



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

What children who live with domestic violence and abuse say about their Dads: Findings from Irish research.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Melbourne

25 September 2017

Stephanie Holt, PhD
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin



Irish Research

Buckley, Whelan & Holt (2006) *Listen to Me! Children's Experience of Domestic Violence*, Children's Research Centre, TCD.

- Buckley, H., Holt, S., Whelan, S., Listen to Me! Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence, *Child Abuse Review*, 16, 2007, p296 – 310.
- Holt, S., Buckley, H., Whelan, S., The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32, 2008, p797 – 810.

Holt (2009) *The Contact Conundrum: Children's Experience of Post-Separation Contact with Domestically Abusive fathers*. PhD, TCD. [PSC]

- Holt, Stephanie, Domestic Abuse & Child Contact: Positioning Children in the Decision-Making Process., *Child Care in Practice*, 17, (4), 2011.
- Holt, S., Domestic Violence and the Paradox of Post-Separation Mothering, *British Journal of Social Work*, 2016, Notes: [Published on Early View, December 8th 2016].
- Holt, S., Post-separation fathering and domestic abuse: challenges and contradictions, *Child Abuse Review*, 24, (3), 2015, p210 - 222, Notes: [Published online early view June 2013].

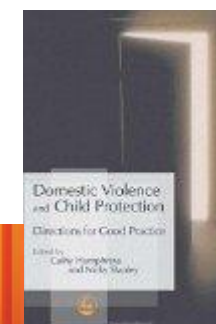
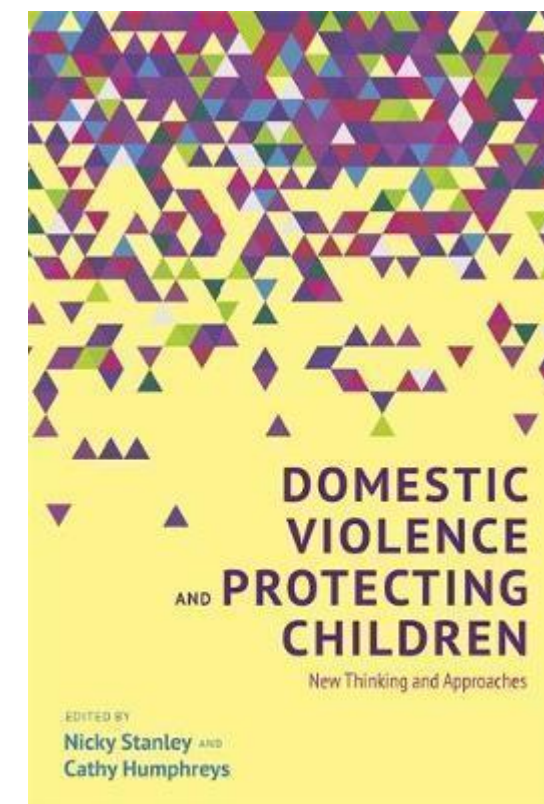
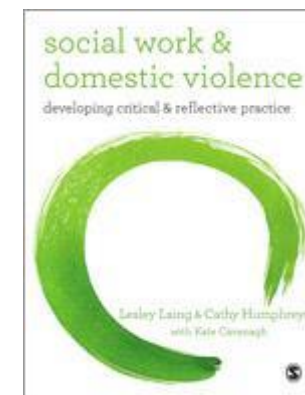
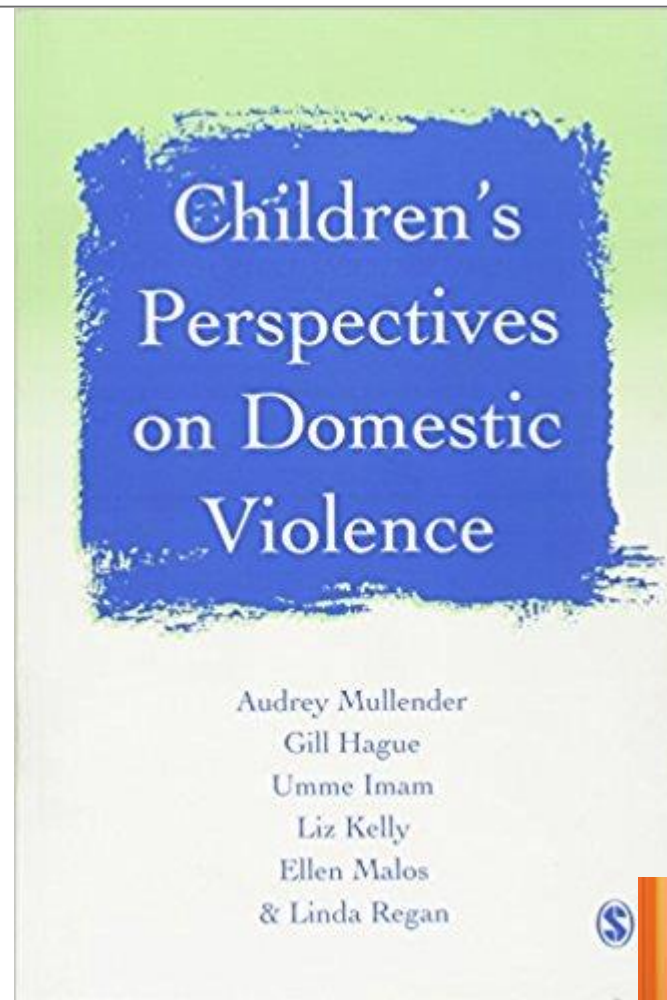
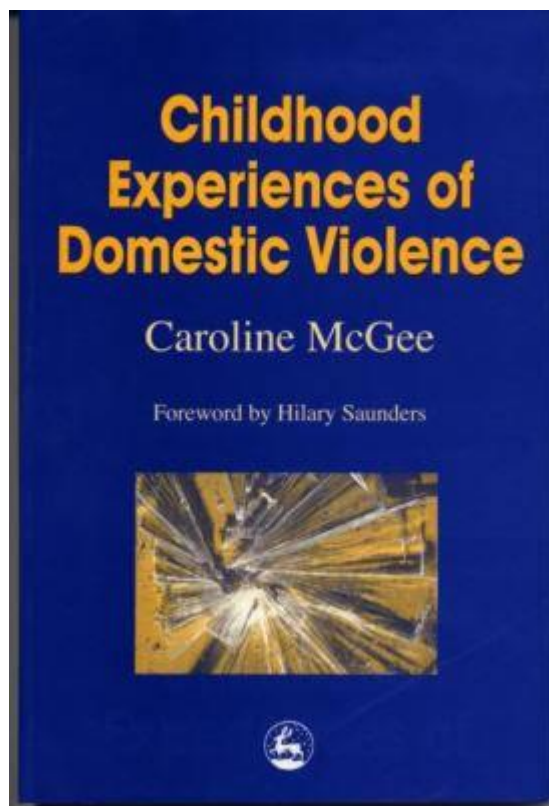
Holt, Kirwan & Ngo (?) Does it work or does it last: Groupwork with Mothers and Children who have experienced domestic violence, Journal of Group Work. GWR

Murphy & Holt (2013) *Evaluation of Pilot Child Contact Centre*, Barnardos/One Family. CCCE

Holt & Ward (2015) *Evaluation of Safe Home Project*. SSE

Overview of Presentation

- Situating the present state of knowledge – international and Irish
- Findings from research in Ireland which has focused on children's experiences of living with domestic violence locating that experience in the context of our understanding of 'coercive control';
- Addressing the paradox of post-separation father involvement – what children say about PSC with their dads and their involvement in the decision-making process
- Moving forward – keeping the lens of inquiry on abusive men as fathers.



The Present State of Knowledge

**Domestic Violence has been
recognised as a key indicator for child
abuse and neglect**

The Present State of Knowledge: Buckley, Whelan & Holt (2006) Listen to Me!

The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Abuse on Children

Holt, Buckley & Whelan (2008) *Child Abuse and Neglect*.

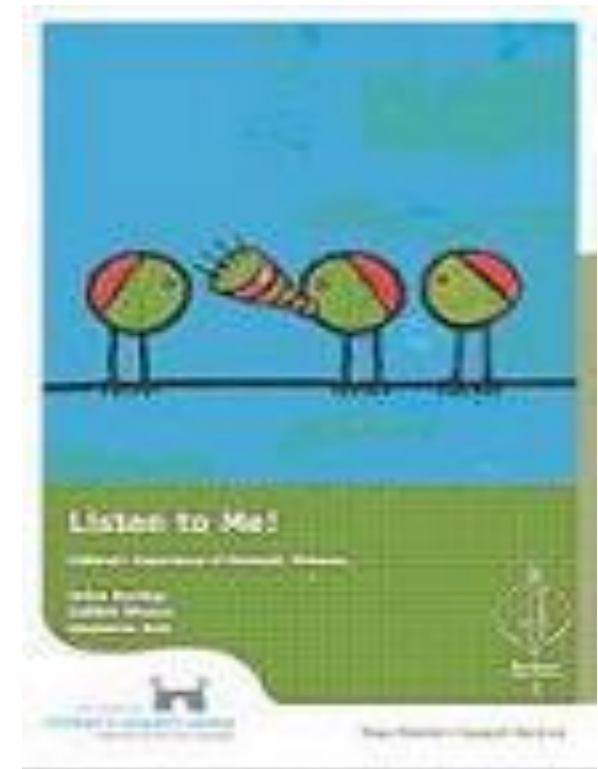
Child Abuse

Developmental Issues

Multiple Adversities

Parenting Capacity

Post-Separation Contact



‘Relationship’ with Father

EMOTIONAL/RELATIONAL ABSENCE

+/

ABUSIVE FATHER PRESENCE

How would you describe your relationship with your dad?

My 'relationship' with my Dad? I don't have one....I feel like I am a pebble at the bottom of a stream and my Dad is this angry stream bashing me against all the other pebbles.

Sara 13 (CCCE, 2013)

Impact: Feeling Different

‘I felt that I had a neon sign that told everyone what was going on in my family... I felt I wasn't on the same wavelength as people...I thought that they were all happy families or whatever and I was kind of like the outcast’

— Young Person (17), *Listen to Me!* 2006

Impact: Fear

I used to hide under my bed all week. I used to make a little place out of it with all my teddies. He ...always used to buy teddies for us...and I used to store them under my bed and any time I felt sad or when they were screaming and roaring down in the kitchen '

— Child, (8), *Listen to Me!*, 2006.

Impact: Invisibility & Powerlessness

He shouts and curses and calls my Mum really, really mean names. I would say ‘stop Dad’, but he doesn’t listen.

Rachel (11) Contact Study, 2009

IMPACT: LOSS

‘Anyone can have a father but he is not my Dad’? Leah (12) PSC 2009

A 'Proper' Dad...

***'To be a 'proper' dad, he doesn't have to bring us anywhere, he doesn't have to spend anything, we just wouldn't have to feel awkward around him, we could actually talk to him, just being in the same room as him and not being all tense and awkward.'* (Eva, 16)**

***'Yeah, like that 'first conversation' awkward silence.'* (Leah, 12)**

Contact Study, 2009

If you could change anything what would that be?

I would shave his head, [to] change something inside him...change the program in his head? I'd make him nicer...he'd give us money and be nicer to us. But still not live with us. We'd still see him, every week on Saturdays. [He'd] give us money and go to see us more.

Cathy (9) Contact Study, 2009

LIVING WITH COERCIVE CONTROL

....you[re] just getting over what happened before and then it hits you again and you feel...you're like spinning the whole time. If it's not happening, you're waiting for it to happen. When it's happening it's almost a relief because, here it is, what I'm waiting for. And then when it's not happening you're waiting for it again.

— Young Adult 18+ *Listen to Me!* 2006



He was so volatile.. that was probably the worst of it that I didn't know would he abuse me. With dad in a lot of ways, it was the threat of what might happen because you never knew exactly what would happen with dad.

Colette (24) Contact Study, 2009

What responsibility do men have for responsible fathering?

Neglect of fathers in research on dv – substantial body of knowledge on perpetrators, it rarely conceptualises them as fathers (Stanley, 2011)

ARE ABUSIVE MEN ‘GOOD ENOUGH’ FATHERS?

— RAKIL (2006: 198)

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

- *Less likely to be involved*
- *More Controlling & Authoritarian*
- *Less Likely to allow Freedom of Expression*
- *Difficulty empathising with child*
- **Bancroft & Silverman (2002)**

Abusive Men As Fathers (Harne, 2004)

Fathers often said they cared about or ‘loved’ their children but rarely considered the impacts of their violence or abuse or how this might affect children’s views of them.

Perceived children as ‘their’ possessions.

Some fathers described very young children as ‘provoking’ violence and intimidation because they were demanding attention or ‘annoying’ them. (Harne, 2004)

Fathers: Limited Capacity to Change & Limited Insight



**Childhoods
characterised by
absent, distant or
abusive fathers**



**Struggled to accept
responsibility for their
behaviour with very limited
insight into the impact it
had and was having on
their children.**

What do Children say about PSC and their relationships with their fathers?

Unreliability & Unpredictability

- *Sometimes he makes up an excuse and then he doesn't see us...so we're just hanging around for ages waiting. Cathy (9)*

Inflexible and Rigid Arrangements

- *Sometimes even when I am really upset and need to talk to her, Dad won't let me. Ciara (9)*

Apathy & Frustration

- *He just acted like we weren't there. Eva (16)*

Abusive fathers not engaging with services

He's beyond the law, no one can make him do anything Kate (13)

Complex Relationships

Lots of the time I really, really, hate him, but at the end of the day, he is still my Dad.

Rachel (11)

I'd give him a million chances Cathy (9)

I'm fed up waiting for him to be a Dad Leah (12)

Physically punitive:

He's just bold...he'll hit ya Sean (7)

But not physically close

He just doesn't care at all Ciara (9)

Fathering capacity

He can hardly take care of himself – how can he take care of us too?

Kate (13)

WHY IS CONTACT RARELY IF EVER DENIED?

IS THE PRACTICE OF DECISION MAKING EVIDENCE INFORMED?

Prevailing pro-contact discourse

▶ **Universal assumptions**

- ▶ Abuse ends with separation
- ▶ Parental Alienation Syndrome

- ▶ Contact is in the child's best interest
- ▶ Father absence more harmful than abusive father presence

▶ **Participation in decision-making process harms children**

How do children understand separation & divorce?

- ▶ They separated 'cos of the fighting and shouting and nasty bad behaviour....but it's still the same, maybe even worse..he just lives somewhere else now. *Robbie (8) PSC 2009*
- ▶ *Mum was sad...crying all the time. Victoria (4) SHE 2015*

How do they understand contact?

► It seemed kinda exciting at first, like what you see on those American sitcoms..seeing your Dad every Saturday....that's till you realise it's the same crap crammed into one day a week! Looking back, they (social workers) should have given it a trial run, cos you don't know what you want or if it's gonna work till you try it. How could I have known what 'contact' I wanted or how could they have known what would 'work'? *Jane (17) PSC*

What do children say about blame, responsibility and solutions?

He [Dad] should go to anger management and they [parents] should both just behave...kids are always being told to behave, why can't adults behave?

Robbie (8) PSC

Daddy hit Mom on the head – bang!

Victoria (4) SHE

What do children say about consultation?

► I think the social workers got a statement off me and Amy once or twice to say we didn't want to see him but [that] didn't do much [good]. I think it was a female Judge, she said 'I can't physically make you go, you know but you kind of do have to see him'.

Shelley (16) PSC

A Voice or a Choice.....

►Them (Contact Centre) making the decision that it wasn't safe for me to see my Dad made it easier for me..I knew that they weren't just 'listening' to me, that they had actually heard me and that made me feel very safe. I'm not sure I could have made that decision myself...I don't think I should have to. Sara

13. CCCE

KIDS ON THE CONTACT DECISION MAKING PROCESS

I don't really believe in fathers, like I think they're a bit useless but that's just because of our experience but maybe some of them could be, you know, ok, and they should be investigated properly, and have proper detailed statements from children whether or not they want to see them, instead of assuming it was good for ya and you'd miss out otherwise. They thought we were missing out..but how can you miss something if you never rightly had it.. I've never had it so I can't miss it. It's not rocket science...if anyone had really bothered to listen they could have figured it out pretty quickly, but their starting point was all wrong. *Eva (16) PSC*

One size fits all?



Are Abusive Men 'Good Enough' Fathers?

**Can
abusive
men be
'good
enough'
fathers?**



Focus on the reality of men's behaviour and not the rhetoric of involved fathering

- **Engaging men – absent present – invisible practices**
- **Children Living with domestic violence!**
- **Throw caution (assumptions) to the wind and instead..**
- **Listen to what children are 'actually' saying!**



***Don't assume you know 'what is good for me' without asking me.
Don't assume you 'know me' without getting to know me. And for
God's sake if I manage to tell you what's wrong with me, please
listen to what I have to say, don't interpret it, just listen.***

— Eva, 16. PSC, 2009

Selected References

- Brown, T., Alexander, R. (2007) *Child Abuse and Family Law: Understanding the Issues Facing Human Service and Legal Professionals*. Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Cooksey, E. C., & Craig, P. H. (1998). Parenting from a distance: The effects of parental characteristics on contact between non-residential fathers and their children. *Demography*, 35(2), 187–200.
- Fisher, M. () 'Beyond evidence-based policy and practice: Reshaping the relationship between research and practice', *Social Work & Social Sciences Review*, 16(2), pp20-36.
- Fotheringham, S., Dunbar, J. & Hensley, D. (2013) 'Speaking for themselves: hope for children caught in high conflict custody and access disputes involving domestic violence', *Journal of Family Violence*, 28: 311-324.
- Hester, M. (2011) 'The Three Planet Model: Towards an Understanding of Contradictions in Approaches to Women and Children's Safety in Contexts of Domestic Violence', *British Journal of Social Work*, 41, pp. 837-853.
- Holt, S. (2015) 'Post-separation Fathering and Domestic Abuse: Challenges and Contradictions', *Child Abuse Review*, 24(3), pp. 210-222.
- Holt, S. (2016) 'Domestic Violence and the Paradox of Post-Separation Mothering', *British Journal of Social Work*, *Forthcoming*.
- Kaganas, F. and Day Sclater, S. (2004) 'Contact disputes: Narrative constructions of 'Good' parents' *Feminist Legal Studies*, 12(1), pp. 1-27.
- Peled, E. (2000). Parenting of men who abuse women: Issues and dilemmas. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(1), 25–36.

Pryor, J., & Rodgers, B. (2001). *Children in changing families: Life after parental separation*. Oxford: Blackwell Press.

Radford, L. & Hester, M. (2015) 'More than a mirage? Safe contact for children and young people who have been exposed to domestic violence', in N. Stanley & C. Humphreys, *Domestic Violence & Protecting Children: New Thinking and Approaches*. London: JKP.

Rivett, M., Howarth, E. & Harold, G. (2006) 'Watching from the stairs': Towards an evidence-based practice in work with child witnesses of domestic violence', *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 11(1): 103-125.

Stanley, N. (2011) *Children Experiencing Domestic Violence: A Research Review*. Dartington: Research in Practice.

Saunders, H. (2004) *Twenty-Nine Child Homicides: Lessons still to be Learnt on Domestic Violence and Child Protection*. Bristol: Women's Aid Federation of England.

Thiara, R.V. and Humphreys, C. (2015) 'Absent presence: the ongoing impact of men's violence on the mother-child relationship', *Child & Family Social Work.*, Advance Access published 5th January 2015, DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12210

Trinder, L., Beek, M., & Connolly, J. (2002). *Making Contact: How Parents and Children Negotiate and Experience Contact After Divorce* York. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Thank you

Email: sholt@tcd.ie

