



Restoring trust

**Children witnessing domestic abuse:
learnings for support services**

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Executive summary

Every year, hundreds of thousands of children and young people (CYP) are exposed to domestic abuse (DA) at home, and this has a powerful and profound impact on their lives.¹ Yet, the existing evidence focusing on CYP who are exposed to and witness DA at home is very limited.

This research aims to:

1. Increase understanding of the impact of witnessing DA on CYP
2. Increase understanding of any barriers to engagement with support services
3. Explore and increase understanding of CYP's support needs and provide learnings about what help will enable them to cope with the effects of witnessing the abuse and to recover as much as possible.

Based on learnings from these aims, the research also highlights suggestions for best practice for services for young witnesses of DA.

Evidence was gathered in two ways:



- Interviews with CYP who have been exposed to and witnessed DA at home or with their safe parents
- Interviews with Victim Support (VS) Advocates who support CYP who have witnessed DA.

Summary of key findings and recommendations







Our findings demonstrate the immense impact that witnessing DA has on many aspects of CYP's lives. Five shared impacts were found from the interviews with Advocates, safe parents and a young person who took part in this study:

	Emotional and psychological wellbeing		Behavioural changes
	Sense of safety and lack of trust		School performance.
	Relationship with family and friends		

As well as increasing understanding of the impact of witnessing DA in a household on CYP, this research also adds much needed knowledge and insight into barriers experienced by CYP in accessing support services. While there is a large range of existing literature concerning barriers to engagement with support services faced by adult survivors of DA, much less is known about the barriers for CYP who witness DA. Four common themes emerged:

	Lack of knowledge about CYP DA services		Lack of insight into the impact on CYP of witnessing DA
	Concerns over privacy and external judgement		Timing and method of providing support by support services.

This research also adds to an understanding of the service needs of CYP who witness DA. Not only is the literature on impacts and barriers very limited, but so is the literature on the needs, support and services that would help CYP who witness DA at home cope with and recover from it. Nine common needs were identified in this research:

	Profound emotional support		Extensive referral pathways
	Tailored and flexible support		A diverse team
	An understanding of emotions and what constitutes DA		Support groups for CYP
	Collaboration between services and agencies		Access to anonymised support.
	Follow-up contact		

To ensure that CYP support services are effective, it is vital that they are evidence-based. Hence, any additional evidence involving CYP voices and experiences is crucial. More research is needed that involves other organisations supporting survivors and victims of DA and that has an intersectional perspective. This research project gave CYP a platform for their voices to be heard and taken into consideration, so that they don't suffer in silence if they witness DA.

Following the findings and lessons learned from this project, we recommend that:

1. A mapping of CYP DA services should be undertaken to understand the provision of services compared with demand. This mapping should inform decisions made by commissioners about current provision for specialist services for CYP affected by DA across England and Wales.
2. In response to the change in status of CYP affected by DA, commissioners of victim services should fill current gaps in the provision of specialist services for CYP affected by DA across England and Wales.
3. Statutory agencies and DA services for adults should refer the safe parent to DA services for CYP if needed; otherwise, many safe parents are not aware of the existence of such services and their children will not be able to access them.
4. CYP DA services should undertake activities to raise awareness of the support available among professionals who are likely to come into contact with victims/survivors of DA in order to facilitate referrals of their children, especially where these services are new.
5. CYP DA support services should incorporate extensive referral pathways that accept referrals from criminal justice agencies such as the police, as well as from other victim services such as Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) services.
6. Services supporting CYP who witness DA should emphasise the confidential nature of the service and be clear about their relationship to social services in their promotional materials.
7. CYP DA services should be mindful of their use of branding and Advocates should make efforts to ensure that those around the CYP are unlikely to be made aware that the CYP are being supported by a DA-related service, particularly where support is provided in school.
8. CYP DA services should provide emotional support and facilitate the development of a caring and secure relationship with the Advocate to help the CYP cope with the impact of DA. Advocates should provide independent support and show that they really care, listen and are trustworthy.
9. CYP DA services should offer support that is flexible and tailored to individual needs.

10. CYP DA services should offer a range of support methods, including an option to access anonymised support and peer support groups. Support needs to be available across England and Wales and be flexible in its approach.
11. There should be a whole school approach to the safeguarding and wellbeing of CYP.
12. CYP should, as a matter of urgency, receive effective education about healthy relationships. All children should have the opportunity to receive high-quality, age-appropriate education on safety, appropriate relationships and crime.
13. CYP DA services should, as a matter of urgency, be resourced and supported to build strong relationships with adult DA services and with schools to provide wrap-around support for the safe parent and children. It is also recommended that CYP DA services work collaboratively with adult DA services that are available in the area for the victims/survivors of DA in order to provide holistic support to the safe parent and their children.
14. CYP DA services should be accessible to all CYP at any point in the future when they feel they need someone to talk to.
15. CYP DA services should have a diverse workforce with Advocates who speak different languages and are of different genders and ethnicities to reflect the community in which the service is delivered.



Introduction

Every year, hundreds of thousands of children and young people (CYP) are exposed to domestic abuse (DA) at home, and this has a powerful and profound impact on their lives. Children witnessing DA is extremely common. The Children's Commissioner for England estimates that 770,000 children live with an adult who experienced domestic violence and abuse in the last year, 300,000 of whom are aged five years and under.² CYP who live in these households are very likely to witness or be harmed by the abuse; the results from a survey of 4,036 CYP conducted by Radford and colleagues found that 12.0% of children aged under 11 years and 18.4% of young people aged 11 to 17 years had witnessed at least one incident of domestic violence or threatening behaviour.³ Furthermore, SafeLives reported that 62% of CYP living in households affected by DA are directly harmed by the perpetrator of the abuse, in addition to the harm caused by witnessing the abuse of others.⁴

CYP who are exposed to DA in the home may suffer a range of severe and lasting effects. Children who witness domestic violence can suffer serious emotional and developmental difficulties that are very similar to those experienced by CYP who are direct victims of abuse.⁵ For example, witnessing DA during childhood is associated with various negative mental, physical and behavioural health outcomes, not only during childhood⁶ but also as adults.⁷ CYP who witness DA have a heightened risk of poor school performance, cognitive delay, emotional and behavioural problems, trauma symptoms and mental health diagnoses in childhood.⁸ Moreover, UNICEF reported that CYP who live with, and are aware of, violence in the home face many challenges and risks that can last throughout their lives, including difficulty in learning and limited social skills, they can exhibit violent,

risky or delinquent behaviour, or they may suffer from depression or severe anxiety. UNICEF also warns of the likelihood of the cycle of violence continuing into the next generation. The single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of DA later in life is whether or not they grew up in a home where there was domestic violence.⁹ Hence, a recent review by the Victims' Commissioner strongly recommended that child victims of DA should receive tailored interventions and support programmes.¹⁰

Victim Support

Victim Support (VS) is the leading independent charity in England and Wales for people who have been affected by crime and traumatic incidents. We are committed to providing free and confidential emotional support and practical help for people affected by all types of crime, regardless of whether they have reported the crime to the police or when it occurred and for as long as it is needed, and do so through our local teams.

In addition, we provide a range of specialist services for murder and manslaughter; violence (including sexual violence); domestic abuse; non-recent sexual abuse; fraud; hate crime; antisocial behaviour; and crimes against vulnerable people, including CYP who witness DA in the household.



The research

The aim

The purpose of this research is to:

1. Increase understanding of the impact of witnessing DA on CYP
2. Increase understanding of any barriers to engagement with support services
3. Explore and increase understanding of CYP's support needs and provide learnings about what help will enable them to cope with the effects of witnessing the abuse and to recover as much as possible.

Based on learnings from these aims, the research also highlights suggestions for best practice for services for young witnesses of DA.

Service focus

This research focused on, and was undertaken in partnership with, the London Children and Young People Domestic Abuse Service, a pilot service funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) between March 2020 and April 2021. This service was London-based and supported CYP who witnessed DA in a household. Support was provided to CYP aged 4 to 17 years whose safe parent or guardian was being supported by a MOPAC-funded VS Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) as a survivor or victim of DA. This pilot service for CYP recognised the influence adverse childhood

experiences can have on a young person's life and aimed to intervene and disrupt the potential impact. It also helped CYP cope with unwanted and harmful effects of witnessing DA by providing wrap-around support for the family. This included reducing the emotional effect of experiencing DA and learning about healthy relationships.

Each young person was allocated a trained Advocate who understood young people's needs and supported them to develop the knowledge and skills to navigate their challenging environment. The support was tailored to individual CYP needs and included emotional support, education on healthy relationships and friendships, looking at how to build self-esteem, healthy coping skills and practical support.

The London CYP DA service launched on 16 March 2020 and ended on 31 March 2021. During this time, 184 CYP who witnessed DA in the household were referred to the service, of whom 51% were boys. Of the CYP referred to the service, 40% were between 9 and 13 years old and 37.5% were between 4 and 8 years old.

Methodology

To meet the aims of the research and to gain in-depth and detailed knowledge, a qualitative research method was used. The qualitative data collection took place between August and September 2020 and used two activities:

1. Interviews with VS Advocates who support CYP
2. Interviews with CYP who have been exposed to and witnessed DA at home or with their safe parents. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and because of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19, which prevented the research team from meeting participants face to face, it was decided that only CYP aged 11 and above could be interviewed directly. Younger children's accounts were provided by their safe parent, who was interviewed on their behalf. Two CYP aged 12 and 13 preferred not to be interviewed and their safe parent provided their account. Some safe parents represented more than one child.

Overall, 14 in-depth semi-structured phone interviews were conducted: seven with VS Advocates, one with a young person, and six with safe parents representing nine young children. The age of participants who took part in the research, either directly or represented by their safe parents, ranged from 5 to 13 years. One young person witnessed DA between their mother and stepfather and one between their father and mother and later between their father and their father's new partner. All other CYP witnessed DA between their mother and father. In all instances, the male, either a father or a stepfather, was the perpetrator of the abuse. CYP were all no longer living in a house where they were exposed to DA at the time of the data collection. All participants were based in London.



Impact of witnessing DA on CYP

Witnessing DA in the household can severely impact different aspects of CYP's lives. All participants who took part in this study reported that CYP are affected in many ways. Not only witnessing but also hearing an argument can have a severe impact on CYP. Previous research has found that children often witness DA in the household indirectly by, for example, hearing it from another room or witnessing the outcomes, such as injuries or broken objects.¹¹ Children also notice, and are affected by, the emotional and psychological impact DA has had on the abused parent.¹² This was supported by participants who took part in this research.

"It [witnessing DA] has affected them [children], I would say, in every single way possible, to be honest."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"It's not just seeing an incident or seeing an argument. You know, hearing it and feeling the atmosphere is enough to affect that child."

Advocate

DA influences children in different ways, even if they are from the same families. The literature refers to gender, age and personality as possible explanations for this.¹³ Some participants who took part in this study identified differences between genders in terms

of how they responded to witnessing DA and how the perpetrator treated them. This is in line with previous studies.

“The personality is of course different but they both [children] were exposed nearly to the same thing but my son... it affected him more seriously because he’s a boy and because of the culture things so he [father] was trying to brainwash our son more and like boys getting on with boys and things like this so he [father] had more control. So I would say the personality and there was more [a] culture thing as well [that influenced the impact of witnessing DA].”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

“So a lack of confidence and lack of self-esteem with the girls. Where the boys seem to externalise it generally.”

Advocate

Some CYP who took part in this study were also abused directly. Being a direct victim of abuse often adds to the negative impact of the abuse emotionally. And as a result of not only witnessing but also often being abused by the perpetrator, many CYP may need long-term support. Moreover, some participants who took part in this study believe that witnessing DA can have a long-term impact on CYP and that it will be very difficult and time-consuming to minimise the effect of what CYP have seen.

“They [children] witnessed a lot of domestic violence and a lot of control and coercive behaviour, and they also suffered domestic violence.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“There is at least one case I have where the child was injured by the perpetrator. And her behaviour, it seems like she will need further support. I feel that she needs to be referred onto a long-term counselling support, due to her being – she was hurt quite badly and strangled.”

Advocate

“The damage is there – you never could fix the damage core like completely, you can just calm it down by extra help and support in the school definitely and therapy maybe... They are very fragile children now... they need more attention.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

Despite differences in the impact of witnessing DA on CYP, the following five themes relating to the effect of DA on CYP were found in this research:



Emotional and psychological wellbeing



Behavioural changes



Sense of safety and lack of trust



School performance.



Relationship with family and friends

Emotional and psychological wellbeing

Exposure to DA often generates a multitude of emotional responses. All participants who took part in this study reported many different emotional responses in CYP as a result of witnessing DA. Young people as well as children may struggle to understand the situation and process what is happening. As a result, they may be confused and uncertain about their feelings.

“I think the strongest emotions are going to be anger, fear and confusion, but then I do think there are more complex emotions that will lie underneath those, sometimes guilt, possibly shame, but, again, that will depend on the age and developmental stage of the child or a young person in question and the extent of what they’ve seen. It has a huge impact on trust, particularly, I think for the older ones who understand a bit more clearly what they’re witnessing. So, trust becomes a huge issue.”

Advocate

“I felt disappointed [at behaviour of alleged perpetrator].”

Young person, 11 years old

“A lot of my children [children the Advocate supports] are under eight, so they are very young. I think they can be quite confused about their feelings, they don’t understand what’s going on or what they’re feeling.”

Advocate

It has been found that exposure to DA increases the risk of developing internalised problems, including social and general anxiety, social withdrawal and depression.¹⁴ Many participants who took part in this study reported that children were withdrawn, anxious and depressed. In addition, some of them reported their children as suffering from auditory hallucinations such as hearing voices.

“They [children] were very depressed. They were very low motivated and very depressed and sad... Even [the] GP said that they are suffering from anxiety and depression... My son, it affected his confidence, and his sleeping, he had [heard] voices in his head.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

“I’ve got a family in particular that were still living all in the same household, and the impact of that is that the young person is completely depressed and shuts down. You know, it’s like she’s [young person] almost detached from what is going on in the household.”

Advocate

Some CYP also experienced a regression in their development, such as wetting their bed. Several also suffered from nightmares and were afraid to sleep alone. Indeed, previous research has found that children exposed to DA may manifest sleep disturbances, emotional distress and fear of being alone.¹⁵

“My eldest daughter was wetting the bed every single night for four years.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“In the home, the safe parent finds it challenging to get the child to sleep in their own bed perhaps, so they are anxious about sleeping alone, or they have nightmares, or they are afraid of the dark or loud noises. So their anxiety causes them to have challenging behaviours in the home.”

Advocate

Safe parents also saw a change in their children’s mood. CYP affected by DA were very moody, with some becoming grumpy and others snappy. Participants who took part in this research also reported that witnessing DA had an impact on CYP’s confidence and self-esteem.

“I think he [child] just became... very grumpy, very moody actually.”

Safe parent of 7-year-old

“She [child] was normally a bubbly person. She liked to speak a lot. She would like to be around you. But since that [DA] happened, she didn’t want to be around anybody. She would keep herself to herself. She would snap at you every now and again if you did something that she didn’t want to do, or any little thing.”

Safe parent of 9-year-old

“Something that I’ve noticed a lot is a lack of self-esteem and confidence.”

Advocate

“I’d say confidence is a real issue. It [witnessing DA] does knock their confidence.”

Advocate

Sense of safety and lack of trust

All participants who took part in this study reported that witnessing DA has had an impact on CYP’s sense of safety and trust. Some children who face trauma at home display hypervigilance (increased alertness) and hyperarousal, including constant anxiety.¹⁶ The impact on CYP’s sense of safety and feeling unsafe most of the time are particularly profound if the perpetrator still lives in the family home.

“My youngest child, she would hide a lot, so she’d find safe places in the house and hide, and she’d try and make me safe places in the house to hide.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“I think one of the main impacts is their feeling of safety in the home. When it’s perpetrated in their kitchen or bedroom, it changes the way they [CYP] view their environment... I think the impact is that they were feeling very unsafe in their home environment.”

Advocate

“Children who live in a high-risk level [environment], an example of that would be if the alleged perpetrator is cohabiting with the family... They never actually have a safe place in the home... They’re always fighting, they’re always defensive. They never have that opportunity to actually put their guard down.”

Advocate

Witnessing DA can cause separation anxiety for many children, especially pre-school children, with many of them being worried about parting from the safe parent. Due to their young age, pre-school children have a limited coping ability, which means that they often react to witnessing DA at home by displaying anxious attachment.¹⁷

Children are worried not only about their own safety but also about the safety of a safe parent. Many have a need to protect the victim of the abuse and as a result become attached to the safe parent and find it difficult to part with them for even a short time.

“They’re [children] worried to say goodbye to the safe parent at the school gates. So, all of a sudden, they became very scared of saying goodbye and they didn’t want to go in to school, when the abuse was worse. They didn’t want their safe parent to be away from them, or they felt they needed to protect their safe parent, so they didn’t want to be away from them and go to school.”

Advocate

“I saw she [child] was getting quite emotional and very attached to me. I could see that she felt like she was having to protect me in a way, because she was getting her cuddly toy and bringing it to me saying, ‘Cuddle this. It will make you feel better.’ She became quite attached.”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

Relationship with family and friends

Participants who took part in this research reported not only having problems with friendships but also having a difficult relationship with siblings and the safe parent. CYP experience problems including building or forming friendships and keeping them, due to their concerns about, and attention to, their home environment.

“They [children] were struggling socially. They were struggling to kind of form friendships and keep friendships. They were struggling even just with the family side of it. They just kind of shut down quite a lot.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“100% it’s been affecting them [CYP] in school, and friendships... They go further and further away from their friends and just lose connection because they’re so worried about what’s happening at home.”

Advocate

The relationship with a safe parent is often negatively impacted due to the perpetrator’s manipulative behaviour, which turns the children against the victim, who is the safe parent. Perpetrators also turn siblings against each other. As a result, relationships with siblings suffer.

“My oldest daughter, he [perpetrator] started to be quite manipulative of her... If she hit me or struck me, he would buy her a present and started using her as a weapon against me. My youngest daughter was stuck in the middle, trying to stick up for me and questioning what was happening.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“He [perpetrator] would often favour one of the children. So, my youngest one, she kind of got away with a lot more. Whereas my eldest was punished a lot more, and that impacted upon them because then their relationship with each other suffered. My eldest would be quite jealous of my youngest one and she would get very angry with her and very upset with her. So, it impacted upon them in that way.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“It [witnessing] had [an] impact on everything... There was like an impact on [my relationship with] my brothers because he [perpetrator] would like, say, ‘She’s not your sister,’ and stuff like that. And that would go straight to their [brothers’] heads.”

Young person, 11 years old

Behavioural changes

All participants who took part in this research said that CYP’s behaviour had changed as a result of witnessing DA. CYP had become angry and aggressive. Often, in their opinion, this was a learned behaviour. As found elsewhere, children observe the people around them behaving in various ways, encode their behaviour, and may imitate observed behaviour.¹⁸

“I had like kind of anger issues, and I’m quite aggressive because of that, so I would pick up what he [perpetrator] would do, so like I’m now very, quite aggressive, but I feel I’ve changed my outlook, so my anger showed more when I was younger.”

Young person, 11 years old

“I noticed she [child] became quite angry herself. She became quite aggressive. She would shout, she would scream, she would have tantrums, so some of that was probably imitations of what she saw between me and her dad. Also, probably things that she couldn’t quite understand or digest, and it was coming out like that.”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

The CYP’s aggression and anger were often directed towards family members and particularly towards a safe parent. This mirrors perpetrator behaviour such as physical and verbal aggression. Previous research has found that 25% of children exposed to DA exhibited abusive behaviours, mostly towards their mother (62%) or sibling (52%), and that this affected boys and girls equally.¹⁹ CYP also displayed disruptive behaviour and aggression towards other pupils at school.

“I was working on a case where the child had witnessed domestic abuse, an altercation between mum and the alleged perpetrator... The child did have a really good relationship with mum previously. Because she had internalised her emotions, she had actually become very aggressive in the family home, consequently, leading to physically assaulting the younger siblings and even assaulting mum.”

Advocate

“It was literally mirroring what their father [perpetrator] had done... You know, they [children] would say that they wanted to kill me and things like that. They would trash my house. They would punch me and they would kick me. It was horrendous.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“So definitely sometimes there are reports that their behaviour at school is challenging, so they could bully other children or they could be a victim themselves at school of bullying.”

Advocate

Young people may also engage in a risky behaviour such as substance abuse or criminal activity.

“With the older ones, I think they can engage in more risky behaviour outside the home, so we have cases where 12-, 13-year-old children are running away or getting involved in petty crime or sexual abuse outside of the home.”

Advocate

School performance

Participants reported that some children struggle at school as a result of witnessing DA. The emotional impact of witnessing DA affects CYP's attention and concentration. This impact on concentration and school performance was not only affected by witnessing DA but also worsened by the pressure perpetrators put on CYP's school performance.

“Very young children, they could actually have a short attention span as a result of what they've witnessed or experienced. That could actually, then, have a domino effect on their focus which then will have an effect on their performance and attainment levels.”

Advocate

“I've seen in the past real pressure from perpetrators, to the point of abuse, [on] how well they [CYP] need to do at school and then that makes them feel really anxious. Like I was supporting someone who was doing her GCSEs and she just could not handle the stress of it because the perpetrator at home was making her feel so bad about it all the time.”

Advocate

Some of the safe parents who took part in this study reported regressive behaviour in their children. Not only is CYP's performance at school impacted negatively, but also their school attendance. In fact, previous research has found that children experiencing separation anxiety could feign illness or be disruptive at school in the hope of being sent home. Moreover, the emotional impact of witnessing DA by CYP is often manifested in school absenteeism.²⁰

"I do a lot of work at home with the children anyway, so I could see that they weren't really... where I could see that my eldest was really struggling with stuff that she hadn't struggled with before. And my youngest, she literally had a mental block. One day she could read a book, and the next day she couldn't even recognise a letter. It literally just happened really, really quickly."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"We also speak to teachers and other school mentors or a counsellor, to find out if it impacted their behaviour at school, their attendance. And, in lots of cases, their attendance dropped or they were feeling sore tummies, they say they have a sore stomach, so they don't go to school, but it's just because they're anxious."

Advocate

Although some children experiencing domestic violence will exhibit difficulties with their schoolwork, the education of others will not be adversely affected.²¹ As a result, the school will not be aware of DA at home. Indeed, some of the safe parents reported no impact on their children's performance at school. It is therefore essential to take into account the range of responses to DA among CYP in order to meet their varied needs.

"At school she [child] still did really well. There were no issues with focusing."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

"It actually had no impact on her at school. It was just literally at home... But it had no impact on her at school whatsoever. Nobody at school knew until, obviously, social services went to them, and I did. That's how they [school] knew about the situation."

Safe parent of 9-year-old



Barriers to CYP's engagement with support

While there is a large range of existing literature concerning barriers to engagement with support services faced by adult survivors of DA, much less is known about the barriers to CYP's engagement with support services. Previous research has found several barriers to CYP accessing and engaging with support that are linked either to the parents or to CYP themselves. Reif and colleagues identified various client-related barriers. For example, clients reported mistrust towards services. Also, researchers reported that there is a lack of recognition by safe parents of the effects of DA exposure on children. Some of the participants who took part in the research by Reif and colleagues highlighted the extent of distress and trauma that victims of DA were facing, which made any focus on children's needs very difficult. Their immediate survival was a priority and children's participation in services was secondary.²² Other researchers reported that some victims believed that their children did not witness the violence or were unaware of it occurring, or that they were too young to be affected by it.²³

Participants who took part in this research reported four common barriers to CYP's engagement with support services:



Lack of knowledge about CYP DA services



Lack of insight into the impact on CYP of witnessing DA



Concerns over privacy and external judgement



Timing and method of providing support by support services.

Lack of knowledge about CYP DA services

Neither the safe parents nor the young person who took part in this research knew about any support or services for CYP affected by DA, or how to access them. Safe parents stated that, if they had known about the DA support services for CYP earlier, they would have accessed them earlier. Hence, it is crucial that statutory agencies and DA services for adults refer or offer these services for CYP, as otherwise many people remain unaware of their existence and will not access them.

"I didn't know what to do to help the girls. So, it has been incredible. I'm lucky because, I suppose, that's it: if you don't know it's there, you don't know how to access it."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"This is something to work on... to like make people aware of the support for children, maybe more information about the support for the public through schools, through even doctor, GP... Before I didn't know much, I was all alone – myself I would be grateful to have them [Advocates] at that time [during trial] as well... No one told me about this [CYP DA service] before."

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

"No, I wouldn't have done [look for help herself]. I was trying to just be calm, and kind, and loving, and trying to keep everyone happy, I guess. I didn't know where to go for support. It's only when it got so bad that the police talked to me for quite a long time about what was available, and asked if it was okay to refer, so I said, 'Yes,' I needed any help we could get."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

It is vital that CYP DA services undertake activities to raise awareness of the support available among professionals who are likely to come into contact with victims/survivors of DA in order to facilitate referrals of their children, especially where these services are new.

Having a holistic approach to supporting families affected by DA, including services for CYP, helps in raising awareness and promoting accessibility to the services. Hence, existing collaboration between VS IDVAs and the CYP DA service is very important and is valued by the safe parents who took part in this research. A referral from a VS IDVA to the CYP DA service enabled safe parents to access much needed support for their children.

"It was via my Victim Support worker who said – because at the time when I was going through everything and she did ask me how my daughter was, and whether being referred to this, which they do for children, would help... If it wasn't for Victim Support I wouldn't have known how to access this, or that there was anything like this available, yes. I know when I contacted the police, for example, they put me in contact with Victim Support. I think maybe the police were also able to – they didn't mention anything about for the child needing social services that could have helped."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

It is recommended that CYP DA services work collaboratively with adult DA services that are available in the area for the victims/survivors of DA in order to provide holistic support to the safe parent and their children.

Concerns over privacy and external judgement

The second barrier to CYP's engagement with support services reported by participants was lack of trust and the stigma attached to having an Advocate or being supported by a DA-related service. Some of the CYP were afraid to tell anyone about DA at home as they were worried about the consequences if either the perpetrator became aware or social services got involved. Indeed, previous research has found that some children may be reluctant about sharing their experiences due to the fear that social services might intervene, for example by removing them from their family, as well as because of ambivalent feelings towards the perpetrator.²⁴ In addition, some of the CYP within this study were unsure about who they could trust to share information about their situation at home.

"I guess I was just kind of scared of what would happen if people found out, kind of thing. Because I'm very – I'm not a quiet person. Well, home things, I keep to myself because I have trust issues, I guess, so I just feel like, is this the right person to trust? And then I just wouldn't tell anyone."

Young person, 11 years old

"I think my youngest daughter was worried, if she talked to people, it would get her in trouble, especially with daddy [perpetrator]."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

Trust issues and the stigma attached to having an Advocate can also be obstacles to engagement with support services, particularly for teenagers. They worry about what their peers and other people will say and think about them if they know they are accessing these services.

"Sometimes it takes CYP who have been in this sort of situation a little while to trust people. Sometimes they don't want to access the service. I mean, little kids are fine. But teenagers sometimes, they're not ready to because they've grown up in such difficult circumstances so in some ways, they don't really want to talk. It's something so personal to them."

Advocate

"I feel like, with the older ones, that's more of a thing, where it's like a stigma sometimes, of having to have a worker and stuff... And that can be quite difficult, when the young person doesn't feel like they need it, or doesn't feel like they're able to access it, because of peer pressure or concerns about what other people will say and stuff. It just feels like there's quite a negative stigma, or they feel that there is a negative stigma around accessing these sorts of services. The younger clients, I don't really see that with as much, they're normally quite happy to do the support and stuff."

Advocate

Services supporting CYP who witness DA therefore need to emphasise the confidential nature of the service and be clear about their relationship to social services in their promotional materials. It is also recommended that services are mindful of their use of branding and Advocates make efforts to ensure that those around the CYP are unlikely to be made aware that the CYP is being supported by a DA-related service, particularly where support is provided in school.

Lack of insight into the impact on CYP of witnessing DA

Some safe parents were not sure if support for their children was needed. Safe parents and CYP start normalising their situation and thinking that it is not bad enough to look for support. As mentioned earlier, previous research has found that some safe parents believe that their children did not witness the violence or that they were too young to be affected by it.²⁵ Some safe parents who took part in this research did not realise the full impact that witnessing DA at home had on their children.

"I mean I feel bad there because I think I was in a little bit in denial that it was affecting him [child] so much really. I think it took me time to notice, which is terrible."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

"One of the main challenges is sometimes when the CYP doesn't realise that it's abuse and they've normalised it. I find that's one of the main challenges. Also when the safe parent doesn't realise that it's abuse, and they've normalised it as well."

Advocate

Services for safe parents who have experienced DA have an important role to play in facilitating access for children of these victims/survivors to the CYP DA services that are available. It is important not only that DA services for adults work collaboratively with CYP DA services to raise awareness of them, but also that they work with the victims/survivors to understand abuse and to encourage their children in a supportive way to access the available support.

In some instances, the perpetrator makes it difficult for the CYP to take part in a support service, especially when they share custodial rights with the safe parent.

"We initially had been referred for the [service name] programme before, and then he [perpetrator] wouldn't give consent for that... he [perpetrator] did eventually because it came up at court."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

Timing and method of providing support by support services

The fourth and final barrier to accessing support services by CYP that was reported by participants was timing and the method of providing support to CYP. For some participants who took part in this study, finding the right method to support the young person took time. Once the right method of contact and support is offered, considering the CYP's age and circumstances, they are more likely to engage with that support.

"I started contacting five-year-olds on the phone. Within the next four weeks the mum said, 'No, I don't want the support.' I gave her two weeks to think about it. Then she came back saying, 'Actually, let's do the video'... Since then it's been going well. Older people [children], they're not interested in video. That's fine, though... It's understandable."

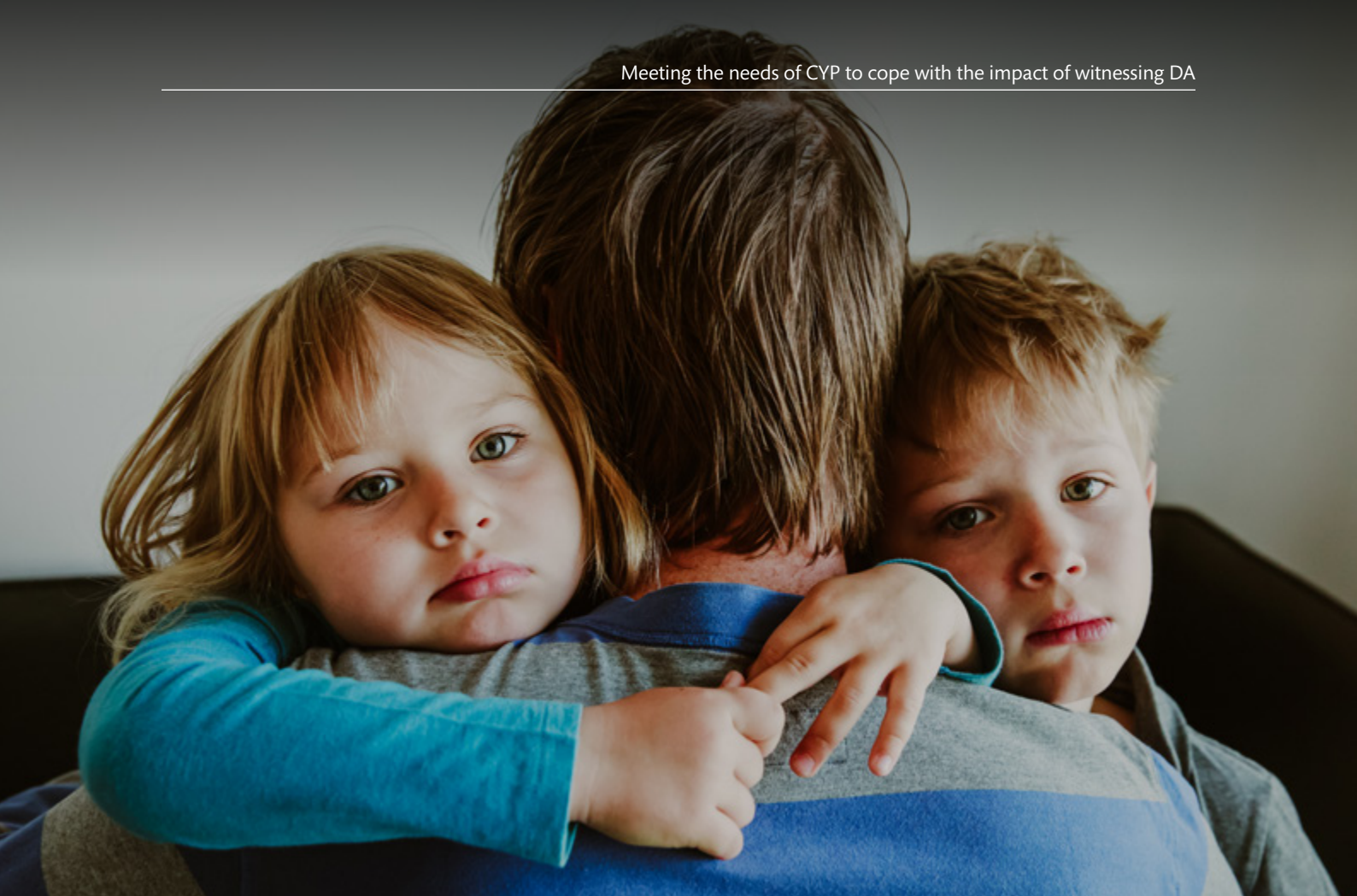
Advocate

It is also very important to offer the service at the right time. The Advocates told us that some older CYP found it more difficult to engage with the support compared with the younger children.

"I think some 12-year-olds are very open to the support, where other 12-year-olds or 13, they feel they're a teenager and they're more introverted. So it depends on the child. But from what I've experienced, the young children are quite open, as long as you are making it engaging and fun, we do a lot of drawing, not too much talking, it's really to keep it fun and engaging."

Advocate

CYP DA services need to offer a range of methods of providing support and be flexible in their approach.



Meeting the needs of CYP to cope with the impact of witnessing DA

All participants acknowledged the importance of support services for CYP in providing vital help to CYP who witness DA. Participants were not aware of any services that provided support and that focused on CYP DA witnesses. Hence, in their opinion, a VS CYP DA service is very much needed to fill this vital gap.

“Ours is the only service which is ultimately focusing on children who have witnessed it [DA]... often those children and young people who have witnessed it have often been overlooked. The focus has been on the safe parent, and that the wellbeing and the emotional impact and the trauma that the young person might have gone through in witnessing it isn't really recognised or responded to.”

Advocate

“Children are more vulnerable and suffer in silence more. If they get more support and help there will be more chance for them for [a] better future, for [a] better life.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

Safe parents who took part in this research told us that the support given to their children has made a difference and has been beneficial not only for their children but also for themselves. Positive changes in CYP could be seen shortly after they started receiving

support. Participants who we interviewed told us that support minimised some of the impact that witnessing DA has had on CYP.

“I’ve been really happy with the support I’ve had, or my daughter has had. To be honest, I don’t know what I would have done without it really. It has made a big difference. I’m just grateful that I had that referral and I was able to have that support.”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

“I just think that it [support] has honestly helped us so much. It has been hugely beneficial to us. And, really, honestly, I dread to think where we would be without your [VS CYP DA] services. So, we are very thankful.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds










“I’ve seen some real changes in some of the young people that I’ve been supporting since February, and, you know, February wasn’t actually that long ago, but their confidence has grown massively. So, I feel like, yes, it is a really good service.”

Advocate

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises children as direct victims of DA. This welcome recognition aims to improve the provision of services to CYP who witness DA. Currently, the commissioning and availability of CYP DA services vary across England and Wales. Previous research suggests that CYP DA services are not available in one-third of local authority areas.²⁶ Just as there is a need to understand the provision of adult DA services compared with demand, VS recommends that the Domestic Abuse Commissioner undertakes a mapping exercise of CYP DA services. In response to the change in status of CYP affected by DA, VS recommends that commissioners of victim services fill current gaps in the provision of specialist services for CYP affected by DA across England and Wales.

As well as increasing understanding of the impact of witnessing DA in a household on CYP and barriers to CYP’s engagement with support services, this research also explored the needs of CYP and the support that will enable them to cope with the effect of witnessing DA. A look at CYP’s needs provides overall learning for implementing best practice.

Participants who took part in this research reported nine common needs:

 <p>Profound emotional support</p>	 <p>Extensive referral pathways</p>
 <p>Tailored and flexible support</p>	 <p>A diverse team</p>
 <p>An understanding of emotions and what constitutes DA</p>	 <p>Support groups for CYP</p>
 <p>Collaboration between services and agencies</p>	 <p>Access to anonymised support.</p>
 <p>Follow-up contact</p>	

These needs are explored further in this chapter.

Profound emotional support

As mentioned earlier, witnessing DA in the household can have a severe impact on different aspects of CYP's lives, including having a profound emotional impact. Participants who took part in this research reported a need for profound emotional support. All participants needed emotional support and a trustworthy person to talk to.

“Mainly at the time I needed somebody to talk to the children, like a therapy, so they will feel like they are not alone, they’ve been supported, they haven’t been forgotten. I wanted someone to talk to my children and bring out all the things like some anger, some stuff they can’t talk to me or tell me about it, so if they can’t talk to me they could talk to somebody else.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

Participants expressed a need to have an independent person to talk to their children so that CYP can speak openly about the impact of witnessing DA and their feelings. Some of the safe parents were unable to help or support their children as they themselves were often in need of support, or their children did not want to talk to them. For this reason, support from an independent person was particularly important.

“I hoped it would give them [children] someone to talk to and be able to trust who wasn’t involved in the situation, who they could be open with and would help them to understand that what was happening isn’t right, and that it will get better. Just to see that there are adults there that they can trust and that are going to help us get out of that situation.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“She [child] doesn’t like to speak to me about certain things. I couldn’t have helped her fully to make her understand how she was feeling, because she wouldn’t like to speak to me, because she thinks that, you know, her job as a daughter is to protect me as a mother.”

Safe parent of 9-year-old

“Emotionally, I was going through a lot, so I was in a bad place with her [child] acting like that, I was already dealing with my own stress. I was very anxious. I became quite angry because I had a lot of resentment and anger towards my partner. With her behaving like that I didn’t have as much patience for her. She would argue with me. I was arguing with her, so I knew that I needed her to have someone where she could express how she was feeling too.”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

Participants expressed the need to build a strong and trusting relationship between the Advocate and the CYP. As CYP often experience difficulty with trusting other people, it is very important to give them time and space to build a strong and trusting relationship with the Advocate. It is also important for CYP to have help in understanding and recognising their emotions and in learning how to manage them in a healthy way.

"It takes quite a long time to build that sense of trust, which is very important, I think, when supporting children who have experienced inconsistencies of parenting and safe environments, they need to feel safe in the environment with us, as the Advocate."

Advocate

"I said [to children], 'You have got a new friend calling you every week.' And they have taken it as though it is a friendship. So, it has been really nice that they each have their own friend."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"I think I just wanted help just in terms for him [child] to be able to express anything he was feeling because he wasn't talking to me or anybody at that point about things."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

"I just wanted to get them to learn how to cope with their kind of anxiety and with their anger... I didn't want there to be any kind of long-term effects."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"I was hoping that, you know, they [Advocates] would help her [child] to understand her emotions, and let her understand that it doesn't just happen to her, it happens to other people as well, and showing her how to deal with the situation, to be honest."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

Building a strong and trusting relationship with the Advocate helped CYP open up and talk about their feelings, and participants reported positive changes in several aspects of CYP's lives.

"Each girl got their own Advocate and it was incredible. It made such a difference. I think for them it makes them feel like they're... Maybe it's more special that way. That person is just for them."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"It [service] has helped them [children], obviously, emotionally. It has helped them learn to manage and deal with their emotions effectively. It has helped them with their sleep patterns. It has helped them with feeling safe. It has helped them to gain confidence, because they both lost a lot of confidence in themselves."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

Although some CYP were nervous about having support at first, gradually, after building a strong relationship with the Advocate, they started being open to receiving support. Having an independent person to talk to the CYP – and, if needed, on their behalf – was very much valued by everyone. After building a strong relationship with their Advocates, CYP could trust them and could also start building up trust in other adults.

"I was quite nervous at first because, like I said, I had trust issues so I didn't feel like I could trust her [Advocate] all the way, but then when I became more comfortable, then like it was easier for me to speak."

Young person, 11 years old

"I think that it was just knowing that there are adults that you can go and trust, and talk to, and that are on their [children's] side and will speak for them. They have been a voice for them, and I think that's what they needed, as children. They needed someone to speak up on their behalf."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"Having that person who was able to give her [child] one-to-one time, to do sessions, to talk about her feelings and to build a relationship where she got to the point where she was actually comfortable enough to tell them if anything happened and how her week was, how her weekend was. She grew comfortable to the point where she explained when she was feeling upset and angry, so that helped."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

CYP started being more confident and were able to open up to other people and talk about the situation and how they felt.

"I think that the support I got was very good and helpful... My trust issues have gone down a bit, like I can trust people more, a tiny bit more."

Young person, 11 years old

"They [service] have done a great job. Well, [Advocate's name] has done a great job with her [child]. She is more confident, and she can speak about the situation without feeling, you know, embarrassed or have to cry about the situation and feel hurt. [Advocate's name] has done a tremendous job with her."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

"I can see the difference now in [the] children. They are more confident now, and recognise now what is anger, and how they feel. It [support] was really therapeutic and supportive... I can see a big difference. To be honest, this [CYP DA support] is the best thing that ever happened to them [children]. This is the best support for them. They [Advocates] were doing everything so professionally."

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

Additionally, all safe parents reported having better relationships with their children. The children are now able to sit with the safe parents and talk about their emotions and what is bothering them. In their opinion, the bond between the safe parents and their children improved as a result of getting support.

"She [child] wouldn't talk about how she really felt. Now she'll sit with me, and we'll talk, and she'll be open. She'll tell me about her dreams, she'll tell me about what she's worried about, and we'll think about what we might be able to do about it. Over the space of, probably, three – no, four – months of working with her Advocate, to have had that effect is incredible because she feels like she can actually voice things now."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"I feel actually my relationship with him [child] has really improved. I feel he is suddenly telling me things a bit more... He is suddenly being a little bit more open and he is a lot happier. He is not as, as I say, he was quite sullen and withdrawn. He just seems a little bit more open, which is lovely."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

"I think it is beneficial to both the safe parent and the child, who has witnessed or experienced the abuse. I think, in many cases, we've seen the bond between the safe parent and the child improve, and the trust improve between the parent and child."

Advocate

CYP felt happier and less anxious. They stopped wetting beds and started to interact more with others. CYP were also less anxious about new adventures such as starting a new school. As a result of Advocates' encouragement and reassurance, CYP felt excited at the prospect of meeting new people and the possibilities of making new friendships.

"The bed wetting has stopped actually. He [child] is not wetting the bed either which has been a real big thing. So that is really positive."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

"Before [Advocate's name] came along, she [child] was more timid. She was shy. She didn't want to interact with you. She didn't really want to be around you too much. She didn't want to open up and say exactly how she is feeling. She would just literally get angry. Then [Advocate's name] came along, and now she is more happy. She is willing to be around you. She wants to talk to you, and she expresses how she feels. She talks about it. She is just happier."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

"It [service] has helped [children] with their friendships. They are both starting school tomorrow in a brand new school, in a brand new place, and rather than them being quite anxious and scared about it, they are incredibly excited. And, I think, in part, that that is down to the therapist [Advocate] just encouraging them and exciting them about starting a new life, and making new friends, and things like that. And I think without having them there, I personally don't think, with what I am going through, I would have been able to encourage them to that level. It [support] has been incredibly beneficial to us as a family."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

Being caring and having a caring attitude also made a positive difference. Safe parents felt that the Advocates really wanted to help their children and went the extra mile to do so.

"They [Advocates] come across like they genuinely care, which means so much. Yes, I think everyone genuinely wants to help, don't they? They genuinely want to make a difference, and you can see that. They're not just doing a job."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

CYP DA services should provide emotional support and facilitate the development of a caring and secure relationship with the Advocate to help the CYP cope with the impact of DA. Advocates should provide independent support and show that they really care, listen and are trustworthy.

Tailored and flexible support

Participants who took part in this study reported a need for support that is flexible and tailored to their individual needs. CYP can be impacted and react differently to witnessing DA, even within the same household, and, as a result, they may have different needs. Hence, the support should be tailored to their individual needs. It is also important to accommodate any changes in the situation at home or in the CYP's life.

“Over the course of the last few months, I'd say each week it [support] changes subtly as each week is changing in our lives, really. Yes, they've [Advocates] been incredible and I'm lucky that they are keeping some support going at the moment, because we're still in quite a bad place. It [support] is continuing at the moment, yes. I think the sessions they've done so far have been really tailored to what has happened in our lives.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“I would say they [Advocates] are very flexible. You know, if the children wake up and aren't in the greatest of moods, they are really flexible.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“No two children will have the same action plan. And we focus on very different concepts. So some children are really struggling with their friendships, so they're maybe being bullied or they don't have friends, so that would be a very big focus. Where other children are battling with anxiety at night-time, so then that will be a focus. So it's very targeted individually.”

Advocate

“She [Advocate] plays warm-up games with him [child] and then each week they look at a topic. I contacted her a while ago because he really said, 'I hate myself, I'm no good. I'm fat,' so she did some sessions around love and caring for ourselves and loving ourselves, it was really good.”

Safe parent of 7-year-old

Children in different age groups have different needs; therefore, in order to address a range of needs, it is vital for support services to be age-appropriate.

“I think what he [child] is getting is wonderful because it fits very well for his age. It's not too heavy but it certainly explores things which I think has been fantastic.”

Safe parent of 7-year-old

“We've got different packs of worksheets within Victim Support that are tailored to age groups... So, it would be age-appropriate.”

Advocate

If the need arises, support services should offer tailored support to CYP who have to attend court proceedings and give evidence. One safe parent told us that support given by Advocates during the court proceedings was very beneficial for their children. The Advocates went to court with the children; they not only supported them emotionally

by encouraging them and comforting them, but also gave advice on how to handle themselves at court and give evidence. This support was beneficial not only for the children but also for their safe parent.

“We had a court case and the children had to go to the court but they obviously were supported by Victim Support. The Advocates from VS went to court [with the children], it was great. They [Advocates] were very very good, yes. They told them they are not alone in there, gave them advice, like you are doing well, they supported them in the way that made them feel okay with the fact that they are in court. It was a positive. Million per cent it helped the children that the Advocates were there, definitely. Because we were lonely and it [going to court] was a big thing and we could not do it alone. It [support at court] was beneficial not just for them [children] but for me as well.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

“There’s a very effective and successful model in place to support children who actually do need to go to court for whatever reason... We have videos and other tools in place, we would actually share that with the young person so they become familiar with the criminal justice process. It does depend entirely on the age.”

Advocate

Participants who took part in this study also told us that they would like flexible support services and would like to be asked by services what method of support they would prefer.

“I think they [support services] should give the kids an option of not bombarding them with seeing them face to face, because there are a lot of kids out there that probably wouldn’t like to speak to somebody face to face. They could at least give them the option to see if they want to do face to face, or have a conversation over the phone. I think that would be perfect.”

Safe parent of 9-year-old

“It’s very dependent on that individual. Some people really work well with face-to-face contact and other people just like having that voice on the other end of the phone. There’s no, kind of, having to feel nervous about seeing someone in the flesh and having to discuss things with them.”

Advocate

Our findings suggest that CYP of different ages have different preferences for support provision. Older children preferred phone support whereas, for younger children, video chat or face-to-face support was preferable. We were told by participants who took part in this study that older CYP preferred phone support when offered a choice between video and phone support. This method of providing support perhaps makes it more anonymous and easier for some young people to open up and engage with the service.

“They’d [older CYP] rather just be on the phone. That’s what I found so far anyway. Most of my clients are under 12. But the few that I have that are over 12 have not wanted to do video. They wanted to do just phone calls... not having to see me probably makes them feel a bit easier.”

Advocate

Additionally, participants said that the location for support needed to be flexible. Support should be offered in locations as required by the young person. Our research showed that some safe parents and CYP were reluctant to receive support at school; the children were reluctant to disclose details of their home situation at school, and parents were worried about their children missing out on education if the sessions took place during school time. Some participants were worried about CYP being embarrassed by the situation and about the reaction of the CYP's peers. As everyone's needs and circumstances are different, there need to be options for where the sessions take place.

"I think certain things should be kept outside of school grounds. I mean, if it has to be the case where they [Advocates] have to speak to the school that's okay, but I think going into actual school to speak [provide support] to the kids, I don't really like the idea of it... Them [Advocates] having access to go to the school is wrong. It's just not appropriate to me, to be honest... I think they should figure out some sort of different way to communicate with the kids."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

"I wasn't that keen on the idea [Advocate going to school]... I don't think she [child] would appreciate that if it [support session] was during, for example, her break time because that is the time she gets to play with her friends. It may be better if it is during class time, then obviously that is eating time out of her school time, so I don't know."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

"I'm not concerned about him [child] missing 45 minutes to an hour of a lesson once a week. Like I say I have seen it work very successfully... I guess that would be my own concern is if he became bothered about other children knowing and things. Then it would be better to have it at home or [in] a different environment."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

Other safe parents were supportive of Advocates coming to school and were happy for their children to get support at school, especially if it wasn't during important lessons. They felt that school was a safe place for their children and having support sessions in a familiar place may help CYP to open up easily and, as a result, gain significant benefits from the support sessions.

"I think doing it [providing support] in school would be good because I think children feel safe there. So, I think that children being in an environment where they already feel quite safe and secure, they are more likely to open up and to gain more from the session. I think maybe if they were doing it somewhere else that they weren't so familiar with [it] wouldn't be as beneficial. So, I think doing it in a school is probably the perfect place, as long as it wasn't impacting upon an important class that they were going to miss."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

Some safe parents had concerns about support happening when they were present during the sessions. Safe parents felt that, if they were not present during the sessions, their children could discuss their worries openly without the fear of being heard by the safe

parent or by any other person who was at home at the time of the support session. In fact, regardless of the location of support provision, safe parents felt that they should not be present during sessions.

"I always make sure that when they [children] have a phone call [with Advocates] I leave the room, but maybe when they are outside of the house they would open up more."

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year olds

"I do wonder how beneficial it [support] would have been had I not been there, if they would have opened up more, and kind of talked more, and gained more from it, had I not had to be involved in it so much."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

Participants who took part in this research also expressed a need for the length of support provision to be flexible. Ideally, in their opinion, support should continue for as long as it is needed and until the situation at home has stabilised. Often, with DA cases, circumstances change rapidly and CYP may need additional support depending on their situation. Ongoing support was particularly important because of major events, such as an upcoming court case. While there is a large range of existing literature showing the importance of ongoing or additional emotional support for adult survivors of DA, especially during their engagement with the criminal justice system, to ensure that they are coping with the related stress and anxiety,²⁷ there is not much information, to our knowledge, about the ideal duration of support for CYP affected by DA. This should be explored further through future research.

"I mean I would just like it [support] to continue. I guess that is the only worry I have. I think what if they [Advocate] suddenly turn around and say, 'That's it, he [child] doesn't need it any more.'... Especially as we have got a final court order in place... so things have been calm but I guess perhaps I would continue [support] for at least another couple of months or so just to see that through because things often flair up after court orders. It will be like when he goes back to school, so probably another couple of months probably."

Safe parent of 7-year-old

In addition, safe parents said that they would like to be taught different techniques to support their children. These techniques can be used when an Advocate is unavailable to provide support, or when the support has finished.

"For one, my oldest daughter's Advocate went on leave for a couple of weeks, and she [Advocate] gave our social worker some work to do with my oldest daughter, but he didn't do it, because he didn't go and see her. So, I guess, maybe, if there's a period where that worker can't do it, and knowing that social services probably aren't going to pick it up on their behalf, maybe send them to the parents and send some ideas to the parent. Maybe the parent could do it. It's hard to say if it could have been a different Advocate, because the relationship is built with that one person."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“I think, for me, if I knew kind of some techniques to use... if there was some kind of techniques that I could access quite quickly to help me to engage with my children about their worries. I think that would help enormously.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“Something else that we do offer is indirect support. So, that’s something I did with a mum when it was really strict lockdown. I gave her activities to do each week and she did them herself with her children.”

Advocate

An understanding of emotions and what constitutes DA

Participants who took part in this study also reported a need to recognise what healthy relationships are as well as the different emotions CYP are going through. They also need to learn techniques for dealing with difficult emotions.

“I was hoping that they [children] would understand that the way they saw me being treated and the way they were treated is not normal – that is not how you should be treated, and that you have a choice in how you behave and how other people behave towards you. So, just to kind of show them that it is okay, you know, not to be treated like that. That is how it should be.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“Some of the sessions I’ve had with the young people, and I’ve asked them about what they think is a healthy relationship, some of the answers were quite shocking... Like you’d go through scenarios with them and little stories and stuff, and just say, ‘Do you think this is a good relationship?’ or, ‘Is this a healthy situation?’ You know, some of the answers were, like, clearly it wasn’t a healthy scenario or relationship when I was reading it out, and they would say, ‘Yes, that’s fine.’”

Advocate

The Advocates provide education and talk to CYP about what constitutes DA as well as about healthy and unhealthy relationships. They also explain to CYP how to identify different emotions they are going through and teach them techniques for dealing with their emotions. This, in turn, enables CYP to identify and speak about different emotions and why they are feeling the way they do. CYP also learn to manage their feelings better.

“We also do what is healthy relationship versus an unhealthy relationship. Or what it means to be a friend.”

Advocate

“She [Advocate] would give me things I could do, like when I was angry, like, so, like four, seven, eight breathing or just sitting down, or going on a walk.”

Young person, 11 years old

"It has been done in such a lovely way. Some of the sessions have been about it's okay to say, 'No,' and it's okay to say, 'No, I don't want to do that,' which for them is really... It's so important."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"The service, helped her [child] with explaining to her why she feels the way she feels, and exactly what is the meaning of the feelings and how she could overcome the situation, or what she can do if she starts to feel anxious about something, or she starts to feel nervous, or she feels threatened in any form or way by the person."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

"I've seen that she [child] is actually able to put into words how she is feeling. Where before, rather than saying she was getting angry or she would get upset, but now she actually explains. She'll say, 'I'm feeling angry. I'm feeling sad. I'm feeling frustrated,' and she is explaining her emotions."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

"They [children] have learned how to quite quickly identify how they are feeling, and why they are feeling that way, and how they can help themselves, or how they can let myself or another adult that they are with, how they can let them know how they are feeling and how to help them."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

Safe parents and the young person who took part in this research wanted to see more preventative actions taken in the form of early education at school as well. Participants expressed a need for CYP to be educated about DA and how to access support at school – during assembly, for example. In their opinion, reaching out to children in this way can educate not only CYP but their safe parents as well. This may encourage them to access support if needed.

"The support should be more focused on prevention, it would be less damaged kids, less damaged society, not after the issues, damage [has] happened. Once something is damaged the damage is there. Nothing will fix it, that's it."

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

"I think through schools, because at our school they do things, like they do a [charity name] assembly, so all the kids learn the [charity name] phone number and those messages like 'Pants are Private', things like that. It's all done in assembly at school. As parents, you get given some information that you can then talk to the children about... If there was an assembly that could be recorded and sent to schools. It could be sent out to parents, just to reach that person that might need access, because I know the school tend to release videos to parents of things that they think are relevant... that would be the best way to reach parents."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

VS believes that it is vital that CYP receive effective education about healthy relationships. All children should have the opportunity to receive high-quality, age-appropriate education on safety, appropriate relationships and crime.

A young person told us that they didn't know much about the impact of witnessing DA on CYP or about how to deal with different emotions they felt as a result of witnessing DA at home. Once educated about DA, this young person felt that they could have benefited from support and help earlier.

"I didn't know anything about that [DA] until recently, so I feel like we need to have those discussions more earlier. I think at the age of like seven or eight, so they [children] can understand it more."

Young person, 11 years old

Furthermore, a few participants felt that support should be provided by schools. They expressed a need to have a therapist within school who children could approach for help if and when needed. Indeed, some parents felt that it should be the school's duty to provide support to children who witness DA at home because children are familiar with the teachers at school and may disclose their situation to them and access support more quickly.

"I do wish that there was somebody kind of within the school. I think it would be great if every school had their own therapist that children could go and speak to. It must happen often in schools where a child is not reaching their potential because of something that might have happened at home."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"I think as a school it is their duty as well to make sure that the kids are okay, because I think a lot of kids are more likely to speak to a stranger, or somebody they know at school compared to somebody that they don't know. I think if they are full on about the situation and can speak to the kids on a level, then they will get as much information that they can for them to actually know what is actually going on at home."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

However, many safe parents reported that, even though they went to the school, explained the situation and asked for help, this help was not offered. Those who had received support from a school therapist found it very useful. They didn't have to worry about accessibility or missing an important lesson, as the school therapist knew their timetable. Parents as well as children felt supported once the school knew about the situation at home.

"I went to the children's head teacher... I asked principally to the teachers, to the head teacher, 'How can I help them? How can we try to support them if they want to speak about anything?' And, again, nothing was offered. So, thankfully, I found you [VS CYP DA service]. But if there was any concerns for a child, maybe if the teacher could discuss it with the parent to say, 'We could offer this,' I think that would make it a lot more accessible to people who can't get to a One Stop Shop for any reason."

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

"I had like – before [Advocate's name], I had a lady called [name], and she was at my school... I think I found it very useful, because I knew that was when I was coming [to school] and there was not going to be any problems with it, no [internet] connection problems... They know that perhaps you have a test or they know that it is an important lesson so they won't approach you, and then they won't say, 'Okay, let's have support now.'"

Young person, 11 years old

"They [school] knew from the beginning of the year. They knew what was happening in our lives and were being supportive. There is a learning mentor at our school, who got to know the girls quite well anyway. When lockdown first started, the deputy head asked me if I'd be happy to put the girls into school under the vulnerable category. She didn't want us to just be the four of us at our house, knowing the situation. She was very aware they need other people around them. So, luckily, even through lockdown, they still went to school for two short days. That was their release away from the house."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"To me, to be honest, I think [child's name's] school, you know, that school has been tremendous... The deputy head, before the school went on holiday, she used to call me every week to see how we were. I knew that there was somebody there to check on us to make sure that we were all okay. But it wasn't helpful a lot, to be honest."

Safe parent of 9-year-old

There needs to be a whole school approach to the safeguarding and wellbeing of CYP, as well as improvements to education around healthy relationships.

Collaboration between services and agencies

Collaboration between professionals is very important in order to address and meet CYP's needs. Indeed, UK government guidelines underline the importance of multi-agency working in child protection.²⁸ All participants who took part in this study reported the advantages of different agencies working together. They felt that by collaborating they could support families better. Indeed, safe parents felt that every agency involved in supporting their family knew about any changes and what was happening with their children because they were working together and communicating. This multi-agency work made a positive difference, according to participants.

"The way that they [Advocates] communicate with the different, I guess, authorities that are involved with us, it has just made such a difference because everybody knows what's going on and where the girls are in terms of what work has been done and what's planned for them. The way they've [Advocates] done it, the time they've spent doing it is just incredible. I feel very lucky, yes."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

This study has found that having a holistic approach and working in collaboration, not only with external services and agencies but also internally, enable professionals to find out if there are any changes in CYP's family circumstances and promptly assess and address any new needs. Safe parents found collaboration between their VS IDVA and their children's Advocates very beneficial. They appreciated that only one agency was involved with their family and they did not have to repeat everything, which was something that had happened to them several times before and can be traumatising. Working with external partners as well as with VS IDVAs was also perceived as beneficial. For example, Advocates worked closely with social services.

"It's really good practice to work closely with the referrer anyway, in order to work in the best interest of the CYP. Therefore, we would liaise very closely with the referrer really, which is an IDVA in this case, to see if there are any changes. It's always a case of identifying new needs and assessing and managing the risks and how we can work in the best interests of the CYP."

Advocate

"I know that, if needed, they [Advocate and VS IDVA] are in contact with each other. My caseworker would ask me how the sessions are going with my daughter, for example... with everything going on, there were so many different people [from different agencies] involved at one point. You are constantly repeating the same things over and over again, and everyone has got a different opinion or different advice, and it gets so confusing. It was good to have support from two separate people but from the same kind of organisation where you won't have to repeat everything."

Safe parent of 5-year-old

"They [Advocates] have been my absolute advocate at discussing things with social services, as well... Especially my oldest daughter's Advocate, she has really been in touch with social services a lot about what's happening, and feeding back things. That has been just incredible, just feeling like someone's speaking up for me."

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

"We work so closely with the social worker, so we'll have a call with the social worker, to discuss what is safe. The social worker is allowed... During lockdown, they are able to go to the house, to see the children, they do unannounced visits, to check what the situation is and what is safe to do... So they will guide what is safe and they will tell us. So the social worker will be physically seeing the child and reporting back to us."

Advocate

Advocates also worked very closely with the CYP's schools. This not only helps the school understand the impact that witnessing DA has on CYP, including on their school performance, but also provides a platform for teachers to engage in conversations with CYP about DA and educate them about DA.

“They [Advocates] helped a lot around school, when I was really down I couldn’t contact school, they made a phone call to school, made sure that school is helping [child’s name]. They were amazing, they were very very supportive, without them I would be really struggling.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds

“She [Advocate] has been sending things into school, as well, as I said – worksheets and ideas of things to do. I think my youngest daughter’s class teacher is also doing some of the work based on what Victim Support have been doing, because he did a session yesterday in class and all the children in the class had to draw ‘Where is your safe place?’ They were all drawing their safe place and talking about safety.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

It is vital that CYP DA services are resourced and supported to build strong relationships with adult DA services and schools to provide wrap-around support for the safe parent and children.

Follow-up contact

All participants who took part in this research project expressed a need for follow-up contact. As CYP’s needs can change over time due to changes in family circumstances, participants expressed a need to be contacted again by support services a few weeks after the service has finished.

Participants would appreciate CYP DA Advocates contacting them and their children a few weeks after support has finished to see how their child is doing and whether a safe parent needs any further advice or tips on how to support their child’s changing needs. Safe parents would also like their children to be reassured by the Advocates that they can contact CYP DA services and ask for help if they need further support at any point in the future.

“Maybe, also that you [CYP DA service] can pick up with them [children] at a later date, and just see how they are and what’s happening. I think that would be really nice. Hopefully, it would be to say, ‘Yes, everything’s great,’ but then, if something had happened, maybe there’s just that option that, even if it was six months down the line, you could still get in touch and pick up on something again. I think that would be really valuable because I know, instead of just saying, ‘Right, case closed, that’s it,’ because, with children, things are going to come out at different times, aren’t they? I guess when they start to think back on things, it might bring up new problems, so it would be quite nice to have a bit of, I guess, like a follow-up service.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“But make sure they [Advocates] let the kids know that if there is anything, you know, ‘I am only a phone call away. It might not be me that you speak to, but you can speak to somebody else on the team or something.’ Then they [CYP] know that even though they are gone and they probably feel a certain type of way, just one day they just feel like they are going through something and they can’t obviously speak to their parent, that they [Advocates] are always there for them.”

Safe parent of 9-year-old

Extensive referral pathways

Safe parents and Advocates who took part in this research reported a need for having extensive referral pathways that accept referrals from criminal justice agencies such as the police, as well as from other victim services such as IDVA services.

“I think all our referrals at the moment are going through an IDVA. That means it would have to go via the police, essentially, for us to support these young people. Maybe if we open our referral pathways to other charities, other women’s organisations, then we might have more clients. I don’t know how it would work, but maybe get schools involved. Social services is a good one, if social services can be one of our referral paths.”

Advocate

“From the minute, for example, when the police are involved, they automatically refer you for witness support and Victim Support. I think they should also [refer] for the children as well, at the minute they know there is a child in the house and they have been a part of something like this [DA], that they should also mention that [support services available to CYP].”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

Some safe parents stated that, if they had known about the support services for CYP who witness DA at home, they would have accessed them earlier. In addition, in order for safe parents and their children to engage with CYP DA support services, the referrer should explain what support is available. Expanding the remit of referrals by support services and accepting self-referrals and referrals from others, such as safe parents, schools and other establishments, give CYP a better chance of accessing much needed support. Indeed, it has previously been reported that in England in 2016/17, the highest number of referrals to children’s social care came from the police (27.5%), followed by schools (17.7%) and health services (14.4%). When school referrals are combined with education services referrals (2.6%), education accounted for 20.3% of referrals overall.²⁹ These potential additional referral routes could be used by the service to help CYP who witness DA get the support they need.

“If I would have known I could have contacted Victim Support and they would have helped, I guess that would be the biggest improvement because there must be a lot of families who don’t know that that support service is there. It’s if it could be... I guess you want to get involved before the police are involved on separate occasions. If you could intervene before that, it would be amazing.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

“All I knew was there was going to be, it would be like sessions just to talk to her [child]. I wasn’t sure how it was going to go, and how my daughter was going to take to that. It was only once I met [Advocate’s name] and we had the first session, and we spoke, then I kind of understood how the sessions were going to work, and how they do activities every week.”

Safe parent of 5-year-old

A diverse team

Advocates reported that having a diverse team may benefit some CYP. They felt that having a diverse team – with Advocates who speak different languages and are of different genders and ethnicities, for example – may help CYP engage with the support. Although it is unlikely to be possible to have Advocates who speak all languages, diversifying the workforce would have many benefits. Previous research has suggested that victims and survivors of crime should be supported by caseworkers from the same community or ethnic group. This is because they may have a better understanding and knowledge of the community in which the victim lives, and as a consequence they may be able to assess needs more effectively and offer more appropriate support to meet those needs.³⁰

“I think it would be nice if we could have more of an option in our team of different genders and different ethnicities. Because I think that sometimes parents or CYP would rather their child, or the child themselves, would rather see someone who is the same gender as them, the same ethnicity as them.”

Advocate

“I’ve got a little Spanish girl that I’m working with who is five going on six, and has fairly limited English. Now, actually, we’ve not really been working with an interpreter because I speak quite decent Spanish. So, in the end, me and mum decided that between her English and my Spanish, just not having the interpreter would just mean we could focus more on the young person, on the child, but it is challenging.”

Advocate

Support groups for CYP

Safe parents and Advocates all felt that there is a need for peer support groups for CYP. Previous studies have found that victims and survivors of different crime types expressed a need to have access to support groups so they can talk with people who went through similar experiences.³¹ This could be beneficial not only for the CYP but also for their safe parents, as peer support has been shown to help victims feel less isolated. They also feel relieved that other people have similar feelings, which they discover through talking to people in a similar situation.³² It has been found that peer support programmes can result in a range of positive outcomes for young people. To encourage CYP to take part in peer support groups, participants emphasised a need for flexibility. Previous research has found that CYP felt that there is a lack of space in the timetable to take part in peer support sessions during school time. Hence, there is a need for a range of options regarding where and when to provide peer support, including flexible times and locations other than school.³³

“I don’t know if it would be something that could happen, but if you could kind of get the children in touch with maybe other children who had been through something similar in the area. If there was kind of like a support group for mums to go to with their children. I mean, I think it would be amazing if I could find someone else who kind of knew what we had been through, and someone who could relate to us.”

Safe parent of 5- and 7-year-olds

“I think that ideally, it would be nice to have a mixture of one-to-one and group support. Yes, I think that would be, like, the ideal.”

Advocate

The Advocates thought that access to long-term support groups with an independent mentor would also be beneficial for CYP. By attending support groups, CYP can speak to others and understand that many young people are in a similar situation and that they are not alone. They can support each other in recovering from witnessing DA.

“I think maybe it would be something slightly more long term, or maybe some mentoring, or some group work I think would actually be quite useful for some young people. I feel like I’ve finished the support that I can do with them, and I feel like I can get them to a certain place, but sometimes I feel like they just need this last little extra something. And it’s not like a one-to-one or something, but I feel maybe some group work, where they can actually meet other young people, who have been through similar things... Just to understand that they’re not alone and there are plenty of other people in that situation... They just need that last little bit of support, but maybe not as intense as what we offer.”

Advocate

Access to anonymised support

Participants who took part in this research expressed a need for CYP to be given an option to access anonymised support. Previous research has found that some communities are reluctant to contact authorities to report DA or to seek help from support services.³⁴ Indeed, some participants believed that anonymised support could benefit and ease access to support for different communities.

“I think it’s really important that children have those call lines [anonymous] or whatever, yes, definitely. I think that would work very well for schoolchildren, I think it’s really positive. I know from my own experience, you just don’t want people to know you are who you are. To have that I think for the children would be good.”

Safe parent of 7-year-old

“Generally, especially in some communities, children would be afraid to talk, if it [support] was anonymised they may be not shy, they would talk... Maybe to have something like this [anonymised support] would be beneficial widely.”

Safe parent of 12- and 13-year-olds



Summary and conclusions

This research has looked into the impact of witnessing DA on CYP and at their support needs, including what help will enable them to cope with the effects of witnessing the abuse and recover as much as possible. It has also increased understanding of any barriers to CYP's engagement with support services. The findings have informed learnings for and recommendations to services for CYP affected by DA.

Our findings demonstrate the immense impact that witnessing DA has on many aspects of CYP's lives. Five shared impacts were found from the interviews with Advocates, safe parents and a young person who took part in this study:



Emotional and psychological wellbeing



Behavioural changes



Sense of safety and lack of trust



School performance.



Relationship with family and friends

As well as increasing understanding of the impact of witnessing DA in a household on CYP, this research also adds much needed knowledge and insight into barriers experienced by CYP in accessing support services. While there is a large range of existing literature concerning barriers to engagement with support services faced by adult survivors of DA, much less is known about the barriers for CYP who witness DA. Four common themes emerged:



Lack of knowledge about CYP DA services



Lack of insight into the impact on CYP of witnessing DA



Concerns over privacy and external judgement



Timing and method of providing support by support services.

This research also adds to an understanding of the service needs of CYP who witness DA. Not only is the literature on impacts and barriers very limited, but so is the literature on the needs, support and services that would help CYP who witness DA at home cope with and recover from it. Nine common needs were identified in this research:



Profound emotional support



Extensive referral pathways



Tailored and flexible support



A diverse team



An understanding of emotions and what constitutes DA



Support groups for CYP



Collaboration between services and agencies



Access to anonymised support.



Follow-up contact

To ensure that CYP support services are effective, it is vital that they are evidence-based. Hence, any additional evidence involving CYP voices and experiences is crucial. More research is needed that involves other organisations supporting survivors and victims of DA and that has an intersectional perspective. This research project gave CYP a platform for their voices to be heard and taken into consideration, so that they don't suffer in silence if they witness DA.

Following the findings and lessons learned from this project, we recommend that:

1. A mapping of CYP DA services should be undertaken to understand the provision of services compared with demand. This mapping should inform decisions made by commissioners about current provision for specialist services for CYP affected by DA across England and Wales.
2. In response to the change in status of CYP affected by DA, commissioners of victim services should fill current gaps in the provision of specialist services for CYP affected by DA across England and Wales.

3. Statutory agencies and DA services for adults should refer the safe parent to DA services for CYP if needed; otherwise, many safe parents are not aware of the existence of such services and their children will not be able to access them.
4. CYP DA services should undertake activities to raise awareness of the support available among professionals who are likely to come into contact with victims/survivors of DA in order to facilitate referrals of their children, especially where these services are new.
5. CYP DA support services should incorporate extensive referral pathways that accept referrals from criminal justice agencies such as the police, as well as from other victim services such as Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) services.
6. Services supporting CYP who witness DA should emphasise the confidential nature of the service and be clear about their relationship to social services in their promotional materials.
7. CYP DA services should be mindful of their use of branding and Advocates should make efforts to ensure that those around the CYP are unlikely to be made aware that the CYP are being supported by a DA-related service, particularly where support is provided in school.
8. CYP DA services should provide emotional support and facilitate the development of a caring and secure relationship with the Advocate to help the CYP cope with the impact of DA. Advocates should provide independent support and show that they really care, listen and are trustworthy.
9. CYP DA services should offer support that is flexible and tailored to individual needs.
10. CYP DA services should offer a range of support methods, including an option to access anonymised support and peer support groups. Support needs to be available across England and Wales and be flexible in its approach.
11. There should be a whole school approach to the safeguarding and wellbeing of CYP.
12. CYP should, as a matter of urgency, receive effective education about healthy relationships. All children should have the opportunity to receive high-quality, age-appropriate education on safety, appropriate relationships and crime.
13. CYP DA services should, as a matter of urgency, be resourced and supported to build strong relationships with adult DA services and with schools to provide wrap-around support for the safe parent and children. It is also recommended that CYP DA services work collaboratively with adult DA services that are available in the area for the victims/survivors of DA in order to provide holistic support to the safe parent and their children.
14. CYP DA services should be accessible to all CYP at any point in the future when they feel they need someone to talk to.
15. CYP DA services should have a diverse workforce with Advocates who speak different languages and are of different genders and ethnicities to reflect the community in which the service is delivered.

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“My youngest child, she would hide a lot, so she’d find safe places in the house and hide, and she’d try and make me safe places in the house to hide.”

Safe parent of 7- and 9-year-olds

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