

Understanding Coercive Control and its Impacts on Children

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Control in Children's and
Mothers' Lives** (Oxford
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**COERCIVE
CONTROL**

**A puppet on his string -
The abuse doesn't stop
when she leaves**

Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives

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OXFORD

Today's talk draws on my new book

The first book ever published on children and coercive control based on interviews with children as well as mothers

Shows positive outcomes for mothers and children during the recovery process, where mothers and children were able to build new family lives based on reciprocal care and mutual respect

Shifts the focus to perpetrators and the harms they cause to children. It shows how it is their actions that are directly harming the child's world, their experience of life, and what they can and cannot do each day

This talk will cover...

1. Understanding coercive control
2. Impacts of coercive control on children and young people
3. Children and young people's experiences after parental separation
4. Writing reports in ways that avoid victim blaming

UNDERSTANDING COERCIVE CONTROL

The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

Coercive control involves situations where somebody subjects another person/s to **persistent, wide-ranging controlling behaviours** over a long period of time, controlling behaviours that go way beyond the reasonable expectations people have of each other in families/relationships, and **makes it clear that standing up for themselves will be punished**, i.e. 'do what I say at all times, or else...'.

Punishment may take many forms; it is not always violence, but it will be something the victim dreads, such as cruel verbal putdowns, hurting loved ones, or forcing unwanted forms of sexual activity on the victim.

By repeatedly punishing the victim for non-compliance, the perpetrator intends to **demoralise and terrorise the victim into a state of permanent obedience** (Stark, 2007).

Domestic abuse has been estimated to cost our economy **£66 billion** annually (Home Office, 2019). That estimate does **not** include impacts on children, as these have been considered too complex to account for.

The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

The perpetrator is motivated by their **deeply held and harmful drive to obtain control over the other people in their family** and to maintain that control indefinitely (Monckton Smith, 2020).

For perpetrators, this drive is so strong that tends to **dominate** their whole life — much of their time is spent pursuing the control they seek, and cultivating a positive public reputation that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will ever believe or rally around the victim/s, should the victim/s ask for help (Monk, 2017).

The **impacts** on the family will include fear, confusion, self-doubt/self-blame, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, trauma, PTSD, illness, the feeling of always ‘walking on eggshells’, trying to please the perpetrator, and not being able to exercise self-determination over key areas of their lives (Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Crossman et al, 2016).

There may also be attempts from victims to **fight back**, resist, speak the truth about what is happening, and protect themselves and the other victims in the family from further harm (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

Who are the perpetrators?

Research by Michael Johnson and colleagues (2014) in the US found **22% of women** had experienced coercive control from ex-husbands, and **5.4% of men** experienced coercive control from ex-wives.

Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales by Andy Myhill (2015) found that, out of a group of women and men who reported experiencing some kind of domestic abuse, **30% of women** and **6% of men** had experiences severe enough to be called 'coercive control'. (Their partners had repeatedly belittled them to the point of making them feel worthless and made them feel frightened by threatening to hurt them.)

97% of perpetrators convicted for controlling and coercive behaviour in England and Wales in the year ending December 2020 were male (Women's Aid, 2021).

Coercive control includes...

- **emotional** and **psychological** abuse and **manipulation**
- control of **time** and **movement** and the **micro-management** of everyday life
- **sexual coerciveness** and **rape**, **paranoia** about infidelity, intimate **image/video abuse** and **reproductive coercion**
- **economic abuse**, including interfering with the victim's/survivor's employment, preventing them from having money/assets, refusing to contribute to bills, and creating debt for which victims/survivors are liable
- **isolation** from sources of support, including family, friends and professionals
- **monitoring**, **harassment** and **stalking** (including via technology)
- **manipulating others** (including children) to upset, marginalise and disempower the victim/survivor
- using **legal** or **institutional** means to threaten, harm or discredit the victim/survivor
- **physical violence**, **physical abuse**, **intimidation**, and **threats** of violence against the victim/survivor, their loved ones (including **pets**) and their **property**



(Gutowski et al, 2022; Sharp-Jeffs, 2022; Spearman et al, 2022; Tarzia and Hegarty, 2022; Dragiewicz et al, 2021; Monk and Bowen, 2021; Tarzia, 2021; Monckton Smith, 2020; Macdonald et al, 2019; Tarzia et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Pitman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Miller et al, 2010; Stark, 2009; Stark, 2007.)

It's continual not episodic

Evan Stark's (2007) book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* argued that our responses to coercive control-based domestic violence were **failing** female victims because they **wrongly** see domestic violence as discreet incidents or episodes of violence, and 'virtually all domestic violence research and intervention is based on this model' (Stark, 2009, p. 293).

This **overlooks** that coercive control perpetrators are using many other abusive tactics besides physical violence – including emotional abuse, monitoring, isolation, stalking, and economic abuse – and **perpetrators are using these tactics continuously**.

Victims-survivors are therefore being **constantly abused**, even if there has not been an incident of physical violence for months (or ever).

Non-violent coercive control

Some coercive control perpetrators **use no violence at all**

As Stark and Hester (2019, p. 91) discuss, ‘fear, constraints on autonomy, belittlement, and other aspects of abuse can create entrapment without any incidents of violence’.

Nevala’s (2017) EU wide data (from the European Union’s FRA Violence Against Women Survey) found that 45% of women who reported experiencing high levels of control from their current partner were not being subjected to any violence from this partner.

Day and Bowen (2015) suggest that these perpetrators are actually the most **clever and skilful** abusers, because they have mastered more covert and hard-to-identify ways of abusing.

Coercive control is caused by the perpetrator

Perpetrators tend to be extremely **self-centred** and often have a highly inflated sense of **entitlement**.

They believe their needs come first and that their partner and children should make pleasing them their overwhelming priority (Bancroft, 2002).

Coercive control is not caused by a ‘toxic relationship’: It is caused by the perpetrator’s deeply held **belief systems, attitudes and expectations**, things that they held before the relationship began.

The perpetrator’s tendency to **coercively control doesn’t disappear when the relationship ends** — it remains within the perpetrator.

Put simply — **the problem is in the perpetrator**, not in the relationship (see Monckton Smith, 2020).

It is **perpetrators** who are costing the people more than **£66 billion** every year (Home Office, 2019).

Fights and arguments

The terms 'fighting' and 'arguing' are misleading and inaccurate when it comes to coercive control

With coercive control, anything that looks like a 'fight' or an 'argument' is actually about the perpetrator trying to impose coercive control on the victim while existing in a state of non-accountability themselves, and the victim resisting this (this is a reasonable and psychologically healthy thing for the victim to do) (Stark, 2007). Resistance may take the form of shouting, screaming or using violence defensively/to fight back. This doesn't mean they aren't a real victim – if they are experiencing coercive control then they are a real victim.

Perpetrators may seem 'angry' but this isn't because they have a problem with anger, it's because they are enraged that the victim is resisting their control.

The abuse is done with a purpose – control: perpetrators often use abusive behaviours (shouting, put-downs, threats, violence) to punish the victim for resisting their control. They use abuse to manipulate, belittle and frighten their victim into greater submission in future (Stark, 2007).

7 myths of coercive control

Myth 1 – ‘The perpetrator is out of control’. **Reality** – if perpetrators show an ability to control themselves in some parts of their life (e.g. at work) then they are able to control themselves

Myth 2 – ‘It’s because of drink/drug use’. **Reality** – if they are ever abusive while sober (including economic abuse) then drink/drugs is not the root cause. Perpetrators can use drink/drugs as a great excuse to behave badly without being held fully accountable for their actions

Myth 3 – ‘Perpetrators are mentally ill’. **Reality** – research suggests that perpetrators do not have higher levels of mental illness than the general population

7 myths of coercive control

Myth 4 – ‘The perpetrator has anger issues’. **Reality** – coercive control is not about anger, it’s about entitlement and the belief that abusing someone is justifiable.

Myth 5 – ‘Leaving ends the abuse’. **Reality** – many perpetrators continue their abuse for years post-separation, particularly via child contact, and 75% of murders happen within a year of the victim/surviving leaving. The period of leaving and the months afterward is the most dangerous time.

Myth 6 – ‘Perpetrators can be reformed by a loving partner’. **Reality** – what perpetrators need if they are to change is to be held accountable for their actions by people in their lives and by social institutions and to be robustly challenged and supported to change their views about abuse and stop abusing.

7 myths of coercive control

Myth 7 – If a victim/survivor fights back or has less than perfect behaviour herself, or is intelligent, seems confident, or is from an affluent background, then she can't be a real victim.

Reality – victims come from all walks of life and are affected in different ways.

- Some victims fight back and some don't, depending on the context.
- Some maintain employment and seem confident and successful.
- Some turn to alcohol, medication or drugs to try to cope with the perpetrator's abuse.
- Many become mentally unwell *because of* the perpetrator's abuse. Their mental health is a *symptom* of the abuse.
- Some are manipulated by the perpetrator into thinking it's their fault, so will tell friends, family and professionals that they are to blame, or that the relationship problems are mutual.

They are all real victims.

DARVO

When a victim-survivor attempts to break free, raises concerns about the perpetrator's abuse and seeks safety for themselves and their children, perpetrators typically respond by **justifying**, **minimising**, or outright **denying** their abusive behaviour, and by attempting to turn the blame on the victim by making **counter accusations** against the victim (Harsey and Freyd, 2020).

Common counter accusations from perpetrators in these circumstances include that the victim has caused the children to dislike the perpetrator and has 'alienated' the children from the perpetrator, that the victim is 'crazy', or that the victim is the violent and abusive one (Meier et al, 2019; Monk, 2017).

This tactic is known as **DARVO**: **D**eny the abuse, **A**ttack the credibility and character of the victim, **R**everse the narrative about who is the **V**ictim and **O**ffender, and about who is the abusive parent and who is the safe parent for the children (Harsey and Freyd, 2020).

Assessing claims of 'change' in abusers

Perpetrators often claim to be willing to change

Bancroft (2002) provides an excellent checklist for assessing whether 'change' in controlling domestic abuse perpetrators is real, or just part of their manipulation

See appendix D of:

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2018/december/coercive-control-impacts-on-children-and-young-people-in-the-family-environment-literature-review-2018/>

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Perpetrators harm children

Research evidence from multiple countries highlights that male coercive control/domestic abuse perpetrators are usually harmful fathers or father-figures.

(e.g. Thompson-Walsh et al, 2021; Haselschwerdt et al, 2020; Katz et al, 2020; Humphreys et al, 2019; Mohaupt et al, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2019; Heward-Belle, 2016; Øverlien, 2013; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011)

Perpetrators harm children

Perpetrators have substantially elevated risks of physically, psychologically and sexually abusing and neglecting the children in their care (Heward-Belle, 2016; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011).

Perpetrators may also stalk, threaten and terrorise their children as part of their abuse of ex-partners (Nikupeteri et al, 2021; Katz et al, 2020; Thiara and Gill, 2012).

Perpetrators harm children

Straus (1990, cited in Bancroft et al, 2012, p.55) in a large-scale study involving over 6,000 people, found that half (49%) of DV perpetrating fathers frequently physically assaulted their children, compared to 7% of fathers who were not DV perpetrators.

20% of DV perpetrating fathers require the children to watch them as they abuse the child's mother (Mbilinyi et al, 2007, cited in Bancroft et al, 2012, p.58).

Perpetrators harm children

There is also a major overlap between fathers who perpetrate DV and those who sexually abuse their children.

Bancroft et al (2012, p.109) reviewed a range of different studies. They found that these studies suggest that between 44–73% of incest perpetrating fathers are also perpetrating domestic violence towards the child's mother.

Children experience coercive control too

In some families, the children experience the perpetrator rigidly and malevolently controlling their daily activities, excessively controlling and limiting their contact with friends and family, hurting their beloved pets, and depriving them of access to amounts of money and resources that are normal for their age.

In some families, perpetrators take a different approach and become extremely permissive with the children, encouraging the children to resent the healthy parenting of the survivor parent.

(See Callaghan et al, 2018; Fellin et al, 2019; Haselschwerdt et al, 2019; Katz, 2016, 2019; 2022; Øverlien, 2013)

My research on children and coercive control

Interviewed 15 mothers and 15 of their children (total: 30) who had experienced coercive control.

Children's ages ranged from 10 to 14 (with the exception of one 20 year old).

Interviewed 9 girls, 6 boys.

Perpetrators were the children's biological father or step-father.

All interviewees were living in the community and had separated from perpetrators.

My findings



Control of time and movement

Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children and stopped mothers and children spending time together:

‘[My daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn’t allowed because he’d be jealous. He’d say things like: “You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?”’ (Marie, mother).

‘It felt like Mum wasn’t there because I didn’t spend time with her or anything’ (Leah, age 11).

‘When Mum was giving me attention he’d tell her to go over to him so she’d have to leave me to play by myself’ (Shannon, age 10).

Control of time and movement

Perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control limited the amount of maternal attention children could enjoy, and reduced the opportunities for fun and affection in their homes.

Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these situations.

Some children started to have doubts about whether their mother loved them or not.

Isolation from the outside world

When perpetrators/fathers controlled mothers' movements outside the home, this severely restricted children's social lives. It prevented children from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

'They [the kids] couldn't have any friends round because he'd kick off or something. Kids' parties were another problem because he'd be accusing me of trying to [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn't do any after school clubs because [he insisted] I had to be back [home] by a certain time. Me and the kids weren't allowed to go round to see their grandparents.' (Isobel, mother).

Isolation from the outside world

The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can have on children's social skills, confidence and development were denied to these children by fathers/step-fathers.

Because of perpetrators'/fathers' behaviour, **many children were living in the same isolated, lonely worlds as their mothers.** This was especially the case for younger children, who were more reliant on mothers to facilitate their access to friends' houses, playgrounds, days out, etc.

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment

Extreme tactics for depriving the family of freedom, independence and resources impacted on children as well as mothers:

Eloise (mother): 'He'd tell us we couldn't touch the food in the fridge, that we weren't allowed to eat, he'd lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn't get out, he'd unplug the phone...'

John (Eloise's son, aged 20): '...He'd take out the power because in the hall we've got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that's it – you've got no power...'

Eloise (mother): '...He used to take an element out the central heating so we'd have no heating. He'd lock us in the house and go out. He'd take the wifi so John couldn't do his homework and I couldn't do my banking on the computer. So we were prisoners in a way.'

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment

This highlights how some perpetrators/fathers directly and purposefully extend their coercive controlling abuse over their children as well as their girlfriend/wife.

Constrained behaviour

Many children could not say and do normal, age-appropriate things at home.

Children had to constrain their own natural behaviour to comply with perpetrators'/fathers' demands:

'When he came home from work he'd want to spend time with them and they were always *his* girls. He used to say to Zoe: "You're my little angel." But at the same time they couldn't shout, they couldn't make noise, they couldn't be children around him unless it was on his terms. It was alright if he wanted to play with them, but at other times it was like he wanted them to disappear.' (Lauren, mother)

'I would be sort of quiet, I didn't shout-out or run around.' (Bob, age 12)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

Most mothers entrapped by coercive control tend to do what they can to keep their children as safe, well and happy as possible (Wendt et al, 2015), though their ability to do this can be limited by the perpetrator's/father's determination to abuse in ways that harm the children (Buchanan, 2018).

Even though mothers cannot stop the father's harmful behaviour, positive parenting from mothers is a major factor in helping children to cope with fathers' domestic violence (Letourneau et al, 2007).

'Mothers are cited more frequently by children who have lived with domestic abuse as their most important source of help than anyone else in their lives... Their relationship with their mother is most children's major support in coping. (Mullender et al, 2002, pp. 210–11)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

‘Mum’s helped me a lot because, if you have a bond with your mum, that can help strengthen you, get you through it. Loads of people out there going through this don’t have a bond with either parent, with anybody, so it’s just themselves, but if you’ve got somebody, at least one person, that can be tremendous.’

(John, age 20)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

'He wanted all of me, all the time when he was home. [. . . But when he was at work] Shannon and I used to play, usually upstairs. The upstairs was sort of our area and the downstairs was his area. . . . I made this wonderful fairy- tale world for her upstairs in her bedroom, and just all upstairs really, and we spent most of the time together up there.' (Ellie, mother)

Eloise: We did things together. When we went to the pictures or we went shopping we could just "let our hair down" and do what we wanted to do.

John: When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them.

Eloise: We used to throw them over the hedge...

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

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

How some mothers felt

‘I was on auto-pilot as a mum. I was looking after them, but with no energy to enjoy the relationship—you’re just completely gone. It’s like you’re outside your own body, just looking at someone else’s life, just doing what you can to get by. It’s like being on autopilot: You’re just functioning because you have to.’

(Lucy, mother)

‘I didn’t feel close to [my son] Jack back then. I felt like I was his protector, but not like I could enjoy him...It’s hard to play [with your child] when you’re feeling sad and anxious all the time...I was so ground down by it all.’ (Sybil, mother)

‘I couldn’t invite her friends from school, because I didn’t know what he might do. But I used to play with her, and one time, when she was about 5, she’d made all these paper cut-outs of like little people and she said: “these are my friends,” and I just felt terrible. I felt so guilty.’ (Ellie, mother)

EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION

Post separation coercive control

Coercive control perpetrators don't tend to respect their partner's decision to end the relationship.

So while the victims are seeking freedom from abuse and to regain their basic autonomy, the perpetrators are typically continuing in their efforts to control and dominate their partner's and children's lives and/or punish them for trying to break free.

(E.g. Clements et al, 2021; Dragiewicz et al, 2021a, 2021b; Monk and Bowen, 2021; Feresin et al, 2019; Humphreys et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Campbell, 2017; Elizabeth, 2017; Coy et al, 2015; Thiara and Gill, 2012; Harne, 2011; Beeble et al, 2007.)

Post separation coercive control

As Hill (2020, p. 244) explains, women can 'choose to leave an abusive relationship. But the choice to end the abuse is not in their hands.

If the perpetrator is hellbent on maintaining control, they don't need the victim in physical proximity: they can control them through the system.

The courts, child support, social security, a rental tribunal— these can all become another weapon in their armoury.'

My research on coercive control: post-separation

Let us again explore the findings of my interviews with children and mothers who had separated from coercive control perpetrators/fathers.

This time, we will look at the fathers' post-separation relationships with their children.

My findings



Terrifying the children

This is what children themselves reported:

‘He used to bring some other men and try to break into the house, and me and my brothers feared for our lives because he used to smack on the doors, and I used to hide.’ (Vince, age 13)

‘My dad’s injunction ran out, he kept turning up at the house... Then he wrote something on the back door, he wrote “dead bitch”, and my mum tried to get it removed before we could see it, but I saw it before it got removed.’ (Roxie, age 11)

Terrifying the children

Perpetrators' terrifying actions could make children's and mothers' lives frightening and unpredictable.

Perpetrators'/fathers' actions drastically limited the safe space available to children and mothers, often leaving them 'under siege'.

This frightening fathering undermined children's mental health, well-being, physical security, and education.

Omnipresent fathering

Many children experienced their father as a constantly negative presence in their post-separation lives, whether they saw him frequently or not.

Those children who did not see their father frequently were still aware that nothing was stopping him reappearing in their lives at any point and causing harm.

This left the children in a continual state of anxiety and worry, and this harmed their ability to live normal lives.

Omnipresent fathering

Children often feared that they might encounter their father and be harmed by him, and this could lead to panic attacks, bedwetting and nightmares. Some children described monitoring their surroundings continuously as a protective strategy:

'I have it so that I check that the doors are locked and windows closed.' (Lotti, age 10)

Children also sought to increase their own and their mother's security by remaining with her:

'Now sometimes I'll sleep in my mum's bed because I feel more comfortable there and I feel more safe sleeping there.' (Bob, age 12)

'Sometimes we weren't able to go to school... I didn't want to leave my mum alone for the day.' (Rosa, age 12)

‘Admirable’ fathering

Perpetrators/fathers often used ‘admirable fathering’ as part of their ongoing attempts to control ex-partners and children (Katz et al, 2020).

They often chose to present themselves as admirable fathers to school staff and other parents, wider communities (both online and offline), and professionals and courts.

The persona of the ‘admirable’ father could include playing the roles of being a caring, committed and/or vulnerable victim father — a father deserving of praise and support.

This appeared to be part of perpetrators’ strategies to increase their own power, while further marginalising and weakening their ex-partner, who is then thought of negatively.

‘Admirable’ fathering

Some perpetrators directed performances of ‘admirable’ fathering at their children, for example by claiming to be vulnerable victims:

‘[During our weekend visits to him] he’d say “oh your mum makes me cry, your mum makes me do this stuff; I can’t see you because of your mum”, he’d just paint such a bad picture of her... he blamed her and us for everything... He said he was on antidepressants because I wasn’t seeing him often enough... I felt very small and bad... [After our weekend visit with our father, my sister Zoe] would be off school most Mondays because she felt so ill, she was on the sofa being held by mum and crying... He would call [my sister Zoe] and say “you’re the only one who really loves me”... I was just so drained and I felt like crying all the time.’ (Grace, age 14)

‘Admirable’ fathering

Here, this father was producing ‘guilt trips’ in his daughters and refusing to take responsibility for his own emotional state.

By presenting himself as a ‘vulnerable victim’, he was coercing his daughters into maintaining relationships with him that were harmful to their well-being.

By making his children feel as though they were responsible for his welfare, he was disguising the emotional power he was actually wielding over them.

‘Admirable’ fathering

Eventually, Grace had received appropriate support to break free of her father’s post-separation emotional abuse. She described how this led to a decision to cease contact with him, and an accompanying increase in her confidence and ability to express her authentic self:

‘I stopped seeing him a couple of years ago... I’ve spoken to two counsellors. One gave me these exercises to help me see what Dad was doing [being emotionally manipulative], and how people around me were trying to help me. That helped my confidence... [After I stopped contact] I could just be, I suppose, me again, because before I had really low confidence and stuff. So, I suppose I’ve come out of my shell a lot more and I can talk to people more. (Grace, age 14)

In general, the more the children in the study were able to break free from perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control and establish a sense of physical and psychological safety, the more they appeared to thrive (Katz, 2022).

Children recovering from coercive control

Once a mother and child break free from a perpetrator and achieve safety, it is possible for them to start recovering.

For this to happen, they need to be largely free from post-separation abuse, to have very limited/no contact with the perpetrator, and have a place to live where they feel secure and safe and have enough money to live on. (Katz, 2022)

Safe environments where children can thrive

‘[My son] John was painting the bathroom, he never would have done that before – [the perpetrator] wouldn’t have allowed it. And he dropped the paint, he thought I was going to go mad. So I come along and he said “you’re probably not going to ask me to paint anymore” and I said “don’t worry John, I will”. He said to me the other day “Mum will you teach me how to make pastry?” because he wants to learn.’ (Eloise, mother)

‘Jack has so much more confidence now. He’s like a different boy. Now he’s more willing to do things because he knows he won’t be criticised by me [like he was criticised by his dad]. He finds it much easier to relax.’ (Sybil, mother)

Feeling contented and supported at home

‘Now we just have a laugh... Now we can just sit together and spend time together... I’d say we’re considerate of each other, we’re sensitive to each other’s feelings and emotions and I’d say we have fun.’ (Isobel, mother)

‘[The house Mum and I live in now] may not be a mansion, but I love it here. It’s nice and cosy. It’s just better and it’s the best.’ (Shannon, age 10)

Freedom and positive connections

[My daughter and I] have started going to storytelling events at the library, we've been to the hairdressers together, we've been out for a meal a couple of times which is really, really nice. (Ellie, mother)

'We just love life at the moment. It's brought us all closer and we're all much happier that we were then, because then we were all dull and didn't like life much, and now we're all happy. We feel we can do anything we want.' (Katie, age 12)

Co-victims and co-survivors

Because of the similarity of children's and mothers' experiences of coercive control, Katz (2022) suggests using the term '**co-victims and co-survivors**' to describe these parents and children.

NAMING COERCIVE CONTROL IN REPORTS:

HIGHLIGHTING THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF
ABUSERS

AVOIDING VICTIM BLAMING

Naming coercive control in reports

Example of
a **poorly**
worded
report

Mother blaming and poor partner selection

Case example 1

The case example below details a common representation of a child protection worker's perceptions of a survivor's capacity to provide good enough parenting to her newborn baby:

Jackson, a newborn baby, is at significant risk of harm due to his mother's mental ill-health, significant history of drug misuse and her involvement in domestically violent relationships. It is recommended that Jackson be placed in alternative care as he is considered to be at an unacceptable risk of harm in her care, due to the aforementioned issues associated with her lifestyle choices. Despite being a victim of repeated assaults, the mother appears reluctant to leave the relationship. The mother has a history of Borderline Personality Disorder and has been in a series of abusive and violent relationships.

This case study illustrates how the underlying cause for concerns about Jackson's well-being is represented to be the mother's 'choice' of partner rather than the abusive behaviours of the person using violence and control. This implies that her poor choices resulted in her victimisation and that she is solely responsible for ensuring Jackson's safety, welfare and wellbeing.

Examples from De Simone and Heward Belle (2021)

Naming coercive control in reports

Example of a poorly worded report

Mutualising responsibility for domestic violence and decontextualising substance misuse and mental distress from DFV

Case example 2

This case example depicts how domestic violence is commonly represented as conflict in an intimate partner relationship for which both parties are equally responsible. Moreover, it demonstrates how women's lived experiences of substance misuse and/or mental distress are frequently reified from the context of victimisation that can precipitate, predispose and/or perpetuate the continuation of these issues:

It is my assessment that the father and mother's relationship is characterised by domestic violence with overlaying mental health concerns and substance misuse. The incidences between the mother and father have occurred in the presence of the child.

The mother's intimate relationships with others, have at times resulted in the mother being physically injured or placed at risk of harm. It is my assessment that the children have suffered cumulative emotional harm as a result of ongoing exposure to escalating domestic violence between the mother and the father. This violence has continued to escalate, with the two most recent incidents involving the use of a gun.

Both parents have issues with drug dependence and it is my assessment that both parents have exposed the child to drugs, drug paraphernalia and people using drugs.

Future risk of harm

The risk of physical harm related to the mother's history and cycle of getting involved in relationships that are violent. Currently the mother advises that she is not in a relationship, however based on her past patterns, child protection concerns remain for the child. Furthermore, there is a risk of physical harm as a result of the mother's substance misuse.

The risk of emotional harm relates to the child being a witness to domestic violence between the mother and the father, and the concern that this will continue in the future. This includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and wilful property damage. Furthermore, there is a risk of emotional harm as a result of the mother's substance misuse.

Should the child return to the care of the mother now, it is my assessment that there is a possibility of the child experiencing emotional and physical harm due to the mother's history of substance misuse and her demonstrated pattern of engaging in unhealthy and unsafe relationships.

Naming coercive control in reports

Example of a well worded report

Alternative framing: pivoting to the perpetrator and partnering with the survivor whilst maintaining a focus on child safety

Case example 3

Drawing on key learnings from successive capacity-building activities including participating in action research projects, training and coaching opportunities, the example below depicts how evidence of domestic violence and risk can be alternately represented.

It is my assessment that the child would be at an unacceptable risk of physical and emotional harm without further departmental intervention due to the following:

- (1) A history of and current domestic violence perpetrated by the father against the mother. Over this time, the father has made a parenting choice to engage in a pattern of coercive control and violent behaviour towards the mother, including behaviour associated with a high risk of lethality. This has included:
 - (a) Physical abuse including strangulation—on three occasions the father has put his hands around the mother's neck and squeezed so hard that she couldn't breathe. He left bruises on her neck and she lost consciousness on two occasions.
 - (b) Control over finances—the father withdraws all of the mother's money from her bank account
 - (c) Control over who the mother sees and speaks to and where she goes;
 - (d) Control over the mother's mobile phone—he goes through it and questions her. If the mother talks on her phone the father follows her, questions her and accuses her of cheating on him;
 - (e) Social isolation—the mother no longer has family or friends for support;
 - (f) The father upsets and provokes the mother until she is emotionally uncontained—screaming and crying and then he calls the police saying he is worried for his and the child's safety;
 - (g) The father has raped the mother several times;
 - (h) The father controls the child's care and routine (he baths the child, dresses him and puts him to bed). This interferes with the mother's attachment and bonding with the child and is used by the father to demonstrate the mother's inability to parent to authorities.

There has been an increase in the intensity, frequency and severity of the father's use of violence, coercion and control towards the mother which continues to impact on the family functioning by creating instability for child and mother, negatively affecting the mother's mental health and a poor child-mother relationship due to father's undermining of the mother's parenting.

Despite the mother's best efforts to separate from the relationship, and work to get the child returned to her care, the father was still able to capitalise on times when she was vulnerable and re-enter her life which resulted in the child being significantly harmed. Should the mother and the father resume their relationship, which history would indicate is more than likely given the significance of the father's violence and control, the child would be at an unacceptable risk of emotional and physical harm.

Despite the mother's ongoing efforts to protect the child and promote the child's wellbeing through (a) reporting the sexual abuse; (b) accepting referrals to domestic violence and rape support services; (c) engaging in psychological supports; and (d) consenting to the child going to day care and a referral to child counselling, the father's continued coercive control and violence is likely to continue to compromise the child's safety, belonging and wellbeing.

Child Safety continues to partner with the mother and have made multiple attempts to assist her to relocate with the child to promote the safety of her and her child, however due to the father's coercive control towards the mother, these attempts have not been successful.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions

Coercive control is a severe form of abuse, and perpetrators of coercive control cause high levels of harm.

Coercive control perpetrating fathers tend to parent their children in negative ways, and subject their children to coercive control in ways that profoundly harm the children's day-to-day experiences of life.

Mothers separating from fathers is unlikely to be enough to make the children safe, as fathers tend to be determined to continue their coercive control post-separation.

The problem lies within the perpetrator (usually the children's father or father figure). Tackling the problem means **tackling the perpetrator**, holding them **accountable**, **curbing their ability to continue abusing**, and **helping the adult and child victims to be safe** (really safe, not just safe on paper).

Thank you

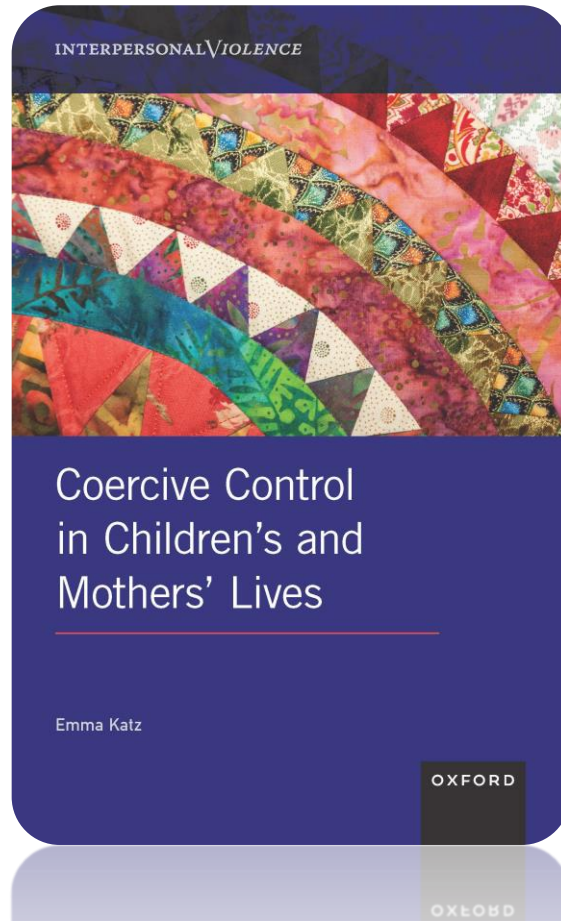
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