

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Mothers and their Young Children and the Development and Evaluation of Groupwork with these Families

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(A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor in Educational Psychology, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities (2004))

Domestic Violence is a serious criminal, social and medical problem. It infringes human rights and causes far-reaching damage to people's lives and development. However, it is only within the last 15 years or so that there has been considerable and increasing public, policy and professional concern about domestic violence, its prevalence, the impact on victims and their families and, in particular the implications for children who have been exposed to domestic violence as part of their family life. Studies estimate 10% to 20% of children are at risk of exposure to domestic violence (Carlson 2000).

The effects of domestic violence on children can include physical injury, emotional difficulties, both aggressive and passive withdrawn behaviours; psychosomatic problems and cognitive / educational difficulties. Effects on babies and very young children appear very profound and can include effects on the developing brain, developmental regression; emotional distress; "failure to thrive" and inability to develop secure attachments. The effects of domestic violence on the women can include depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, physical ill-health, which in turn can affect the mother-child relationship and may undermine a mother's parenting ability.

In 2004, within Stockport Social Services, domestic violence was the most frequently cited reason for referral to the Referral and Assessment Service (which had responsibility for the assessment of all Children's Services incoming work). As Senior Educational Psychologist for Early Years I helped to facilitate and evaluate multi-agency Groups for Young Children and their Mothers who have experienced domestic violence.

The Young Children and Mothers Group described in this study aimed to provide:

- "Therapeutic" play experiences for the children
- A Parenting / Support Group for the mothers
- "Theraplay" (Jernberg and Booth 1998) activities for the mums and their children together

For this study, mothers' views on the effects of domestic violence on themselves and their young children were sought. The Groupwork programme and the practical issues around it were described and the impact of the Group and the benefits it had for the children and their mothers evaluated.

All the mothers interviewed for this study had experienced a wide range of severe violence and all reported many effects of the violence on them: depression, fear, sleeplessness and problems concentrating being the most commonly cited. The mothers all felt that their experiences of domestic violence had undermined their ability to parent their young children. The young children had also been affected by

the domestic violence – all exhibited some emotional difficulties – being fearful of new people and new situations, being frightened of the perpetrator of the violence, sleeping difficulties and being distressed, confused and sad being the effects most often reported. Half the children assessed for this research also exhibited developmental delays, particularly in the area of expressive language.

On a more positive note the study suggested that the Group was very much appreciated and had been useful both in terms of the benefits for the children, the support the mothers received and in enhancing the mother-child relationship. Implications for future practice were also considered.