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## Beyond 'witnessing': Children's Experiences of Coercive Control in Domestic Violence and Abuse

Jane E.M. Callaghan, Joanne H. Alexander, Lisa C Fellin and Judith Sixsmith

### Abstract

Children's experiences and voices are underrepresented in academic literature and professional practice around domestic violence and abuse. The project 'Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies' addresses this absence, through direct engagement with children. We present an analysis from interviews with 21 children in the United Kingdom (12 girls and 9 boys, aged 8-18 years), about their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and their responses to this violence. These interviews were analysed using interpretive interactionism. Three themes from this analysis are presented: a) **'Children's experiences of abusive control', which explores children's awareness of** controlling behaviour by the adult perpetrator, their experience of that control, and its impact on them; b) **'Constraint', which explores how children experience the constraint associated with** coercive control in situations of domestic violence, and c) **'Children as agents' which explores children's strategies for managing controlling** behaviour in their home and in family relationships. The paper argues that, in situations where violence and abuse occurs between adult intimate partners, children are significantly impacted, and can be reasonably described as victims of abusive control. Recognising children as direct victims of domestic violence and abuse would produce significant changes in the way professionals respond to them, by 1) recognising children's experience of the impact of domestic violence and abuse; 2) recognising children's agency, **undermining the perception of them as passive** 'witnesses' or **'collateral damage' in adult abusive encounters; and 3) strengthening** professional responses to them *as direct victims*, not as passive witnesses to violence.

## Introduction

Recognising **children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse is an important concern in working effectively** with them as victims and survivors (Mullender et al., 2003; Øverlien, 2011). This paper focuses **on children's** experiences of domestic violence of coercive and controlling behaviours in families affected by domestic violence. **Our paper is concerned with children's experiences in situations where the main perpetrator and victim of violence** would be **legally defined as two adults in an intimate relationship (not where the child is involved in 'dating violence')**. **In this paper, we use the term 'children who experience violence' and choose not to use the terms 'witness' to violence, or describe children as 'exposed' to domestic violence, because we intend throughout this** article to disrupt this passive construction of childhood.

The extent and impact of domestic violence on children is well documented. In terms of prevalence, a UK study suggests about 29.5% of children under 18 have been exposed to domestic violence during their lifetime and approximately 5.7% of children and young people, will experience domestic violence in a year (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013), and research evidence suggests that its psychosocial impact can be severe. Children who grow up in families affected by domestic violence and abuse have a higher risk of mental health difficulties throughout their lives (Bogat, DeJonghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman, 2009; Mezey, Bacchus, Bewley, & White, 2005; Peltonen, Ellonen, Larsen, & Helweg-Larsen, 2010), increased risk of physical health difficulties (Bair-Merritt, Blackstone, & Feudtner, 2006); risk of educational drop out and other educational challenges (Byrne & Taylor, 2007; Koenen, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Purcell, 2003; Willis et al., 2010); risk of involvement in criminal behaviour (R. Gilbert et al., 2009; T. Gilbert, Farrand, & Lankshear, 2012) and interpersonal difficulties in their own future intimate relationships and friendships (Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Siegel, 2013). They are also more likely to be bullied and to engage in bullying themselves (Baldry, 2003; Lepistö, Luukkaala, & Paavilainen, 2011) and are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, and becoming involved in violent relationships themselves (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010). An emergent literature suggests that there may also be lasting neurological impact that can have far-reaching implications for **children's** lifelong wellbeing (Anda et al., 2006; Choi, Jeong, Polcari, Rohan, & Teicher, 2012; Koenen et al., 2003). **It has been suggested that 'witnessing'**

domestic violence is at least as impactful as being directly physically abused (Moylan et al., 2010; Sousa et al., 2011).

Domestic violence and abuse pervades the family and has a negative impact on patterns of relating throughout the household (Cooper & Vetere, 2008; Dallos & Vetere, 2012). Systemic theorists suggest that, when a third person **(e.g. a child) is drawn into the dynamics of the intimate dyad, this should be understood as ‘triangulation’**. While this can be an ordinary part of family interactions, in situations of violence and abuse, it is likely to be associated with conflict and distress, as children are invoked to take sides, establish intergenerational coalitions or shifting alliances against a parent and / or siblings (Dallos & Vetere, 2012). Research using this understanding of family life has evidenced the significant impact of triangulation on children in situations of domestic violence, including the **impact of split loyalties, ‘parentification’ and other role inversions, and scapegoating, with the potential to produce** long term psychological distress (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buehler & Welsh, 2009; Cooper & Vetere, 2008).

Dallos and Vetere (2012) argue that violence and intimidation are often directed to both the adult and child victims, **making the discrete categories of ‘domestic violence’ and ‘child abuse’ difficult to sustain, particularly when abuse** of the child is used as a strategy to intimidate and control the partner (Hester, 2000). Children in families where domestic violence occurs are more likely to be direct victims of violence themselves, particularly of parental violence (Devaney, 2008; Humphreys, 2007; Jouriles, McDonald, Slep, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008), and child domestic homicide is often preceded by adult domestic violence, suggesting an association between the two (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; CAADA, 2014a; Jaffe, Campbell, Hamilton, & Juodis, 2012). Failing to recognise the risk that domestic violence poses to child safety can place children at increased risk, particularly if that risk is not taken into account in child protection, and in contact arrangements post-separation (Hans, Hardesty, J. L. Haselschwerdt, & Frey, 2014; Hester, 2011; Kress, Adamson, Paylo, DeMarco, & Bradley, 2012). Despite this clear evidence that children experience significant harm in families where domestic violence occurs, they remain largely conceptualised as **‘witnesses’ rather than ‘victims’**. Further, there is limited research that engages either with **children’s lived experience of violence, or more specifically with their experience of psychological abuse and** coercive control in family relationships affected by domestic violence.

For some time, researchers and activists have called for recognition of the impact of domestic violence on children in families **and the consequent importance of taking children's experiences seriously**. For instance, Peled (1996, 1998) **suggested that children should not be regarded as 'secondary victims' in domestic violence, given the impact of violence on them**, while Mullender et al. (2003) **noted the importance of children's 'active participation' in domestic violence services, suggesting that this meant children "being listened to and taken seriously as participants in the domestic violence situation; and being able to be actively involved in finding solutions and helping make decisions."** (p.121). Such concepts clearly fit with contemporary calls for children to be co-producers of services, heard and responded to in service planning, delivery and evaluation (New Economics Foundation, 2013; Walsh, Wilson, Baines, & Martin, 2012). **However, despite this perspective, services for children remain largely a 'bolt on'** to existing domestic violence services, with many children not receiving any specialist support post- domestic violence and abuse, and only 9% of children in the UK having access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for mid to long term support (CAADA, 2014b). **This article focuses on children's lived experiences of domestic violence and coercive control, and considers whether understanding them as *direct victims* might have implications for support services, including social care, mental health support and legal protection..**

Children remain excluded from most domestic violence policy, and legal definitions do not include them as victims (except in situations of teenage dating violence, where domestic violence is again understood as occurring in the intimate dyad). For example, UK domestic violence legislation and policy represents domestic violence and abuse as something that includes only those directly involved in the intimate adult dyad - others in the family, including children, are not seen as victims:

**"Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality."** (Home Office, 2013 p. 2).

While this definition is not comprehensive in terms of those affected by the abuse, it is comprehensive in abuse typology. The legal definition incorporates psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse and

control, and notes explicitly the importance of taking seriously the more subtle elements of control and coercion in providing an appropriate response to families affected by domestic violence and abuse, a point that is strengthened in proposed amendments to the Serious Crime Bill in 2015 to criminalise patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour, and psychological abuse. This change recognises that psychological abuse and controlling behaviours **feature significantly in victims' lived experience of domestic** violence and abuse. Coercive control and psychological abuse take place in familial contexts, where children can be enrolled in coercive behaviours, used as tools to exert control, and where children can be direct victims of controlling and coercive acts (Hardesty et al., 2015). Children may be directly involved by the perpetrator in coercive control activities, including isolation, blackmailing, monitoring activities, stalking, and can be used in other ways by abusers to minimize, legitimise and justify violent behaviour (M. Johnson, 2009; Stark, 2007). However, despite legislative changes to incorporate coercive control and abuse, children are still absent from legal definitions of domestic violence, except as teen victims of dating violence. This leaves open questions about the way children are understood in domestic violence **research, and the degree to which these legal definitions engage children's lived experiences of domestic violence** and coercive control.

The representation of children in situations of domestic violence as passive *witnesses* rather than as people who directly *experience* violence and coercion is reproduced in academic and professional discourses. We recently completed a review of 177 articles published between 2002 and 2015, focused on children who have experienced domestic violence. **85% of these articles described children as 'exposed' to domestic violence, and 67% used the term 'witness'**. This kind of language positions children as impacted by domestic violence, but it does not give them the status of direct victims. Rather, as in policy or in criminal law, **they are framed as 'collateral damage' in families** affected by domestic violence – the fallout of the abusive couple relationship, and not themselves victims. This construction of children as secondary victims enables children to **be seen as 'additional' in services that provide** support for families affected by domestic violence, as the key issue is seen to be the violent dyad. In their 2014 policy briefing, CAADA **recommend that** “To ensure children are protected and helped, Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) and The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) **should monitor provision and outcomes for children exposed to domestic abuse**” (p. 9). By placing children's needs

on the agenda, CAADA are **certainly advancing our thinking around domestic violence and abuse and children's** experiences in relation to this. However, the language used in this briefing remains framed in terms of children as **'exposed to domestic abuse'** – positioning children as living with abuse, affected by it, but not as its direct victims. This produces a disjuncture in academic and policy discourses of children who live with domestic violence, positioning them simultaneously as damaged by the violence they see, but not as victims of it. This framing is common in the UK, and leaves us a little distant from, for instance, a Norwegian model, that requires us to take **both the child and the parent's perspective into account when working with domestic violence** (Øverlien, 2009). We **need to move away from the more passive framing of children as 'witness' to** a more complex framing, one that sees them both as victims and as active beings, making sense of and working with their experiences of domestic violence (Mullender et al., 2003; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Øverlien, 2011), if we are to genuinely help children deal with and recover from domestic violence. Such an approach also recognises that children who experience domestic violence are not *just* damaged by the experience, but also have a complex range of coping strategies that facilitate the construction of a more resistant and resilient sense of self (Alexander, Callaghan, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2015; Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Øverlien, 2014). As Overlien & Hydén (2009) suggest, when we talk to children about domestic violence, it is clear that it "is not something the children 'witness', in the sense that they watch it passively from a distance. Children who experience violence in their homes *experience* it with all their senses. They hear it, see it, and experience the aftermath." (p. 479). Theoretical and legislative frameworks are inadequate to support children who have experienced domestic violence, if they do not recognise children's capacity for meaning-making and personal agency in adverse situations (Mullender et al., 2003; Swanson, Bowyer, & Vetere, 2014). Recognising how children experience domestic violence and abuse, their engagement with controlling and coercive behaviour in the family, and their ability to resist (symbolically and explicitly) such violence has important implications for the provision of appropriate services that aim to build on **children's capabilities.**

In this article, it is our argument that children are significantly impacted by domestic violence, in households where **they might be described, under law, as 'witnesses' to the violence.** This article explores how children experience domestic violence and abuse, specifically focusing on their experiences of coercive control in the family, its impact,

and their capacity for agentic and resistant action in these situations. We consider the implications of these experiences for the recognition of children as direct victims of domestic violence.

## Method

**The study ‘Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies’ (UNARS)** is a four-nation project, funded by the European Commission, that aims to explore children’s experiences of domestic violence, with a particular focus on children’s **capacity to make** sense of the violence in their family, their strategies to maintain a sense of agency and their ability to be resilient and resistant in these situations. The project involved interviews with 100 children in the UK, Greece, Spain and Italy, and also used creative methods like photo (Hill, 2013) and graphic elicitation to help children articulate their experience (Gabb & Singh, 2014; Gabb, 2008). This paper draws on interviews with the UK sub-sample.

## Participants

In this paper, we explore all the 20 individual interviews conducted in the UK with children aged 8 to 18 years. We recruited 12 girls and 9 boys (one interview was with 2 brothers) through specialist domestic violence services, particularly domestic abuse refuges and support organisations. The UK data subset was chosen for the current analysis because of its relevance regarding the implications for children of imminent changes in UK policy to incorporate the construct of coercive control. One of the researchers (JA) spent several months before data collection began within the domestic abuse organisations. This increased the rigor of the project, by enabling the development of familiarity with culture of participating organisations and the contexts of families fleeing domestic abuse (Shenton, 2004).

Table 1 provides a description of the young people interviewed in the UK. [INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

## Interviews

The 20 semi-structured interviews lasted between 24 and 83 minutes (average length 46 minutes long). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim including relevant information about non-verbal communication. We

employed spatial emotional **mapping of the children's houses** (Gabb & Singh, 2015) , and family drawings (Dumont, 2008), to **support and facilitate children's** accounts of their lived experiences.

## Analysis

Interviews were analysed using Denzin's (2001) *Interpretive Interactionism* to enable the exploration of the interface

**of the personal and social in participants' life stories, to develop** an understanding of how lived experience is

**constituted in social and political contexts. This method was particularly suited to an exploration of children's**

experiences of domestic violence, which are lived at the intersection of the private (home and family) and the social and

political (statutory services, child protection, policy, etc). Two members of the research team coded transcripts

**independently, using line by line analysis. This coding was guided by the project's overarching focus on children's**

experiences of domestic violence and abusive control, how they coped with it, and their capacity for agency and

resistance. Once independent coding was completed, codes were compared and discussed by the research team, to

facilitate refinement of the coding system. This process of '**investigator triangulation**' (Denzin, 1978, 2001) enabled the

building of consensus in the interpretation to ensure methodological rigour. Codes were then classified, re-ordered and

categories were produced to enable increasing interpretive abstraction. Finally, the various transcripts were considered

together to contextualise the accounts, exploring how meanings and experiences were constituted

**across different children's accounts**, and within an interpersonal, social and political context. Throughout this

process, careful attention was paid to the way that research relationships facilitated the co-creation of meaning in

the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). (This reflexive process is the subject of a subsequent paper.)

## Ethics

The research project was ethically complex. The research team were mindful of the way that children were

positioned as vulnerable and negatively impacted by their experiences of domestic violence: asking children to

articulate their experiences might be risky or subject them to secondary traumatisation (Eriksson & Näsman, 2012;

Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012), but they were also committed to facilitating their ability to articulate and

make meaning of their own experiences (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Skansvors, 2009; Valentine, Butler, & Skelton,

2001). Several steps were taken to protect children involved in the research, including ensuring that they understood

the focus of the research, and had access to the questions before the interview so they could make informed choices



about the interview and interview process; structuring interviews to take into account the developmental level of the young person, and ensuring that researchers were responsive to children's cues and interactional styles in the interviews (Pascal & Bertram, 2009), and using a range of creative techniques to support the interview, when children wanted to use them (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010). Children were only interviewed if they had left situations of domestic abuse, and if professionals working with them assessed them to be safe to work with (Morris et al., 2012). If children were distressed, or if the researchers had concerns, specialist domestic violence workers were accessible for consultation and if necessary, immediate referral. Before each interview, there was an initial meeting with children and their (non-violent) parent, in which the purpose of the research was explained. A cooling-off period of at least 24 hours was agreed, and written and verbal informed consent was secured from willing parents and assent from willing children (Eriksson & Näsman, 2012). . To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have replaced children's real names and thick description within children's accounts (which could potentially identify them) has been omitted or contextualised.

## Analysis

The interviews focused largely on how children they coped with and managed their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. In this paper, we specifically present interview themes that that related to abuse and control, and the ways that children managed these experiences. Our aim here is to highlight that children's **experiences of** domestic violence exceed the **'witness' role or the passive designation as 'exposed'** to violence. Rather their accounts suggest that they are profoundly impacted by the experience of living with domestic violence and abuse, are aware of controlling and abusive behaviours and have some understanding of their effect, and that they find complex ways to manage and cope with these controlling dynamics.

### Children's experiences of coercive control

The children we interviewed were aware of both the overt expressions of physical violence in their families, and the patterns of control and abuse that were in evidence in the home. They were also aware of the impact of this control

and abuse on their mothers, themselves and their siblings. For instance, **Oliver talks about his father's controlling** behaviour:

*Oliver: ((erm)) I think it was because my mum wanted to go out ith her frie ds, a d he did t a t her to go out a d all that . a d started like thro i g stuff a d sayi g You re ot goi g to go . a d you eed to help a d I du o, help lea a d ake the food*

Oliver has a good understanding of how controlling dynamics operate within his family, and articulates both his **father's controlling behaviour** (insults, insisting that his mother participates in domestic labour and throwing items to induce fear) and its effects (that she would stay home and not see her friends). Similarly, Dylan notes:

*Dylan: Because things would just get escalated ((.)) like if he knew what she was doing all the time, he could control like, everything, he would try to like, do stuff to scare us and I, I dunno, but I dunno what he ould do, it s just he a ts to k o like hat s goi g o so he just k o s like*

He is aware that his father used fear to control his mother, and insisted on knowing her movements and actions. In his account, this sense of control is not restricted to his mother, it extends to Dylan and his brother (**“he would do stuff to scare us). His father's need to ‘know’ is represented in Dylan's account as central to the way that his father exerted control.** This suggests a relatively sophisticated understanding of controlling dynamics within the family, and insight into how these coercive behaviours – even quite subtle ones like knowing all aspects of family activity – **function to restrict both his mother's and his own capacity for action.** This sense of the **perpetrator's controlling** behaviour extending to children is also expressed by Jess, who describes the irrational and extreme forms of control exerted:

*Jess: If you touched the newspaper before he read it you were grounded.*

This kind of behaviour has a potent impact on the children, which they are able to express both in terms of their physical responses, and its psychological effect:

*Emma: Like o iously he I as little I d hide a ay fro hi , yeah, ut as you get older you a t hide fro that ki d of thi g, like if it s i your head you physi ally a t hide fro it. I ea you a try a d forget ut that akes it orse . ause it ottles up a d the you e just, and when it does bottle up too much it just, everything just explodes in you and like, oh my God, why did this happen? And then you start thi ki g, oh if o ly I as t ali e this ould t ha e happe ed, if I as t or this ould t ha e happe ed, that ki d of thi g.*

**Emma reports that, while she could physically hide from the perpetrator's violence, its psychological impact is more profound.** She articulates the way that the violence and abusive control becomes more and more internalised, producing a sense of depression and self-loathing. In this extract it is clear that the impact of domestic violence and abuse on Emma is significant, and that its primary mechanism is not the physical violence per se, but its

**psychological effects, which are ‘in her head’ and cannot be evaded.** It is the inescapable nature of internalised psychological abuse and control that she finds worse, as it becomes for her a voice in her head that is difficult to escape. Later in the interview, she suggests that the perpetrator’s abusive and controlling behaviour is the source of her self-harming behaviour.

**The sense of the perpetrator’s attempts to control** both the adult victim, and the children, extends beyond separation, and after fleeing violence, children remain acutely aware of the potential for continued attempts to manipulate and control. Sometimes this is experienced simply as the presence of the perpetrator, whose behaviour continues to exert an undue influence on what the family can and cannot do. For instance, Alison says:

Alison: ‘Cause he’ll be at the shop when mum wants to go in, and she wouldn’t wanna go in, so she’ll have to wait and get her bits ((.)) and then they’ll be snide comments. Here, the perpetrator’s unwanted contact with the adult victim, in public locations like shops both influence Alison’s mother’s behaviour (she waits to go to the shop) and impacts her perceived social acceptability, resulting in a sense of stigma and shame that pervades the family. Despite having been separated for five years, Alison’s father’s behaviour continues to impact on the family, limiting their access to ordinary social interactions, and producing social embarrassment and a sense of being watched and judged by others.

In addition to controlling behaviours targeting their mothers, children described some post-separation contact with their fathers as deliberate attempts to disrupt, control and manipulate. For example, Alison **describes her father’s** use of contact and court proceedings as a strategy of control some five years post-separation:

*Alison: Yeah, he spent three years, and then we went to this court thing and then, he got this thing to say that he can see us kids, but ((.)), he’s been messing my mum about, first he goes like “yeah it’ll be on a Thursday after school for a couple of hours”, so we could still go to our Nan’s for Sunday dinner, so now we hardly see my Nan, and then, like he’s changed it to wanting the whole of Sunday ((.)) ‘cause he was busy on a Saturday. Mum’s like “No”, but she had to do ‘cause he, he went to court again.*

She describes the impact on family relationships produced by frequent formal and informal challenges to agreed contact arrangements, and sees **her father’s use of contact arrangements in terms of ‘messing my mum about’**. Ali reflects here on the effect of this behaviour, disrupting family life and interfering with the maintenance of other important relationships. Her relationship with her grandmother is threatened by changes in contact arrangements

with her father suggesting the impact of abusive control **throughout the child's social and familial networks**.

Oliver **describes his father's use of** gifts and money to draw him into interactions with him:

*Oli er: ause the so eti es he ould like, ig ore, ause like I said he do t like to take i for atio, a d the er so eti es he ould say Oh o e o, I ll get you so ethi g ((laughs)) and I as little so I as like Okay , ause I a t say o to he he says Let s get o e of your fa ourite thi gs or so ethi g s iles I a t say o to that so I o e ith hi and then I have to talk to him so, yeah*

He describes how his father directly breeched contact orders, and used money to try to draw Oliver into unscheduled contact and conversation:

*The first thing was he drove past ... and then I looked on the road and I actually saw him, I was like "What?!" And then I kept walking and he was saying my name, and then he went down, then went to the zebra crossing, turned around and then it was alright 'cause I knew some older people that were behind me, but anyway, he just like, he just like, put his like, two five pounds like that to me ((demonstrates how his dad held out money for him)) and then he didn't say anything, and then I just walked on but took it and walked on, and then he just turned around and went back ((.)) he went*

Oliver is quite young (12 years old at the time of interview) but shows significant psychological awareness of the potential for control involved in these two situations. In the first, he recognises **that accepting his father's gifts** produces a sense of obligation, opening up an expectation that he has to talk to him. He views **his father as** 'buying' his affections. In the second extract, he clearly views this unscheduled breach of contact orders as frightening (he notes that it is alright because there are other known adults around, so appears aware that the contact is potentially dangerous), and finds the pressing of money into his hand concerning. In both situations, he views these attempts to give gifts as a source of concern, showing an understanding of the potential for these gifts to come with strings attached.

This theme highlighted **children's awareness of controlling behaviour and coercion, and their understanding of its** impact on family life, and on them, extending points raised by Swanston, Bowyer, & Vetere, 2014, in their small scale study of primary school aged children who experience domestic abuse. Children narrate the disruption and distress that they experience as a consequence of coercive control and abuse in the family. This clearly illustrates that they are not passive witnesses to violence and coercive control in the intimate dyad. They are immediately involved and affected by coercive and controlling behaviour, that does not simply target the adult victim, but impacts the entire family.

## Constraint – A coherent response to coercive control

In the previous theme, we explored children's experience of coercive control within the family. In this theme, we explore the impact of domestic violence and coercive behaviour on children, considering how the violence and abuse imposes a sense of constraint on children's lives. In interviews, children described the effect of psychological abuse and control in terms of constrained use of space, constrained self-expression, as well as explaining how their relationships were managed in relation to the controlling and abusive relationships that characterised their home life. Indeed, self-constraint was one of the most marked ways that children both experienced and managed abuse at home. This illustrates that children adapted to accommodate violence and control: they learned to manage what they said and what they did, as a way of preventing themselves from being too visible, too loud, too noticeable to the abuser, as a way of not drawing attention to themselves. For example, Lucy says

*I'd always hesitate of what I would say...even if I said "Hello", I'd always think before like, is he just going to shut me out? Is he going to respond in a nice way, or be angry or anything like that? I'd always think ahead of what I was saying*

Here, we see Lucy engaged in a very complex process of reflection and self-management, in response to her sense of the unpredictability of her father's reactions. She reports consciously and carefully reading his moods, anticipating his potential responses to even the most innocuous words from her. On the one hand, Lucy's vigilant scanning of his potential responses is a clear indicator that she is both aware of the controlling element of the abusive behaviour in her home, and actively managing herself in relation to it. She is 'always thinking ahead'. As noted by Swanston, Bowyer & Vetere (2014) children living in domestic violence act as 'miniature radar devices' constantly striving to 'predict the unpredictable'. Learning to manage what you do and do not say, who you speak to, and how you speak, is a clear strategy that children use in coping with domestic abuse on a daily basis. Lucy's account here is not dissimilar from that used by adult victims of domestic abuse (see, for example, Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Emery, 2011; Johnson, 2011).

Children also described monitoring and regulating their speech, their self-presentation and self-expression, as well as their social interactions, as clear strategies for keeping themselves (and other people) safe. For instance, Sophia (15 years old) talks about keeping an eye on the clock, watching for 'coming home time':

Int: When you knew that your step-dad was coming round, did it feel different then?

Sophia: Yeah.

Int: What did it feel like then?

*Sophia: Like “Oh no, I’ve got to keep my mouth shut and I can’t say anything”.*

**She manages her day carefully, and is aware of the shifting atmosphere at ‘coming home time’, preparing for the arrival of her step-father by being quiet and limiting her self-expression.**

This sense of constraint extends into **children’s** use of physical space too (Alexander, Callaghan, Sixsmith & Fellin, 2015). Children adopt very clear strategies for managing their use of space, in a manner that keeps them out of the way of the violent parent, and also that enables them to feel more safe and secure. All the children we talked to were **able to identify ‘safe’ and ‘risky’** spaces in the house although with the recognition that spatial dynamics could change, transforming a safe space into a risky one at particular times. Shared areas of the house were generally identified as unsafe, and children described careful monitoring and use of those spaces to keep themselves (and often their siblings) safe:

*Int: ...what rooms felt safest for you?*

*Isabel: My room, bathroom and the stairs*

*Int: Why did they feel safest?*

*Isabel: Because they’re places that he hardly ever goes*

Being aware of the **spaces the violent parent did and did not use was an important part of children’s safety strategies.**

Knowing safe and unsafe spaces and times enabled them to move in and out of these spaces to keep themselves out

**of harm’s way:**

*Int: So you were scared about going home and when you were actually there, what was it like?*

*Rachel: I went straight upstairs to my bedroom, ((umm)) I’d sort of like sneak downstairs and check that no one was arguing or anything and if it was all OK, I’d come downstairs and sit down ((umm)) ((.)) and watch TV with my brother ((umm)) but if there was an argument I’d run downstairs, grab my brother and take him upstairs.*

Here, Rachel describes a very conscious strategy of monitoring – **‘sneaking’ downstairs to check if it was peaceful**, and making use of the shared spaces if it was safe. It is clear that she does not feel ownership of shared spaces in the family home; yet a feeling of ownership and control are key aspects of place making, belonging and feeling at home (Mallett, 2004; Storer et al., 2014; Wilson, Houmøller, & Bernays, 2012). However, she was very carefully attuned to the atmosphere of the house, and if a fight was imminent she would remove herself and her brother to one of the safer spaces in the house (Swanston, et al., 2014).

In the aftermath of the violence, this vigilant scanning and monitoring of space continues. For instance, Lizzy notes that the outside world felt like a potentially hostile space for her, feeling that she always needed to be aware of the risk her mother's **partner** posed to her:

*Lizzy: Yeah, it was, it was like, ((erm)) you didn't really wanna go outside 'cause like, every time you did you were like, is that him? Is that him? And you just, even like now, when I go in the car park and it's dark 'cause I'm taking the rubbish out, it's still like, is he still there? Or is someone there watching us or something?*  
*Int: So you're checking all the time?*  
*Lizzy: Yeah.*

It is important to note that, in their experience of constraint and vigilant monitoring of space, children's accounts are not dissimilar from those of adult victims. For example, compare Lizzy's account above to experiences of adult women in abusive relationships, typified in this extract from Humphreys & Thiara (2003):

*"I've put the phone in and I take my mobile to bed every night. I keep doors wide open so I can hear all through the house and I sometimes just don't sleep anyway. It comes in fits and starts. I have panic attacks.... All my doors have got bolts on and clip-ons, and locks and bolts and more bolts and all my windows are nailed shut." P 214*

Children are impacted by violence and by the controlling circumstances in which they find themselves. The psychological abuse, and the sense of constant fear that is associated with coercive control, is a regular feature of their lives, and they creatively and consciously take steps to manage their experiences in strategies that worked for them to minimise damage. Far from passive witnesses, **they are not 'exposed' to violence** and abuse, rather, they live with it and experience it directly, just as adult do. In addition they respond to violence and coercive control as creative agents, able to adapt and change to meet their adverse experiences and manage them.

## Children as agents

Children play a range of active roles in domestic violence and abuse. Previous studies have documented children's active intervention to physically block and prevent the violent partner from hurting the adult or child victim (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Katz, 2015; Mullender et al., 2003). Children also engage in strategic behaviour to divert and de-escalate violent interactions (elsewhere, we have highlighted children's use of 'getting a glass of water' as a way to check out the nature of an argument, and perhaps interrupt the development of a violent or abusive encounter – see

Callaghan et al (in press)). Abusive partners also try to involve children in hurting their adult victim – either emotionally or physically. For instance, Ben (aged 8) says:

*Well, my mum met this nice guy, well ((.)) he seemed nice, but as he went through our lives, as we started, as we started to like him, ((.)) we didn't actually know that he was a really bad person, so my mum ((.)) for some reason my mum got into this massive argument with him and then ((.)) he was, when I was there he started telling me that if I, if we went to court I was meant to tell the judge that mum, my mum was being a bad person and ((.))*

Here, Ben is actively positioned as informant by the abusive partner, who tries to enrol Ben in the abuse of his mother, through getting him to lie about the argument. For Ben, this incident enables him to construct an alternate view of the abusive partner, shifting him from being a ‘nice guy’ to a ‘really bad person’. Again, this extract is not the narrative of a passive witness or victim. He is an active participant both in the production of the abuse and the abuse narrative, and in building his own insights into and understanding of what happened.

Children also reported their own active involvement in managing the abuse, through disclosure and help seeking.

For example, Lizzy notes:

*Lizzy: Yeah, I went to the neighbours and asked them to ring the police and, yeah, I was only about seven so*

*Int: And did they do that?*

*Lizzy: Yeah, the police came and my nan came and she came and picked us up and took us to her, her house.*

**Although she was ‘only about seven or so’, Lizzy** describes herself taking independent and deliberate action to intervene in the violent situation, removing herself from the home where the violence was taking place, and calling the police and her grandmother for assistance. She identifies that she and her mother need support and intervention, and as an active subject and agent, seeks out assistance from others. In her response to violence, Lizzy becomes **central to her and her family’s** safety and security.

Similarly to the 5 school-age children from Swanston et al. (2014)’s study., the children we interviewed were able to voice their needs for support and care in a range of ways. After Paul (aged 9) remained with his father when his mother went into refuge, he was able to find resistant ways of keeping in touch, despite his father’s attempts to control his access to his mother:



*Int: Did you used to send her texts?*

*Paul: Yeah*

*Int: Were you allowed to do that?*

*Paul: Yeah. ... Sometimes. Cause like sometimes I sended a text. Like upstairs. I missed my mum!*

*I used to say in the text "I hate my life". Cause I never got to see my mum.*

*Int: And you found ways like that of telling her that you missed her.*

**Paul says that he did used to send her texts, even though (as his hesitation, and the ‘sometimes’ in the interview suggests) he was not strictly ‘allowed’ to by his father. He was able to communicate his emotional needs – that he needed his mother and missed her both by sneaking his phone upstairs with him so that he could text her, and by expressing verbally the severity of his distress at their separation.**

**Children also take active roles in managing and resisting the perpetrator’s attempts at coercive control.** We have seen how Oliver describes his resistance to his **father’s attempts to manipulate** him through material objects, post separation – later in the interview, Oliver explicitly states that “I’m not going to like try to be buyed”. Similarly, Mark says:

*Mark: [...] when my mum gets money he takes it off her, so I say, I don’t say anything, she don’t get no money.... I mean like when she gets money out of the bank my dad takes it off her. So I have to lie to him.*

**Mark is aware of the way that financial control functions to limit his mother’s capacity for agency in her life. He** supports his mother in resisting this, by lying about her access to money, actively protecting her from the risk of control. Mark actively resists controlling dynamics within the family.

**Dylan uses his own knowledge and access to information to resist his father’s controlling behaviours.** Aware of his **father’s** attempts at giving presents in exchange for information –he chooses not to play along:

*Dylan: I don’t know ((erm)) I can’t really explain it, I didn’t really have a feeling ((.)) like I knew he wanted like information for exchange, but ((.)) at the end of the day, I have the information, he doesn’t so I could technically control it so ((.)) it’s easier for me to just ((.)) get gifts ((laughs)) and it’s harder for him to get the information, so it was, ((.)) yeah*

Here Dylan is aware that his father uses information to increase his sense of control over the family. However, he is also aware that, as the holder of that information, he, Dylan, has more power in the situation. He recognises that he has retained some power and control **in his position as ‘knower’, in relation to his dad’s weaker position of ‘wanting to know’**. This awareness means that he is less easily manipulated into divulging information about the family to his father, and this awareness produces a strong sense of self-reliance, and a sense of confidence in his own ability to resist controlling behaviour.

Similarly, Jess, **demonstrates a remarkable understanding of her father’s attempts** to secure information about her mother, and takes an active role in resisting this.

*Jess: I think the last year or so it’s made me think, “I’m not going to answer my phone if you’re going to ask about mum. I’m not going to answer my phone if you’re going to ask me questions. I will answer my phone if you say hi Jess how’s your day? And I will answer my phone if you’re going to give me money.*

She communicates that directly to her father that she understands his attempt to secure information about her mother, through Jess. She challenges this directly, and lays down her own terms for their relationship, moving forward post-separation. This is a powerful resistance to relational abuse and controlling behaviour, effectively exposing the controlling tactics and using her insight into them to nullify their effect.

Oliver draws on his understanding of the legal process and of contact arrangements to similarly manage the controlling behaviour of his father, in relation to the contact breaches described in the first theme:

*Oliver: And then the next time he came... it was just, we were just walking and then we just saw him again, and then he was like “Do you want a lift?” and I ignored him and then he said “Do you want a lift?” I said “No” and then he said “Why?” and I said “I’ll call the Police because you know you’re not allowed to come near me” or something, and then ((.)) and then he said “but are you sure you don’t want a lift?”, I said “No I’m fine, I’ll call the Police”, then he went “Okay sorry” and then he went off*

Oliver invokes the police as a means of challenging his father’s **attempt to get Oliver to go in the car, using the proxy power of the courts and the police to leverage interpersonal power for himself, enabling him to actively resist his father’s behaviour.**

These resistances enable children to construct a more empowered and agentic sense of self. For instance, Emma describes this vision of her own future self:

*Emma: Yeah, like, I don't wanna be like my auntie, who relies on men, I wanna be someone independent that can do things on my own, which is important for women. I mean too many women do rely on men, and they wonder why they get themselves into stupid positions with money and that.*

Emma expresses concerns about being dependent on men, seeing dependency as problematic, and as producing a vulnerability to control and abuse. Instead, having lived with the effect of coercive control, she sees for herself the possibility of a life of independence, particularly financial independence, which she sees as protecting her from dependency and control.

The children we interviewed had developed a range of spatial, cognitive and relational strategies for dealing with the impact of coercive control in their lives. They were able to forge agentic positions for themselves, through gestures of defiance, through active management of the abuser, and through the construction of a sense of a positive future self. Given their awareness of the controlling dynamics in the family, their understanding of its impact on them and others, and their ability to perceive and enact strategies to manage the controlling behaviour and its impact, the notion that they are passive witnesses to domestic violence and abuse seems unsustainable. They are not collateral damage in violent adult relationships: rather they are both direct victims, and survivors.

## Discussion

This paper adds to a growing body of qualitative literature that seeks to take seriously the voices of children as they articulate their experience of domestic violence and abuse (Mullender et al., 2003; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Øverlien, 2011; Peled, 1996; Swanston et al., 2014). Recent UK policy in relation to health and social care has emphasized the need to listen to the experiences and voices of those whose lives are marginalized in our society (including the voice of children) to ensure that service provision is relevant, fit for purpose and person centred.

Without this, services run the risk of being not just insensitive to need, potentially damaging and liable to let down those most in need. We argue that in order to understand why and how children are let down in professional responses to domestic violence, we need to start by questioning why we continue to ignore their experiences of domestic violence and coercive control *as* victims and survivors. By framing children as collateral or secondary victims (Peled, 1996), **by describing them as ‘witnesses’ or ‘impacted’, we fail to fully acknowledge their rights to** be respected as individuals who live with, experience and are affected by the violence, just as much as adult victims are. The analysis of interviews with children who have experienced domestic violence show clearly that children are fully aware of coercive control in their family, are impacted by controlling dynamics within the family, and try to predict and manage these dynamics and behaviours with a complex range of direct and indirect strategies.

Previous research and theoretical writing has recognised the impact on children of controlling and coercive behaviour in the family on children (Cooper & Vetere, 2008; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Hester, 2000), The importance of involving children in safety planning that takes into account coercive control has been noted (Kress et al., 2012). However these recommendations are largely based on clinical and other practice based observations, and do not provide a space for children to speak directly about their experiences. The current study adds to Øverlien's (2013) important insight into the importance of coercive control as an **element of children's experiences of violence, developing a more explicitly focused understanding of children's experiences of coercive control and its experience.**

By talking directly to children about their capacity to cope in situations of domestic violence and abuse, this article has highlighted how children live with this experience, and are able to develop coherent strategies of resistance to support them in coping with controlling and coercive behaviour. This would enable us to consider how children are situated as direct victims of coercive control, highlighting the importance of shifting from a view of children as witnesses or as collateral damage to violence in the intimate dyad. It also, simultaneously enables us to see **children's capacity to respond creatively to this very difficult adult control, to enable the construction of a resistant and resilient self-identity.**

**This insight into children's experiences of both the impact of coercive control, and of their capacity to resist such control** has significant implications for practice in supporting families affected by domestic violence. The

introduction of legislation to recognise coercive control as an illegal act in the UK potentially offers an important step forward in recognising children as actively involved in domestic abuse. The analysis of interviews with children who experience domestic violence suggests that **the ‘victim’ in domestic violence is not just the adult in the intimate dyad**; it is also any children within the household who are affected by the violence, either directly or indirectly. A shift to recognise children as equal victims in the crime of domestic violence and abuse has two important implications – it requires that we listen to children who experience domestic violence and abuse, and it creates space to recognise their own creative and agentic strategies in response to abuse and control within the family. It opens a different discursive space in which the child is recognised as being as important as the adult antagonists in our responses to domestic violence and abuse. .

Domestic violence has long been recognised by scholars as being an issue of power and control as much as it is one of physical violence and coercion (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Gondolf, 2007; **O’Leary, 1999; Øverlien, 2013**). The legal frameworks that support social services and criminal justice intervention in situations of domestic violence have historically prioritised physical violence, and the management of the risk in relationships where violence occurs (Robbins, McLaughlin, Banks, Bellam, & Thackray, 2014). As we have noted, the historical definition restricts our legal understanding of domestic violence to intimate relationships, predominantly in adult dyads. The implication of this framing of domestic violence is to reproduce, discursively, conditions in which children are only **ever positioned as ‘collateral damage’ in the policing and management of domestic violence**. Children are not recognised in policy or in criminal law as direct *victims* of domestic violence. If they are discussed at all in **domestic violence policy, it is as witnesses or as ‘also affected’**. This positioning is at odds with the well-established and still growing body of evidence that indicates how damaging domestic violence is to children, and is rooted in an old fashioned understanding that domestic violence is primarily about violent interactions in the dyad and not the intimate family relational structure of violence psychological abuse and control. It is important to recognise, both legally and in work with families affected by domestic violence, that the exercise of power in abusive and controlling relational dynamics can be most troubling and distressing for children. For children who experience domestic violence, this means that their needs are marginalised, as the focus of criminal justice and social services intervention is on management of risk of violence between the adults. For example, CAADA

(2014b), in their summary of their extensive database of domestic violence cases, note that only half of children on their records who have experienced domestic violence were known to social services, and that only 42% of the parents of children who experience domestic violence and abuse receive support from specialist domestic violence services. Despite the documented high rates of mental health need amongst children who experience domestic violence and abuse, CAADA also note that only 11% receive specialist support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). **By hearing children's experiences of domestic violence, we are able to recognise its significant impact on their wellbeing, highlighting the importance of a specific response to their emotional and psychosocial needs from both CAMHS, and from Social Care (see also Swanston, Bowyer & Vetere, 2014).** Services should focus on meeting needs, and responding to distress, rather than being accessible only when children meet the criteria for full diagnostic labels. Generally, services assume that the needs of children fleeing domestic violence and abuse can be achieved by supporting the mother-child dyad, and by improving maternal communication and responsiveness (Katz, 2015; Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Milford & Oates, 2009). **Children's** perception of the complexity of familial relationships, particularly around control and coercion, reveals a nuanced, troubled but coherent response to abusive and controlling behaviour, that must be understood in its own right if we are to provide appropriate support to them. Therapeutic support that builds on **children's established strategies to manage coercive and controlling dynamics is required to enable children to** further develop a sense of themselves as agentic, resistant and resilient.

This research has highlighted the importance of recognising **the impact of coercive control on children's lives.** The proposed criminalisation of coercive control in the UK legal definition of domestic violence shifts our focus from physical violence between partners in an intimate dyad, and should facilitate a greater focus on power, control and psychological and emotional abuse. Practitioners and academics working to understand and support children who are affected by domestic violence need to consider ways in which they can work to support the recognition of children, not as witnesses to domestic violence, but as its victims. This will enable a recognition of the impact of domestic violence, and facilitate the leverage of more appropriate support services for children and families who are recovering from such violence.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued that it is important to recognise children directly as equal victims in domestic violence and abuse. It is crucial that we move beyond seeing this as an issue between two adults whereby children are

**‘witnesses’ and are ‘impacted by’** coercive control and focus on providing a more effective legal and safeguarding framework for children which does not victimise them further through inappropriate professional responses. The impact of domestic violence on children is known to be significant and long reaching, but they are still represented both in professional discourse and before the law as passive, as impacted by the violence, but not really bound by the coercive control that is often an integral part of a violent household.

By presenting an analysis of the accounts of children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse, we have highlighted how children experience coercive control in their homes, how they respond to this, and how they are able to be active agents in securing help from others outside the home, and in supporting other victims within the home.

Acknowledging children as direct victims of domestic violence and abuse would produce significant changes **in the way professionals respond to them, by: recognising children’s experience of the impact of domestic violence and abuse; recognising children’s agency, undermining the perception of them as passive ‘witnesses’ or ‘collateral damage’ in adult abusive encounters; and strengthening professional responses to them as victims**, not as witnesses to violence. We have argued that the shift in the legal definition of domestic violence and abuse, to include the dimension of control and psychological abuse opens up a possibility to recognise that domestic abuse frequently has multiple victims, and that children should be recognised legally as victims of domestic abuse too, providing them with a stronger platform from which to make their voices heard.

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**Table 1: Summary of interview participants**

<b>Pseudonym of child</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Duration of Interview (in minutes)</b>
George & Paul	11 & 9	38
Bethany	10	38
Rachel	11	65
Emma	16	61
Lizzy	14	50
Kate	8	59
Ben	8	24
Harry	9	48
Josh	9	44
Oliver	12	60
Dylan	15	34
Lotty	9	26
Jess	18	83
Sophia	15	29
Isabel	13	54
Lucy	13	36
Alison	15	59
Nancy	9	38
Andy	12	49
Mark	13	31

## Interview Schedule

Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where you come from, any brothers and sisters, where you live now, and with who?

How would you describe your family? If you had to tell the story of you and your family, what would it be?

Who are you closest to in your family? What is your relationship with this person like? Why do you see them as the **person you're closest to**?

**Who are you least close to? What kind of relationship do you have with them? Why do you think you're least close** to them?

This project is about children growing up with domestic violence – with lots of fighting and maybe hitting in their home. Do you think of yourself as growing up in that kind of situation? What is that like for you?

**When there are bad times at home, when people are fighting or getting angry with each other, what's that like for you?**

How do you cope with those kinds of situations?

Is there anything you do that makes you feel better, when bad things are happening at home? What do you do / say? How does it help?

Is there someone you can talk to about the things that happen or have happened at home?

What do you think needs/or needed to change to make things better at home?

What can other people do to change things?

How do you think you can/or could change things?