

Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed By and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control

This article begins to build knowledge of how non-violent coercive controlling behaviours can be central to children's experiences of domestic violence. It considers how children can be harmed by, and resist, coercive controlling tactics perpetrated by their father/father-figure against their mother. Already, we know much about how women/mothers experience non-physical forms of domestic violence, including psychological/emotional/verbal and financial abuse, isolation and monitoring of their activities. However, this knowledge has not yet reached most research on children and domestic violence, which tends to focus on children's exposure to physical violence. In this qualitative study, 30 participants from the UK, 15 mothers and 15 of their children (most aged 10–14) who had separated from domestic violence perpetrators, participated in semi-structured interviews. All participants were living in the community. Using the 'Framework' approach to thematically analyse the data, findings indicated that perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control often prevented children from spending time with their mothers and grandparents, visiting other children's houses and engaging in extra-curricular activities. These non-violent behaviours from perpetrators/fathers placed children in isolated, disempowering and constrained worlds which could hamper children's resilience and development and contribute to emotional/behavioural problems. Implications for practice and the need to empower children in these circumstances are discussed. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Children experiencing domestic violence may be affected by more than the physical violence perpetrated by one parent against the other.
- Children may be harmed by non-physical abusive behaviours inherent to coercive control-based domestic violence, including continual monitoring, isolation and verbal/emotional/psychological and financial abuses.
- Responsibility for the impacts on children of coercive control-based domestic violence should be placed with the perpetrator (usually fathers/father-figures) and not with the victimised parent (usually mothers).

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KEY WORDS: domestic violence/domestic abuse; school-aged child; parents/mothers/fathers; perpetrators; qualitative study

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This article addresses a lag in thinking in research on children’s experiences of domestic violence. It will argue that although the concept of coercive control is increasingly being applied to women’s experiences of domestic violence, the field of children and domestic violence is often still primarily grounded in the physical incident model.

Coercive controlling behaviours such as emotional and financial abuse, isolation and monitoring are often central to domestic violence (Stark, 2007). Yet almost no previous research has focused on how children experience these behaviours when living with domestic violence perpetrated by their father/father-figure against their mother. Instead, the primary issue facing children who live with domestic violence is seen as children’s exposure to ‘incidents’ of physical violence. Words such as ‘domestic/intimate partner violence’, ‘violence’ and ‘the [violent] incident/episode’ are often used synonymously (Holden, 2003; Buckley *et al.*, 2007; Overlien and Hyden, 2009; Overlien, 2010; Stanley, 2011; Jaffe *et al.*, 2012; Clarke and Wydall, 2015).

This article is among the first to use a broader, coercive control-based definition of domestic violence in relation to children. It highlights how more pervasive and ongoing non-violent forms of control-based domestic violence from perpetrators/fathers may lead to children being prevented from spending time with their mothers, visiting grandparents or peers, going on ‘days out’ or participating in extra-curricular activities. These issues have been largely unconsidered in previous research, but may contribute significantly to the emotional and behavioural problems that children living with domestic violence often experience (Holt *et al.*, 2008). This article also adds to the literature on children’s agency in domestic violence contexts (Callaghan, 2015a; Houghton, 2015; Katz, 2015; Overlien and Hyden, 2009; Mullender *et al.*, 2002) by suggesting how children can resist not only physical violence against their mother, but also perpetrators’/fathers’ emotional and financial abuse and control of mothers’ time and movement within the home.

The article is based on interviews with 15 mothers and 15 children who have past experiences of domestic violence. Qualitative research with children in these circumstances is relatively rare (Overlien, 2010). Swanston *et al.* (2014) state that theirs was the first study to ‘specifically speak to both school-aged children residing in the community [rather than refuges] and their mothers about the child’s experience of domestic violence’ (p. 186). The current study also interviewed children and mothers in these contexts, and therefore adds to the small number of studies to have gathered qualitative data with such participants. Collecting data from multiple members of the same family (children and mothers) was considered advantageous. It allowed deeper understandings to be developed of how domestic violence had been experienced by different family members, and enabled children’s voices and views to be heard.

Using the Concept of Coercive Control

According to Stark (2007), current state responses to domestic violence are failing women because they define domestic violence as discreet incidents or

episodes of physical violence (a view that is termed the 'physical incident' model in this article), and, as Stark (2009, p. 293) states, 'virtually all domestic violence research and intervention is predicated on this model'. The physical incident model is harmful because it ignores the many non-physical forms of abuse inherent to coercive control, as well as the ongoing nature of the domestic violence. This can lead to false understandings of what victims/survivors are experiencing and how it is affecting them, as well as misunderstandings of the levels of risk posed by perpetrators (Stark, 2007). The concept of coercive control provides a more accurate framework for understanding control-based forms of domestic violence, and enables fuller understandings of victims'/survivors' lived experiences and needs to be developed.

Coercive control is increasingly recognised as being distinct from what Johnson (2008) calls 'situational couple violence'; that is, violence sparked by situational factors and where control is not a primary motivation (Myhill, 2015). Coercive control is a particularly harmful form of domestic violence (Lehmann *et al.*, 2012), and is usually perpetrated by men (Myhill, 2015; Hester, 2009). It is known to involve a range of tactics intended to intimidate, humiliate, degrade, exploit, isolate and control (Stark, 2009). These include verbal, emotional and psychological abuse, control of time, space and movement, continual monitoring, stalking, physical violence, intimidation and threats of violence against the victim/survivor, their loved ones and property, rape, sexual coerciveness and control of pregnancy, financial abuse and the denial of resources, and isolation from sources of support (Matheson *et al.*, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2014; Stark, 2007, 2012; Lehmann *et al.*, 2012; Miller *et al.*, 2010).

Although some perpetrators use physical violence frequently, others use little or none; instead, preferring to maintain dominance over their partner through more insidious methods such as psychological abuse and the control of time, movement and activities (Westmarland and Kelly, 2013). Perpetrators of coercive control engage in minimising, denying and blaming others for their abusive behaviours (Lehmann *et al.*, 2012), may claim to be the real victim in the relationship (Bancroft *et al.*, 2012; Morris, 2009) and can present themselves as charming and heroic (Morris, 2009; Stark, 2007). Rather than arising from conflict or stress, coercive control is used to suppress potential conflicts or challenges to perpetrators' authority (Stark, 2007). The range of abuses involved mean that victims/survivors tend to experience control-based domestic violence as ongoing and cumulative rather than as episodic (Morris, 2009; Stark, 2007, 2009).

Coercive control can have devastating impacts on victims/survivors. In addition to its well-documented effects on physical and mental health (Dillon *et al.*, 2013), Westmarland and Kelly (2013) highlight that coercive control limits victims'/survivors' 'space for action', that is their freedom to say and do things and to meet their own needs without worry or fear. As perpetrators microregulate their everyday behaviours (Stark, 2007), victims'/survivors' options, choices and ability to decide for themselves diminish. These constraints on their agency and voice often contribute to a profound disempowerment, loss of self and loss of confidence in victims/survivors (Matheson *et al.*, 2015; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013).

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The Lag in the Adoption of Coercive Control to Understand Children’s Experiences of Domestic Violence

The children and domestic violence field tends to be grounded in the physical incident model of domestic violence. For example, living with domestic violence is equated with living in ‘a violent household’ (Jaffe *et al.*, 2012, p. 7), or ‘growing up in a violent environment’ (Buckley *et al.*, 2007, p. 307). This use of the term ‘violent’ suggests that physical violence (a) must be present and (b) is the primary cause of the negative impacts that domestic violence can have on children (Holt *et al.*, 2008).

This framing renders invisible children’s experiences of non-violent, control-based abuses in their homes. Jaffe *et al.* (2012, pp. 5–6) also refer to Holden’s (2003) typology of children’s exposure to domestic violence without critiquing its limited focus on ‘incidents’ of physical violence and its exclusion of non-physical forms of domestic violence:

‘The forms of [children’s] exposure can be separated into 10 discrete categories... These types range from being actively involved in *the violent incident*, to observing the initial effects, to ostensibly being unaware of it. The first six categories reflect some type of direct involvement with *the violent incident* whereas the last four categories concern some type of indirect exposure to *the incident*.’ (Holden, 2003, pp. 152–153, my emphasis)

This framework does not account for the harms that children experience when, for example, their father calls their mother stupid in front of them, prevents their mother from taking them to other children’s houses or forbids contact with their grandparents. The notion of an ‘incident’ also suggests a significant and unusual event. However, issues such as not being allowed to visit grandparents may be an ongoing form of control imposed by the perpetrator that has been integrated into mothers’ and children’s realities over many years to the point where they no longer give it thought. One recent study (Jouriles and McDonald, 2015) examined whether children are differently affected by physical violence that is motivated by coercive control compared to ‘situational couple violence’ (Johnson, 2008). However that study’s emphasis was still on physical violence. Therefore, there is a need to investigate how domestic violence permeates the everyday lives of children to greater extents than are often considered.

Innovative studies that explore children’s knowledgeableness, agency, active roles and coping strategies in domestic violence contexts could also be enriched by shifting away from the physical incident model. For example, Overlien and Hyden (2009) investigated children’s ‘actions or absence of actions during a domestic violence *episode*’ (p. 479, my emphasis), while Eriksson *et al.* (2013) note that most children are ‘aware of what is going on and... witnessing *violence* can be traumatic for children’ (p. 82, my emphasis). Similarly, Clarke and Wydall (2015) describe how ‘children who witness adult *violence* in the home... are rarely passive observers... they experience it from the position of subjects and not objects’ (p. 181, my emphasis), and Stanley (2011) notes that children can take ‘active roles in coping with domestic violence, protecting their mothers and siblings and seeking help at the time of the *incident*’ (p. 27, my emphasis). Extending research to consider how children are aware and active in relation to pervasive and non-physical forms

of domestic violence should deepen understandings of these children's lived realities and of exactly what it is that is harming them.

The Study

The data presented in this article are drawn from semi-structured interviews with children and mothers with past experiences of domestic violence. Interviews were conducted in the Midlands region of England in the UK between 2011 and 2012. Conducting semi-structured interviews based on a topic guide allowed data to be gathered on specific research questions, while also enabling participants to introduce new topics as relevant. Open questions were asked about: (1) life during the domestic violence; (2) the process of separating from perpetrators/fathers; (3) experiences of services; and (4) participants' post-separation lives and recoveries. The primary purpose of the interviews was to explore mother-child supportiveness in domestic violence contexts. No specific questions were asked about participants' experiences of coercive control. Instead, this theme emerged during the data analysis as participants' accounts were reviewed. Researching ethically was given priority throughout the study (Mullender *et al.*, 2002). The research was reviewed and approved by the University of Nottingham's Research Ethics Committee. A group of domestic violence survivors were also consulted in the early stages of the project to advise on achieving a suitable research design.

Fifteen mothers and 15 children from 15 families were interviewed, producing 30 interviews in total. However, not all of the mothers and children were paired. In seven families, the mother and one child were interviewed; in four families, the mother and two of her children participated; and in four families, it was only possible to interview the mother, either because the children were too young or did not wish to participate (see Table 1). It was recognised that the minority of non-participating children would not necessarily agree with their mothers' accounts and that the absence of their interviews represents a limitation in this research.

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Table 1. Sample composition

	Mother's name	Child/ren's name/s	Child/ren's age and gender
Mother and 1 child interviewed	Ellie	Shannon	10, female
	Isobel	Bob	12, male
	Eloise	John	20, male
	Kimberley	Elle	14, female
	Marie	Leah	11, female
	Alison	Jane	11, female
	Bella	Roxie	11, female
Mother and 2 children interviewed	Ruby	Thomas and Katie	10, male and 12, female
	Akeela	Brock and Vince	12, male and 13, male
	Violet	Angel and Joe	12, female and 14, male
	Lauren	Zoe and Grace	12, female and 14, female
Mother-only interviews	Charlie	Ross and Tanya	9, male and 14, female
	Lucy	Zara	11, female
	Ria	Carly	7, female
	Sybil	Jack	11, male

As Table 1 shows, except for one young person, the children interviewed were ten- to 14-years old. The exception was 20-year-old John, who still lived with his mother Eloise, and the themes arising from his interview were similar to those of the younger children. Children aged 15–19 would have been interviewed if possible, but the opportunity did not arise. Six of the children interviewed were male and nine were female. Of the 15 children, ten were White British, two were Black British and three were British Asian. Of the 15 mothers, 13 were White British, one was Black British and one was British Asian. The perpetrator was the child's or children's father in 12 out of 15 families, and had been the mother's partner in three out of 15 families. Overall, the sample size of 30 participants is small, though comparable with many other qualitative studies in this field. The research is also limited by its under-representation of certain groups, including ethnic minority families and families living in rural areas. Further research is necessary to explore whether the findings are applicable to other populations beyond this sample.

All participants were residing in the community at the time of the study. Most children and mothers were recruited through voluntary-sector organisations such as Women's Aid that support survivors of domestic violence. Mothers who were using/had used these services were contacted, informed about the study and asked if they and their children were interested in participating. Three families (e.g. mothers and children) were also recruited through 'snowball sampling', where participants who had been interviewed put the researcher in contact with further participants. While some families had previously stayed in refuges and/or experienced interventions from social services, others had not.

All participants gave informed consent via the signing of consent forms. In line with the recommendations of Eriksson and Nasman (2012), minimising imbalances of power between participants and the researcher was attempted at all stages of the fieldwork. Prior to interview, participants were informed that a referral to an appropriate statutory agency would be made if concerns about the safety of someone under 18 years became evident. Fortunately, this situation did not arise. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, and great care was taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity (Mullender *et al.*, 2002).

To participate, mothers and children needed to be separated from perpetrators/fathers and to be largely living in safety. Children were required to be aged ten years or over. The researcher established that these criteria were met through conversations with gatekeepers and mothers before consent forms were signed. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes. Children and mothers were usually interviewed separately, although a few chose to be interviewed with their mother/child present. Interviews were digitally voice-recorded, and all participants were given a £10 gift voucher.

The Framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002) was used to conduct the data analysis. A thematic framework was produced based on the research questions, the topic guide and emergent issues arising from the interviews. The data were then coded using this framework. Next, the data were placed in charts, and 'the range of attitudes and experiences' that participants had expressed about each theme was considered (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002, p. 317). The final stage of analysis involved 'defining concepts, mapping the range and nature of phenomena... finding associations', and considering the potential implications of the findings (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002, p. 321).

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Findings and Discussion

Types of Abuse

Mothers in the current study had experienced physical violence from perpetrators/fathers to varying extents. For nearly half (7/15), the physical violence was infrequent (see Table 2).

It was notable that, in the families where physical violence was not a regular feature of perpetrators'/fathers' abuse of mothers, interview data suggested that children had experienced the same negative impacts (e.g. internalising and externalising behaviours, mental health difficulties) as those who had lived with frequent and sometimes severe physical violence.

Although this article focuses on how children experienced, were harmed by and resisted non-physical forms of domestic violence perpetrated against their mothers, these children also experienced other forms of abuse from perpetrators/fathers. In line with the findings of previous research, if physical violence against mothers took place, children were usually aware of it (Swanston *et al.*, 2014; Mullender *et al.*, 2002). All of the children were directly emotionally abused by perpetrators/fathers. Some were also directly physically and/or sexually abused by perpetrators/fathers (Bancroft *et al.*, 2012; Harne, 2011). Furthermore, many perpetrators/fathers directly attacked and undermined children's relationships with their mothers (Bancroft *et al.*, 2012; Morris, 2009). Further research is needed to investigate how these multiple types of abuse beyond exposure to physical violence impact on children in the short, medium and long term.

Harmful Impacts of Living with Coercive Control

Control of Time, Movement and Activities within the Home

A key non-violent aspect of perpetrators'/fathers' domestic violence that impacted on children was their control over how mothers spent their time within the home. Mothers and children described how perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children:

'Lots of times when Mum was giving me attention he'd tell her to go over to him so she'd have to leave me to play by myself.' (Shannon, aged 10)

Table 2. Presence of physical and non-physical forms of domestic violence by perpetrators/fathers against mothers*

Types of domestic violence against mothers	Frequent and in some cases extreme physical violence, plus non-physical forms of domestic violence including psychological, emotional, sexual and financial abuse, isolation and monitoring of time, movement and activities	Infrequent or no physical violence. Non-physical forms of domestic violence including psychological, emotional, sexual and financial abuse, isolation and monitoring of time, movement and activities
Mothers and children (mothers' names appear first)	Ellie and Shannon Eloise and John Kimberley and Elle Charlie, <i>Tanya</i> and <i>Ross</i> Lucy and <i>Zara</i> Ria and <i>Carly</i> Akeela, Vince and Brock Bella and Roxie	Isobel and Bob Marie and Leah Ruby, Katie and Thomas Alison and Jane Lauren, Grace and Zoe Sybil and <i>Jack</i> Violet, Joe and Angel

*Non-interviewed children appear in italics.

'All of the children were directly emotionally abused by perpetrators/fathers

'Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children'

‘Monopolising mothers’ time maintained perpetrators’/fathers’ dominance in families’

‘Children’s “space for action” (their freedom to say and do things) was narrowed by perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control’

‘Several perpetrators/fathers also controlled mothers’ movements outside the home... [This] severely restricted children’s social lives’

‘There was no fun, no playtime allowed. Like when [my daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn’t allowed because he’d be jealous. He’d say: “You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?”’ (Marie, mother)

Preventing mothers and children from spending time together by monopolising mothers’ time maintained perpetrators’/fathers’ dominance in families. Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these ongoing situations. The limited parental attention and restricted opportunities for fun and affection that perpetrators/fathers imposed may have contributed to the withdrawn or aggressive behaviours that most of the children in this sample displayed during the domestic violence.

Narrowed Space for Action

In accordance with the findings of Westmarland and Kelly (2013), data from mothers’ interviews suggested that children’s ‘space for action’ (their freedom to say and do things) was narrowed by perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control, and was also narrowed by children themselves as a way of avoiding abuse. For example, one mother, Lauren, discussed how:

‘When he [perpetrator/father] came home from work he’d want to spend time with them [children] and they were always *his* girls. He used to say to Zoe “You’re my little angel.” But at the same time they couldn’t shout, they couldn’t make noise, they couldn’t be children around him unless it was on his terms. It was alright if he wanted to play with them, but at other times it was like he wanted them to disappear. It was like having another child in the house and he’d throw tantrums if we did something wrong.’ (Lauren, mother)

Lauren’s daughter Zoe’s exposure to physical violence against her mother was minimal (see Table 2). However, Lauren reported that Zoe (aged newborn to three years while living with the perpetrator/father) had experienced delayed speech and had not begun to speak regularly until she and her mother had been living apart from the perpetrator/father for many months. It may be that living in an environment where the perpetrator/father often demanded that Zoe be quiet contributed to Zoe constraining her own voice as a survival strategy.

Isolation from Sources of Support

Several perpetrators/fathers also controlled mothers’ movements outside the home. Data from mothers highlighted how this controlling tactic not only affected them; it also severely restricted children’s social lives by preventing them from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

‘Kids’ parties were another problem because he’d be accusing me of trying to “get off” [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn’t do any after-school clubs because I had to be back by a certain time. Me and the kids weren’t allowed to go round to see his [perpetrator’s/father’s] mum.’ (Isobel, mother)

‘[Because of the perpetrator’s/father’s control] I just didn’t go out, so then the children didn’t go out. It was just school and home. So they missed out on days out, family trips, socialising with people. And they’ve missed out on knowing what healthy relationships are about in other families because children don’t make as many friendships if you can’t mix with other mums.’ (Marie, mother)

The isolation that children lived with as a result of perpetrators’/fathers’ controlling tactics severely limited children’s opportunities to create

resilience-building relationships with non-abusive people outside their immediate family. The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can give to children's social skills, confidence and development were therefore denied to these children.

Resisting Coercive Control

In line with the findings of previous studies (Katz, 2015; Houghton, 2015; Callaghan, 2015a; Overlien and Hyden, 2009; Mullender *et al.*, 2002), the children and mothers in the current study were not passive victims of perpetrators'/fathers' domestic violence. However, their actions often went beyond attempts to prevent, and protect each other from, physical violence. Many children and mothers also actively resisted perpetrators'/fathers' non-violent abusive behaviours. Children and mothers took opportunities to resist such behaviours whenever they could within the constraints that perpetrators/fathers placed on them, and in accordance with whatever space they had for action.

Resisting Control and Financial Abuse

In cases where children and mothers were able to leave their homes and experience periods of freedom and autonomy, they did so:

'[Me and my son] did things together. When we went to the cinema or we went shopping we could just 'let our hair down' and do what we wanted to do. We were going to the cinema 2–3 times a week to get out of the house.' (Eloise, mother)

This mother and her child also used these opportunities to subvert the perpetrator's/father's financial abuse by working together to hide their purchases from him:

John (aged 20): 'When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them.'

Eloise (mother of John): 'We used to throw them over the hedge.'

John: 'Into the garden so he wouldn't see them.'

Eloise: 'Clothing or anything I'd bought John, because he [the perpetrator/father] would go mad [that I'd spent money on John].'

These acts highlight the everyday nature of children's and mothers' resistance to coercive control. By defying perpetrators'/fathers' rules, children and mothers may have strengthened their sense of agency and prevented perpetrators/fathers from gaining total control over them.

Resisting Control of Time, Movement and Activities within the Home

Many children and mothers also seized opportunities to resist restrictions within the home. Times when perpetrators/fathers were absent from the home or were sleeping were particularly useful:

'Well some days he [perpetrator/father] would be out, and me and Mum would watch a movie and have some time together, which he wouldn't let us do when he was there.' (Katie, aged 12)

'He always made her [daughter] sleep on her own you see, but she wouldn't go to sleep without me being next to her. So I'd wait for him to go to sleep and then I'd get in next to her or she'd get in next to me.' (Ellie, mother)

'Many children and mothers also actively resisted perpetrators'/fathers' non-violent abusive behaviours'

'These acts highlight the everyday nature of children's and mothers' resistance to coercive control'

‘Children... resisted domestic violence... by providing their mothers with emotional support’

‘Commonplace and “age appropriate” actions... gave mothers a sense of being cared for that partly countered the emotional abuse of perpetrators/fathers’

‘Children’s access to resilience-building and developmentally-helpful persons and activities was limited’

By spending time together against perpetrators’/fathers’ wishes, children and mothers were providing each other with emotional support, reducing one another’s isolation and maintaining a level of closeness in their mother-child relationships. These quotations illustrate how mothers and children can seek opportunities to promote each other’s well-being, and reduce the negative impacts of the domestic abuse, even when much of their lives are being overrun by perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control.

Resisting Negative Emotional Impacts

A final way that children in the current study resisted domestic violence was by providing their mothers with emotional support. Such support was often woven into everyday life, rather than occurring as the result of a particular ‘incident’ of abuse.

‘If I saw Mum was upset I’d give her a cuddle or something like that, try and make her feel happy.’ (Bob, aged 12)

‘[My son] John’s been so emotionally supportive... He would say to me: “Mum don’t go to bed tonight in his [perpetrator’s/father’s] room; come and sleep with me.” So I’d get into John’s bed and John had a beanbag and he’d lay on the floor and say – “shall I put us a movie on Mum, what do you want to watch?” – to cheer me up.’ (Eloise, mother)

‘[My daughter] Jane really did get me through it. She was really close to me and massively supportive. There were lots of hugs and she’d make me pretend cups of tea with her plastic kitchen set.’ (Alison, mother)

The emotional supports provided by these children highlight the important roles that they were playing in promoting their mothers’ well-being. Commonplace and ‘age appropriate’ actions such as making their mother a drink with a plastic kitchen set, though seemingly trivial, gave mothers a sense of being cared for that partly countered the emotional abuse of perpetrators/fathers. In cases such as Alison’s, support from her daughter ‘got her through it’ and ultimately helped her to separate from the perpetrator/father.

Implications for Research and Practice

The children in this study appeared to suffer from a range of coercive controlling behaviours by perpetrators/fathers, extending far beyond exposure to physical violence. Fathers/father-figures controlled mothers’ time and movements, isolated mothers (and consequently isolated children) from sources of support and produced family environments that narrowed mothers’ and children’s space for action. These behaviours entrapped children (and their mothers) in constrained situations where children’s access to resilience-building and developmentally-helpful persons and activities was limited. The impacts of perpetrators/fathers preventing children from spending time with their mother, visiting grandparents or going to other children’s houses may contribute to emotional and behavioural problems in children as much as, or even more than, physical violence perpetrated against their mother.

This article has also indicated the need to extend understanding of how children and mothers can resist and protect each other from domestic violence.

Existing discussions of children's agency and resistance have mainly focused on physical violence (Callaghan, 2015a; Overlien and Hyden, 2009). However, the current study suggests that children can also resist perpetrators'/fathers' emotional and financial abuse of their mothers, and their attempts to prevent children and mothers from spending time together. Daily routines and 'age-appropriate' behaviours, such as watching movies with their mother or making her pretend cups of tea with a plastic kitchen set, signalled children's intentions to maintain elements of 'normal life' and positive mother-child relationships in the face of perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control. Like much of the coercive control itself, these resistances were not incident based, but were woven into daily life.

These findings suggest the inadequacy of using the physical incident model as a basis for defining and discussing children's experiences of domestic violence. The next step is to give greater attention to whether or not children are experiencing coercive control-based domestic violence (Lehmann *et al.*, 2012; Stark, 2007, 2012) or what Johnson (2008) terms 'situational couple violence'. This distinction may be vital, as coercive control-based domestic violence is thought to be particularly harmful (Lehmann *et al.*, 2012) and requires interventions that tackle perpetrators' negative use of power and control while also empowering victims/survivors. Children with experiences of coercive control may have different support needs to those who have lived with situational couple violence. Future work in the children and domestic violence field could therefore begin to identify the presence of coercive control in children's lives using instruments such as Lehmann *et al.*'s (2012) Checklist of Controlling Behaviors. Instruments that measure the presence of coercive control-based domestic violence in children's lives could be invaluable in future research, and for practitioners in social work, family courts, education and health. To gain a fuller understanding of what is harming children who grow up in contexts of coercive control-based domestic violence, and how best to meet their needs, it is also vital to investigate whether the parenting of perpetrators (usually fathers/father figures) is abusive (Bancroft *et al.*, 2012; Harne, 2011), and if perpetrators are undermining children's relationships with their non-abusive parent (usually their mother) (Bancroft *et al.*, 2012; Morris, 2009).

Practitioners working to gain understandings of how children are affected by control-based domestic violence could ask children and mothers about constraints that are placed on their movements, their activities and who they can engage with inside and outside the home. Practitioners could also talk to children and mothers about whether there are things that they do, or refrain from doing, because of the reactions of perpetrators/fathers, and how this might be affecting children.

Overall, there is much potential for further research and practice initiatives in this area. Shifting from the physical incident model to the concept of coercive control can help to provide knowledge and practice that is in line with children's lived realities and support needs. This shift may also help to dispel the myths that domestic violence between adults does not affect children, and that unless children have witnessed physical violence between their parents, then they have not been impacted by domestic violence.

In considering how children are harmed by coercive control, perpetrators/fathers should be held accountable for these harms and the all-too-common practice of mother/victim blaming must be avoided (Callaghan, 2015b; Morris, 2009).

'Resistances were not incident based, but were woven into daily life'

'Children with experiences of coercive control may have different support needs to those who have lived with situational couple violence'

'Practitioners... could ask children and mothers about constraints that are placed on their movements'

'Perpetrators/fathers should be held accountable for these harms'

**‘Placing
“empowerment”
alongside “safety”
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Mothers face multiple barriers to separating safely from perpetrators/fathers, including the likelihood of escalating abuse from perpetrators/fathers, lack of alternative housing and emotional abuse by perpetrators/fathers that convinces mothers that separation is not viable (Thiara and Gill, 2011; Elizabeth, 2003). Rather than needing to be blamed or pressured, mothers require effective supports from professionals and services to free themselves and their children from perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control.

Finally, like women/mothers, children in coercive control-based domestic violence contexts may live with narrowed space for action, reduced ‘voice’ within the family, disempowerment and erosion of their confidence and sense of agency. This suggests that practitioners engaging with children with current or past experiences of coercive control could make empowering children an important strand of their work. Westmarland and Kelly (2013) emphasise the necessity of women/mothers who have suffered from domestic violence gaining ‘expanded space for action that empowers through restoring their voice and ability to make choices’ (p. 1100). The findings of the current study suggest that children too would benefit from this. Placing ‘empowerment’ alongside ‘safety’ and ‘protection’ on the children and domestic violence agenda would represent a positive step forward.

Conclusion

This article has suggested how children may be harmed by, and also resist, forms of coercive control-based domestic violence other than physical violence – a topic that has received almost no attention in research to date. The results of this study are a starting point for further research in this area, highlighting how children can experience negative impacts when perpetrators/fathers control mothers’ time and activities, isolate mothers and narrow ‘space for action’ within the family. Employing a coercive control-based definition in future children and domestic violence work, and moving beyond a physical incident model, would enable us to develop deeper understandings of these children’s lived experiences and support needs.

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