

People with children

Where domestic and family violence occurs in families with **children**, the victim is most likely to be the perpetrator's female intimate partner and the mother of the children. A perpetrator in these circumstances is also highly likely to directly abuse the children or otherwise **expose them to violence**. These children are also victims of domestic and family violence.

There are particular vulnerabilities a perpetrator may seek to exploit in exercising control over the victim and children. They may relate to the victim's sense of their parenting role, their relationship with the children, and their responsibility to promote the children's wellbeing and protect them from harm, while also trying to cope with the dangerous and debilitating effects of the violence. These factors, together with poor mental health and social conditions that may be related to the domestic and family violence, may impact on a victim's capacity to parent effectively [Hooker et al 2016].

Where the victim is the mother of the child, a perpetrator's use of the victim's mothering role as a means of committing domestic and family violence may begin prior to pregnancy, or may continue or escalate during and after the **pregnancy**. A perpetrator may, for example, **control or prevent contraception** leading to unwanted pregnancy, or coerce the victim into pregnancy so as to prevent her from working or studying or to otherwise exercise control over her; or the perpetrator may perceive that the pregnancy occurred sooner than intended, or suspect that he is not the father.

A perpetrator may use a range of tactics to undermine or destroy the relationship between mother and child [Hooker et al 2016]. Depending on the child's age, the perpetrator may deliberately abuse the victim in front of the child so as to induce fear in the child or a sense that their mother is weak and unable to protect herself. The perpetrator may discredit the victim's mothering skills by accusing her of being a bad mother, or he may coach and recruit the child in the perpetration of the violence, or **isolate** the victim and children from family, friends and other sources of support and care. Over time these corrosive and manipulative behaviours may increasingly restrict and control all aspects of the everyday lives of victims and their children, including their sense of reality and their capacity to act competently and assertively; and may ultimately impair their **physical, emotional and mental health** and wellbeing.

A victim responsible for the care of children **may delay leaving** the abusive relationship, or may leave and return on multiple occasions before finally leaving, for fear that the act of leaving may prompt an escalation of the domestic and family violence. [Moe 2009] A victim's sense of duty to protect children from further harm may directly influence these decisions [Meyer 2010].

Research demonstrates that separation coincides with an **increased risk** of threatened and actual violence as a perpetrator may respond to a perceived loss of control over the victim with amplified efforts to reassert control [Jaffe & Crooks 2005]. Importantly, in the context of separating parents, there is also an increased risk of harm to children's psychological and physical wellbeing due to exposure to domestic and family violence, history of maltreatment, parental stress, social isolation, and inadequate resources and support [Jaffe et al 2014].

Other factors that may influence a victim's decision to remain in the abusive relationship include lack of independent financial resources; lack of child care options, other than the perpetrator; overcrowded or inadequate shelter accommodation ill equipped for the needs of her children or animals; fear that parenting orders may put the children at further risk of harm by the perpetrator; fear that the perpetrator will avoid child support obligations; or fear of isolation, poverty and homelessness [Chung et al 2000]. These factors may in turn serve to increase the level of control the perpetrator exerts over the victim and children [Moe 2009].

A mother, for example, who is a victim of domestic and family violence must constantly reassess the risk of harm to herself and her children and the associated need to protect from further harm. If she does not leave the abusive relationship, she may fear having her children removed from her care by the child protection agency for failing to protect them from violence [Humphreys 2007]. If she does leave, and endeavour to remove herself and her children from ongoing violence, she may fear being penalised by the court for not demonstrating a willingness to facilitate a relationship between the children and their abusive father [Bagshaw et al 2011]. A victim in these circumstances is unlikely to resolve this tension in the best interests of her children without a high level of support that ensures the safety and wellbeing of herself and her children, her capacity to keep mothering, and the proper exercise of her legal rights. And yet research shows that victims who have experienced prolonged and severe domestic and family violence may, in seeking help, also experience stigmatising and victim-blaming social attitudes from formal and informal sources of support that convey a message that the victim is responsible for their own suffering, for example, by remaining in the abusive relationship [Meyer 2015]. This experience may be aggravated by an approach taken by the child protection agency that focuses on the victim's failure to protect rather than the perpetrator's culpability for the violence [Humphreys 2007].

Where a victim feels she has no other choice but to remove herself and her children from the abusive relationship, she may have to contend with the financial, housing, employment, social and parenting challenges already mentioned while also experiencing ongoing domestic and family violence from the perpetrator. For example, the perpetrator may engage in more insidious forms of **emotional or psychological abuse** using **digital technologies or social media**; or the perpetrator may follow, harass or monitor the victim at work or in the local community, or seek to coerce the victim into arrangements for the care and parenting of the children, or withdraw child support, or use contact handover occasions to humiliate and degrade the victim in front of the children [Kaye et al 2003]. Prior to separation the victim may act as a buffer to prevent or deflect abuse away from the children; however, on separation, the children may spend time alone with the perpetrator placing them at greater risk of harm. Victims report that these behaviours can be as dangerous and debilitating as those experienced during the abusive relationship.

A 2015 evaluation [Kaspiew et al Synthesis 2015] of the 2012 Family Violence Amendments to the Commonwealth *Family Law Act 1975* found that issues giving rise to safety concerns were relevant for up to one in five of the separated parents surveyed. The safety concerns associated with ongoing contact with the other parent mostly involved violent or dangerous behaviour, emotional abuse, substance misuse or mental health issues. An earlier analysis [Bagshaw et al 2011] of the effect of family violence on post-separation parenting arrangements for groups of parents and children who separated after the 1995 and after the 2006 amendments to the Act recorded that nearly half of the children reported feeling "not at all safe" with one of their parents, and nearly three times more of these children reported this feeling when with their fathers than with their mothers. It also observed that women and children were far more likely than men to be victims of severe abuse, intimidation and threats, giving rise to fear and intimidation.