

The Centre for Social Justice  
1 Westminster Palace Gardens  
Artillery Row  
London SW1P 1RL

Telephone 020 7340 9650  
Website [www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk](http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk)

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The logo for The Centre for Social Justice, featuring the text 'THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE' in white, uppercase letters on a dark red background.

**PRESS RELEASE FROM THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**  
**RELEASE TIME: IMMEDIATE**

## **‘Stop ignoring the 1 in 4 children who witness domestic abuse’, says CSJ**

*A narrow focus on female victims of domestic abuse risks sidelining the nearly 3 million children who will have been exposed to violence and cruelty in the home.*

A major new report calls for a fundamental overhaul of government policies to tackle the substantial harm to children’s wellbeing.

The report from the Centre for Social Justice highlights the scarring psychological impact of living with domestic abuse, which it says is just as significant as being physically abused.

A major failing in state-sanctioned measures to curb domestic abuse is the lack of priority given to the needs of children who suffer the trauma of living alongside domestic violence.

Their physical and mental well-being and chances of doing well at school suffer from an abusive upbringing.

In later life, they are also far more likely to become victims of domestic abuse or to become a perpetrator of such cruelty.

But present policies for tackling the problem tend to concentrate on the needs of the adult victims – usually women – for a place of safety and downplay the damage done to children.

To break the devastating cycle of abuse, the report urges the government to set out a cross-government family strategy which puts early intervention and support for families at the heart of an expanded domestic abuse remit.

The strategy should strive to incorporate an understanding of why and how negative effects emerge and lead to further cycles of abuse in later years.

“Children often develop anxiety, depression, aggression and even post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of living with domestic abuse.

Approximately two thirds (63 per cent) of child witnesses show more emotional or behavioural problems than the average child.

“Living with abuse also makes the rest of their lives much harder because of the way it affects their perceptions of themselves and other people. These shape their self worth, identity and ability to relate to others in childhood and adulthood, making it much for difficult to succeed at school and develop friendships.

“Although it is by no means inevitable, childhood exposure to domestic abuse is one of the most powerful predictors of becoming both a perpetrator and a victim of domestic abuse as an adult,” the report, *Beyond Violence: Breaking cycles of domestic abuse*, says.

The report also notes that:

- Children whose mothers experience domestic abuse in the child's first year of life have more difficult temperaments at age one;
- The mental development of children exposed to domestic abuse during the first two years is particularly affected; they have IQ scores that are, on average, 7.25 points lower than those who were not exposed;
- The psychological impact of living with domestic abuse is no smaller than the impact of being physically abused.

The CSJ report also calls for a new criminal offence of “coercive control” to be introduced to curb domestic abuse.

It says that coercive control, the use of mind games and controlling strategies (which may or may not include physical violence), is the most harmful and insidious form of domestic abuse.'

The report warns of a lack of funds directed towards child protection and early intervention initiatives, and a lack of awareness of the extent and nature of the harm caused to children living with domestic abuse.

Despite growing evidence of the harm done to children by abusive households, practical steps taken by social workers and other agencies often overlook the impact on children.

Child witnesses lack the vital support to help them overcome the wide range of difficulties that place them at risk of relationship problems and abuse in the future.

The report follows a YouGov/CSJ poll which found overwhelming public support for a new approach to domestic abuse, especially for the child victims.

Ninety per cent of people said that public money should be made available to provide children affected by domestic abuse with counselling or therapy, while a quarter said that helping young people to develop healthy relationships was the single most important measure to prevent domestic abuse.

Dr Elly Farmer, a Clinical Psychologist and a co-author of the report, said:

“The best way to help these children recover and remain free of domestic abuse is by helping their parents to forge better relationships with the children themselves, new partners, and if at all possible, each other.

“Living with domestic abuse is an incredibly frightening experience for children which communicates that violence is normal, acceptable and an effective way of expressing emotions or resolving conflict.

“Evidence suggests that it harms infants and preschool children the most, but the harmful effects are often only noticed during the teenage years.

“Without early intervention including support to build positive family relationships early in children’s lives, toxic cycles of abuse will keep repeating themselves.

“The evidence for each recommendation set out in the report indicates that their implementation would lead to a dramatic reduction in the damaging effects on children, while drawing substantial savings over the short and long term.”

The second co-author of the report, CSJ Chairman-in-Residence Dr Samantha Callan, concluded:

“The impact on children of being a witness of domestic abuse is underplayed even though they are more likely to fail at school, develop anti-social behaviour and going on to harm their own children.”

The report sets out a comprehensive, relationship-based understanding of domestic abuse which forms the basis of identifying the best programmes and approaches.

Christian Guy, Managing Director of the Centre for Social Justice said, “In order to break damaging cycles of domestic abuse we need to support the millions of child witnesses who live as silent and fearful victims caught in the crossfire.

“It is time for concerted cross party action to make them a priority. Too many who need our help are left damaged and devastated by an unchecked legacy of abuse.”

Key recommendations in the report include:

- Both central government and local authorities should fund and evaluate pilot programmes aimed at building restorative mother-child and father-child relationships following domestic abuse in the home, at the same time as providing counselling and therapy to children living with violence.
- All local authorities need to come together with statutory and voluntary agency partners to design and implement a system of integrated multi-agency working that proactively identifies at risk children and responds to them and their families with timely offers of help.
- Given that most victims and their children access support at the GP’s surgery or in hospital, more effective help for domestic abuse should be concentrated in health services.

## **ENDS**

For media inquiries, please contact Alistair Thompson on 07970 162225 or 0203 008 8145 or Romilly Dennys on 07786 221309 or 0203 0088149.

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think tank established in 2004 to put social justice at the heart of British politics. In 2007 the CSJ published its landmark report, *Breakthrough Britain*.

This publication, which set out 190 evidence-based policy recommendations to tackle poverty in Britain, transformed the social policy and political landscape and was awarded Publication of the Year by Prospect Magazine in 2008.

Since *Breakthrough Britain* the CSJ has published over 40 reports which have shaped government policy and influenced opposition parties.

These have included the seminal papers *Dying to Belong* and *Dynamic Benefits*, which has led the Coalition Government's welfare reforms.

Further to this, the CSJ manages an Alliance of over 250 of the most effective grass roots, poverty fighting organisations.