) found that there was a significant increase in parental stress

since the pandemic began and the prevalence of ACEs was higher amongst families with higher levels of parental stress. It is known that being under extreme stress can lead parents to resort to negative coping strategies (NSPCC, 2020) which could put children at risk of physical or emotional abuse or neglect. Additionally, social isolation has been shown repeatedly to be a risk factor for maltreatment (Moncher, 1995) not only in the UK context, which the majority of studies in the subject are based, but also cross-culturally (Gracia and Musitu, 2003).

This raises an ethical issue relating to the government's decision to implement a lockdown without consideration of the likely impact on families of isolation and risk to children's safety. Despite this significant body of evidence, the government failed to recognise that a rise in prevalence and severity of child abuse would be the result. However, one could argue that it would have been unethical for a lockdown not to be enforced as this would have inevitably caused many more deaths as the infection rate would have risen due to general social contact not being limited. Increasing funding to intervention services in a timelier manner may have prevented the significant increase in incidents of abuse. This would have allowed these services to maintain their usual availability rather than experience the reduction in service that they did (NSPCC, 2020). Staff could have taken precautions such as wearing a mask and face shield in order to carry out home visits to decrease chances of spreading or contracting COVID-19. The recent enactment of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is a step forward for both children and adults in domestic abuse situations as it will require all local authorities to have provision to assist victims, recognising that seeing, hearing, or experiencing the effects of domestic abuse make children victims themselves. Earlier on in the pandemic, the UK government released (now withdrawn) guidance stating that teachers should continue to be vigilant to any possible signs of child abuse, including children they are only interacting with online (GOV.UK, 2020). However, this guidance failed to give any advice on how to identify signs of abuse solely through online interactions (Khan and Mikuska, 2021).

In conclusion, the pandemic has impacted children's lives in many ways, the long-term effects of which will not be known until much further in the future. With the rise in mental health issues already recorded since the pandemic began, it can be hypothetically predicted

that depression will become more prevalent due to increased exposure to domestic violence (Calvano et al, 2021; Choi et al 2012). The government's actions, in regard to abuse victims, during lockdown show that they failed a large percentage of vulnerable people, which resulted in a number of deaths greater than that of the same period for each year for over a decade (Counting Dead Women Project, 2020). Not enough focus was placed on mental health promotion thus resulting in individuals turning to negative coping strategies which placed children at an increased risk of maltreatment (NSPCC, 2020). Significant work will need to be done to attempt to reverse any negative effects this pandemic will have had on children, but also parents and the wider community as everyone has felt the difficulties brought on by COVID-19.

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