

Who are Family Rights Group and how can we help?

We are the charity that works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home.

We advise parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare.

We campaign for families to have a voice, be treated fairly and get help early to prevent problems escalating. We champion family group conferences and other policies and practices that keep children safe within their family network.

If your family is involved with local authority children's services, or you need help from these services, we can give you information and advice.

www.frg.org.uk

Family Rights Group
The Print House
18 Ashwin Street
London E8 3DL

Our confidential telephone
advice service: 0808 801 0366
Monday to Friday 9.30am – 3.00pm
Twitter: @FamilyRightsGp

Company number registered in England: 2702928
Family Rights Group is a registered charity number 1015665

Keeping Safe: Family Rights Group and
Rights of Women domestic violence project

Information for mothers involved with Children's Services because of domestic violence



This leaflet is for you if you are a mother and social workers are worried that your children are (or may be) harmed by experiencing or witnessing domestic violence.

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What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence can involve physical or sexual abuse, rape, emotional abuse and isolation, coercion, threats, intimidation, economic abuse, financial control, forced marriage and honour-based violence. It can happen online as well as offline.

Women are affected by, and respond to, domestic violence in different ways. Too often women feel blamed. We know that every woman's experience is different and that many mothers have to navigate very complex situations in order to keep themselves and their children safe.

We hope that you will find this brief guide useful and that it will help you find further support, services and advice. Our website www.frg.org.uk contains more detailed advice and explains all the terms written in bold in this leaflet. Please see 'where to go for further advice' on the back page for our advice service contact details.

*Note on the language we have used:
We refer to survivors of domestic violence as 'the mother' or 'she' and to the abuser or perpetrator as 'the father' or 'he' because this language reflects the situation in the majority of cases. However, we recognise that men and same-sex partners can also be survivors of domestic violence.*

Who are Children's Services and what do they do?

Children's Services is the council department legally responsible for supporting and protecting vulnerable children. They can provide extra help to children and their families, or if they assess the children as at risk of harm, they must take steps to protect them. This department used to be called Social Services.

What help can my child and I get from Children's Services?

Children's Services can provide a range of services to help keep you and your child safe. This can include a combination of practical and emotional support. It might also involve referring you to specialist agencies.

Helpful services can include:

Specialist domestic violence support for you such as safety planning, legal advice including how to protect yourself through the courts, accommodation, advocacy, counselling, confidence building and understanding domestic violence.

Specialist parenting support to help you address how domestic violence may have disrupted your parenting. A specialist course which focuses on both these areas may be helpful to you and may reassure your child's social worker that you can protect your child in future.

Help with housing such as housing law advice, help to access a refuge and resettlement support.

An **Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA)**. This is a specialist advocate who supports domestic violence survivors in high risk situations (including through court processes) and liaises with services to get the right help.

Individual counselling or group work for your child from a specialist domestic violence support organisation.

Drug and alcohol support services if these issues affect how you care for your child.

Help with making safe arrangements for contact. This can help you to ensure that any arrangements for your child to have contact with others, for example, their father, are safe and suitable for you and your child. You may also need legal advice about this.

Advice about the impact of your immigration status where it is uncertain. Sometimes an uncertain immigration status may mean that you may have less right to support than other survivors of domestic violence but you should still be able to get some help and specialist advice.

Referring the abuser to a perpetrator programme. This may be useful to help your partner/ex-partner to address his violence and abuse and reduce the likelihood of future risk to you and your child. Support from a women's worker should be offered to you, as good practice, when your partner/ex-partner is attending a perpetrators' programme.

Help with safely managing risk if the abuser is still in your home. This may include your partner being asked to address his behaviour through undertaking domestic violence work with professionals and you being asked to access domestic violence support for yourself. The situation is likely to be closely monitored.

Why might Children's Services be worried about my child?

Research shows that domestic violence:

- Can result in children being physically hurt and/or emotionally harmed.
- Often impacts on children's behaviour and schooling.
- Can affect children of any age.
- Can disrupt your parenting, making it harder for you to parent as well as you would wish.

How do Children's Services work with families?

Early help and family support

You, or anyone working with you and your family, can ask for help for you and your child if you have experienced domestic violence or are worried that this might happen.

At an early stage, a professional who is already working with your child, may offer you and your child an '**early help**' assessment to work out what support you need.

This assessment may be known as a **Common Assessment Framework (CAF)**. You and your child should be involved in this assessment and in drawing up the support plan which can provide a range of services. The idea is that, wherever possible, children should be able to access help early without needing to be referred through Children's Services.

However, you, or a professional, should contact Children's Services if:

- i. Your child has more complex needs and may need ongoing support from a children's **social worker**, or
- ii. Your child may be at risk of harm.

The type of support and plan put in place will be based on an assessment by Children's Services of your family's situation. You and your child should be fully involved in this.

Child in need

If the assessment finds that your child needs extra support and social work help then a **child in need plan** should be drawn up with you setting out what help you will be offered.

Child protection

If the assessment finds that your child may be at risk of **significant harm**, Children's Services have a legal duty to look further into your child's situation.

If they have information which suggests that your child is suffering (or likely to suffer) harm, then professionals will hold a **strategy meeting** to share information and decide whether/how to carry out a child protection investigation (also called making **child protection enquiries**). You will not be invited to attend this meeting but should be informed as soon as possible afterwards about what is likely to happen.

If after making these enquiries, they remain concerned about your child's safety and development, a **child protection conference** will be held. You should be invited to this conference. The purpose of the conference is to decide if your child continues to be at risk of harm:

- If the conference decides your child is at risk of continuing harm, they will draw up a **child protection plan** to keep your child safe.
- If the conference decides that your child is not at risk of continuing harm then a **child in need** plan could be made if the conference agrees it is needed.

If your child has a child protection plan, a **core group** of key professionals will meet with you regularly to share information about how the plan is working and to develop it further. The plan will be reconsidered at a **review child protection conference**.

Legal planning

If your child's social worker and their manager remain very worried about your child's safety and wellbeing, in spite of the child protection plan, they may take legal advice at a **legal planning meeting** to decide what steps are needed to protect your child.

If your social worker sends you a **letter before proceedings** telling you they are holding a **pre-proceedings meeting** it is very important that you contact a **specialist solicitor** who is a member of the **Children Law Accreditation Scheme** immediately.

You will have a right to free legal advice from the solicitor if you give them a copy of this letter.

If your social worker sends you a **letter of issue** telling you that they are applying to court for an order to protect your child you should also contact a **specialist solicitor** who is a member of the **Children Law Accreditation Scheme** urgently.

Court process

If Children's Services apply to the court for an order to protect your child and to allow them to share parental responsibility with you this is known as care proceedings. You have a right to free legal aid and you should work closely with your solicitor to prepare your case. Children's Services can make plans for your child that you may not agree with if they get a temporary care order or a care order.

Top Tips: When you need help

Contact the police if you are worried that you or your children are at immediate risk of harm – your safety comes first.

Try to find help from a specialist domestic violence service or independent advice agency to support or advocate for you. You can contact the freephone 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline 0808 2000 247 for advice and help finding a refuge place if you need it.

Ask Children's Services for help early if you can and for as long as you need it.

Top Tips: Working with Children's Services

Try to work openly and

constructively with your social worker even though it can be difficult and painful to discuss current and past problems. If difficulties arise, try to resolve them with the help of an advocate or the social work manager so that, together, you agree how your child will be protected. If you are very dissatisfied you can **complain**.

Ask your social worker to be open with you and to keep you informed and updated about the assessment and plan for your child. Do ask questions if you need to so that you fully understand the issues.

Be aware that domestic violence can happen when a woman is pregnant and you may be referred to Children's Services if professionals are worried about this. Do cooperate with the social worker, midwife and any other professionals so that an assessment of your baby's needs is finished before the baby is born.

Consider agreeing to a referral to a specialist domestic violence service. It is important you speak freely to the professionals there, even if you don't see yourself as a victim or what has happened at home as domestic violence. It might help you and will show your social worker that you are prepared to reflect on the situation.

Make sure you know what work is being done with the perpetrator of the domestic violence, for example, how they are being helped to address their violence.

Tell your social worker if you are worried that you are being offered services which are not right for you or which might put you or your child at risk. Also check that services are provided to you by professionals with specialist knowledge of domestic violence.

Ask your social worker for help if you need extra support to take part in or attend assessments, meetings or services such as:

- i. An interpreter if you are not comfortable communicating in English – you should usually be offered a trained female interpreter unconnected to your family network.
- ii. An advocate (including a specialist domestic violence advocate) or a professional supporter to help you put your views across in meetings.
- iii. Help or support with travel or childcare if you can't take part without this help (maybe due to isolation or having moved because of domestic violence). Children's Services can provide practical assistance (including cash) if they assess that this is needed.

Discuss any worries you have about your safety if your child's father is invited to the same meeting as you. You can ask for arrangements to be put in place such as 'split' meetings to keep you safe.

Seek independent or legal advice if you are worried about any agreements, contact arrangements or plans for your child. Always ask about timescales and reviews.

Make sure that your safety and that of your child is planned for if/when you separate and afterwards as risks can continue or escalate after separation.

Involve your wider family and friends early (if that is **safe**) so that together you can try to make a family plan, for example, through a **family group conference**, to keep you and your child safe.

Tell your social worker if you are worried that sharing personal information about you may place you and your child at risk. For example, it may be very important that your abuser does not find out about your address where it is confidential. Ask to be consulted about any plans your social worker has to share information about you **before** it happens, and that any decision to share information should only be made by a manager. Ask to be told what information is to be shared, with whom and why.

Don't delay looking for advice and support. You may feel scared about reporting what is happening and also scared about not reporting this but you and your child's safety is what matters most.

Don't dismiss or minimise professionals' concerns about the impact of domestic violence on your child – listen to and consider what they have to say. If they are worried that your child is being harmed, they have to be involved and work to keep your child safe. It is better if you are working with them to achieve this.

Don't stop cooperating with a written agreement or child protection plan without seeking legal advice first and being fully aware of what action Children's Services may take to protect your child if you stop co-operating.

Don't avoid contact with professionals and/or conceal your pregnancy. This can raise professionals' concerns and mean that you have less time to get the right support and advice, and to make changes.

Don't miss appointments and meetings about your child if you can help it as this might also raise professionals' concerns.

Where to go for further advice

Children's Services' involvement

Family Rights Group

Provides free confidential telephone and online advice.

Freephone: 0808 801 0366

(9.30am – 3.00pm Monday – Friday)

www.frg.org.uk/need-help-or-advice/parents/domestic-violence-advice

Legal advice and information

Rights of Women

Specialist women lawyers offer free confidential advice on the law.

Family: 020 7251 6577

Criminal: 020 7251 8887

Women in London: 020 7608 1137

Immigration and Asylum Law: 020 7490 7689

www.rightsofwomen.org.uk

Coram Children's Legal Centre

Provides free, independent legal advice on the law and policy affecting children.

www.childrenslegalcentre.com

To work out if you qualify for legal aid and get free advice if you qualify

Civil Legal Advice Line

T: 0345 345 4345

Minicom: 0345 609 6677

Text: text 'legalaid'- and your name to 80010

There is a free translation service and

you can book a BSL interpreter.

www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice

To find a solicitor specialising in childcare law

Law Society of England and Wales

T: 020 7320 5650

www.lawsociety.org.uk

Specialist domestic violence help

Ashiana

Supports Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee women.

www.ashiana.org.uk

Domestic Violence Intervention Project

Works with male perpetrators, their women partners/ex-partners and their children through providing specialist services.

www.dvip.org.uk

Imkaan

A UK-based black feminist organisation working to address violence against women and girls.

www.imkaan.org.uk

Latin American Women's Rights Service

Provides a range of free services, in Spanish and Portuguese, including domestic violence support.

www.lawrs.org.uk

National Domestic Violence Helpline

Provides advice and can find you emergency accommodation in a refuge place if you need it.

(In partnership with Refuge and Women's Aid)

Freephone 24-hour: 0808 2000 247

Refuge

Supports women and children through a range of direct services, including refuges, independent advocacy as well as advocating for better policies/practices. Refuge works in partnership with Women's Aid to provide the 24-hour freephone.

National Domestic Violence Helpline

As above.

Freephone 24-hour: 0808 2000 247

www.refuge.org.uk

Respect

Works with domestic violence perpetrators, male victims and young people.

Domestic Violence Perpetrators' helpline

Freephone: 0808 802 4040

Men's Advice Line

Freephone: 0808 801 0327

www.respect.uk.net

Shpresa

Supports Albanian women affected by domestic violence and works in partnership with Women's Therapy Centre.

www.shpresaprogramme.com

Solace Women's Aid

Provides London-based domestic violence support services for women and children.

Freephone: 0808 802 5565

www.solacewomensaid.org

Solais Anois

Offers refuge and support to Irish women and children including those from the Travelling community. Contact via Solace Women's Aid, *as above.*

Southall Black Sisters

Provides services in London to Asian and African-Caribbean survivors of domestic violence and other forms of gender-related violence.

T: 020 8571 0800

www.southallblacksisters.org.uk

Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships (STIRitUP)

Addresses issues of violence in young people's relationships and has produced an app to help young people who want to know more about relationships.

www.stiritapp.eu

www.stiritup.eu

Women's Aid

A national charity working and campaigning to end domestic violence against women and girls. Women's Aid coordinates and supports a wide range of services for women and children and their website has lots of useful information.

Women's Aid works in partnership with Refuge to provide the 24-hour freephone.

National Domestic Violence Helpline

As above.

Freephone 24-hour: 0808 2000 247

www.womensaid.org.uk

Housing, immigration, money issues and more

Citizens Advice Bureau

Provides free confidential and impartial advice on a range of issues.

T: 0344 4111 444

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Shelter

Provides advice and information about housing and homelessness.

Freephone: 0808 800 4444

www.shelter.org.uk

Thanks to Trust for London for funding Family Rights Group to develop these advice resources.