

Multiple Perspectives on the Police Response to  
Children Present at a Domestic Violence Incident:  
An Irish case study

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other University and that it is entirely my own work except where acknowledged.

I agree that Trinity College Dublin may lend a copy of this thesis upon request.

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## **Abstract**

The expanding recognition of the negative impact that exposure to domestic violence can have on children, has led to a focus on the response of professionals, in particular the police, who have been identified as first responders to many children living with domestic violence. Findings in the literature suggest that the police are well placed to offer an initial professional response to the safeguarding of children in this context, however little is known about this “key moment” of professional response (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Richardson-Foster, Stanley, Miller, & Thomson, 2012). Research shows that children’s level of involvement is not indicative to the response by police officers who continue to report some reluctance in engaging directly with children at a domestic violence scene (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; HMIC, 2015b; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Swerin, Growette Bostaph, King, & Kirkland Gillespie, 2018). This thesis sought to explore the child’s experience of the police response to domestic violence in the context of a police call-out, by drawing on multiple perspectives including children and adult actors, in order to provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon. This was achieved by a qualitative case study methodology that used the individual and focus group interview as the main source of data collection involving a total of 60 participants, including children, mothers, police and a range of Health and Social Care practitioners. Findings support the need for a more direct response by police to children at a domestic violence incident in order for them to be recognised as victim in their own right. An ecological perspective reveals how the police response for the child is situated within a complex interplay of systems that operate within the child’s environment. The messages that children are given about the police role within their communities, through their interactions with peers and the police themselves, as well as what they learn about them from within the home, can be seen as important in understanding how the child living with domestic violence perceives police involvement. A recognition of children as active agents more aligned to a children’s rights discourse and new sociological understandings of childhood are yet to be fully realised in practice responses by police. The dominant discourse that not speaking to children about sensitive adult issues will protect the innocence of childhood is no longer viable and calls for a reconceptualising of children as involved actor and a response that recognises children in this role.

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# **Chapter One: An Introduction to the Study and the Irish Context**

## **Introduction**

The expanding recognition of the negative impact that exposure to domestic violence can have on children, has led to a focus on the response of professionals, in particular the police, who have been identified as first responders to many children living with domestic violence. Findings in the literature suggest that the police are well placed to offer an initial professional response to the safeguarding of children in this context, however little is known about this “key moment” of professional response (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Research shows that children’s level of involvement is not indicative to the response by police officers who continue to report some reluctance in engaging directly with children at a domestic violence scene (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; HMIC, 2015b; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Swerin et al., 2018). This doctoral research therefore is interested in learning more about how the child living with domestic violence, experiences the police response to an incident of violence in the home.

This opening chapter serves as an introduction to the study; providing the background and rationale for conducting this research and the main research questions that are explored. Definitions and terminology applied throughout the dissertation are also explained. Theoretical principles informing this thesis stem from a social constructionist and ‘new’ sociology of childhood perspective within which context is viewed as a necessary component to understanding the phenomenon. In order to provide sufficient context, the chapter adopts a “history of the present” (Skehill, 2003, 2007) approach by tracing some of the key social and political movements in Irish history that provide the backdrop to more recent developments in Irish policing and responses to domestic violence and children. Chapter One concludes with an outline of the chapters that follow.

## **Background and rationale**

Internationally, the link between domestic violence and child abuse is now recognised as a significant concern with implications for health, social and justice sectors (Stanley, 2011). There is a growing consensus that children and young people living with domestic violence are victims in their own right and that there is a need for this to be

reflected more strategically in policy and practice responses to the issue (Buckley, Whelan, & Holt, 2006; Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2016a; Øverlien, 2010; Stanley, Miller, Richardson Foster, & Thomson, 2010). Definitions of domestic violence have now widened to include the physical and non-physical forms of violence, and patterns of control that are used by the perpetrator to impact both adults and children living in the home (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2016). An increase in qualitative research including children on their experiences of living in a domestically violent home, has contributed to a richer understanding of children's capacity for agency and the complex set of strategies they employ in their resistance and management of those experiences (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). The evidence indicates that children, once perceived as passive bystanders within the domestic violence debate, are on the contrary more actively involved in an array of actions which they carry out with purpose (Katz, 2016).

Children's experiences of living with domestic violence are often hidden and can remain in the private sphere until a formal professional response such as the police become involved (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). The police are more often called at a point when the violence has escalated in severity (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000) and therefore present a critical moment of response to the child who is living in that home. However, findings from the small number of studies in this area of police response (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), continue to report some reluctance from police to engaging directly with children at an incident, often fearing that they will cause more harm to the child by their presence. The police response tends to focus more on the adult victim and perpetrator and unless the child is directly injured they remain as "figures on the sidelines" at an incident (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012, p. 231). Children want to be included in the response by police and for their experiences to be acknowledged and validated by responding officers (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, children's views and experiences of the police response are quite mixed and often dependent on individual officers level of understanding of domestic violence and confidence in communicating with children (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

In the UK, the development of new practice guidelines for police similar to those already existing in North America (Baker, Jaffe, Berkowitz, & Berkman, 2002; Berkman & Esserman, 2004), recommend officers to check on all children present at a domestic violence call-out and to be aware of the link between child abuse and domestic violence in their investigations (College of Policing, 2015). There has been some

improvement in the awareness of children and the impact to them by police, as seen in increased levels of reporting to social work departments (HMIC, 2015b; Stanley, Miller, Foster, & Thomson, 2011). However, there is still a disparity between the level of police contact with children at the scene and their experiences as victim in the home (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Swerin et al., 2018).

In Ireland, there is a dearth of empirical research pertaining to the experiences of children living with domestic violence. The only existing studies, both qualitative which were carried out just over a decade ago, included children and young people's perspectives who shared their experience of living with domestic violence and service responses, including the Irish police (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). In both studies, children spoke of not feeling believed by police when they sought help and there was a general lack of confidence in the police's ability to keep them safe and put an end to the violence. The findings highlighted that although children were very much impacted by their experiences of living with domestic violence, there was a shortfall in services that directly supported their needs, with the response from professionals focusing on the adult victim (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). While in Ireland we have witnessed a strengthening of the rights of children<sup>1</sup> in both policy<sup>2</sup> and legislation<sup>3</sup> that is designed to realise the rights of children and better protect them from harm, there is an absence of empirical research that includes the experiences and views of the children, their families and the practitioners who are involved in these processes, resulting in a weak evidence base from which to inform policy and practice responses to meet the needs of children experiencing domestic violence. It is important therefore to capture the views and experiences of children through research in order to better inform policy and practice (Øverlien, 2010).

#### *Positioning the researcher in the study – a note on reflexivity*

A process of reflexivity by which the researcher's own context and personal biography are located is critical to qualitative research (Finlay & Gough, 2003). McKay, Ryan, and Sumsion (2003) contend that reflexivity brings a transparency to the impact a

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2012 Children's Referendum on the Thirty-first Amendment to the Constitution on Children the Irish people voted in favour of protecting and extending the rights of children in line with international statute.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014-2020' (DCYA, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> The Children First Act, 2015 introduced a mandatory reporting system into Ireland which imposes a duty on persons to notify the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) of any child considered to be at risk of emotional or physical harm. Exposure to domestic violence in the home falls under the category of emotional abuse thereby requiring a referral (DCYA, 2011).

researcher's own personal and professional experiences and biases have on the study design, data analysis and presentation of findings. Throughout the research process, I endeavoured to remain aware of my own positionality as a female in her late thirties, unmarried with no children, educated and from a white lower middle class background. Having returned to third level education as a mature student, I brought my own life experiences and understanding of the world that undoubtedly shaped how I approached the topic. In terms of my professional background, I undertook this PhD as a newly qualified social worker and graduate of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Shortly after graduating I was successfully awarded a studentship funded by the School of Social Work and Social Policy and COSC (The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence), to conduct research exploring Garda responses to children and young people (CYP) who are living with domestic violence. The topic of my research was therefore chosen for me. However, had I not an interest in the broader area of domestic violence I would not have pursued it. What appealed most to me was ascertaining the views of children and young people themselves as opposed to relying on adult informants. I had a strong sense that children had something to say on this topic and were impacted on a much greater level than already known. I was naturally curious about finding ways to include children to participate and have their voices heard. This became one of the core objectives of the study – to position the child's experience as central and enable them to have a voice in what I felt was an important matter impacting their life. Unfortunately as the study progressed it became apparent that including children in research particularly on a sensitive subject was not without its challenges and I was forced to change strategy and adapt whilst still finding a way to remain true to my personal ethos. Observations in this regard will be referred to in the methodology chapter. A personal reflection on conducting the study is included in the final chapter of this dissertation to complete the 'cycle of reflexivity'.

## **Aims and objectives**

An understanding of children as active agents in the domestic violence home and the child's right to be heard as a victim of domestic violence, underpin the main aim of this study - to explore children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence in the context of a police call-out/incident in the home. This is achieved by employing a qualitative case study methodology that explores the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, including; children, mothers, police and health and social care practitioners (HSCP). Practitioners, although not directly involved in the incident under



exploration, provide an 'expert' view from a practice response based on their professional experience in supporting children and families impacted by domestic violence. The objective of seeking multiple perspectives is thus to provide a contextually rich understanding to this rather under-researched area of police response. It is expected that emerging out of this will be implications for best practice in supporting children who are identified by police as experiencing domestic violence.

## **Research questions**

1. Drawing on four different perspectives; children, mothers, police and Health and Social Care Practitioners (HSCP): How do children living with domestic violence experience the police response to a domestic violence call-out?
2. What influences how children living with domestic violence experience the police response to domestic violence?
3. What do police officers understand their role to be when there are children present at a domestic violence incident?
4. How can findings from the study contribute to best practice in supporting children who are living with domestic violence?

## **Definitions and terminology used in the study**

### ***Defining domestic violence***

For the purpose of this research, the term 'domestic violence' has been adopted in accordance with the standard definition that is continued to be used in Irish legislation and policy. The definition refers to domestic violence as:

*The use of physical or emotional force or threat of physical force, including sexual violence, in close adult relationships. This includes violence perpetrated by spouse, partner, son, daughter or any other person who is a close blood relation to the victim. The term "domestic violence" goes beyond actual physical violence. It can also involve emotional abuse; the destruction of property; isolation from friends, family and other potential sources of support; threats to others including children; stalking; and control over access to money,*

*personal items, food, transportation and the telephone. (Office of the Tanaiste, 1997)*

Although the definition is relatively old, it is comprehensive enough in that it includes other forms of non-physical violence that are more consistent with coercive control. Coercive control has recently been recognised in Irish domestic violence legislation and will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter.

Domestic violence is generally viewed as a gendered issue with the vast majority of severe violence between partners being perpetrated by males against a female intimate partner (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). There are others who view the issue as a human one that affects both men and women equally (McNeely, Cook, & Torres, 1999). There has been a long standing debate between feminist and family violence scholars as to the level of gender symmetry in domestic violence (Allen, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Kimmel, 2002). A feminist analysis asserts that domestic violence is a gendered issue arising from the patriarchal structures in society that place men in a more privileged position that they must uphold through means of violence against women if necessary (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Melton & Sillito, 2012). This view, which asserts that domestic violence is asymmetrically perpetrated with women the primary victims and men the main perpetrators (DeKeseredy, 2011; Kimmel, 2002), has been the most influential in public policy development (Melton & Sillito, 2012). The opposing argument which dominates much of the family violence studies, holds that statistically, women are as violent in relationships as men, inferring to gender symmetry in domestic violence (McNeely et al., 1999; D. Saunders, 1988). Family violence scholars generally refute the feminist argument that patriarchy is the main root of domestic violence and suggest that there are a number of factors from which the issue emanates, taking a more ecological approach to interventions (Dutton, 2012; Hamel, 2008).

Although domestic violence can affect both men and women in intimate relationships, a vast majority of police call-outs to a domestic violence incident where children are present involve male perpetrated violence against a female partner (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Gjelsvik, Verhoek-Oftedahl, & Pearlman, 2003). In Ireland, the National Crime Council study found that 1 in 3 women and only 1 in 20 men report domestic violence to the Irish police (Watson & Parsons, 2005). Thus, for the purpose of this study, a gendered approach to the issue will be adopted which observes children in the context

of their experience of domestic violence that is perpetrated by their father or mother's male partner against their mother.

### ***Children 'experience' domestic violence***

The term 'experiencing domestic violence' is used to acknowledge the multiple ways that children are impacted by the abuse and the processes that they engage in when attempting to understand and make sense of the violence (Stanley, 2011). Within this dissertation, phrases such as 'living with domestic violence' and 'living in a domestically violent home' are used interchangeably to describe children's involvement in and experiences of both physical and non-physical forms of violence perpetrated by their father, which the child is both directly and indirectly impacted by. By applying active verbs to describe children as 'living' and 'experiencing' domestic violence, this goes beyond observing the child as a passive witness who is simply exposed to their mothers victimisation and rather includes the child in that experience as victim in their own right, supporting current discourses in this field of study (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Överlien, 2017; Stanley, 2011).

The term child is used throughout the study as a general reference to children of any age who are living with domestic violence. Child in this sense is being used not in accordance with age but to situate the person as child of parent/care-giver in the home. It is understood that children experience domestic violence and are impacted by those experiences in different ways throughout the life course (Cunningham & Baker, 2007). References will be made more specifically to childhood stages within the study when they present as being important to provide necessary context to findings. This study holds the individual nature of the child's experience as a more useful lens for understanding since children of the same age and even close siblings have been found to create different meanings of their experiences of domestic violence (Mullender et al., 2002).

### ***Policing terminology***

An Garda Síochána is the Irish name for the police service in Ireland. Police has been applied throughout the dissertation as a generic terms when discussing both Irish police and police from other jurisdictions, but distinctions will be made when appropriate. Direct quotations however will include terms used by participants such as "Guards", "Garda", "Gardaí" or "Members" which are all terms used when referring to a

police officer in Ireland. Finally, “call-out”, “incident”, “scene” are used interchangeably when describing the context of the police response.

### **‘A history of the present’: Introducing the Irish context**

The conceptualising of domestic violence and children has gone through such vast changes over the last century, that in order to appreciate how they are spoken of and understood today, we need as Skehill (2007) argues, to firstly understand the past as a “history of the present”. The remainder of this introduction chapter to the thesis thus begins with a socio-historical account of domestic violence in Ireland, tracing some of the key political and legislative developments that occurred from the 1960s and into the latter part of the last century, helping to change the discourse on domestic violence and child abuse, placing them on the political and social policy agendas. A social constructionist lens underpinning this thesis, is applied here to show how the way in which we talk about and respond to domestic violence and children in contemporary Ireland, has been influenced by historical and political landscapes. Consistent with a social constructionist perspective, it is those with power who have the most influence over shaping a dominant discourse and interest in social phenomena (Burr, 2003). Within this framework, Irish culture and history become important markers in tracing a shift in how domestic violence is conceptualised by police in Ireland and the re-positioning of children as social actors.

The first part of the discussion begins by providing a rationale for applying a historical perspective and looks to the positioning of women and children in Irish society and the influence of a strong Church and State bond on Irish family life. By applying this historical perspective, we begin to build a picture of the cultural norms that existed in Ireland during the last century and the hidden nature of child abuse and domestic violence in Irish society. The next section traces some of the key social and legislative developments that led to a rise in feminist thinking and a re-positioning of women and children in Ireland. The section concludes by observing some of the early responses to child abuse and domestic violence in Ireland and the increased involvement of the police in intervening in what were once deemed to be private family matters. A discussion on contemporary discourses of policing domestic violence and child abuse in Ireland is then provided, alongside recent legislative and policy developments that have led to a greater awareness of the rights and welfare needs of children living in Ireland. The section concludes by briefly examining children’s perception of the police role in society.

### ***Domestic violence – The historical dimension***

The rationale for applying a historical approach to domestic violence is influenced by the assumption made in social constructionist theory, that knowledge and meaning making is constructed by social and political forces that are reproduced over time and space (Bryman, 2012). As Schwandt (2000) observes;

*We invent concepts, models, schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. Furthermore, there is an inevitable historical and socio-cultural dimension to this construction. We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth. (p. 197)*

The present study is located within a constructionist paradigm that has informed a qualitative methodology which places an emphasis on context and subjective meaning (Bryman, 2012). By applying a historical context to domestic violence, we can see how definitions and representations have shifted over time, illustrating the fluidity of meaning making through a process in which “concepts are socially constructed rather than fixed with any one, unchanging, uncontested meaning” (Meulenhart and Kimes, 1999, p. 235). Indeed, the re-conceptualising of women’s role in society and an awareness of the limited rights afforded to women and children, grew momentum only when a political shift occurred through the second-wave feminist movement, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. In terms of children and conceptions of childhood, Ireland has witnessed a re-positioning of children in both the policy and practice arenas, that has taken place against a backdrop of a long history of institutional care provided by the Irish Catholic Church to women and children (Inglis, 2007). Reflecting on such reforms, McGregor (2014) highlights “the importance of a critical historical perspective at times of transition” (p.780), and argues that the past should be used as a continuous reference point right up to the present when attempting reform, as it is from the past that we can learn from our mistakes. This chapter serves to create the context for the present thesis by establishing some of the key developments in Ireland which have contributed to the current background against which the study has been conducted.

### ***Locating women and children in the Irish Free State and beyond***

This section will look at how allegiances between State and Church in Ireland during the years of independence of British rule, were influential in shaping the lives of women

and children in Ireland. The Catholic Church in Ireland was a powerful force in the lives of the Irish people and the forging of Irish identities and moral codes that impacted on the everyday life of citizens (Inglis, 1987). A particular focus will be given in this section to the role this alliance played in positioning women and children in early twentieth-century Irish society through what O'Sullivan and O'Donnell (2012) refer to as a 'tripartite' relationship between church, state and family.

Prior to the establishment of the Irish Free State, citizens were bound by British laws which at the time allowed for divorce and contraception to be available to those who could afford to avail of it (Guilbride, 2004). With independence from Britain came new laws that were firmly grounded in notions of creating a new identity for the Irish people that was different to the British, with religion becoming an obvious way of creating a bigger sense of separateness (Brady, 1974). Guilbride (2004) comments on the idealized model of Catholic Ireland and its virtuous women post British rule. An attempt made to build an Ireland that was firmly grounded in Catholic ideology is evident in the Irish Constitution and the treatment of women that followed. The ruling party during the early period of Irish independence, Cumann na nGaedheal, sought direction from the Catholic Church on several social matters including the issue of divorce and were advised to rule against it, amongst other things, that would impact greatly on the lives of Irish women (Guilbride, 2004). Women in Ireland in the first forty years or so after independence were bound by religious ideology that situated them in the ideal of marriage fulfilling duties of motherhood and domesticity (J. Smith, 2007). Those who persisted to act outside of the moral codes were bound in other ways by a history of institutional reform and social isolation (For a historical analysis of institutional care provision in Ireland, see O'Sullivan and O'Donnell, 2012 and J. Smith, 2007).

### ***Domestic violence and the sanctity of marriage***

The Irish Constitution firmly situates women in the domestic sphere with their primary role as caregiver to their husband and children. Share et al. (2012) draw attention to the patriarchal statements within the Irish Constitution, in particular Article 41.2.1 which recognises women's subordinate role within the family and the home. Similarly, Hilliard (2004) asserts that marriage and domesticity were bound together by Church and State in early Ireland. Marriage has long been understood as the main context within which domestic violence occurs (Erez, 1986) and this understanding is evident in the early language used to describe the issue (Murray & Powell, 2009). References such as "the marriage license as a hitting license", a term coined by Gelles and Straus (Stets &

Straus, 1989) and “the vow includes wife beating” (Fields, 1978 cited in Erez, 1986, p. 266) were regularly cited by feminist scholars when they first began to speak out about the problem. Once an act of violence was committed inside a marriage, it was perceived differently by both the law and society in general, in that it was a private matter to be dealt with outside of the law (Erez, 1986).

Any early references made in the literature to the police response to domestic violence in Ireland were built around a rhetoric of the ‘evil drink’, whereby a violent husband was constructed as a drunkard who became violent against his wife after returning from the public house (Brady, 1974). In Brady’s account of the history of Irish policing, he refers to the early work of the guards having a focus on dealing with the illegal distribution and manufacturing of alcohol across the country that was impacting on the moral conduct of men and causing much distress to families. Further afield, immigrant Irish women were reported to be experiencing the same problem in marriage with heavy drinking and violence becoming a dominant characteristic of Irish spouses (Gordon, 1988). No divorce legislation<sup>4</sup> or welfare provision for single mothers, combined with the social stigma of leaving your husband, meant that many women and their children in Ireland remained in marriages, in which abuse of some form was an accepted norm of family life (Hilliard, 2004). Having identified the role women were afforded in early Independent Ireland, and how the sanctity of marriage provided a means for the perpetuation of domestic violence, the next section brings to light the positioning of children in Ireland during this period.

### ***Institutional care and the construction of the ‘vagrant’ child***

The lack of early sociological studies on children and the concept of childhood are significant in our understanding of the overall invisibility of children in early Irish society. Debates around why there was such little interest in children or childhood as objects of research, centre around the notion that children were merely void of any real substance until they entered into adulthood (Qvortrup, 1994a), and therefore were positioned similarly in the way that women were viewed at the time, in what Alanen (1988) describes as “peripheral to the global systems” (p. 53). Women and children were insignificant outside the relationship they offered to the lives of the more significant men (Alanen, 1988).

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<sup>4</sup> Divorce legislation was introduced to Ireland in 1996 after two referendums were required to allow for a constitutional amendment allowing for divorce.

Ireland's history of institutional care has been touched on briefly in this chapter when locating women in post-independence Ireland. However, this form of confinement was not unique to women, with vast numbers of children and young people being similarly held in large institutions operated by the Church on behalf of the Irish state between 1930 and the late 1960s (Raftery & O'Sullivan, 1999). Representations at the time of poorer children as 'vagrants' and 'delinquents', left them open to ill-treatment by the instruments of the State, and further judged by society as young criminals who needed to be reformed in the care system (Holohan, 2011). The perception of children as criminals, it is argued by Holohan (2011), contributed to their treatment by the care staff. The physical and sexual abuse of children in these schools is well documented, with Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) providing first-hand accounts from victims, of the abuse they endured while under the care of the Irish State. An in-depth discussion on the abuses committed by religious on children during this period is outside the remit of this chapter, however it is an important factor in tracing the construction of children in Irish society and how they were misrepresented by the authorities at the time for their perceived wrong-doings. More-over, it is evident of a system that afforded more vulnerable children very few rights to welfare outside of the institutional system, polarising them further from their communities. The rights of women and children emerged almost simultaneously during a period of immense cultural shifts and the re-positioning of women and children in society that took place out of the second-wave feminist movement. In the next section, the rise of feminist thinking in Ireland and the positioning of domestic violence on the political agenda is discussed.

### ***A new political discourse: Positioning domestic violence on the Irish political agenda***

An international movement by feminist thinkers in the late 1960s referred to in the literature as the second-wave feminist movement, brought the issue of domestic violence once again into the public arena and demanded political and legislative reform that recognised the rights of women (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Anglo-American feminist ideas were adapted to shed light on the lived experience of women in Ireland during the 1970s and their invisibility in the public sphere (Connolly & O'Toole, 2005). As mentioned earlier, the Irish woman's place was considered to be in the home and as sole care giver for their family (Connolly & O'Toole, 2005). Issues around employment equality including the marriage ban<sup>5</sup>, and key debates around

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<sup>5</sup> The marriage ban forced women who were working in the Irish public sector to give up their employment once married.



reproductive rights became political. Overall, the strategies of the second wave feminist movement in Ireland may not be considered to be as radical as those used by feminists in Britain and Northern Europe, yet in the context of conservative Ireland, it was perceived in the social and political spheres as a radical attempt at challenging persistent power structures (Share et al., 2012). It also as Kiely and Leane (2014) argue, encouraged women in Ireland to reflect differently upon their lives and position in Irish society, marking a change in the conceptualising of women and children in Ireland.

The first Irish refuge, established in 1974 in a building on Harcourt Street, witnessed women from all over the country seeking support and protection from abusive partners as they began to name what they were experiencing as domestic violence (O'Connor & Wilson, 2002). In 1994, Women's Aid Ireland began to raise a broader awareness of the issue through using the homily during mass in Catholic churches to speak up about the issue and the services they offered (O'Connor & Wilson, 2002). The use of the homily to help inform the Irish public on domestic violence is quite significant if we consider the historically hidden nature of the issue and the strong influence the Catholic church had on Irish family life. In 1995, a document entitled 'Making the Links' and published by Women's Aid, looked into the prevalence of domestic violence in Ireland and reported that one in every five females in Ireland had experienced violence in an intimate relationship (Kelleher, Kelleher, & O'Connor, 1995). Whilst the prevalence of physical and sexual violence in Ireland was evident from the findings, the issue was largely under-reported to police, as victims reportedly feared their complaints not being taken seriously (Kelleher & O'Connor, 1995).

On the back of pressure from special interest groups and the increasing power and influence of women's rights lobbyists, Ireland witnessed a number of legislative changes<sup>6</sup> that would help improve the lives of women and their children. Additionally,

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<sup>6</sup> The introduction of an Unmarried Mothers Allowance in 1973 and the enactment of the Unfair Dismissals Act, 1977, provided women in Ireland a level of financial security (Conway, 2004). A revision of the Act in 1981 extended the length of barring orders to a maximum of twelve months and allowed for parties to apply for a 'protection order' to serve as an interim measure of protection. The introduction of the Judicial Separation and Family Law Reform Act 1989, provided for the victim to apply for a separation based on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour by one spouse and thus offering an alternative measure of protection for victims of domestic violence (Kearns, Coen, & Canavan, 2008).

provisions were put in place that would begin to recognise the need to provide protection to women experiencing domestic violence.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Early responses to child abuse in Ireland***

Around the same time that women's rights were given a political platform, there was a growing recognition of the need to establish a more strategic response to the issue of child abuse. Buckley and O'Nolan (2013) draw attention to some of the key developments in policy and legislation that influenced the expansion of child welfare and protection services in Ireland. Such developments include the introduction of statutory child abuse guidelines followed by the Child Care Act, 1991 and the recognition of child sexual abuse (CSA). In 1975 an expert group formed by the Department of Health, found that child abuse was a significant issue in Ireland (Murphy et al., 2005). Despite this, it appears that no major efforts were made during this time by professionals to raise awareness around the issue and provide much needed education to the Irish public on the impact of child abuse (Murphy et al., 2005). Crowe (2008) points out that it was not until 1983 that the Department of Health guidelines<sup>8</sup> mentioned CSA and later produced a set of guidelines in 1987,<sup>9</sup> which served as official child protection procedural guidelines, offering professionals guidance on identifying and investigating cases of intra-familial CSA. The introduction of the Child Care Act, 1991 provided more legal mechanisms for professionals to avail of in order to protect the needs of vulnerable children and placed more accountability on Health Boards in their provision of state services to at risk families. However full implementation of the Act took some time (Buckley & O'Nolan, 2013). Ireland witnessed an increase in CSA reporting throughout the 1990s, contributing to a greater public awareness and understanding of the issue from the reporting of high profile cases including the Kilkenny Incest Investigation (McGuinness, 1993) and The West of Ireland Farmer Case (Bruton, 1998). Both of these cases depicted extreme cases of neglect and abuse endured by children where domestic violence was also reported as a common feature, providing evidence of the increased risk to children in domestic violence homes (Buckley & O' Nolan, 2013).

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<sup>7</sup> The Irish Family Law (Maintenance of Spouses and Children) Act, 1976 introduced the first civil remedy for domestic violence which allowed for a victim to apply for a 'barring order' excluding the abusive spouse from the home (Nestor, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Department of Health (1983) Non-Accidental Injury to Children: Guidelines on Procedures for the Identification, Investigation and Management of Non-Accidental Injury to Children. Dublin: Department of Health.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Health (1987) Child Abuse Guidelines: Guidelines on Procedures for the Identification, Investigation and Management of Child Abuse. Dublin: Department of Health.

### ***Police investigation of child abuse cases***

A collection of small scale research studies compiled by Buckley (2002), includes those carried out by police officers and social workers practising in Ireland during the 1990s, and provides an insight in to early child protection responses. There is evidence from the studies to suggest that the construction of child abuse as a criminal issue, brought with it new challenges for the Irish police and a need to adapt policing skills to meet the sensitive nature of such cases. Referring to a study conducted by officer O'Rourke in 1992 on police involvement in child abuse cases, Buckley (2002) reports that the "Gardaí, at the time, had not sufficiently recognised that dealing with child abuse was fundamentally different from investigating other types of crime" (p. 107). Indeed, the Irish police were criticised by commentators for the poor investigation of child abuse from the 1950s onwards (Brady, 2014).

The introduction of 12 female officers to the police force in 1959 was regarded as a significant landmark in Irish policing and the response to women and child victims. Clancy (2009) reports on lobbying by the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers back as far as 1936 for the introduction of women to the Irish police force, and the political resistance which such efforts were met with along the way. The introduction of female officers happened at a slow pace. By 1996, 7% of the force were female, whose role focused on supporting women and children at risk or in trouble (McNiffe, 1997). The gendered nature of police work was an issue raised by officers in two of the studies that Buckley (2002) included in her book. Buckley (2002) describes how;

*Both of these projects highlighted what was, at the time, a significant gender issue whereby the majority of child sexual abuse investigations were carried out by female members of An Garda Síochána, and in-service training on rape and sexual assault was available only to female Gardaí. (p. 108)*

During this time it was female officers who were assigned to investigate child abuse cases but this gendered norm later became challenged and they began to train all new officers on child protection (Buckley, 2002).

### ***Policing domestic violence in Ireland during the last century***

Brady (2014) book entitled 'The Guarding of Ireland', is one of only a few publications to document the history of Irish policing, and covers the period from 1960 to 2014.

There are very few early references to the police role in responding to domestic violence, but instead a less formal approach was potentially taken by the local officer in their own community (Brady, 2000). Brady (2014) describes the key role that community policing took in establishing the Irish police force in both rural and urban parts of Ireland during the early years after independence. Ireland had a large network of police stationed within even small rural communities and the local guard was seen as a source of security and a place where civil matters were dealt with (Brady, 2014).

In terms of the police response to domestic violence, Brady (2014) observes that the first part of the 1980s witnessed a “significant shift in focus by the Gardaí in relation to domestic violence” (p. 176). A response to pressure from advocacy groups for police to intervene in what had been historically viewed as a private family matter, led to the introduction of training of new recruits on domestic violence and sexual abuse from the mid-1970s (Brady, 2014). However, there was a general sense that domestic violence was not a favoured area of police work and a somewhat blasé attitude was taken by some officers who continued to perceive it as a family matter that both parties could resolve between themselves (Dempsey, 2004). Women’s Aid research into violence against women in Ireland reported that only 1 in 5 victims of domestic violence went to the police, citing a fear of not being believed as the main barrier (Kelleher et al., 1995). However, Brady (2014) highlights that an increased number of female officers deployed outside Dublin from the early 1980s “had a marked effect in the investigation of domestic crime and sex abuse cases” (p. 176). Indeed, it was female officers who took on the role in supporting victims to testify in some of the first cases of child abuse and family violence in Ireland (Clancy, 2009).

It was not until somewhat later that a specialist unit dealing with domestic violence was established by An Garda Síochána in 1994, known as ‘Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Unit’, formerly known as the ‘Mother and Child Unit’ (Buckley & O’Nolan, 2013). The introduction of a specialist unit coincided with a more strategic response by the Irish police to domestic violence, with the introduction of a domestic violence policy in 1993 (revised again in 1997, 2017), that advocated a pro-arrest policy (Dempsey, 2004). The enactment of the Domestic Violence Act 1996, provided greater legal remedies for victims of domestic violence and a criminal justice response to the issue. Such legislative changes, and what Heller (2001) describes as a shift towards a more ‘service orientated’ approach by police that improved the response to victims of domestic violence, led to an increase in the number of incidents being reported. Indeed, figures on reported incidents of domestic violence increased by 159% over a

five years period from 1994 to 1999 (Heller, 2001). Local networks were established across Ireland that brought together representatives from statutory and voluntary and community groups to develop a coordinated response to tackle the issue of domestic violence. Amongst members of the networks was an awareness of the detrimental impact that domestic violence had on children and a need to “understand and respond to the individual needs of victims (including children) of domestic violence” (Heller, 2001, p. 10). Based on Heller’s (2001) documenting of such developments, it would appear that more attention was being given to the issue at a strategic level and the needs of children in Ireland experiencing domestic violence were slowly being recognised. The conceptual shift from ‘vagrant’ child, to child ‘victim’ marked the beginning of a greater protectionist ideology in Ireland when it came to the safeguarding of children and will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

### **Repositioning the child in contemporary Ireland**

The changing view of childhood and the position of children in modern Western societies has contributed to a broader understanding of the need to place value on the lived experiences of children and young people and furthermore a greater recognition of the roles and responsibilities of government and the wider community in protecting children from harm (Hayes, 2002). The shift in understanding that has taken place from the one time discourse on children as “becomings” who are on a journey in to adulthood, has been directed more towards a concept of children as “beings” who are actively constructing their childhood (Qvortrup, 1994b), or the more contemporary argument that children are both “being and becoming” (Uprichard, 2008). Such developments are resounded in the changes that have occurred in Ireland’s attempts through policy and legislation to protect vulnerable children growing up in Ireland and what might be observed as children’s and young people’s more active involvement in everyday matters that affect them.

What arose from such discussions were revised child protection services and statutory policies and funding for services which aimed to protect and safeguard the lives of children living in Ireland (Hayes, 2002). Hayes (2002) maintains that the introduction of the Ombudsman for Children Act, 2002, was a clear step in acknowledging children as rights holders and in need of an independent advocate on matters that require investigation. The Child and Family Agency known as Tusla established in 2014 out of the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013, comprises Children and Family Services, Family Support services, as well as the National Educational Welfare Board and

Domestic Violence Services. Indeed, the inclusion of domestic violence services within the Child and Family Agency can be viewed as symbolic in recognising the impact to children living with domestic violence and the need for a more strategic response to them.

In the 2012 Children's Referendum on the Thirty-first Amendment to the Constitution on Children, the Irish people voted in favour of protecting and extending the rights of children in line with international statute. The first National Children's Strategy, *Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy 2000 – 2010 (Department of Health and Children, 2000)*, marked a significant attempt by Irish policy makers to meet the criteria laid out in the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The National Children's Strategy set out to provide a more strategic approach to improving the quality of life for Irish children and young people through gaining an understanding of their lives and how best services could be developed to meet their specific needs. The Strategy held the view of children and young people as valued members within Irish society who can contribute to the making of evidence based policy and legislation which affects their lives as young citizens.

The message within the goals of the National Strategy communicated the government's intent to meet the requirements of the UNCRC, in particular Article 12 which recognises the voice of the child. In 2005, the NCO in collaboration with the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland, published a document entitled *Young Voices: guidelines on how to involve children and young people in your work*.<sup>10</sup> A key principle of the project was on children becoming participating active citizens with an input into policy and services that directly affect them, with a wider impact on promoting citizenship and social inclusion. This venture was an example at the time of the type of collaborative work being done by statutory and non-statutory agencies and their bid to make services more participative of children and young people.

*Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*, is the current national policy framework for children and young people covering the period 2014 – 2020 (DCYA, 2014). The framework sets out provision for children and young people's views to be listened to and included in

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<sup>10</sup> This document was built on the work done by the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland (on behalf of the Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative) which was published in a document entitled *Hearing Young Voices: Consulting Children and Young People, including those Experiencing poverty or other forms of Social Exclusion, in relation to Public Policy Development in Ireland (2002)* and accompanying Guidelines (2003).

policy as well as the importance of early intervention and preventative services for children in Ireland that will support each child in receiving the necessary supports they need to be active members of their communities achieving full potential both in learning and development. It also mentions domestic violence as a risk factor for children and the need to recognise the life-long impact and trauma children experience from exposure to domestic violence amongst others adversities including parental mental health issues, bereavement, child abuse (DCYA, 2014).

### ***Domestic violence in modern Ireland and the child victim***

In 2016, 10,101 women and 3,685 children received a support service or/and emergency accommodation from a domestic violence service in Ireland (Safe Ireland, 2016). Women's Aid Ireland figures for 2017, reported 3,552 incidents of child abuse disclosed by women (Women's Aid, 2017). Indeed, the risk of domestic violence is increased when there are children in the relationship (Walby & Allen, 2004; Watson & Parsons, 2005). Watson and Parsons (2005) found that women with children were more likely to have experienced violence in the last five years.

When we consider the construction of children as meaningful beings and rights holders as a somewhat recent phenomenon, then it is not surprising that the association between domestic violence and child abuse was not officially dealt with until more recently. Nationally, it was in a document entitled *Putting Children First* (Department of Health, 1996), that domestic violence was officially referred to as being within the definitional framework of child abuse (Buckley, 1999). In 2002, the United Kingdom amended the 1989 Children Act under section 120 of the Adoption and Children Act (2002) to include the witnessing of domestic violence as harm which constituted a child protection concern. It was not until 2011 when the National Children First policy in Ireland (DCYA, 2011) was revised to include domestic violence as a form of child abuse that similar recognition was reflected in Irish policy.

There is a relatively small body of empirical research pertaining to the views of children and young people living in Ireland who have experienced domestic violence. The first piece of Irish research comes from Buckley et al. (2006). The study entitled *Listen to Me* was commissioned by the Mayo Women's Support Service and included focus groups with 22 children and young people between the ages of 8 and 18 years, as well as mothers and practitioners. Findings from the study provided valuable insight into the views of children and young people in Ireland who had experienced living with

domestic violence, out of which the authors produced a set of recommendations to develop much needed services in Ireland to children impacted by the issue.<sup>11</sup> The second Irish study was published shortly after by Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) using slightly different research methods (individual interviews), but a similar sample size of 22 children and young (5-21 years), recruited from a refuge and community population. Within both studies, the young participants were able to identify their experience of domestic violence, not only through physical incidents that they overheard or witnessed, but also through the patterns of controlling behaviours used by the abusive parent that prevented them and their siblings from living a normal childhood (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Arising from both studies was a need for more child-centred services for children who have been affected by domestic violence. One of the overall proposals coming from the study was the need "for a greater recognition by the professional system of the huge adversities experienced by child victims of domestic violence and an increase in community-based child-centred supports to respond to their needs" (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007, p. 2). Using these two documents as an example, it demonstrates the shift in conceptualising domestic violence as an adult issue in Ireland to one that recognises the child as victim requiring specialist support and a multi-agency response. Findings from these studies will be explored further in the next chapter.

### ***Policy and legislative context***

Recent updates have been made to domestic violence legislation in Ireland through the enactment of The Domestic Violence Bill 2017, as a measure to bring Irish laws in line with provisions laid out in the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Ireland signed up to the Convention in 2011, however legislative changes were required around barring orders and the protection of constitutional property rights before the convention could be ratified. Following similar legislative changes in the UK, the Domestic Violence Act 2018, now recognises coercive control as a crime and creates the basis for a broader understanding of children's experience of living with domestic violence. The legislation defines coercive control in terms of persistent controlling or coercive behaviours that have serious effect on a person resulting in a fear of violence will be used against them and impacting on their daily life and routine.

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<sup>11</sup> Mayo Children's Initiative was established in 2009 as a direct result of recommendations from the 'Listen to Me Study'. This was the first service in Ireland to be set up to work with children around the issue of domestic violence.



Under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, the statutory Child and Family Agency known as Tusla was established in 2014, and brought with it a legislative duty on government to 'care and protect' those who are a victim of domestic violence, including children. The Children First Act 2015 introduced a mandatory reporting system into Ireland which imposes a duty on persons to notify the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) of any child considered to be at risk of emotional or physical harm. The full enactment of the legislation took some time to be fully implemented with delays to the introduction of mandatory reporting in late 2017. Children who are living in a home where there is domestic violence are considered to be at risk (DCYA, 2011). Implementation of *The Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-2021* is overseen by COSC (The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence). High level goals involve prevention strategies through awareness and training, the provision of victim services and perpetrator accountability, all of which are to be informed by effective data gathering and research and monitoring. Children are often briefly mentioned in the strategy as needing support as witnesses to domestic and sexual violence in the home (COSC, 2016).

### ***Policing domestic violence in Ireland***

The policy of An Garda Síochána on Domestic Abuse Intervention, originally published in 1997 and revised in 2017, provides a working definition of the issue and outlines the procedures that police officers in Ireland must adhere to when responding to domestic abuse incidents (An Garda Síochána, 2017). The document recognises the broad set of relationships that domestic violence can occur within, and refers briefly to the negative impact on children who are living in homes where there is domestic violence. Police Inspectors are directed to oversee the implementation of the policy within each policing Division. Officers are required to investigate all incidents of domestic abuse reported by the victim or a third party, recognising the risk to victims when perpetrators do not perceive police to carry out appropriate action, thereby leading to further abuse. The new policy continues with a pro-arrest approach, advising officers to use the power of arrest when there is cause to suspect that an offence has been committed, even in a situation when no legal order exists and the injured party refuses to make a formal complaint. The policy speaks briefly to the pattern of abuse and increase in severity over time which may add to the victim's vulnerability. In accordance with Garda Victim Service Policy – EU-Victims Directive, officers are advised to ensure that victims are provided with relevant information on support services and legal instruments available to them.

The Garda Inspectorate Report (Garda Inspectorate, 2014) found serious flaws in the policing of domestic violence in Ireland. Some of the key issues related to ineffective recording systems for domestic violence incidents, a lack of evidence that policy was being implemented and monitored at an operational level, low arrest rates relative to the number of incidents and general inconsistencies in how incidents were dealt with by officers. The attitude of police towards domestic violence work was raised as a key issue in that some officers demonstrated a good understanding of the complexities of domestic violence and provided a good service to victims, however this was starkly contrasted by the views of officers when they perceived domestic violence calls to be “problematic, time consuming, and a waste of resources” (p. 17). In terms of children, the report identifies children as “secondary victims” (p. 42) of domestic violence and the impact caused to them by domestic violence. The implications of not recording domestic violence correctly on both children and the adult victim, was raised under victim service and care and the need to recognise that a domestic violence incident is very often not an isolated event. The report also recognises the whole of family as impacted by domestic violence, thereby requiring a higher priority in policing.

Drawing on an Irish study conducted in Cork, Fennell and Ryan (2004) explore the police response to domestic violence in accordance with policy at the time, using incident forms from 10 police stations in the Cork area across a 17 month period and seven completed surveys from regular police. They cite a paper presented by Morgan and Fitzgerald in 1992<sup>12</sup> from which they observe “This study suggested that the Gardaí saw themselves in a counselling role in relation to domestic violence as opposed to a strictly policing role” (p. 83). Children were reported as present in 55% of all reported incidents of domestic violence. Disputes over access to children were recorded but regarded as more of a civil than criminal matter.

### ***Police role in safeguarding and responding to children***

In response to incidents of domestic violence where there are children present, the policy states under procedure 2.8 (g) that the investigating Garda must take note of the “physical and emotional condition of any children present; note any child protection concerns; comply with Children First National Guidance, as appropriate” (p.5). The welfare of children is covered under a specific heading in section 7.0 of the policy and reminds police of their powers under section 12 of the Child Care Act, 1991 which allows them to remove a child from a home where they feel there is an immediate risk

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<sup>12</sup> The paper was presented at the Conference on Safety for Women in October 1992.

to that child's safety. Officers are advised to identify if there are any children present in the home at the time of the incident or during follow up. In a situation where an officer "suspects that there is a risk to the health, safety or welfare of any children involved, Tusla will be notified without delay as per *An Garda Síochána Policy on the Investigation of Sexual Crime, Crimes Against Children and Child Welfare*" (p. 15). The policy also informs officers that "Children who witness Domestic Abuse incidents are often traumatised and may also suffer emotional abuse. This should be taken into account when considering referrals to Tusla" (p. 16).

There is some discretion therefore left to the officer on the decision to make a notification to Tusla regarding children present at a domestic violence incident, or known to be residing in the home. However, in the *Garda Policy on the Investigation of Sexual Crime Crimes Against Children Child Welfare*, it clearly directs officers that they must make a notification to Tusla when children are in a family where there is domestic violence. Section 37 deals with Domestic Violence - 7.3.

*Members encountering domestic violence incidents between persons who have children will refer all such cases to Túsla. Bearing in mind the repeated and systematic nature of domestic violence, notifications will be made to Túsla whether or not the children were present at the scene of the incident at the time that it occurred. It must never be assumed that a domestic violence incident is a once-off isolated event. (p. 87)*

There is some ambiguity therefore between the two policies as to whether a notification must be made or if it is at the discretion of the individual officer to make the decision. In terms of engaging directly with children at a domestic violence incident, there is very little mentioned in either policy to direct officers on how to proceed with children present. The policy stipulates however the need for specialist interviewers to conduct interviews with children under 14 years who "are victims of violent or sexual incident" (p. 16). It then recommends officers "that any statements are taken by specialist interviewers, in order to limit further trauma" (p. 16). These statements would both suggest that the purpose therefore of speaking directly with the child is to gather evidence if they are an injured party and direct victim of abuse.

A recent audit was carried out into the use of Section 12 of the Child Care Act 1991 which allows for Gardaí to remove a child from a home if they consider the child to be in immediate risk of harm (Shannon, 2017). Findings highlight the increased demand on Gardaí and diversity within their role which child protection is now considered to be a firm part of. Shannon's (2017) report found police to be concerned with ensuring the safety and general well-being of children and recognised the need to ensure that police contact with the child is not a traumatising experience. The report found in general very positive regard for children in the work of the Gardaí:

*“Indeed, the overwhelming finding in this audit is that Garda members commit great efforts to treating children sensitively and compassionately when a child has been removed under section 12”  
(Shannon, 2017, p. xi)*

Further findings from the audit revealed no formal training for new recruits on child protection and poor inter-agency communication between the Child and Family Agency and An Garda Síochána.

### ***Culture within An Garda Síochána and reform***

An Garda Síochána Modernisation and Renewal Programme 2016 -2021 sets out the need for cultural reform within Irish policing and is situated against a wider reform process that was established under commitments within the Policing Plan 2017. An independent audit was carried out the same year presenting a snapshot of police culture within the Irish system (PriceWaterhouseCooper, 2018). The audit revealed certain issues with the overall morale of officers which were said to reflect the backdrop of controversy and scrutiny into governance and oversight within An Garda Síochána, which contributed to a largely negative media portrayal of the service and its members in recent years. Overall, findings report the impact that police scandals over the last twenty years have had on morale and public perception of the police and the need to learn from mistakes of the past and cultivate a new culture through strong leadership. A process of modernisation and professionalisation happening within the Irish police force also places an emphasis on community policing and the importance of re-establishing trust and confidence between communities and local police (O'Sullivan, 2015).

P. Williams (2016) small scale qualitative study on policing culture in Ireland, conducted individual interviews with eight serving members of An Garda Síochána. The research added to dearth of empirical studies involving the Irish police force and external researchers. Findings revealed that over time the job may make an individual “tougher” or “cold” which was described more as a lack of empathy for a situation, as opposed to people, in that over time situations become less shocking or emotive to the officer. Findings also reported the heavy use of discretion in policing in order to keep the peace and manage a situation without evoking any criminal charges against the assailant. A “job” was considered “well done” when an officer was able to handle the situation such as a domestic dispute by resolving it at the scene or when an arrest was made without the need for force to be applied, thereby completing the task without unnecessary conflict (p. 44). There was no reference made to working with children or the police role in safeguarding children.

### ***Children’s views on the police role in Ireland***

Finally, children’s views of the police in Ireland and elsewhere will be explored briefly before concluding the chapter with an outline of the thesis. In 2008 an Irish youth project established the ‘What’s the story? Collective’, made up of a group of youth workers, young people, youth leaders and an artist to look at issues of power and social justice. What emerged was a number of personal accounts by young people of their experiences with the Gardaí. This resulted in a six week exhibition in 2010 entitled ‘Policing Dialogues’ which looked at the power relationship between young people and the Gardaí. The project also looked at involving the young people in developing an area specific training programme for new recruits. This piece of work was symbolic in giving the young people of that area a voice in matters that affect them and recognising the need to build stronger more respectful relationships with the Gardaí and the local community. The young people shared their experiences of feeling powerless in their interactions with the Gardaí, with many recounting times when they were stopped by the Gardaí for what they felt was for no reason provoking frustration and anger in them (Whelan, 2011). Quantitative research conducted by Feeney (2009) involving 103 young people aged 15 – 19 in the Dublin region of Ireland were surveyed on their views and attitudes to Gardaí. Similar to Whelan (2011), there was a general dissatisfaction with police interactions that were described as disrespectful or stopping and searching young people which they felt were unfairly discriminated against because of their status as teenager. Feeney (2009) asked young people whether they thought domestic violence was a private matter, not a Garda matter, to which the vast majority of

participants disagreed, suggesting that young people recognise domestic violence as a public issue requiring police intervention.

Outside of Ireland, qualitative research by Øverlien and Aas (2016) in Norway, reported on findings from individual interviews with 25 children on their understanding of the police role. They found that there was generally a “trust” and “respect” for the police by the children (p. 4). In the event of an emergency situation, children reported that they would call the police for help. Indeed, a police intervention was viewed by some of the children as having the potential to end the violence and abuse in the home (McGee, 2000; Øverlien & Aas, 2016). Children in the study associated the police with the more punitive aspect of the role as opposed to the welfare side, which was taken into account when deciding whether or not to call the police. Often children who had no experience of contact with the police in this context, focused on the authoritative side of policing which prevented them from seeking help for domestic violence. Indeed, media misrepresentations of police as carrying guns, car chases and using physical force to arrest the ‘bad guys’, can lead children to focus simply on the punitive role of police (Powell, Skouteris, & Murfett, 2008).

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has served as an introduction by firstly setting out the background and rationale for the study and the approach taken to achieve the main aim and objective - to explore children’s experiences of the police response to domestic violence. In order to situate the research within the Irish context, a socio-historical perspective has been applied. McGregor (2014)<sup>13</sup> argues that there is a change in discourse that is shaping the development of child care policy in Ireland today and the establishment of Tusla, The Child and Family Agency. Three core and inter-related ‘new discourses’ are shaping present policy development in child welfare: a concern to purge past shame; purge past systemic failures; and reconceptualise child protection services towards a child-centred and children’s rights orientation (McGregor, 2014, p. 775). Although it may be concluded that there has been a transformation in the area of women’s and children’s rights in Ireland and wider definitions afforded to the phenomenon domestic violence, there remains some question over how far this shift is echoed throughout the everyday lives of Irish families and their interaction with agencies of the State.

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<sup>13</sup> To clarify this is the same author cited at the beginning of the chapter – Caroline Skehill, later writing under her married name McGregor.

## **Thesis outline**

Chapters Two and Three provide a review of the literature. **Chapter Two** is dealt with in two parts. Part One begins by discussing findings related to the impact of domestic violence on children taking a life-course perspective to demonstrate the cumulative risk to the child living with domestic violence but also some of the supportive factors which play in role in to what extent the child is impacted. This is followed by drawing on findings from qualitative studies that include the voice of children to explore how domestic violence impacts on the child's family life and relationships and the strategies they develop to cope with those experiences. Part Two discusses the ways in which children are constructed as 'victim' in the domestic violence debate and presents a more contemporary discourse which has emerged positioning the child as active agent in the home with the capacity for agency. The chapter concludes by exploring how new conceptions of the agentic child might translate to practice and policy and some final observations on the use of a victim discourse with children experiencing domestic violence.

**Chapter Three**, the second of the literature review chapters provides a review of the police response to domestic violence and perspectives on the police response to children at a domestic violence call-out. The discussion begins by examining the help-seeking behaviours in terms of police reporting by abused mothers and what they observe to be a supportive response by police. Constructions of domestic violence in policing culture and individual attitude of officers in how they respond to incidents is explored, followed by a review of the literature on police response to a domestic violence incident with children present, examining the perspective of both police and children. Finally the chapter draws on best practice guidelines from the UK and US literature to outline recommended approaches for police to take in responding to a domestic violence call-out where children are present.

**Chapter Four** presents the methodology used in the research; the theoretical framework and steps undertaken to carry out the research strategy. An outline is provided of the multi-pronged recruitment strategies used to access the four sample populations and challenges in recruiting children and young people to the study. Details on sampling and interviewing of each of the populations is provided paying special attention to interviews with children that took a different approach using a story-telling scenario to elicit the views of children on the police response to domestic violence.

**Chapter Five** is the first of three chapters to present findings from the study. Chapter Five builds a picture drawing on the four perspectives to provide a descriptive account of what happens when the police respond to a domestic violence incident where children are present in the home. The discussion includes help-seeking by mothers and children calling the police, the actions of children on police arrival to the scene and level of engagement between police and children. It then examines views on a positive police response and an ineffective response by police.

**Chapter Six** draws on an ecological framework to examine some of the broader factors that influence the child's experience of the police response both within their direct and indirect environment. Factors are discussed at the micro, meso, exo and macro systems including the role of family, messages to children about the police in the community, police culture and broader cultural norms within Ireland and discourses on domestic violence.

**Chapter Seven** explores the different ways children experiencing domestic violence are conceptualised by adults and discusses these in relation to police perception of their role with children. Four separate yet overlapping constructs of the child are presented. They are: the invisible child; the passive bystander; the vulnerable innocent; the involved actor. These are used to explore the variation in police response to children and how this differs to children's representation as victim in the domestically violent home.

**Chapter Eight** provides a summary of findings from the study followed by a discussion on how to move forward theoretically to include children in the practice response to domestic violence.



## **Chapter Two: Constructing the Child ‘Victim’ of Domestic Violence**

### **Introduction**

During the mid to late 1990s, the link between child abuse and domestic violence was beginning to emerge as an issue that required the attention of policy makers and practitioners involved in the safeguarding of children. A systematic review of the early research literature on domestic violence by Appel and Holden (1998), highlighted the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse. Indeed, the construction of domestic violence as an adult issue began to be challenged by authors who recognised the direct and indirect ways that children living with domestic violence were negatively impacted by their experiences (McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). References to children as ‘secondary victims’ and ‘collateral damage’, did not reflect the distinct role that children played in the domestic violence home and undermined the child’s status as victim in their own right (Peled, 1998; A. Saunders, 1995). Since then, children are now positioned less peripheral and more central within the domestic violence debate, owing to the growing depth of qualitative research being conducted with children in this area, providing rich insights into the child’s experience of domestic violence.

As the focus of this thesis recognises the child’s experience through new sociological understandings that position children as social actors as opposed to passive bystanders, this literature review prioritises qualitative studies that include children’s experiences of living with domestic violence as told by the child themselves, as opposed to research that relies on adult informants, a more common research approach taken in the past. This has also lead to placing a greater emphasis on research that highlights children’s agency in the domestic violence home as opposed to one that pathologizes children’s experiences (Callaghan, Fellin, Alexander, Mavrou, & Papathanasiou, 2017). In this way, children’s actions as well as emotions are discussed in order to acknowledge the child as a social actor in the domestic violence home, focusing on capacity as opposed to deficits that are more inclined to limit the child as passive. A social constructionist perspective understands the actions of individuals to be informed by the meaning they make of their lived experience of events. Children’s action thus is viewed through this lens as a result of the meaning they give to their experience of domestic violence and abuse and the ways in which they actively engage in strategies to protect themselves.

As such this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part of the chapter briefly examines the impact of domestic violence on children from a life-course perspective, as a way of illustrating the cumulative harm to children living with domestic violence. The rest of the section draws on participatory research with children who have experienced domestic violence, examining how domestic violence impacts on the everyday life and relationships of children, as well as the coping strategies children develop to keep themselves and others safe. This is achieved by drawing selectively from qualitative research conducted in the UK, Nordic countries and North America, as well as paying particular attention to empirical research conducted in Ireland. Part two explores how children are constructed within the context of that experience and how that construction influences the response to them. It begins by exploring the recent theoretical and research insights pertaining to children in the domestic violence literature and the repositioning of the child as central to the domestic violence debate. Conceptualising the child as a victim of domestic violence in research is also explored, with the next section examining how conceptions of children inform the child's involvement in research and practice responses.

### **Impact on the child: A life-course perspective**

A life course perspective for understanding the impact of living with domestic violence on children, takes into account both the immediate and the long term impact on individual well-being and functioning across the life-span (L. Williams, 2003). L. Williams (2003) posits that a life course perspective is required if we are to better understand the nature and patterns of abuse in households throughout the different life stages, and equally how multiple forms of abuse may be experienced increasing in intensity and severity over time. Children may be directly impacted by domestic violence when they intervene to protect a care-giver, sometimes causing physical injury to themselves (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007), or they may be the direct target of the perpetrator who involves the child in the systematic abuse of them and their non-abusing care-giver (Mullender et al., 2002). Children may also be direct witnesses to physical and sexual violence in the home (McGee, 2000), resulting in symptoms of trauma (Pynoos & Nader, 1988). In other domestically violent households, the child may never be directly caught up in the violence, however they are still indirectly impacted when care-giving is jeopardised by the abusers actions (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001), and the child must adapt to living in an environment in which daily needs for comfort and security are compromised (Stanley, 2011). The child's

experience therefore goes beyond just witnessing, in that they see, hear and feel the immediate and aftermath of the trauma (Edleson, 1999).

This section of the chapter draws from the literature using a life course perspective to briefly examine the impact of domestic violence on children, by looking separately at the stages within the child's development. The section concludes with a review of the mediating as well as supportive factors which can contribute to future outcomes for the individual child. While it is helpful to understand some of the potential impacts to children, not all children will be impacted by their experiences of violence and abuse in the same way. Indeed, as Mullender et al. (2002) contend: "children respond as unique individuals to what they are experiencing" (p. 202), demonstrating the individuality of the child's experience which should be accounted for.

### ***Pre-birth***

Pregnancy is well documented in the literature as a risk period for a woman whose partner is abusive (J. Campbell, Woods, Chouaf, & Parker, 2000; McGee, 2000). Mothers experience of domestic violence during the gestation period, a critical period in the child's development, has been related to poorer health and developmental delays in early childhood (Yount, DiGirolamo, & Ramakrishnan, 2011). Beginning from pre-birth, the development of a foetus in utero can experience and be impacted by a mothers' heightened stress levels and anxiety, resulting in increased cortisol that can be transferred to the unborn child (Carpenter & Stacks, 2009). In addition, violence during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth and neonatal death (Murphy, Schei, Myhr, & Du Mont, 2001; Yount et al., 2011).

### ***Infants and toddlers***

During this early period in development, the young child is entirely dependent on their care-givers to provide for their emotional and physical needs (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003). The ability of care-givers to provide for the child's basic needs, including a secure and safe base from which to learn and develop, can be compromised when domestic violence undermines parenting capacity and can result in poor attachment between the child and primary caregiver (Edleson, 1999; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Drawing on quantitative data from the SARP database across five US sites, Fantuzzo, Fusco, Mohr, and Perry (2007) found that younger children are more at risk of exposure to multiple incidents due to their increased dependence and proximity to adult care-givers. Maternal reporting from a US study

consisting of 48 Mothers who had experienced severe physical abuse and symptoms of PTSD, reported trauma symptoms in their infant children (Bogat, DeJonghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006). According to Levendosky et al. (2003), based on maternal reports and direct observation of mother-child interaction, mothers psychological functioning may be impaired by experiences of domestic violence and in turn have a negative impact on parenting resulting in behavioural and emotional difficulties seen in pre-schoolers. Pre-schoolers may display with emotional outbursts of aggression, anxiety and be difficult to comfort (Cunningham & Baker, 2007), as well as physiological symptoms including headaches, stomach aches, nightmares, problems sleeping and bedwetting (Stanley, 2011).

### ***School-aged (6-12 years)***

School-aged children (6-12 years) are reported in the literature to develop increased externalising behaviours as a result of their experiences of living with domestic violence (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; McGee, 2000; Mullender & Morley, 1994). Behaviours may also involve the child isolating themselves socially and withdrawing (Holt et al., 2008). During this stage the child is more at risk of being bullied in school by peers (Baldry, 2003), or developing aggressive behaviours (Bauer et al., 2006). Children may be more prone to 'acting out' due to misplaced anger when they have nobody to communicate with about what is happening at home (Cunningham & Baker, 2007). During this stage children are becoming more aware that their experience of violence in the home is not the norm, and may begin to manage how much they disclose about family life to others, keeping their experiences of the violence hidden (Marianne Hester, 2007). Learning to keep the violence a secret is one of many complex strategies that the child develops over time to keep themselves and other family members safe. Children's coping strategies will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

### ***Adolescence and young adulthood***

Adolescents and young adults who have experienced domestic violence and abuse in childhood have been found to be at greater risk of developing poorer mental health, including self-harming behaviours and suicidal ideation (Haj-Yahia, 2001). Fergusson and Horwood (1998) gathered data over the course of 18 years to examine the psychosocial adjustment with retrospective reports of exposure to domestic violence in childhood. Findings revealed increased rates of poor mental health, substance abuse and criminal behaviours in those who reported exposure to domestic violence

throughout childhood (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998). Elsewhere, reports of delinquent behaviour particularly violence in adolescent girls exposed to domestic violence in childhood have been found (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). Young people when asked, may directly attribute their emotional difficulties to their father's violence against their mother (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Furthermore, childhood experiences of domestic violence commonly appear in the narratives of young adult men and women receiving homeless and addiction services (Mayock, Corr, & O'Sullivan, 2013).

### **Mediating factors**

Not all children will experience domestic violence in the same way, nor will they all be impacted negatively by their experience of it. Certain theories and concepts are helpful in understanding these differences in outcomes and will be explored in this section. Firstly, ecological systems theory, originally conceived by Urie Bronfenbrenner, provides a framework for understanding the interconnectedness between a person and their environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The theory is regarded for its contribution to theories on development due to the sharp focus it brings to context and environment (Ashabi & O'Neal, 2015). Bronfenbrenner's theory locates the child within their immediate environment in the core of the system, known as the microsystem. Surrounding the child are care-givers, peers, the child's school and community in which they live that form mesosystems, some of which are more directly related to the child (such as parent child relationship) than others (child and community). The next system Bronfenbrenner identifies is the exosystem, a more indirect environment to the child, yet still an influential factor. Within this layer of the child's system operate the police, social services and voluntary agencies that exist within the wider community in which the child lives in. The macrosystem then is where political and social norms exist, forming the outer layer that surrounds the entire system. Finally, the chronosystem positioned outside of the macrosystem accounts for the changes that take place over time, effecting the system as a whole (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Academics in the field of child abuse, have successfully applied a developmental-ecological approach to explore the impact of domestic violence on children, in order to demonstrate the complex nature and interactions between the child and their social and environmental contexts (Mohr, Noone Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2000; Mohr & Tulman, 2000). In addition, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has been used in social work practice by practitioners to develop a richer understanding of factors influencing the child's development and assessment (Siporin, 1980). It is also favoured

as a tool for understanding child development by practitioners in early learning settings (Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny, 2017). Whilst the adaptability of the theory makes it widely accessible across disciplines, it has been critiqued by some commentators for failing to include the concept of resilience and to acknowledge the individual's capacity to overcome adversities in their lives (Christensen, 2016). Notwithstanding this, the ecological model provides a strong theoretical framework from which to explore the multiple factors that influence how the child experiences living in a home with domestic violence. The theory is drawn on in Chapter Six of this thesis when presenting findings on factors influencing how the child experiences the police response to domestic violence.

'Polyvictimization', a term coined by Finkelhor et al. (2011), describes how children and young people may be exposed to multiple forms of violence, abuse, crime and deprivation within families and their wider community. Findings suggest that school-aged children who grow up in a violent and chaotic environment are in fact more at risk of experiencing multiple adversities, contributing to polyvictimization and poorer outcomes (Finkelhor et al., 2011). The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study by Felitti and colleagues (1988) has become increasingly used as a benchmark study from which to explore the cumulative risk to children growing up in a home with domestic violence and abuse, where there also exists other risk factors which can negatively impact on the child's future outcomes. There is an awareness of the negative impact in later life on both physical and mental health, peer and intimate relationships, as well as economic status in individuals who have grown up experiencing multiple adversities in childhood, including; parental addiction and mental health problems, poverty and social isolation, domestic violence, and childhood physical and sexual abuse (Felitti et al., 1998). It is argued that the more adversity experienced in childhood, the higher the ACE scoring which is predictive of poorer future outcomes.

There has been much speculation in the literature on the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence within families. Wood and Sommers (2011) systematic review of the literature from 2000 – 2010 found no evidence in the research to support a direct causation between children's witnessing of domestic violence and later perpetration or victimisation. They conclude that the intergenerational transmission of IPV<sup>14</sup> should be considered within a broader understanding of IPV and the multiple set of factors that combine to shape an individual's experience such as "social support, mental health,

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<sup>14</sup> Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a more common term used in US literature when discussing domestic violence.

gender and cultural norms” (p.232). The authors draw on evidence from the literature to argue that dose-response relationships may be more helpful in explaining the intergenerational cycle of IPV, by suggesting that “the stronger the experience of witnessing IPV, the stronger the likelihood of either having adverse health outcomes or perpetuating an intergenerational pattern of IPV” (2012, p. 232). Longitudinal research carried out in the US by Widom and colleagues (2014), measured IPV victimisation in adulthood 30 years later of children between the age of 0-11 with a reported history of childhood maltreatment including physical and sexual abuse and/or neglect, and a control group with no similar history. Findings reported that childhood maltreatment, in particular neglect, was associated with an increased risk of abuse leading to injury by a partner in adult relationships. Indeed, neglect in childhood was also found to be a predictor of increased likelihood of IPV perpetration in adulthood for both men and women (Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014).

There is a growing awareness regarding the prevalence of abuse within young dating relationships. In a UK study done conducted by Barter, McCarry, Berridge, and Evans (2009), 1,353 young people were questioned about their experience of violence in dating relationships. The findings reported that 25% of girls and 18% of boys had experienced some form of physical abuse in their relationship, with the vast majority of those reporting that they had either told a friend or nobody about the violence. One of the risk factors identified in the study which increased a young person’s risk of teen dating violence was a history of parental domestic violence.

Whilst there is evidence to suggest some level of perpetration of violence or victimisation in the intimate relationships of individuals who have experienced domestic violence in childhood, there are also cases where the cycle is not repeated for individuals. There is however, enough evidence to suggest that by strengthening relationships and building resilience in children in domestic violence homes, that this can act as a buffer against long term negative impacts for some children (Hughes, Graham-Bermann, & Gruber, 2001; Martinez-Torteya, Anne Bogat, Von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009). Mullender et al. (2002) provide accounts of children surviving “even the direst circumstances with resilience” (p. 207).

Together the studies presented in this section, indicate a need to intervene early in the lives of children and families experiencing domestic violence, so as to avoid the potential for poor future outcomes. However, adults in the lives of children growing up with domestic violence, can sometimes fail to appreciate children’s capacity to

understand what is happening in the home, and the impact the violence has on their lives (McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Based on children's accounts of their experiences living with domestic violence, they are much more aware of the violence and abuse than parents acknowledge (Stanley, 2011). The next section of this chapter thus turns to the voices of children, who as research participants have shared their personal stories of living with domestic violence, through which we have come to gain a deeper understanding of the child's subjective experience of living with domestic violence

### **Children's views and experiences of living with domestic violence**

This next section draws selectively from existing qualitative research that prioritises the voice of children and young people as direct informants on their experiences of living with domestic violence (Buckley et al., 2006; Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Katz, 2015; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Stanley et al., 2010; Swanston, Bowyer, & Vetere, 2014). Findings from the above mentioned studies will be employed throughout this thesis to examine what it is like from the child's perspective to live in a home with violence and abuse. New sociological understandings of children and childhood underpin the present study within which the child is conceived of as a social actor with agency as opposed to a passive subject (James & Prout, 1997). Indeed, much of the current literature on children's experiences of domestic violence pays particular attention to children's use of agency and their position as victim in the domestic violence home (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). Agency has become a key concept used in the literature in this field, and will be examined in more detail later in this chapter. This section provides an overview of children's experiences of domestic violence and looks firstly at children's awareness of the violence and abuse, followed by the impact on family life and relationships. To conclude part one of this chapter, children's coping strategies will be examined in light of the current literature in this area.

A common theme found across all of the above mentioned studies is the depth of children's awareness of both the physical and non-physical forms of violence that take place in the home. Children describe how their daily lives and relationships are impacted by their experience of living with domestic violence (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). There is sufficient research evidence to assert that children are aware of the violence and abuse that takes place in the home and that parents often underestimate that awareness (McGee,



2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Stanley, Miller, & Foster, 2012). This is evident in children's ability, even from a young age, to recall incidents that took place and the impact it had on family life (Mullender et al., 2002). Children are capable of tuning into changes in family dynamics caused by parental violence as well as being impacted by more indirect forms of emotional violence and abuse perpetrated against their mother (Swanston et al., 2014).

Children's emotional responses are more complex than adults may perceive them to be (Mullender et al., 2002). Early qualitative studies conducted by Mullender et al. (2002) and McGee (2000) involving interviews with children in the UK who had experienced domestic violence, revealed the complexity of children's emotional response. In both studies, the children described mixed feelings of fear, sadness, anger and confusion which they experienced individually but also simultaneously, and sometimes towards both care-givers. Younger children may also blame themselves for their parents arguing, and may intervene to stop them; portrayed by children in their narratives as intervening in some way to stop the parents arguing (Thornton, 2014). A small scale qualitative study by Swanston et al. (2014) in the UK, explored the experiences of school-aged children 8 to 13 years (n=5) and their mothers (n=3) who had been exposed to domestic violence. Consistent with findings by other authors (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Katz, 2016; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009), it was not only the physical violence that children described as being frightening, but also the threat and fear of living in an unpredictable environment (Swanston et al., 2014).

### ***Children's experiences of coercive control and non-physical violence***

The recognition of coercive control in domestic violence policy and legislation in a growing number of jurisdictions including the United Kingdom and Ireland, has resulted in a shift in perspective from focusing not just on the impact of physical violence to acknowledging other forms of abuse (Stark, 2007), that are less easily identified but are considered to have as big an impact on the child (Katz, 2016). Reflecting this in research, there has been a growing interest in exploring children's experiences of coercive control (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2016; Øverlien, 2013). A qualitative study conducted in the UK as part of the wider Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies (UNARS) project included individual interviews with 20 children and young people aged 8 to 18 years recruited through specialist domestic violence services, reports on children's experiences of coercive control (Callaghan, Alexander,

et al., 2016a).<sup>15</sup> The children in the study showed an awareness of the different forms of abuse used by the perpetrator which they described as impacting negatively on their daily lives and often continuing post-separation (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a). Controlling behaviours and manipulation were used by the perpetrator to create an environment of tension and fear for children (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a). Indeed Callaghan et al. (2016a) argue that children are “immediately involved and affected by coercive and controlling behaviour that does not simply target the adult victim but affects the entire family” (p. 13). Children therefore become acutely aware of the controlling behaviours and feel the impact of it (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a). Katz’s (2016) study in the UK reports similar findings on the impact of coercive control on children. The qualitative methodology involved individual interviews with 15 children (most aged 10-14) and 15 mothers recruited from a community based sample. Children and mothers reported the many ways through which a perpetrator controlled their activities, often impinging on the mother-child relationship when their abuser demanded so much of their attention, directing it away from her child (Katz, 2015). Still, children showed ways of resisting controlling efforts and children and mothers sought comfort from each other in little ways by taking opportunities to do so when they arose and it was safe for them both (Katz, 2016). More recently work by Naughton (2017), an Irish scholar, found that emotional abuse and living in a controlling environment was linked to more negative long term outcomes for children as they were failing to be recognised as victims and receive formal supports, compared with children who fit a more traditional ‘victim’ construct of a physically abused and injured party. Increasing research evidence in the field of coercive control supports Katz’s (2016) argument on “the inadequacy of using the physical incident model as a basis for defining and discussing children’s experiences of domestic violence” (p. 56).

### ***Impact on family life and relationships***

The loss of childhood is commonly referred to by children in the literature when they talk about the impact that living with domestic violence had on their schooling, friendships, and calendar events such as birthdays and holidays that became times of worry and anxiety (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). The term ‘walking on egg shells’ has been used by children and young people in the

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<sup>15</sup> The Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies (UNARS) project is one of the largest scale studies on children’s experiences of domestic violence conducted across four European countries (Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain). The project involved qualitative interviews with 100 children, as well as professionals and parents/caregivers, and brings to light a new perspective to the CEdomestic violence literature that is more in line with constructions of children as social actors, recognising children’s agency, resistance and resilience (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015).

literature to describe their experiences of living in a home with domestic violence (Buckley et al., 2006; McGee, 2000). Predicting when an incident might take place and picking up on signs from the abuser becomes a daily task for the child (Swanston et al., 2014). An environment of unpredictability and uncertainty can lead children to feel constantly on edge and in fear of the abuser (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Children in the Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) study recalled waking up during the night to hear their mother being assaulted downstairs. The children described complex feelings of guilt when they took no action to protect their mother, even though they knew it was safer for them to remain upstairs (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Not seeing the violence was perceived by children to be even more frightening when they had to listen to it but not know exactly what was going on and not knowing if anyone was seriously injured (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000). Indeed, domestic violence has been described as a 'burden' that is carried by children when they constantly fear either parent getting hurt (L. Kelly, Sharp, & Klein, 2014).

A small scale qualitative study by Thornton (2014) used play and drawing activities to explore the emotional impact of domestic violence on younger children. The sample included eight children (5-9 years) and their mothers, offering rich insights into the strong emotional impact and the disruption caused by domestic violence to family life. Findings from the study revealed children's anger and confusion. Evidence in the children's pictures highlighted attempts to disconnect in an emotional way from the trauma of the abuse (Thornton, 2014). A parents emotional unavailability was reflected in the children's narratives and is closely linked to the conflict of loyalty and confusion children can feel towards both parents (Peled, 1998). Within the literature children describe a complex set of emotions towards both parents, including; anger, sadness, anxiety, fear and grief, that contribute to often conflicting feelings (Buckley et al., 2006; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Indeed, undermining the mother-child relationship is recognised in the literature as a form of abuse regularly used by perpetrators (Katz, 2016; Morris, 2009). The relationship between parents and children in the same family may differ depending on the child's personal experience of the abuse and feelings towards their parents (Buckley et al., 2006; Mullender et al., 2002). There are accounts of children leaving the home to live with grandparents or other relatives voluntarily to get away from the violence at home (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Swanston et al. (2014) found that children experience a "diminished sense of trust and reliance on adults" (p. 190) when they fail to protect them from the violence and abuse both during and post-separation. This, Swanston et al. argue can lead to children then taking on adult roles when they feel there is no safe adult to rely on.

Whilst the parent-child relationship can be impacted negatively, there are also several examples of the supportive role and comfort found in family relationships in the domestic violence home. The eldest child is often found to have a strong bond with their mother and is likely to take on a caring role feeling a certain sense of responsibility towards their mother and younger siblings (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2016b; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Mullender et al., 2002; Överlien, 2017). Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016b) argue that by assuming the carer role, children can facilitate the construction of a "more empowered and agentic sense of self" (p. 653). Younger children in the Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) study showed a sensitivity to their mothers feelings and described responding to seeing their mother crying by comforting her. A 7 year old boy described this as going up to his mother's room when she was crying to give her a hug (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Indeed, Katz (2015) highlights the positive nature that the mother-child relationship offers in the domestic violence home, and provides examples of children's agency and resistance in finding precious moments where both mother and child find comfort in one another. Whilst children's feelings toward their mother may be quite complicated in the aftermath of domestic violence, rebuilding the mother-child relationship is viewed as an important step in the recovery process for children and is something that professionals can encourage in their response (DeVoe & Smith, 2003; Nixon, Tutty, Radtke, Ateah, & Ursel, 2017; Thornton, 2014).

When it comes to children's feelings towards an abusive parent, there is evidence that younger children find it more difficult to attribute blame to a parent and tend to miss their father and be impacted by the separation of the family (Mullender et al., 2002; Stanley, 2011). However, young children can also show an awareness of the need for their parents to live separately when there has been constant fighting between them (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Feelings towards a father may depend on the level of violence that a child has witnessed being perpetrated against their mother (Ornduff & Monahan, 1999). Ornduff and Monahan's (1999) qualitative study involving a sample of children in refuge in the US, reported quite strong negative feelings from even younger children towards their father, many of which had witnessed serious physical assaults against their mother. Young people more often speak negatively of fearing and hating their father, particularly when they have a better understanding of the power and control aspect of their fathers abuse against their mother, yet still may show concern for their fathers well-being (Buckley et al., 2006; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Continued contact with an abusive father in the post-separation context can cause

further upset and anxiety for children who fear for their own and siblings emotional and physical safety during access visits (Holt, 2015; Lamb, Humphreys, & Hegarty, 2018).

## **Children's strategies of survival in the domestic violence home**

### ***Keeping secrets***

Much of the literature speaks about the hidden nature of domestic violence and the pressure that children instinctively feel to keep the experiences of domestic violence secret to the outside world (Stanley, 2011). The secrecy is kept within families when the violence is known of but not talked about among siblings and parents, rendering it as an even greater taboo and subject of shame that children dare not mention to anyone outside of the family. Abused mothers may avoid communicating with their children about what is happening in the home as a means of protecting them (Nixon et al., 2017), but also because they find it difficult to talk to their children about their partners violence (M. Hester, Pearson, Harwin, & Abrahams, 2007). Children learn from an early age to keep the violence a secret and may use secrecy as a strategy of coping with their experiences of domestic violence (M. Hester et al., 2007; A. Saunders, 1995). Children are often afraid to disclose what is happening at home, in some cases to avoid the police becoming involved and either parent being arrested, in addition to the risk of them being placed in out of home care (L. Kelly et al., 2014). The children that recount reporting their experience of domestic violence to adults and not being believed or their experiences being minimised, only contributes further to children's fear of disclosing and not being taken seriously (L. Kelly et al., 2014). In the Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) study, children told how the violence and abuse perpetrated in the home was not disclosed to anyone outside of the family. Indeed the secrecy of domestic violence was considered by one young participant who had lived with years of hidden violence in the home, as a major issue and the reason for the perpetuation of violence in their family (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). They argued for the need to provide support services for children alone and increased discussion in schools about domestic violence so that it can be spoken of more openly rather than it being viewed as a private family matter (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). The silence within families is often compounded by mothers believing that particularly younger children are unaware of the violence and therefore are unaffected by it, in which case there is no reason to talk about it as doing so may only cause greater upset (Buckley et al., 2006). Therefore, when the police respond to a home in relation to a domestic violence incident with children in the home, a child may have lived with the secret of domestic violence for

several years, as the children in the Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) study had. Children's help-seeking will be examined in more detail in the next chapter when a closer look is taken at the literature on police responses to domestic violence.

### ***Resignation, distraction, hiding and other coping strategies used by children***

Responding to the risk of over pathologising children's experiences of domestic violence, the more recent contributions to literature in this field of study use concepts such as resilience, resistance and agency to position the child as a key social agent in the domestic violence home (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). An individual child may develop multiple strategies that are adaptive to the violent situation and perceived threat to them and other family members (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). This next section therefore looks at some of the actions used by children in the domestic violence home to keep themselves and others safe, both physically and emotionally.

In Thornton's study (2014), staying close to their mother was a coping response used by children and some came to accept the violence and abuse as part of everyday life. Over time, some children report the violence becoming a normal part of life, especially for those who have grown up living with domestic violence. In the Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) study, one boy spoke of how the violence felt normal to him up until he was 6 or 7 years of age and began to realise that something was wrong. He also spoke of it being unspoken of between him and his siblings. Concerns over food and meeting basic needs were prioritised over emotional well-being (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Similarly, children in the Swanston et al. (2014) research reported feeling that the violence was normal until they had time to reflect on their experiences of family life when they had left that environment. Younger children are often more likely to disengage emotionally as a coping strategy as opposed to more problem-focused coping (Omduff & Monahan, 1999). Children and particularly young people's use of resignation as a coping strategy has been cited in the literature (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011; Donaldson, Prinstein, Danovsky, & Spirito, 2000; Øverlien, 2017). Qualitative research conducted by DeBoard-Lucas and Grych (2011) involving semi-structured interviews with 34 children (7-12) years, found that children who had lived with domestic violence over a long period, began to resign themselves to the fact that the violence was not going to end and that there was nothing they could do about it. Interestingly, Donaldson et., al's (2000) quantitative survey research involving

768 children aged (9-17 years), found that males were more likely to perceive resignation as a useful coping strategy compared with females.

Children can also use disengagement in other ways to stay safe in the domestic violence home. In Katz's (2016) study she describes a younger child's delayed speech as a possible survival strategy in a home, where keeping quiet was the only option. Children report how they manage their behaviour and regulate speech making to ensure they say or do the right thing as a strategy to protect themselves from the unpredictable nature of an abusive parent (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Swanston et al., 2014). There are several accounts from children in the literature of hiding in a safe place, usually their bedroom, during an episode of abuse (Alexander, Callaghan, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2015; L. Kelly et al., 2014; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016a) refer to the use of space by children in managing their safety in the home. Findings highlighted the importance for children to identify safe and unsafe spaces in the home from the abuser. One of the children in the study spoke of their bedroom, bathroom and stairs as safe spaces in the home (2016a, p. 15).

Alternatively, coping strategies can involve children becoming more independent and learning to rely on themselves as opposed to the adults in their lives (Swanston et al., 2014). Children may also use fantasy as a way of coping with the violence, either by dissociating or fantasising about a revenge situation against their father and bringing their mother to safety (Ornduff & Monahan, 1999). More common coping strategies employed by children involve distracting themselves with activities and music in an effort to block out what is happening (Alexander et al., 2015; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). Whilst Thornton (2014) refers to certain coping strategies as "inadequate" (p.99) when the child is left to process traumatic emotions without the support of an adult caregiver, it is also evidence of children's agency in the domestic violence home and ability to develop their own coping skills. Viewing such strategies in this way will be explored in more detail in the second part of this chapter.

## **Part One: Conclusion**

Children are impacted by their direct and indirect experiences of the abuse, and also by how they are constructed and understood as victims, living in a domestic violence home. Why is it then that whilst the evidence clearly points to the serious negative impact that domestic violence has on children, and their active involvement in

strategising how to keep themselves and other safe, are they not positioned more central in practice responses? Trying to understand this through a theoretical lens, leads to the sociology of childhood and the construction of children and childhood that informs how children living with domestic violence are conceived as victim or not.

## **Part Two: Constructing the Agentic Child Living with Domestic Violence**

Part two begins by returning to the main theoretical framework in which this thesis is grounded—social constructionism and new sociological understandings of childhood. This is followed by a discussion on involving children in research on domestic violence and some of the challenges that continue to exist in this area. The chapter concludes by drawing from the recent literature to position the child as active agent in the domestically violent home and how this might translate to practice and policy settings.

### **Constructions of children and childhood**

#### ***The ‘new’ sociology of childhood***

In the early writings on rethinking childhood, Alanen (1988) called for a move away from what was commonly seen as a triangular sociological approach to childhood which looked at socialization, the family and childhood together, to one which viewed children and young people as active agents constructing their own realities. Influenced by a new discourse on children’s rights that arose from the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the ‘new’ sociology of childhood which began to emerge in the early 1990s (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; Qvortrup, 1994b), has become the main sociological framework for the study of children and childhood (King, 2007). James and Prout (1997) argue that viewing childhood as a social construct is paramount to a more fluid approach to conceptualising children and childhood. The theory that childhood is a construct of a particular society at a given period in time suggests that the meaning making of childhood is a fluid process which adapts and changes to serve the expectations society has on children as competent agents in their own lives (James & Prout, 1997). King (2007) contends, that how children are conceptualised and the expectations placed on them, is “all relative and depends upon the particular constructions of childhood of different societies or of the same society at different times” (p. 196).



During this period, the earlier popular functionalist and developmental psychology theories of childhood were challenged by the new sociological view of children as holders of rights and agency, which became a more popular view to take in political spheres (Prout, 2004). King (2007) argues that this new theoretical approach to childhood runs simultaneously with the emergence of children's rights as a political issue, highlighting the interconnectedness of both. King (2007) points out that a growing interest in children's rights has allowed the new concept of the child grow out of the 'new' sociology of childhood to avoid any major criticism, since critics would be concerned that they would be viewed as questioning the autonomy of children and their ability to make decisions for themselves. There is however, sufficient evidence now to commit to such a perspective of children as capable social actors, and arguably it is the adults role to provide space for children's participation and decision making in social and political spheres (Kellett, 2010; Montgomery & Kellett, 2009).

### ***Voice, Agency and Capacity***

New sociological understandings of childhood and a children's rights discourse have given way to a current backdrop in which children are understood, through which has emerged a greater appreciation of the contribution children and young people can make to research and policy development. This shift in thinking, underpinned by new sociological understandings of children and as exemplified by the UNCRC, lays out children's rights as active citizens, affording them amongst other things, the right to a voice,<sup>16</sup> has informed a growing number of studies that seek to elicit the views of children on sensitive matters including domestic violence. However, providing children with the space to have their voice heard can be problematic when adults hold the power in deciding what aspects of the child's voice is effectively listened to. Children's silencing and vulnerability has been "compounded by a deeply entrenched cultural belief in western society that it is better not to discuss upsetting events with children" (A. Saunders, 1995, p. 1). In a paper by James, James, and McNamee (2004), normative constructions of childhood are seen as influencing the decision making of welfare practitioners employed to ascertain the child's voice in family law proceedings. The authors argue that there is a disconnect between theoretical shifts in policy and legislation regarding children and their right to a voice and how this is translated into practice with children. Within the discussion appears a tension that practitioners must attempt to balance: the lack of responsibility that comes with what is valued as an ideal

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<sup>16</sup> Voice, meaning "the right to express one's views freely – including the entitlement to be listened to" (Montgomery, 2009: 237)

childhood and the powerlessness that is something negatively associated with childhood. Herein lies the tension when practitioners revert to notions of an ideal childhood 'freedom from responsibility' at the cost of their voice being heard:

*Consequently, it is towards sustaining the notion of an ideal childhood and 'children's freedom from responsibility', that practitioners often retreat in the process of constructing what they regard as being in the 'best interests' of the child, and they do this by turning down, rather than by amplifying, children's voices (James et al., 2004, p. 193).*

Children's agency is hereby denied by adults who apply a welfarist approach and make decisions on behalf of the child in their presumed best interest (James et al., 2004). The authors argue the need for practitioners working with children particularly those seeking to work in the child's best interests, to consider the child as actor: "Such a status category would embrace the child as both object and subject and the child, endowed with agency, would become able to be seen as a person, a social actor in their own right" (James et al., 2004, p. 200).

### **Involving children in domestic violence research**

According to Kirk (2007), there is less need for "adults acting as proxies for children" (p. 1252) and more openness to ascertain the child's voice in research on sensitive matters. The domestic violence literature, once dominated by an adult perspective (Øverlien, 2010), now places a greater emphasis on understanding the subjective experience of children living with domestic violence. A growing understanding of children as competent and capable social actors underpins a new wave of participatory research that values children's participation at various stages of the research process (Houghton, 2018). Despite developments in the conceptualising of children as active subjects as opposed to passive objects, it is their status of 'child' that remains central to the debate on children's participation in research (Powell & Smith, 2009). A developmental perspective would argue that the child, because of their age and physical stature, represents a vulnerability that requires adult protection. Continued conceptions of the vulnerable 'child' as well as adult perspectives of the child 'victim' of domestic abuse, further add to the challenges to children's participation in domestic violence research and policy making (Houghton, 2018). Policy makers, academics and service providers in the domestic violence arena would now more widely agree with the need to conduct more participatory research with children that includes larger samples that are more representative of both a refuge and a community population (Kimball,

2015). However, including children and young people in research, particularly on sensitive subjects, is not without its challenges (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Morris, Kelsey, & Humphreys, 2012; Øverlien, 2010). Adults acting in proxy must consent to children's participation, acting in the child's best interest (Coyne, 2010) In a paper on the methodological challenges to conducting research with children on their views of parental separation. Campbell (2008) discusses the discourses that surround children and adult decision making regarding their inclusion in research that is constructed as 'sensitive'. Campbell posits that the perception of children as 'vulnerable' fails to account for children's resilience and adults concerned with the child's best interests may not always act in a way that serves the child's needs. The assumptions made about what will cause harm to children and what they should be protected from speaking about, which may or may not cause them distress, however little evidence exists to suggest that children do become distressed by sharing their views once an ethically sound research process has been followed (Øverlien & Holt, 2018).

Conceptions of the vulnerable child can impact negatively on children's participation in research, resulting in a smaller evidence base to develop practice responses to meet the needs of children living with domestic violence (Cater & Øverlien, 2014). Within the literature, the assumption is often made that by supporting the adult victim of abuse, this acts as a protective factor for the child (L. Kelly, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). Although this may be true, others would argue that there is still a need to identify additional support needs that are specific to the child (Øverlien, 2010) and that this can be achieved through a participatory approach to research and policy-making with children who have lived experiences of domestic violence and abuse (Houghton, 2018). There is a growing body of work demonstrating the insightful and highly valuable contribution that children's voices can add to the domestic violence research and policy landscape, that is slowly beginning to re-position the child as a key contributor to the field, whilst also expanding our understanding of children's use of agency (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Houghton, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009).

### **Conceptualising the child 'victim' of domestic violence**

Historically, children are constructed as victim in the domestic violence debate through their direct involvement in the abuse which can result in an injured child (Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemeister, 2003). Holden's taxonomy of abuse has been helpful in illuminating the various ways through which the child is impacted by their direct and indirect experiences of domestic violence (Holden, 2003). Holden's work

was instrumental in raising the child's status to victim, alongside that of the adults. However, the construction of the child as victim has been historically based on their direct involvement, be that through a 'verbal or physical' assault against them (Holden, 2003, p. 153). This is now considered problematic as it fails to recognise the impact on children of living in a coercive controlling environment (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2016). It is the on-going cumulative impact of living in a home with violence and patterns of control that equally warrant the child's victim status (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2016). Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, Alexander, and Sixsmith (2017) argue that the continued 'representation of children and young people as silent and passive' in both the domestic violence literature and policy arena, fails to recognise children's 'capacity for agency' (2017, p. 3371). By recognising children's capacity for agency even through their victimisation, this can more effectively support the abused child (Fellin, Alexander, & Callaghan, 2017; Wyness, 2015). By conceptualising the child growing up with domestic violence and abuse as an active as opposed to passive victim, we can begin to provide them with the support they need to feel and stay safe.

### ***Conceptualising the agentic child victim – a way forward***

To situate this thesis in current discourses on the child victim of domestic violence, the next section draws from a growing body of literature that places a greater emphasis on children's capacity as social agents as opposed to observing children's experiences of domestic violence solely from a deficit perspective. Øverlien and Hydén (2009) argue for a need to look not only at the emotional response of children but to also acknowledge the actions taken by children in domestic violence homes, recognising their capacity and agency. Øverlien and Hydén (2009) explored children's use of action as a coping strategy during and after a domestic violence incident. The paper draws on data collected from group therapy sessions with 15 children (12-15 years) who had experienced living with domestic violence and was followed up by 10 individual interviews with children from the same group. The children described a number of actions used by them during an incident, including: distracting themselves with music and reading or running to their bedroom, both of which might be viewed as avoidant coping strategies. Children, although young when the incidents took place, also gave accounts of intervening in the episode by 'rescuing' their mother and finding ways to support her, 'playing along with' the abuser to prevent them from hurting the mother and phoning the police. Øverlien and Hydén (2009) posit that "trying to make oneself invisible or blocking out sight and sound might be the only way to avoid being hit oneself" (p. 489). In this way younger children may seek sanctuary in their bedroom,

hiding under a bed or in other tight spaces that feel safe and use distraction techniques to block out the sounds of the violence. This does not mean however that the child is unaware of what is happening elsewhere in the home, in fact it is their awareness of the violence that attributes to their action of hiding.

The UNARS project mentioned earlier in this chapter, brings to light a new perspective to children's experiences of domestic violence in the literature that is more in line with constructions of children as social actors, recognising children's agency, resistance and resilience (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). Key findings from the project are reported in various publications cited in this chapter and throughout this thesis, making a valuable contribution to the knowledge base. Children's agency was evident throughout the study in the strategies employed by children to actively resist and manage their experiences of the abuse, such as; taking action by phoning the police, seeking help from a neighbour, taking siblings to a safe space and resisting perpetrators attempts to control and manipulate them post separation and during access (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a).

Building on some of the early work by researchers mentioned already in this chapter, findings from the UNARS study strongly supports the need for children to be positioned as victims of domestic violence in their own right (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). This also involves including children in the service response to domestic violence, and facilitating their inclusion in research through which they can share their experiences and views as victims, in order to develop responses that are more appropriate to the child's needs (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Øverlien, 2010; Stanley et al., 2010). Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016a) maintain that:

*A shift to recognise children as equal victims in the crime of domestic violence and abuse has two important implications – It requires that we listen to children who experience domestic violence and abuse, and it creates space to recognise their own creative and agentic strategies in response to abuse and control within the family. (p. 22)*

The persistent framing of domestic violence as an adult issue in policy and practice, means that children are not recognised in the professional response and continue to be positioned as peripheral damage (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Katz (2015) argues that a unilateral model used in the domestic violence research when looking at the parent-child relationship, views mothers as

agentic and children as passive. She suggests that a bilateral model takes account of children's agency in the parent-child relationship and is less inclined to contribute to mother-blaming. Within this model, Katz argues that children take action 'purposefully' in managing relationships with both abuser and abused mother. She argues that within the literature, children actions such as help-seeking or caring for family members in the domestically violent home are construed in a negative light, but should be approached more in terms of recognising such actions as children's agency.

Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016a) argue that normative constructions of what a good childhood is can often inform interventions that focus on changing children's behaviours, as opposed to working with the behaviours in a more positive way by viewing them as strengths as opposed to deficits. Described earlier in this chapter, it is such normative constructs on the 'ideal' childhood that also shape professional decision making on including children's voices in the court process (James & James, 2004). When it comes to interventions with children living with domestic violence, there is a strong desire by adults to protect children's childhood and innocence, which paradoxically can render them silent in matters that directly effect a childhood that is already impacted (Øverlien & Holt, 2018). Indeed the silencing of children can be sometimes accounted for by adults when they are distracted by the emotive circumstances in which they find themselves (Ferguson, 2017). This can be seen when social workers are not child-focused during what can be tense home visits (Ferguson, 2017). In other situations, the assumption of the child's vulnerability prevents adults voicing what is needed to allow the child space to be seen (Burnham, 2018). Thus, recent contributions to the literature that recognise children as agents in the domestic violence home offers a new paradigm through which to understand children who experience domestic violence. Within this new paradigm, the assumption of children's vulnerability is replaced with the presumption of agency, in that the child has developed complex survival strategies that can be used as a starting point in interventions to build resilience and increase capacity to recover from the trauma of living with domestic violence (Fellin et al., 2017).

*Unless and until 'the child' is conceptualised as having an active agency, it will continue to be hard for practitioners to give real credence to the importance of children's thoughts, wishes and feelings when making decisions on children's behalf, because it is*

*precisely these things that express each child's individuality and agency. (James et al., 2004, p. 199)*

### ***Some comments on the use of 'victim' to describe children experiencing domestic violence***

Överlien (2017) argues against applying a victim discourse to children's experiences of domestic violence as this continues to promote the perception of children as vulnerable, allowing a welfarist approach to prevail. This is not to deny the very fact that children living with domestic violence need adult protection but that this should be approached in a way that acknowledges and supports the child as a social actor who has the capacity for agency (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Överlien, 2017). Young people themselves, when asked, have rejected the term victim being used because of the connotations of vulnerability that it ensues which they do not always identify with (Barton, 2015; Bracewell, 2017). Furthermore, young people prefer to be treated as teenagers as opposed to 'victim' by refuge staff (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). However, in order for police and other services to respond to children experiencing domestic violence, they perhaps need to be constructed in this way, as 'victim' is an easier construct to understand when it comes to providing a professional response. There is a tension therefore between young people's resistance of victimhood and their recognition in practice as 'victim'. This requires responders to recognise the young person's capacity for agency simultaneous to their needs as 'victim' of domestic violence and support resilience (Callaghan, Fellin, Alexander, et al., 2017).

### **Chapter summary**

Part one of this chapter drew selectively on the literature pertaining to the impact of domestic violence on children using a life-course perspective to discuss the cumulative risk to children in the domestically violent home. The discussion then focused more specifically on qualitative studies to bring attention to the subjective experience of children living with domestic violence and the complex strategies they employ to keep themselves and others safe, concluding that the child is central to the issue. Part two of the chapter returned to the main theoretical framework of this study to trace the shift in constructions of the child from passive to active agent and how conceptualising the child as agentic has been applied in the literature to expand our understanding of the child experiencing domestic violence. A call for children to be regarded in policy as victim in their own right and some concerns with using a victim discourse when it

comes to how we respond to children concluded the discussion. What is evident from this literature is the marked repositioning of children within the domestic violence debate that now recognises the level to which they are involved in and impacted by living with domestic violence, but also the child's capacity for agency through such adversity. What is not clear yet is to what extent constructions of the child in this way are reflected in how they are responded to in practice. The next chapter focuses therefore on practice responses by police to domestic violence moving the discussion closer to the main topic of this dissertation on police response to children experiencing domestic violence.



## **Chapter Three: Domestic Violence Call-Outs: Police Responding to Children at the Scene**

### **Introduction**

The construction of domestic violence as a private family matter has been challenged over the course of the last thirty years, and is now widely accepted as a public issue that demands police intervention (DeJong, Burgess-Proctor, & Elis, 2008). Having positioned the child firmly within the domestic violence debate, the following chapter provides a review of the existing literature pertaining to the police response to children experiencing domestic violence. The chapter begins firstly by identifying some of the key factors involved in female reporting to police including the presence of children in the home, and abused mother's perspectives on a supportive police response. The discussion then focuses on constructions of domestic violence at a systemic level in police culture, and how individual officer traits including gender and personal attitude, translate into practice approaches. The discretionary nature of policing domestic violence will then be examined, followed by a focus on more recent responses by police to non-physical violence and coercive control. Police perspectives on responding to domestic violence incidents involving children will then be examined, before findings from the small pool of empirical research on children's experience of the police response to domestic violence is presented. Drawing on findings from seminal studies in this area, the views of children on what a positive police response entails will be outlined. The literature review concludes by presenting best practice guidelines from the UK and North American literature for police responding to children present at a domestic violence call-out.

### **Reporting domestic violence to police**

The reporting of domestic violence to police and actual prevalence rates of the issue are said to vary greatly (MacQueen & Norris, 2016; Novisky & Peralta, 2015; Watson & Parsons, 2005). Figures show that as little as one in five victims will report to the police (Kelleher et al., 1995; MacQueen & Norris, 2016), with as little as 14% of victims reporting a serious incident of domestic violence (FRA, 2014).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, by the time the police become involved, a victim of domestic violence is likely to have experienced

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<sup>17</sup> The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) conducted interviews with 42,000 women across the 28 Member States of the European Union (EU). Findings offer a rich source of data pertaining to the experiences of women on all forms of violence including gender based violence.

multiple incidents and escalated levels of violence (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). In addition, domestic violence is already known to be a severely under-reported issue, which means that when a victim does report for the first time, officers need to act appropriately by instilling confidence in the victim that the police can keep them safe (HMIC, 2014). A number of studies have been conducted on female victim's perception of police response to domestic violence, and reveal the factors involved in victim's decision making process on whether to involve police services (Johnson, 2007; Novisky & Peralta, 2015; Stephens and Sinden, 2000).

### ***Normative factors***

Using survey data between 2008/2009 from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS), MacQueen and Norris (2016) examined factors contributing to police awareness of domestic violence in Scotland. The study found that police were more likely to be aware of victims of multiple abuse, who are female, of low socio-economic status and whose children had witnessed the abuse (MacQueen & Norris, 2016). Elsewhere, reports on how police are perceived within certain socio-economic groups (Baumer, 2002; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007), as well as normative factors on what constitutes crime within the private family setting (Kang & Lynch, 2014), were found to be instrumental in determining whether a victim will report a crime. Berkman and Esserman (2004) argue that in poorer communities, abused women may be more reluctant to involve police when they have had negative experiences with police and/or social services in other contexts. They suggest that police can be met with "suspicion, disbelief, or resistance" (p. 3) when they try to assist families who have a mistrust of police. Contrary to this, MacQueen and Norris (2016) found no evidence that positive perceptions of local police, has any effect on police awareness of domestic violence victimisation. Findings pointed more to normative factors contributing to under-reporting, such as an understanding of domestic violence as a private matter, where "police would not be regarded as having a legitimate role to play" (MacQueen & Norris, 2016, p. 60). In the same study, situational factors including the form of abuse were also found to factor into a victim's decision-making process. A victim whose experiences of domestic violence involve non-physical forms of violence and coercive control may fear not being believed by police and thereby decide not to report it. However, it has also been argued that a victim of severe physical violence may have sufficient evidence of physical harm to report to police, but may be so terrified of their abuser, that it prevents them from reporting (Jennett, 2012). There is some evidence therefore to suggest, that a prevailing construction of domestic violence as a private

issue, and the type of violence experienced, are factors in a woman's decision-making process to involve police.

### ***Children as a factor in victim reporting***

Further studies reveal how being a parent, mostly from the perspective of mothers, and having children living in an abusive household, can hinder victim reporting of domestic violence. Mothers' fear of involving police can include; the perceived threat that police intervention will pose to the stability of the family unit (U. Kelly, 2009), fears of children being placed into out of home care (Berkman, Casey, Berkowitz, & Marans, 2004; Radford et al., 2011), and/or the father of their child(ren) being arrested and imprisoned (L. Kelly et al., 2014; McGee, 2000). With the introduction of mandatory arrest policies in the US, women now report fears of being mistaken for the main aggressor and arrested, leaving children in the home without their mother and in the care of an abusive father (Novisky & Peralta, 2015). Novisky and Peralta (2015) "caution that mandatory arrest policies may be increasing perceptions among women that the costs of reporting are too high for the consideration of involving law enforcement" (p. 81). The 'cost-benefit' consideration to involving the police in domestic violence may be as Kang and Lynch (2014) assert, affected by life stages and family composition. Kang and Lynch's quantitative survey design in the US found that just under 50% of victims in the sample phoned the police, with the remainder choosing not to report to police. Findings from the study describe a strong correlation between victim-offender relationship and victims reporting decisions, with married couples being a higher indicator of reporting in younger couples, with this slowly diminishing as the couple aged and children became older and less dependent on their care-givers (Kang & Lynch, 2014).

In terms of children's presence in the home and reporting of domestic violence, there are some varied findings in the literature. Empirical research conducted in the US by Novisky & Peralta (2015), found no direct relationship between having children in the home and victims' reporting of domestic violence to the police. These findings diverge somewhat from existing qualitative research that shows the presence of children to be more positively correlated with reporting of domestic violence to police (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; MacQueen & Norris, 2016). Chang et al. (2010) posit that when a mother fears for the safety of a child, this can act as a turning point in a mother's help seeking and reporting behaviour. Similarly, MacQueen & Norris (2016) found a clear correlation between victim's awareness of their child's witnessing of the violence and reporting to the police. Novisky & Peralta (2015) maintain that the lack of data on

children's age in their study may be a factor in the results. The authors postulate that mothers of adolescents may not perceive the need to involve police as highly when adolescents are considered to be more independent than younger children, and is somewhat consistent with Kang and Lynch (2014) assertion that married couples with older children are less likely to report domestic violence. Novisky and Peralta (2015) put the lack of significant findings on their hypothesis down to age and gender as potential factors which they did not collect data on. It is clear from the review so far that children play a key role in abused mother's decision making on whether or not to report domestic violence to the police. The decision making process is complicated by many factors, including a mothers' mistrust of police and fear of social service intervention, children's age and perceived dependence, and whether the mother is aware of their child witnessing a violent incident. When police are called, the violence has more often escalated and the risk to children is perceived as greater, which means that police need to respond supportively to avoid creating further anxiety for children and their mothers (Berkman et al., 2004).

### ***Female victim's perspective on a positive police response to domestic violence***

A consistent finding across the literature on what constitutes a supportive response from the police to domestic violence includes; listening to victims and taking their concerns seriously; providing information on support services and showing concern for other family members (Jennett, 2012; I. Johnson, 2007a; I. M. Johnson, 2007b; Stanley et al., 2012). For example, Johnson's (2007) mixed methods study in the US, examined police reports on domestic violence incidents over a year and followed up with telephone surveys with victims. Johnson (2007) found that female victim's level of satisfaction with police response and willingness to phone the police again, was directly related to the perceived level of interest that the officer showed in them. A positive response was associated with actions taken by the officer that included; providing information on support services and ways to protect themselves, listening to the victim, and showing concern for the safety of the children. In contrast, almost one-third of the women found it to be unhelpful when an officer was "too impersonal or not sympathetic" (p. 505), and female victims reported dissatisfaction with police when they were perceived to be giving too much attention to the abuser's version of events (Johnson, 2007). Within the study, police transparency around what would happen to the abuser when an arrest was made, was understood by women as helpful in showing victims that police cared about their safety. There is also evidence within the literature

on what a positive police response to domestic violence should look like (HMIC, 2014); however the research also shows some variation in victim's experiences of police involvement in domestic violence (HMIC, 2015b; Safe Ireland, 2014).

### **Police response to domestic violence: culture, discretion and individuality**

Historically, domestic violence has been considered a private matter, but is increasingly becoming a priority for police as a serious social issue (HMIC, 2014). Qualitative research conducted during the late 1990s by members of the Australian New South Wales (NSW) police during a period of police reform and awareness raising of domestic violence, interviewed police officers and domestic violence workers, to identify a best practice response to policing domestic violence (Jennett, 2012). What they discovered was that despite changes, there was a persistent view by officers "that the private sphere is sacrosanct" (p. 33), with many of the male officers reluctant to intervene in matters that happened within the family home. Indeed, the view that 'a man's home is his castle' put forth by some male police in the study, was said to reflect patriarchal views of the time. As described in chapter one of this thesis, the protection of the family unit within the Irish Constitution and the sanctity of marriage owing to a strong church-State bond, contributed to a history where the abuse of women and children remained hidden and outside of police intervention. Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) posit that "the demeanour and attitudes of the police are perceived to represent wider social attitudes which define the experience of abuse that is enacted in the family and the home and move it from the private into the public realm" (p. 231). The attitude of individual officers when they respond to families experiencing domestic violence and their understanding of the issue, is critical to providing a supportive response. However, attitudes are formed at both a systemic level and at an individual level within policing culture (Paoline III, 2003). Police culture is a "conceptual tool that helps explain and contextualise policing practices" (Ballucci, Gill, & Campbell, 2017, p. 242). Empirical research conducted by Ballucci et al. (2017) in the US used a survey questionnaire with 169 police officers to explore the use of risk assessment tools in domestic violence call-outs. Findings from the study revealed variation in officer's receptivity to the use of the tools. "Progressive and traditional attitudes" towards the investigative role of police in domestic violence built within police culture are used to explain the variation in uptake (Ballucci et al., 2017, p. 242).

Domestic violence work is traditionally perceived by police officers as one of the more dangerous calls to attend to, due to the unpredictable nature of entering people's homes (Ballucci et al., 2017; DeJong et al., 2008), the often highly emotional atmosphere and the propensity of alcohol misuse (Sharma, 2015). Police officers can find this area of policing challenging, particularly for those with limited knowledge and understanding of the issue (Myhill & Johnson, 2016). Indeed, the complex nature of domestic violence has been related to feelings of frustration, confusion, anger and sometimes resentment in officers who fail to appreciate the nuances of domestic violence (Berkman et al., 2004; Jennett, 2012). Whilst victims may be involved in repeatedly phoning the police when they fear for their safety and the abuser has breached a legal order, they do not always want police to make an arrest (Coulter, Kuehnle, Byers, & Alfonso, 1999). This can contribute to what Jennett (2012) found to be the negative stereotyping of victims when "police label certain women 'recidivist victims' and lose patience with them" (p. 38) and is more in line with traditional attitudes to domestic violence. A victim's reluctance to follow through with an official complaint against their abuser, or to provide sufficient evidence for police to build an investigation, can be met with frustration from officers who grow tired of responding to the same families (Diemer, Ross, Humphreys, & Healey, 2016). Jennett (2012) maintains that domestic violence does not always produce the satisfaction of a "good result" (p. 37) in police work, as making a case to convict an abuser is time consuming, and can result in a case being dropped if a victim becomes uncooperative. When officers do not understand the dynamics of abuse they can begin to view responding to domestic violence as 'time-wasting' (Diemer et al., 2016), and tend to "oversimplify the issue" (Jennett, 2012, p.37).

The introduction of pro-arrest and mandatory arrest policies in US States during the late 1990s, provided police with more opportunity to take action and led to a marked increase in arrest rates for domestic violence related incidents (Dugan, 2003). However, such policies have been criticised for the increase in dual-arrests being made when officers fail to correctly identify a main aggressor, leading to victim arrests (Finn, Blackwell, Stalans, Studdard, & Dugan, 2004). Victims may also be unhappy with police who arrest a perpetrator even when they do not wish to make a complaint (Diemer et al., 2016). Conversely, victims and officers may both become disillusioned by the criminal justice system, when perpetrators fail to be convicted for any lengthy period only to return to the home, even when a legal order is in place (Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004; Berkman et al., 2004). Ballucci et al. (2017) argue that;

*The role and attitude reflected in traditional police culture is at odds with effective investigative techniques necessary in IPV cases. Observing the social context, knowledge of past calls, and asking particular types of questions are all necessary investigative techniques to increase the safety of those involved in IPV calls. (p. 245)*

There is some tension therefore between traditional attitudes to domestic violence and progressive attitudes held by officers who have a clearer understanding of the complexity of domestic violence. Balenovich, Grossi, and Hughes (2008) conducted qualitative research in the US involving focus group interviews with a total of ten domestic violence detectives. The study found a set of three distinct roles that officers assume and are shaped by individual attitudes to domestic violence. Roles can be viewed on a continuum beginning with the “strict enforcer” who focuses on the criminal justice aspect of the role, followed by the “service officer” who is more inclined towards the social services element, and lastly the “integrated investigator” who responds to an incident by addressing the legal side and the social needs of victims (Balenovich et al., 2008, p. 25). It is the integrated investigator which Balenovich et al. (2008) cite as the most effective in resolving domestic violence incidents. However, the dominant role described by officers in the study was the strict enforcer, demonstrating a need for officers to be more aware of the need to address the welfare needs of victims alongside the legal aspect in order to come to a resolution.

### ***The use of discretion in policing domestic violence***

The use of discretion in policing domestic violence has increasingly become a topic of debate (Diemer et al., 2016; Myhill & Johnson, 2016). Whilst discretion is agreed to be integral to police work (Goldsmith, 1990), Diemer et al. (2016) argue that there is a need to find an appropriate balance between ‘discretion and compulsion’ by officers when it comes to responding effectively to domestic violence. Diemer et al. (2016) conducted mixed methods research in Victoria Australia involving interviews with 125 police officers in addition to an analysis of their police database on family violence. The aim of the study was to examine officers’ compliance with a newly introduced ‘Code of Practice’ that provided officers with clear guidelines when responding to domestic violence. An ‘Options Model’ had been recently introduced providing officers with a set

of interventions to use at a domestic violence incident. The model was an attempt at minimising opportunity for police discretion, thus providing a more consistent police response to domestic violence. All of the officers in the study felt positively about the Options Model, from which they reported charging perpetrators and Intervention Orders (IO) to be the most useful approaches to take, with referral options viewed as the least helpful (Diemer et al., 2016). However, some officers without specialist training in domestic violence failed to see the efficacy in using such an approach, considering the use of the options as an 'arse covering' exercise (p. 8). In the UK, risk assessment tools have been introduced for officers to use at a domestic violence incident to increase awareness for the safety of children in the home. Whilst such tools may be useful in providing a structured response and prompting officers to seek out certain information pertaining to children in the home, Richardson-Foster et al. argue that "in the absence of meaningful engagement with children, any such risk assessments are likely to be little more than tick-box exercises" (2012, p. 232).

In a UK study using field observations and police data recorded over a week in a British police force, Myhill and Johnson (2015) found that police discretion was not always used in a positive way and can lead to the under-recording of domestic violence incidents, having a direct impact on future interventions with victims. Myhill and Johnson (2015) observe how the discretion that is often required of officers to interpret an increasingly broad definition of domestic violence, shapes how domestic violence is constructed:

*It is still possible for officers to minimize the seriousness of domestic-related incidents, or even make them disappear altogether. And in that sense, frontline officers, in particular, influence to some degree what domestic violence is and, consequently, how the police and their partner agencies respond to it. (Myhill & Johnson, 2015, p. 12)*

In terms of child contact, the same study found that call-takers and front-line officers responding to child contact issues between parents, often "failed to situate it in a wider pattern of abuse" (Myhill & Johnson, 2015, p. 13), classifying it as a civil dispute and not recognising a potential domestic violence element. A "pro-access philosophy", whereby a history of domestic violence in the family is unaccounted for by judges in family law decision making, has contributed to increased accountability on the mother



to fulfil access agreements that are not always in the best interests of the child (Naughton, O'Donnell, Greenwood, & Muldoon, 2015). Indeed, the police are regularly called to incidents of domestic violence that occur in the post-separation period directly related to disagreements involving children (Stanley et al., 2010). Consistent with Jennett (2012) finding on officers frustration when domestic violence fails to provide a result, Myhill and Johnson (2015) suggest that the inappropriate use of discretion may relate to pressure to get 'a result' which domestic violence incidents do not always afford when a victim chooses not to pursue prosecution. Other reasons included resource issues within departments that put mounting pressure on officers, and the additional paperwork that goes along with investigating domestic violence, which is not always viewed as necessary in each case.

### ***Individuality***

The variation in attitude and response by certain police officers is also explained by individual characteristics of an officer, including gender and the level of training on domestic violence that has been completed by them. Paoline III (2003) argues that researchers seeking to understand policing culture should not adopt a homogenous view of police and need to take account of the individuality of officers which can be seen in how they perform the role. Hester et al. (1999) suggest that up until the middle of the 1980s, the police response to domestic violence in the UK was largely inconsistent and depended greatly on the individual officer's attitude and personal approach to the issue. Accounts in the existing research from victims of abuse, still report a somewhat inconsistent response from police officers that is often dependent on the attitude of individual officers (Coulter et al., 1999; I. M. Johnson, 2007b). Indeed, police officer attitude to domestic violence is referred to in the literature as a critical factor in the provision of an effective service response to families experiencing domestic violence (Balenovich et al., 2008; Ballucci et al., 2017; DeJong et al., 2008). Jennett (2012) highlighted that not all male officers in their study of Australian police held the view of domestic violence as a private matter. They found that a personal history or understanding of domestic violence often contributed to an officer's interest in and pursuit of domestic violence cases.

As well as the attitude of officers, characteristics such as the gender of an officer has been discussed in the literature on policing domestic violence. Using survey data collected from two police districts in Taiwan, Chu and Sun (2014) found when controlling for officer training and confidence in responding to domestic violence cases,

that “female officers were more likely than their male counterparts to be supportive of minimum police involvement and less inclined to be tolerant of domestic violence” (p. 229). This finding was also evident in the Jennett’s (2012) study, when one male police participant commented that female officers appeared to spend more time taking statements and showed more interest in building a history of a case when responding to domestic violence. Authors including McCarthy (2013), have discussed the gendered nature of ‘soft’ policing, associated with early intervention initiatives and relationship building between police and communities, as well as effective multi-agency work with social services. McCarthy (2013) found some tension between how such ‘soft’ duties in police work are ‘packaged’ amidst more traditional masculine constructs of policing such as investigative duties and responding to serious crimes. There is evidence that victims of domestic violence respond positively to police when they demonstrate ‘soft’ skills such as empathy, listening and taking the time to build rapport with victims they respond to (I. M. Johnson, 2007b).

Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that the gender of an officer may play a role in how police respond to domestic violence incidents, it has been found that knowledge and understanding of the issue, irrespective of gender, is more predictive of what victims perceive to be a positive response (Coulter et al., 1999). Empirical research has found that officers with training in domestic violence demonstrate a greater awareness of the gendered nature of the issue and provide a more victim-centred response (Diemer et al., 2016; Jennett, 2012; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). An inspection into the policing of domestic violence in the UK, found that proper training is required to enable officers to have the skills and knowledge to provide an effective response to victims and their families (HMIC, 2014). Indeed, a dominant theme stemming from the literature in this area, is the need for officer training in domestic violence in order for police to be able to understand the complexity that exists in domestic violence relationships and identify patterns of abuse and control that occur over time which can help to better assess the potential risk to victims and their children (HMIC, 2014; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Johnson’s (2007) study found that the overall positive experience reported by female victims, was down to amongst other things, the on-going training of local police. The evidence suggests that police culture at a systemic level but also the individuality of officers is important to understand variations in the police response to domestic violence.

## **Progressive policing: recognising and responding to coercive control**

A lack of understanding and knowledge of domestic violence and coercive control was raised as a key factor that can result in officers inadvertently not identifying risk factors or seeing the cumulative impact that on-going non-violent or minor offences can have on a victim and how they present at a scene (Myhill & Johnson, 2015). Stark (2012) raises the issue of police responding to domestic violence through a violence incident model which does not take into account the multiple other forms of non-physical violence and patterns of abuse that a victim of domestic violence can experience. It is proposed that police should respond to an incident through a coercive control model, which Stark (2012) argues will provide a more effective immediate and long term response to families experiencing domestic violence. Officers tend to focus on the criminal aspect and look for evidence of physical assault which is more in line with a traditional criminal justice response, but is not sufficient when it comes to policing domestic violence and the need to look at the wider context (Ballucci et al., 2017). Coercive control (Stark, 2007) is now recognised in domestic violence legislation across several jurisdictions, including Ireland, and brings with it an even greater need for officers to be aware of the more subtle signs of abuse and the cumulative risk to children (Katz, 2016).

A collaborative study conducted in the UK and US by Robinson, Pinchevsky, and Guthrie (2016), sought to explore officer's perceptions of domestic violence, including incidents that involve reports of non-violent abuse such as stalking and controlling behaviours. Quantitative and qualitative data from both countries revealed a good understanding of domestic violence in general among officers, but police responses were still largely led by a physical incident model of abuse (Robinson et al., 2016). The study found that a less proactive response by officers was linked to incidents where there was no physical violence. Analysis between and within countries found that officers in the UK were somewhat more attuned than officers in the US to non-physical abuse. Indeed, a focus on the physical aspect of domestic violence was also evident in MacQueen and Norris (2016) analysis of 2008/2009 survey data from Scotland. Findings reported that police were more likely to become aware of domestic violence that involved multiple experiences of physical violence, as opposed to victims who experienced non-violent abuse alone, suggesting a need for both communities and the police to be able to better identify with the negative effects that psychological abuse can have on victims and their families. Indeed, when there is no direct evidence to

support a crime being committed, Myhill and Johnson (2015) argue that officers without sufficient training and knowledge of coercive control, may fail to identify and subsequently record it as domestic violence. By not recording an incident as domestic violence on the police database, other officers are not presented with the full history of abuse that may have occurred at a particular address which may impact on future risk assessment, potentially putting victims as well as officers in danger. As described in the previous chapter, coercive control impacts the whole family and is therefore critical for police to begin to recognise the signs if they are to respond in a supportive way to adults and children at the domestic violence incident.

### **Police response to children experiencing domestic violence**

Across jurisdictions, definitions of domestic violence have broadened to include a much wider set of actors, including a recognition of the risk to children living in domestic violence homes (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In terms of policing policy and guidelines, there is a greater emphasis now than in the past on reporting children's presence at a domestic violence incident, showing some progress made in this area (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Swerin et al., 2018). Police data indicates children's presence in just under half of all call-outs to domestic violence recorded by police (Fantuzzo & Fusco, 2007; Gjelsvik et al., 2003; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Swerin et al., 2018), with close to half of all children recorded being under six years of age (Gjelsvik et al., 2003; Swerin et al., 2018). Police are therefore well placed as first-responders to assist in the safeguarding of children in domestic violence homes through the identification and referral of children to external agencies (Fantuzzo et al., 2007). Indeed, Featherstone and Peckover (2007) posit that the police call-outs to domestic violence provide a "key moment" (p. 187) for intervention to effectively support children and families experiencing domestic violence. However, the recording on children's presence at domestic violence incidents by police has been criticised in the literature for inconsistency in the level of detail gathered and the quality of data on children recorded by police (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012; Shields, 2008). A review conducted by Shields (2008) involving 3000 records of domestic violence from the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) across an 18 month period, found that whilst police were more likely to complete additional forms if a child was present, they could play a more significant role in safeguarding children if they followed mandated procedures more systematically. Since 2003, whilst the SFPD have been mandated to include family characteristics in their documentation, Shields' (2008) evaluation however found that police were not always doing this and therefore were missing opportunities to identify

families that needed supports. Shields (2008) argues that by not documenting children's presence, those in need of services may go unnoticed.

Whilst there are a number of studies that examine the police response to domestic violence from adult victim perspectives (Hirschel & Hutchison, 2003; Hoyle, 1998; I. M. Johnson, 2007b; McGee, 2000; Novisky & Peralta, 2015), there is a shortfall in empirical research that examines the issue from the child's perspective (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). A 2010 large scale mixed method UK study, commissioned by the NSPCC, examined the professional response to families experiencing domestic violence across two sites (Stanley et al., 2010). Data was collected from a wide range of sources that included qualitative interviews with 33 police, 25 practitioners, 11 adult victims and 10 perpetrators, in addition to 19 children and young people, offering multiple perspectives on the professional response to domestic violence families (Stanley et al., 2010). Drawing upon this dataset, Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) focus specifically on the police response to children experiencing domestic violence, drawing on both the child and police perspectives. Findings from the study, will be examined firstly from the police perspective, followed by children and young people's views on the police response to domestic violence. Overall, findings from the study supported Featherstone and Peckover (2007) assertion that police call-outs to domestic violence represent a 'key moment' in the safeguarding of children (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012, p. 221).

Firstly, in terms of children's location in the home when police responded, data was captured under the following categories; *child witnessed incident*, *child asleep*, *child in another room*, *child recorded as on premises*, *child not on premises* (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). The location of children during an incident was marked in the category 'unknown' for 40% of the children in the sample, suggesting either that the officer failed to document it or did not inquire after children in the home. Indeed, the often scant detail on children's presentation at the scene, suggested that officers had not completed a thorough check on children's safety, and often relied solely on parents as informants rather than engaging directly with children (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Aside from police reporting on children's presence in the home and whether they witnessed an incident or were sleeping, little is known about children's actions and location in the home when the police respond to a domestic violence incident, highlighting a gap in the data collected by police. If children, as the previous chapter has shown, are involved in domestic violence incidents that result in the police response, then they should be included more in the police response, or at the very

least, more detailed data should be collected on their presence at the scene by the responding officers.

### ***Police and child engagement at a domestic violence incident***

Police participants in Richardson-Foster et al.'s study generally agreed that "it was within their remit to check the house for the presence of children and to check on their welfare" (2012, p. 229), however there was little evidence in the police reports of officers speaking directly to children, apart from cases where children were physically injured. A focus on physical injury by police is more in line with what Balenovich et al. (2008) described as the 'strict enforcer' role used by police that responds to legalistic issues as opposed to welfare. Indeed, a general finding in the literature is that police do not engage directly with children at a domestic violence incident (McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Police perspectives on engagement with children at a domestic violence incident demonstrate some reluctance in speaking directly to children, with as little as four out of the 33 sampled police officers in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study stating that it was "not their role to speak to children" (p. 229), and closer to half expressing some hesitation in speaking to children at a domestic violence incident. Indeed, a general finding was that children and young people were viewed by police as "figures on the sidelines of domestic violence incidents" (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012, p. 231).

Some of the reasons given by officers for the lack of engagement with children in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study included; a lack of skills and training in the area of child interviewing which officers felt would be better left to specialist trained interviewers, and a fear of adding further to what was already a distressing incident for children. The study found that those with specialist child abuse training were more receptive to the need to speak to children at an incident. Indeed, the lack of skills and confidence reported by police in communication with children at a domestic violence incident, was considered to be a gap in training by senior police participants in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) research. The shortage in service provision for children affected by domestic violence was cited by officers who felt that engaging with a child may run the risk of "opening a 'Pandora's box' of overwhelming need in children" (p. 230). By not engaging with children, police felt that they were protecting them from further trauma. One police participant described giving children "as little information as possible" (p. 230), especially in cases where a parent had to be arrested.

A child's age may also be a factor in police engagement with children at an incident. Officers reported feeling more comfortable speaking to older children, with Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) concluding that the "child's status *qua* led to his or her exclusion" (p. 231). Finally, pressure to move to the next call and maintain performance targets was also recognised by officers as a reason for not spending time to speak with children (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Responding to recommendations on police and child contact at a domestic violence scene that emerged from the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, police drew boundaries between their role and that of the social worker. This distinction between the criminal justice remit and welfare aspect of the police role is commonly cited by officers when discussing the police role with children (Heinonen & Ellonen, 2016; Øverlien & Aas, 2016). However, what is being asked of police is not to carry out a full assessment or provide a therapeutic intervention to children and families, but to merely "offer reassurance and information and to acknowledge children's involvement in the experience of domestic violence" (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012, p. 232).

More recent qualitative research on police and children's perspectives of the response to domestic violence conducted by Øverlien and Aas (2015) in Norway, reported similar findings to Richardson-Foster et al. (2012). Both authors argue that the police response to domestic violence can be a turning point where the secrecy of violence in families can become public, presenting an opportunity for the child's experience to be acknowledged (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Øverlien and Aas's (2016) study involved individual interviews with a sample of 25 children between the ages of eight and twenty years, who were living or had been living in refuge in Norway. Thirteen of the children had directly experienced the police responding to their home in relation to domestic violence. In addition, the authors draw on findings from individual interviews with 24 police officers of various rank in both front-line and specialist roles in four police districts across Norway.

Police perspectives on communication with children were somewhat varied depending on officers interpretation of policy and guidelines, which the authors agree necessitates some level of discretion by officers, echoing findings reported earlier in this chapter on the discretionary nature of policing domestic violence. Similar to findings from police interviews in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, front-line officers expressed some reluctance in speaking directly to children about the incident without specialist training, and were conscious that this may damage any later investigation. However, more specialist officers were of the view that responding officers could play a

supportive role to future investigations by talking with children at the scene and suggesting when further investigation is needed (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). Overall, across both studies there were diverging views amongst officers depending on their level of specialist training on what constituted an appropriate response to children (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

Interestingly, police participants in both studies spoke of the 'loyalty conflict' that children would be faced with if asked by police to provide information on either parent (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Officers clearly demonstrated a sensitivity to the pressure that this placed on children and acknowledged the emotional difficulty for children whose loyalties are divided. This finding also suggests however, that officers are more likely to view the purpose of communication with children based on them as potential witnesses, as opposed to offering support. This is important in showing how police respond from a criminal justice perspective which clearly is a core aspect of their role (Berkman & Esserman, 2004). In this sense then, the purpose of speaking with a child at an incident is to gather evidence or to begin an investigation if they are a direct witness and/or have been injured (Berkman & Esserman, 2004). Whilst police show an awareness of the negative impact that living with domestic violence may have on a child's future outcomes, often seeing children in domestic violence families later involved in delinquent behaviour (Berkman & Esserman, 2004), they generally do not consider this in guiding their response (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) describe how "children were not a primary focus for the police attention in that they were seen as neither the victim nor the perpetrator but were positioned outside the core dynamic of an incident" (p. 231). This can be explained by officers adopting what Berkman and Esserman refer to as a "narrowly focused definition of the police role" (2004, p. 6), that places less emphasis on the welfare and support function of police. Indeed, Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) suggest that by reframing the child as a victim in police policy, this would help widen the response of the police to the child victim as well as the adult parties involved.

A very recent contribution to the literature in this area comes from Swerin et al. (2018) in the North Western US. They used police recorded data to examine police responses to children present at domestic violence incidents (Swerin et al., 2018). Whilst findings reveal a greater awareness amongst police officers of the risk to children in domestic violence homes, there was still a reluctance by officers to speak directly with children at the scene. Analysis of data did however show that officers were more likely to provide a victim-directed response when there were children present. The authors suggest



more training and better implementation of best practice approaches by officers would lead to a more child-centred response (Swerin et al., 2018).

The literature also points to mother's efforts to hide the police response to children which therefore can impact on the level of engagement that occurs between officers and children at the scene. In McGee's (2000) study, children were often not aware that their mother had called the police to report their father. Mothers may be less likely to report to the police that a child has witnessed an incident, as they fear the removal of children from the home by social services (Berkman & Esserman, 2004; Gjelsvik et al., 2003; Radford et al., 2011). Berkman and Esserman (2004) argue that this can create an environment where children do not get the attention they need when parents try to prevent police making contact with children at the scene. So, whilst children's presence in the home may be a reason to involve the police, as discussed earlier in this chapter, mothers may minimise children's involvement with police when they respond. Thus, when police do not make an effort to engage with children at the scene, they are failing to acknowledge the child's experience of abuse. Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) argue that "in denying them a role in the experience of domestic violence, police officers run the risk of colluding with parental claims that children are unaware of and unaffected by such violence" (p. 231).

Police participants in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study in Norway, recognised the caring aspect of the police role when it came to children and the responsibility that officers have in speaking openly to children about why they have been called to the home as opposed to ignoring them and rendering the violence taboo. In the UK, HMIC audit reviews over 2014 and 2015 reveal a greater awareness among officers of the needs of children in domestic violence homes but that work still has to be done in this area of response (HMIC, 2014, 2015a). Police officers involved in the review process spoke of their responsibility in safeguarding children, which included checking on children present in the home even when parents report them to be sleeping upstairs. However, victims who took part in the review, recalled very few occasions when officers physically checked on their children at the incident (HMIC, 2015a). The cumulative risk to children is slowly being recognised (HMIC, 2015b), and marks a shift away from looking purely from a single incident model of harm. Indeed, the repositioning of children in domestic violence homes as victims in police policy has been recommended as a way of bringing a greater focus on children at a domestic violence call-out (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, to what extent and how far

practice responses by front-line police have adapted to meet the needs of both adult and child victim in a domestic violence incident, are yet to be fully known.

## **Children's views and experiences of the police response to domestic violence**

Within the early literature on children experiencing domestic violence, the police are regularly mentioned by children when they talk about their experiences of the professional response to domestic violence (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Whilst the children and young people in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, reported rather "cynical and distrustful attitudes" (p. 226) towards police, they still saw the police as a source of protection when it came to domestic violence. Children themselves can be directly responsible for the police responding to an incident involving their parents (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). In the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study there were 11 incidents involving children age 5-17 years phoning emergency services. However, children report mixed feelings about phoning the police, particularly when they feel that involving the police may make matters worse (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). The decision to phone the police is therefore not one that is taken lightly for either mothers or children, and is often done under the most life endangering circumstances (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Øverlien and Aas (2016) refer to the potential risk that phoning the police places on the child and a need for officers to be mindful of this in their response, particularly when they arrive to an incident and the situation presents as calm.

In general, children report quite mixed views of police interventions in domestic violence (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Whilst some children are able to distinguish between differences in individual officers (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), police were portrayed by some of the children in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study as "face-less, nameless and genderless" (p. 6). Within the literature (Mullender et al., 2002; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), there are accounts from children and young people of feeling excluded from the police response and ignored by officers who tended to focus on the adult victim and perpetrator. A resounding message from children is the desire to be included in the police response and for their version of events to be listened to by officers and to have their experience of the abuse taken seriously (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However in reality, the children in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study were more

likely to feel left out of the overall process. Some of the children felt as though the police had no interest in talking with them or hearing their perspective of events (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study, two children out of the 13 reported police talking to them, however both were the “primary victim” (p. 6) of the abuser. Overall, children were more likely to feel that their accounts would not be seen as credible by police because of their status as ‘child’ (Mullender et al., 2002; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

Longitudinal research conducted in the UK between 2011 and 2014 involving interviews with 100 adult female victims of domestic violence and seven of their children, explored their experiences with the police response. Children in the study reported feeling “let down” by the police, and made to feel like “liars” (p. 43) when they and their mother were not listened to and taken seriously by responding officers. These experiences had led some of the children to have little confidence in the police to keep them safe and felt that they would not contact the police in the future if they needed protection (L. Kelly et al., 2014).

A small scale qualitative study involving interviews with five school-aged children and three of their mothers, described children’s negative experiences with police services who they felt were unable to keep them and their mothers safe (Swanston et al., 2014). One child in the study described the police calling to the home on multiple occasions and wanting to press charges against her father even when her mother did not wish to. Similarly in Hogan and O’Reilly’s (2007) study, a young participant spoke of how she began to phone the police about her father after years of repeatedly seeing him abuse her mother, but reported nothing being done in response to her calls. In such circumstances, children are very much dependent on their care-givers as the adult to decide what course of action is needed to keep them safe (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). Police officers may not always take a young person’s reporting of incidents seriously and perceive repeated calls for breaches of orders as “wasting their time” (Hogan & O’Reilly, 2007, p. 59). However, the evidence suggests that children, when asked, may choose to go against an adult victims decision to not make a complaint and in many cases want to see the police take action and arrest or at the very least remove the abusive parent from the home. The child’s voice as victim in this scenario is not heard and an adult-centric response to the issue remains, rendering children silent (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

A mixed methods study commissioned by the NSPCC and conducted by Radford and colleagues (2011), looked into service provision in London for children and young people living with domestic violence (Radford et al., 2011). Qualitative data was collected from a range of practitioners working in the area of domestic violence, including police, as well as individual and group interviews with a total of 37 mothers and seven focus groups with a total of 23 children ranging in age from four to 13 years. Mothers and children were recruited through specialist domestic violence services in the community and were living in a mixture of refuge and community-based accommodation. The children and young people in the study reported mixed views on the police, depending on the individual officer. Both mothers and children wanted the police to take action to protect them and keep them safe by removing or arresting the perpetrator (Radford et al., 2011). Consistent with findings in the earlier mentioned studies,<sup>18</sup> a general message from the children and young people was that the police should take more of a role in speaking directly and separately to children at a domestic violence incident (Radford et al., 2011).

In the US, data drawn from the Second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV II), included telephone interviews with parents of children 0-9years and young people aged 10-17. The main findings support existing research already mentioned in this chapter, on the lack of communication between police and children at a domestic violence incident (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015). Whilst nearly half the sample had witnessed the incident and police arrest, only one in four children reported the police speaking directly to them. The severity of the incidents was noted as high, with physical injury to a family member in one in three cases. Although children were rarely found to be physically injured at the scene, the children were frightened by the event and many feared for their own safety, which caused them distress (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015).

### ***Children's views on an unhelpful and helpful police response to domestic violence***

The police response to domestic violence therefore offers an opportunity to “convey reassurance and authority” (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012, p. 232) to children at the scene. In the McGee (2000) study, children wanted the police to do something about the violence by arresting the perpetrator, thus sending a message that domestic

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<sup>18</sup> Conclusions from these studies found that children wanted police to acknowledge them at the scene and to include them in the response (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

violence is unacceptable. Teenagers may be more critical of the police response when they do not take any action to remove the perpetrator which the children in the McGee's study felt could reinforce the perpetrators behaviour when they receive no punishment and place the mother and child at greater risk (McGee, 2000). Phoning the police is thus understood by children as a means of stopping the violence and for the perpetrator to be punished for their wrongdoings (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009).

The police response can be perceived more negatively by children when no arrest is made (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015). Children in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study reported seeing the police respond to the home on numerous occasions but without resolving the violence, which resulted in one young boy being left in the home with his violent stepfather. However, the child's wishes as discussed earlier, may not always reflect their mothers in terms of whether having the abuser arrested is the safest course of action to take (Hirschel & Hutchison, 2003). There is some divergence in the literature when it comes to police officers making an arrest when children are present. In Fantuzzo et al. (2007) study, they found that police were more likely to make an arrest if there were children present, with children's presence impacting on how seriously the responding police perceived the incident to be. Similarly, in a study by Tatum and Pence (2015), they found that children's presence at a domestic violence incident increased the likelihood of police making an arrest. This diverges somewhat from more recent findings by Swerin et al. (2018), who describe officers reporting lower arrest rates at incidents where children are present. They posit that this may be due to officers not wishing to add further trauma to a child seeing their parent arrested, although conclude that this is an area that requires further investigation (Swerin et al., 2018)

The children and young people in both of the Irish studies (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007) describe similar experiences of a poor service by local police who failed to protect them and their mother from a violent father and in many cases did not take their disclosures of abuse seriously. Officers not arresting for breaches of an order was a common occurrence, slow response when called and 'giving out' to children who phoned the police on their parents when there was an incident, all contributed to a lack of trust and confidence in the police being able to protect them (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007).

Examples of a good response reported by children and young people in the literature included;

- being listened to by officers who took their concerns seriously;
- quick response times;
- information on support services;
- reassurances of safety; and
- transparency around what would happen next.

(Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

Children report wanting to know what is going to happen to the perpetrator and if they are going to be returning to the home (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In terms of their own safety post-separation, children feel that their opinions should be taken into account when deciding “next steps” (p. 226) regarding family matters, particularly around access with the abuser (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

One of the young people in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study illustrated a positive police response involving an officer speaking directly to them and providing them with information on support services for children. Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) propose that front-line officers have relevant information on support services available on hand to offer children and mothers and that this may help to improve the confidence of officers in speaking to children and open up conversations with them when they have something tangible to offer by way of support.

Other examples from children of a positive response, was an officer described as “being good at listening” (p. 227), highlighting the importance for children to feel heard by police. As well as police engagement with children at the scene, children in both studies mentioned the importance of quick response times. In the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, children associated a slow response time with a lack of priority given to domestic violence. Another child in the study suggested that when they arrive, that the police should remove the father immediately rather than waiting to get both adult versions of events. This would mean that the child and mother’s concerns were being taken seriously by police, recognising the urgency associated with a family member phoning the emergency services against a father or spouse (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In addition to the above, a positive police response was illustrated by one young boy in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study, when he was asked by the officer what he wanted to feel safe and felt his wishes to be brought to refuge with his mum were taken seriously. In addition, the police were involved in helping the boy develop a safety plan which was reported to help him to feel secure.

Whilst the evidence indicates that children, once perceived as passive bystanders, are on the contrary very much involved either directly or indirectly in the violence, research also shows that children's level of involvement is not indicative of police engagement with them (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; HMIC, 2015b; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). A response to this in the UK has been the development of new practice guidelines informing officers to check on all children present at a domestic violence callout, encouraging officers to be mindful of the link between child abuse and domestic abuse in their investigations (College of Policing, 2015). The next section of this chapter examines the literature (largely emanating from North America and UK) on best practice guidelines for police responding to children present at a domestic violence incident.

### **Recommended approaches for police responding to children present at a domestic violence incident**

There is a strong consensus in the literature of the critical role that police play as part of a wider community response to children experiencing domestic violence (Berkman & Esserman, 2004; HMIC, 2014; Stanley et al., 2010; Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council, 2007). Within the North American literature, there are two key examples of best practice approaches developed to guide police in the response to children present at a domestic violence incident. *'Police in the lives of young children exposed to domestic violence'* is fourth in a series of papers on early childhood, domestic violence and poverty (Berkman & Esserman, 2004). The paper involved childcare and police professionals working collaboratively to produce basic information on the needs of children living with domestic violence and guidance for officers on how to respond effectively to children present at a domestic violence incident (Berkman & Esserman, 2004). The Centre for Children and Families in Canada built on the earlier work of Baker et al. (2002), to develop *'A Handbook for Police Responding to Domestic Violence'* (Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004), offering Canadian police services the necessary knowledge and direction in risk assessment and risk reduction to children exposed to violence in the home. Whilst both documents acknowledge the limitations of the police role, the guidelines offer a pragmatic approach by suggesting simple ways that police can support children they come in contact with in this context. The priority given to this area of policing is underpinned by an understanding of the critical role that police as first-responders play in the identification and safeguarding of children experiencing domestic violence.

The framework set out by Berkman and Esserman (2004) provides a list of interventions that police can use which are helpful to children in a domestic violence situation. Reflective of children's views described earlier in this chapter, this includes first and foremost, police using their authority to restore safety in a "calm, respectful, culturally sensitive and non-punitive manner" (p. 8). If, as Jouriles, Rancher, Vu, and McDonald (2017) findings suggest, police involvement in domestic violence is positively associated with children's anxiety symptoms, then the police have a duty of care to respond in a manner that supports a less traumatic experience of the event for children whilst promoting their safety and well-being.

Best practice recommends that officers should insist on seeing all children present even if they have not been directly involved or were reported to be injured (Berkman & Esserman, 2004; Centre for Children and Families, 2004). In terms of communication between officers and children at the scene, Berkman and Esserman (2004) recommend officers speak directly to children aged over two years and explain in an age appropriate way what is happening and why they have responded, being aware of the individual reaction children may have to seeing officers in the home, depending on their past experiences. However, when it comes to formally interviewing children as part of an investigation, then this should be done by specialist trained officers who understand the sensitive approach that is required in order to avoid further trauma to a child. Front-line officers should instead observe children at the scene and make an initial assessment of any potential risk to the child that may require a more formal intervention from specialist services. Officers are further recommended to communicate openly and respectfully with parents as to the reason for them checking on all children present, particularly with families where there is distrust of the police (Berkman & Esserman, 2004). In terms of referrals to child protective services, officers are recommended to identify protective factors in the family and explain to the parent(s) why the report is being sent, and what will happen next, making sure not to use the referral as a threat, as this may result in mothers not phoning the police in the future for protection. Rather, actions taken by officers that support the mother-child relationship are seen as a positive step that police can take in assisting with the recovery process for children. Indeed, children often report their mother as the first point of comfort and safety (Radford et al., 2011), further supporting this approach by police. In a situation where a mother is not able to care for children due to injury or any other reason, then the police should help to identify a safe adult for the child to stay with (Berkman and Esserman, 2004). Finally, in terms of follow up, Berkman and Esserman (2004) suggest that officers should take a relationship-based approach and ensure that a



follow-up call is made to victims and their children, as a child might not show any signs of trauma until after the event, hence a follow-up call is a helpful way of supporting the child. In the US there have also been examples of positive interventions used in community policing to support children experiencing domestic violence both in the short and long-term (B. Smith, Nickles, Mulmat, & Davies, 2001).

A similar framework for police responding to domestic violence has been developed by The College of Policing in the UK (College of Policing, 2015). Consistent with North American guidelines (Baker et al., 2002), it recommends officers check on the welfare of all children present at a domestic violence incident, and inquire about children not present at the scene but who are ordinarily resident in the household. The framework requires officers check bedrooms and ensure the safety and well-being of each child. There is some discretion allowed when it comes to speaking directly to children. Whilst officers do not require parental consent to speak to a child, they are required to consider whether it is in the child's best interest or not if they have slept through the event and are not aware of the police presence, in which case waking them could add further trauma. If children are awake however and aware of the incident, then officers are recommended not to ask leading questions and to only inquire after the child's well-being and safety. They refer to the fact that the child may be both a victim and a witness under the category of neglect when they have been exposed to domestic violence. Again when it comes to a criminal investigation, children should only be interviewed by a specialist interviewer (College of Policing). Whilst, such tools may be useful in providing a structured response and prompting officers to seek out certain information pertaining to children in the home, Richardson-Foster et al. argue that "in the absence of meaningful engagement with children, any such risk assessments are likely to be little more than tick-box exercises" (2012, p. 232).

### **Summary of literature review and emergent research questions**

In the last two chapters literature pertaining to the impact on children using a life-course approach has been reviewed. Qualitative studies including the voice of children were prioritised and illustrated the active involvement of children in the domestically violent home and the various strategies children develop to cope with their experiences. A discussion on the changing discourses on children and childhood observing concepts such as agency and voice were explored alongside more recent contributions to the literature that calls for children to be awarded the same victim status as adults. It was then considered how conceptions of the agentic child as victim

of domestic violence might translate to practice and policy settings and discussed briefly some potential challenges on applying a victim discourse with children experiencing domestic violence. The discussion then turned to the response of police to domestic violence. Police perspectives on contact with children present at an incident varied but in general there was a reluctance by police to speak to children at the scene and a fear of adding further to children's trauma. Findings in the literature report a clear divergence between what children want from the police in terms of direct engagement at the scene and the actual police response. Best practice guidelines reflect children's need for contact with police at the scene however there still remains a gap in practice responses by police that fully recognise the child.

Overall, findings reveal a need for further exploration of the broader factors influencing how the child experiences the police response to domestic violence and police officers understanding of their role with children.

Emergent research questions:

1. Drawing on four different perspectives; children, mothers, police and Health and Social Care Practitioners (HSCP): How do children living with domestic violence experience the police response to a domestic violence call-out?
2. What influences how children living with domestic violence experience the police response to domestic violence?
3. What do police officers understand their role to be when there are children present at a domestic violence incident?
4. How can findings from the study contribute to best practice in supporting children who are living with domestic violence?

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology used to achieve the central aim of the study - to explore children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence in the context of the police call -out from multiple perspectives that includes children and adult actors. This is achieved by a qualitative study that involved interviews with children who had an experience of the police calling to their home as a result of domestic violence, involving the abuse of their mother perpetrated by a male intimate partner. This doctoral research also includes the perspective of adult actors including; mothers, practitioners and police, who are considered in this context as important in developing a richer understanding of the police response to children experiencing domestic violence.

A review of the literature provided in the previous two chapters, demonstrates how although children are directly and indirectly impacted by their experiences of domestic violence, they still however remain peripheral to the professional response, including the police. This chapter sets out the conceptual framework that underpinned the research design and analysis of the data, followed by the steps taken to carry out the research strategy (Silverman, 2005). Ethical concerns were an important aspect at all stages of the research process and will be discussed in some detail before concluding with the limitations of the study.

### **The conceptual framework**

Social constructionism underpins the epistemological approach of this thesis, where reality is understood as a social construct, through which meaning is made within social, cultural and political contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Within social constructionism, reality is constructed through knowledge that has become institutionalised, creating a shared meaning and co-construction of reality through which we live our everyday lives (Burr, 2003). Lock and Strong (2010) assert that social constructionism "is concerned with meaning and understanding as the central feature of human activities" (p. 6). Indeed, it is the meaning-making and sense-making processes that inform action or inaction which are of central importance to social constructionism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Chapter One of this thesis, illustrated how domestic violence, both as a phenomena and its meaning, has changed over time, shaped by political and social forces. Social constructionism is therefore an appropriate theoretical framework to support an understanding of the social and political forces that are inherently embedded in the meaning given to acts of violence and abuse and how that meaning has shifted over time and place (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Indeed, the construction of child abuse more broadly has evolved over time, becoming a greater social concern, resulting in the re-positioning of children within the domestic abuse debate and a re-construction of the meaning of their experiences (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). Social constructionism allows space for the voice of the victim to be heard (Crotty, 1998). To this end, social constructionism offers a viable epistemological perspective in which to explore the subjective experiences of children who come in contact with the police in the context of domestic violence. Within this conceptual framework, the phenomena is explored by ascertaining the views of both the children themselves, and also the adults in their lives who are understood as having influence on shaping the child's experience and meaning-making.

The conceptual framework of this thesis is further influenced by the researchers' social work education, and complements an interpretivist approach to knowledge making. It is within this paradigm that "research and practice in social work acknowledges that research and knowledge building are a mix of the rational, serendipitous, and intuitive" (Rodwell, 1998, p. 16). The constructionist, similar to the social worker, takes a collaborative approach and abandons the role of professional expert, instead allowing space from which power can be shared and diversity is welcomed (Rodwell, 1998). Within this framework, multiple perspectives are valued and facilitated by the research process (Padgett, 2008).

### ***Sociology of childhood and children's rights framework***

Drawing from social constructionism, the 'new' sociology of childhood and a broad children's rights discourse combine to produce the conceptual framework within which the thesis is located. The study is firmly grounded in the understanding that children are competent and capable social actors in their own right (James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994). Influenced by a new discourse on children's rights that arose from the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the 'new' sociology of childhood which began to emerge in the early 1990s (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994b), has become the main

sociological framework for the study of children and childhood (King, 2007). It is argued that viewing childhood as a social construct, as opposed to assuming a realist lens, is paramount to a more fluid approach to conceptualising children and childhood (James & Prout, 1997). It is agreed that childhood is a stage within physical development that is common to all children, but how childhood is understood varies across cultural, political and economic contexts and children's engagement and actions in everyday life (James & James, 2004). This theoretical approach to childhood runs simultaneously with the emergence of children's rights as a political issue, highlighting the interconnectedness of both (King, 2007). New understandings of childhood, consistent with a constructivist epistemology, position the child as an agentic being and valued social actor with a set of rights which must be upheld (James & Prout, 1997).

Positioned against the backdrop of an emergence of a sharply focused lens of research and practice interest on childhood and children's experiences, and reflective of the core ethos of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), this thesis reflects a construction of childhood that appreciates children as competent social actors (Emond, 2008), whose thoughts and opinions are worthy of consideration (Bosisio, 2012). It further considers that children and young people not only have the ability to operate within "adult-centred socially constructed meanings of citizenship", but also the capacity to influence them as well (Bacon, 2014, p. 22).

### ***Children's 'voice' and 'agency'***

Children's rights and new sociological understandings of childhood are intertwined by two key concepts – the 'voice' of the child and children's 'agency', both of which underpin the research design and data analysis of this study. Montgomery and Kellett (2009) posit that voice is "the right to express one's views freely – including the entitlement to be listened to" (p. 237). Article 12 of the UNCRC affords the child the right to a voice and to be heard in matters affecting them in relation to administrative and judicial contexts. However, there is some disagreement as to whether this right extends to children's ability to have a voice in research, particularly when parental consent is required which can limit children's opportunity to participate and contribute meaningfully (Hammersley, 2015). The limitations imposed by parental consent became an issue in the present study and will be discussed later in this chapter under the section 'Ethical Issues'. Aside from such challenges, a general recognition of children as 'agentic' beings as opposed to passive 'becomings' (Qvortrup, 1994b), has marked a key shift in thinking on children and childhood in academic research. As

discussed in the previous two chapters, the concept of 'agency' is increasingly being adopted by academics researching children's experiences of domestic violence, to illuminate the child's active as opposed to passive presence in the domestic violence home (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien, 2014).

### ***Research questions***

An understanding of children as active agents in the domestic violence home and the child's right to be heard as a victim of domestic violence, led to the main aim of this study – to explore children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence and contribute to the shortfall in empirical research on this topic. The achievement of this understanding is central to the aims of this PhD study and informs the following research questions:

1. Drawing on four different perspectives; children, mothers, police and Health and Social Care Practitioners (HSCP): How do children living with domestic violence experience the police response to a domestic violence call-out?
2. What influences how children living with domestic violence experience the police response to domestic violence?
3. What do police officers understand their role to be when there are children present at a domestic violence incident?
4. How can findings from the study contribute to best practice in supporting children who are living with domestic violence?

Underpinning the research questions are sociological understandings of the child as a social actor in the domestic violence home who is reflexive and has the capacity for agency and to construct meaning from their experiences (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). The overarching aim of the study is therefore to explore the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence from the position of 'agentic' child who plays an active role in the domestic violence home and prioritises the child's view on how police can help children living with domestic violence to feel and stay safe.

## **Designing a research strategy**

This research is focused on understanding and learning more about the child's experience of contact with the police in the context of domestic violence. Owing to the dearth of empirical research in this area, an exploratory study using qualitative methods was considered to be the most appropriate research design (Braun & Clarke, 2013). An emphasis on understanding the subjective experience is more suited to a qualitative methodological approach and fitted within the epistemological framework of the study (Silverman, 2011). Furthermore, research on a sensitive topic that seeks to explore the views and experiences of a vulnerable group, which adult and child victims of domestic violence can be regarded as, is more likely to involve a qualitative methodology (Liamputtong, 2007). Indeed, qualitative methods are often used in social work research to explore sensitive topics or to understand the lived experience of a person, offering an insider perspective that can inform evidence-based practice (Padgett, 2008). Such an approach fitted with the researcher's social work training and desire to explore the subjective meaning and create a greater awareness of the child's needs as victim during the police response. Whilst quantitative methods can be used successfully in children's research, qualitative data provides richer meaning and context to the child's experience (Morrows & Richards, 1996). Qualitative methods allow respondents to communicate their own subjective experience, which Freeman and Mathison (2009) argue is more suited to authentic research with children. Furthermore, qualitative methods, in contrast to quantitative approaches, allow for a more emotive dataset and understanding of the child's world (Grover, 2004).

Within the domestic violence literature, we see both quantitative and qualitative approaches being applied to empirical research. A quantitative approach, largely favoured by North American scholars, has been used to quantify the extent of domestic violence; however approaches taken are highly contested by either side of the family violence and feminist strands of the debate (Dobash et al., 1992; McNeely et al., 1999; D. Saunders, 1988).<sup>19</sup> Qualitative methodologies are more applicable than quantitative when seeking to explore the subjective meaning given to experiences of abuse by survivors (Downes, Kelly, & Westmarland, 2014). A review of the international and national literature on children's experiences of domestic violence provided in Chapters Two and Three, demonstrates how a qualitative approach can be used successfully to illicit the perspectives and experiences of children who have experienced domestic violence. In more general terms, qualitative methodologies are considered to be more

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<sup>19</sup> Both strands of the debate are discussed in chapter one of this dissertation under the heading defining domestic violence.

suitable than quantitative methods when applying an inductive approach to understanding the subjective meaning of a phenomenon (Silverman, 2005). Furthermore, the sensitivity of the topic as well as the exploratory nature of the present study's central research question; 'How do children experience the police response to domestic violence?', deems the chosen qualitative methodology more appropriate (Bryman, 2012).

### ***A case study approach***

A qualitative case study methodological framework supports the overall research study. Robson (1993) maintains that a case study approach is an appropriate strategy for providing a rich and in-depth investigation of a "particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (1993, p.52). The emphasis is on description and understanding as opposed to explanation (Perry, 2011). Simons (2009) distinguishes case study research by its aim of 'particularisation' – "to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or add to knowledge of a specific topic" (p. 24). This characterisation of a case study approach makes it particularly relevant to the present study, in that it seeks to provide increased knowledge on the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence, an area of which little is known about.

The context in which the phenomenon being studied is located is of particular concern in a case study approach (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017). The boundary between the phenomenon and context is often indistinct (Yin, 2017). A case study approach explores processes and outcomes, making it a suitable method to use in researching real world problems of an exploratory nature, allowing for in-depth analysis of a phenomenon in context (O'Leary, 2005). The case study can be used for a number of different types of studies and does not fit solely with any one school of thinking, making it applicable across disciplines (Perry, 2011). For the purpose of this study, the 'case' or phenomenon under study is the police response to children experiencing domestic violence. The context is the police call-out to a domestic violence incident in the home.

A case study approach often involves the use of multiple research methods which can be both qualitative and quantitative (Creswell, 2013), however in this particular case, the research uses one method of data collection, the qualitative interview (group and



individual), to gather multiple perspectives from four sets of actors.<sup>20</sup> Different perspectives are valued over expertise and fit well with the conceptual framework of the present study, as outlined earlier in this chapter (Perry, 2011). Yin (2017) argues that the use of several different sources or actors strengthens findings through triangulation.<sup>21</sup> In the present study, triangulation of sources provides a richer and more comprehensive account of the phenomenon by answering the research questions from multiple viewpoints that includes; children, mothers, health and social care practitioners and police. The purpose of triangulation is both to ensure that different sources of evidence support the same finding (Yin, 2017), but also to illuminate differences within the case (Perry, 2011). Triangulation is used in this study to “deepen the understanding of a phenomenon, not to confirm one true reality” (Jentoft & Olsen, 2017, p. 4). In researching children’s experiences of domestic violence, Øverlien (2010) maintains that “understanding the problem from a wide array of perspectives, will enhance study outcomes” (p. 90). A case study allows for multiple perspectives of an event to be explored making it a suitable approach to use in this research study.

### **Carrying out the research strategy**

Carrying out the research strategy involved five major steps which will now be outlined in order to show the various stages that were undertaken by the researcher. The steps include; *conducting the literature review, seeking ethical and agency approval, engaging with gatekeepers, sampling and interviewing participants, and the transcription and analysis of the data.* The stages will be discussed in the initial sequence in which they were carried out, however as fieldwork progressed, movement through the stages became more of a fluid and iterative process (Charmaz, 2006). At times the researcher was forced to return to engaging with new agency gatekeepers during periods when recruitment was slow. This also led to more opportunistic sampling (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003), which resulted in interviewing with one population often overlapping with another.

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<sup>20</sup> Jentoft and Olsen (2017) carried out research in Norway with vulnerable groups using a case study methodology. Triangulation of sources included different actors who were central to the case under study. The interview was used as the primary data collection method.

<sup>21</sup> Whilst triangulation of sources is often associated with mixed methods research, it is being applied in this study as a strategy to increase rigour in the qualitative case study (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

## **1. Conducting the literature review**

A review of literature on: impact of domestic violence on children, qualitative research including children's experiences of domestic violence, police response to domestic violence with children present and police response more generally to domestic violence was carried out and is presented in chapters two and three. The following databases were used in the search; JSTOR, PsycARTICLES, Sage Journals, Scopus, Social Sciences Index, Sociological Abstracts. The search strategy included the use of keywords and search terms to capture variation in terminology used across jurisdictions such as: "domestic violence" or "domestic abuse" or "intimate partner violence" or "family violence". Reference lists from key readings were also used in the search for recent literature. Google scholar was used in this way also to follow papers citing key published authors in the field of children experiencing domestic violence.

Example of search used to identify literature pertaining to the police response to domestic violence involving children applied the following:

"domestic violence" or "domestic abuse" or "intimate partner violence" or "family violence"

And child\* or "young person" or adolescen\*

And police or "law enforcement"

## **2. Seeking ethical and agency approval**

Increasingly, Research Ethics Committees (RECs) play a greater role in ensuring procedural guidelines are followed (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015a), and have become a critical hurdle for children's researchers to overcome, particularly when it involves sensitive topics (A. Campbell, 2008; Powell & Smith, 2009). The first major step in undertaking the present research involved seeking agency and ethical approval. Gaining ethical approval to conduct the research resulted in a lengthy process of engaging with firstly the university Research Ethics Committee (REC), followed by approval from three external agencies through which the recruitment of service users and practitioners took place (A. Campbell, 2008). This involved three distinct applications, the first of which was ethical approval from the REC in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin where the research took place. Secondly, an application was made to the Child and Family Agency (Tusla)<sup>22</sup> Research Ethics Board in order to have permission to recruit service users and staff employed by

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<sup>22</sup> Tusla – The Child and Family Agency is the umbrella agency under which all statutory child and family services and domestic violence services in Ireland operate.

the agency. Agency approval from Tusla was a necessary requirement before any formal contact could be made with potential gatekeepers who were employed in their services. During the same period official approval was sought from the Irish police - An Garda Síochána Research Unit. Approval from one agency was dependent on the others agreement to participate since the involvement of both agencies was considered to be an integral part of the overall study. Ethical approval was also secured from a non-statutory agency supporting children and their families in the community, during the fieldwork stage who facilitated the recruitment of the majority of children to this research. Overall, this study involved completion of four ethical applications.

In preparation for the ethics applications, professionally designed information booklets and consent forms were tailored specifically to each population and subsamples of children and young people by age ranges (5-7, 8-12, 13-17, 18-21).<sup>23</sup> The researcher was intent on maintaining a child-centred approach to the study which informed the design of the research material using child friendly images and language.<sup>24</sup> In addition, information packs containing a copy of each information sheet, consent form and a letter outlining the research aims and objectives, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and a letter requesting an agency to act in a gatekeeper role, were provided to potential agency gatekeepers. The information packs were used as a tool to promote the study and could be used by services to discuss the project with staff and their service users where appropriate.<sup>25</sup>

- **Setbacks seeking ethical approval**

The research encountered several setbacks in this initial stage during which the research proposal was reviewed and amended accordingly to meet the demands set out by the relevant ethical boards. This resulted in the development of a clear set of inclusion/exclusion criteria for both children and mothers to the study, ensuring safe and ethical research. Concerns were raised by the university REC regarding the potential risk to younger children's (5 years upwards) participation on what was considered a sensitive topic, as well as scepticism surrounding younger children's capacity to participate in research. Such concerns were successfully defended by the researcher with reference to the existing literature (referred to in earlier chapters), that

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<sup>23</sup> The categories of age ranges used were informed by Vygotsky's Social Development Theory which is suited to a more constructionist approach to development as opposed to Piaget's theory of cognitive development which involves more concrete stages (Sudbery, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Appendix A – Children's information booklets

<sup>25</sup> Appendix B – Agency information pack

demonstrates younger children's ability to share their views successfully in a research capacity on similar topics of a sensitive nature.

However, the issue of parental consent when it comes to children's participation in research was not as easily addressed due to legalities specific to Ireland, which require dual parent consent, i.e. the consent of both legal guardians for children under 18 years to participate in research. Although local policy guidelines on consent procedures suggest that in most situations one parent consent is sufficient (National Consent Advisory Group, 2013), the university REC based their decision for a dual parent consent requirement on the grounds of recent legislation introduced in Ireland<sup>26</sup> that strengthens amongst other things, parental rights in relation to consent. It was argued therefore on legal grounds by the REC that both the mother and father had a right to be informed and provide consent to the child's involvement in research. To overcome this setback an additional clause was added to the inclusion/exclusion criteria for children's participation in this study which read:

*In a situation where a father has joint custody and his consent must be legally sought for the child to participant in the study, then the researcher will seek the advice of the gatekeeper. Where a gatekeeper identifies that it would not be in the best interests of a child to seek consent from the child's father to participate then the child will be excluded from the study.*

In domestic violence research with children, both seeking consent and not seeking it from the abusing parent raises serious ethical issues around the potential risk to the non-abusing parent and child (Cater & Øverlien, 2014). The result of this additional clause therefore, had serious implications for the recruitment of children to the study. The need for two parent consent became a primary issue for this research and is referred to again in more detail in later sections of this chapter as it arose at different stages of the research process. Full permission was granted from the university REC and two external agencies eleven months after the initial application to the university REC was first made. Once ethical and agency approval was secured, fieldwork commenced and a third agency approval was secured.

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<sup>26</sup> The Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 ("Children and Family Relationships Act," 2015)

### **3. *Engaging with gatekeepers***

Engaging with gatekeepers was the first stage of a multi-pronged recruitment strategy that involved the following four strategies which will be discussed in more detail as they arise in the chapter;

- a) Identification of gatekeepers through engagement with agencies supporting children and families impacted by domestic violence.
- b) Convening a service provider forum.
- c) Presentation of research proposal to key audiences.<sup>27</sup>
- d) Poster to drive recruitment of young people.<sup>28</sup>

Once ethical and agency approval was secured, the next stage in carrying out the research involved the identification of service providers and agencies that would assist in the recruitment of children, mothers and HSCP to the study. A purposive sampling framework was employed to identify agencies who would act in a gatekeeper role (Bryman, 2012). Both statutory and voluntary agencies operating in the Greater Dublin area were targeted who had a strong track record of engaging families in work related to domestic violence. Family support workers were considered particularly well placed to act in a gatekeeper role for the recruitment of children and mothers through their on-going relationship in the community with families impacted by domestic violence, and their engagement in other Irish studies of this kind (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). As well as four family support services, one large specialist domestic violence service offering long term services and transitional housing to women and children fleeing domestic violence was also targeted. A teen counselling service was approached by the researcher as a way of recruiting young people to the study who may have experienced domestic violence and were seeking professional support. In addition, an advocacy and support service for members of the Irish Traveller community was also approached as a way of increasing diversity to the sample. In total, seven services operating in the Greater Dublin area were initially approached at this first stage of fieldwork.

Contact was made with the identified agencies through an email to the Head of Services or Project Leader of the service, introducing the research and requesting an

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<sup>27</sup> This included a presentation at a training day for police on domestic violence in the Greater Dublin area, and a social work conference.

<sup>28</sup> Appendix C - Poster sent to youth services and aftercare network who posted it to their social media page.

agency visit to talk about the research in more detail. This was generally followed by a telephone conversation between the main contact in the agency and the researcher. With the exception of one service who opted out at an early stage, informing the researcher that they did not engage with external researchers, all others showed an interest in participating in the study and were provided with an 'Agency Information Pack'. In most cases the researcher was then invited to attend a team meeting to talk about the research with the workers who were then given some time to consider families that would meet the inclusion criteria for participation in the research. Workers were also asked at this stage to consider their own participation in the study as practitioners. On-going contact was maintained around recruitment efforts, either through the Project Leader, or in a few cases, practitioners themselves made contact with the researcher to discuss potential participants. However, feedback from practitioners consistently related back to concerns over the need to seek fathers consent for a child to participate. Many of the practitioners felt strongly that this was a weakness in the study design and significantly limited the families that they could approach about participation.

Shortly after meeting with the first set of agencies, a service provider forum was convened by the researcher, inviting members of the academic, practice and policy making community who were engaged in work related to families impacted by domestic violence. The purpose of the forum was twofold; firstly to seek feedback on the research methodology, particularly in terms of accessing children's voices, and secondly, as a method of establishing rapport between the researcher and potential gatekeepers and other professionals working in the area of domestic violence. A total of 18 were in attendance including police officers, domestic violence workers, social workers, family support workers, childcare workers, one domestic violence survivor and academics involved in children's research. Building a positive working relationship with service providers became an important aspect of the early stages of fieldwork and led to a number of positive alliances being made between the researcher and agencies. One in particular led to the recruitment of the majority of children for the study. Others gave suggestions on alternative places to recruit young people from, such as residential care settings and after-care networks, which although were helpful, did not lead to any further successful recruitment. These efforts to recruit young people will be discussed further in the next section.

A number of other agencies were approached by the researcher who were involved in working with families or more specifically young people who had experienced living

with domestic violence. However, although they showed an interest in the merits of the research, many did not feel it was appropriate for the agency to assist in a gatekeeping role. The reasons given related to internal policy of not engaging with external researchers, time and resource issues within the service, and a lack of suitable participants to recruit from that met the inclusion criteria. The small number of services that agreed to be involved played a key role in recruiting mothers to take part in the research, yet found it more difficult to identify suitable children who met the criteria to participate. Gatekeepers voiced frustration at the restrictions that the need for two parent consent for children's participation placed on who they could ask. Unsurprisingly, the services through which the children in this research were recruited, stood out for their child-centred approach to working with children experiencing domestic violence and had a history of engaging with external researchers.

#### ***4. Sampling and interviewing participants***

The next stage in carrying out the research design involved sampling and interviewing participants. During the early stages of the research design it was intended that a larger sample of children as well as young people (5-21 years) would be recruited to the study. As a qualified social worker, it was important to the researcher, as described in Chapter One that the child's experience was captured first, as a way of keeping children and young people's voices central to the study and incorporating their views into data collection with the adult populations in the sample. However, after discussions with gatekeepers it became clearer that recruiting a large enough sample of children and young people to do this, would not be without its challenges. Arising from challenges recruiting sufficient numbers of children and particularly young people to the study it was decided to change course slightly. The need to adapt sampling strategies in response to challenges recruiting children to research on sensitive subjects, has been documented elsewhere (A. Campbell, 2008; Powell & Smith, 2009). The need to rely largely on adult informants to hear about the child's experience was disappointing to the researcher. Although attention to children's rights was visible in Irish policy and legislation that encouraged children to have a voice in matters effecting them, there appeared to be a disconnect between policy, practice and research when it came to facilitating children to have their voice heard. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight of this thesis.

The researcher thus decided to seek out health and social care practitioners to take part in the study as the first stage of data collection, which occurred quite authentically during the previous phase of engaging with gatekeepers. This happened alongside the

recruitment of mothers who were often engaged in the services from which practitioners had been recruited. By firstly building relationships in the field with practitioners, this assisted in the recruitment of both mothers and/or their children who met the inclusion criteria. The following section outlines the sampling and interviewing for each individual population; HSCP, mothers, children and police. Each one is dealt with in the relative order in which they were conducted. Interviews with mothers and children were on-going throughout the duration of the fieldwork period which spanned across eleven months pertaining to opportunistic sampling. Particular attention in this section is given to interviews with children.

- **Sampling and interviewing health and social care practitioners**

A sample of practitioners in the field that were engaging in work with children and families impacted by domestic violence was recruited using purposive and snowball sampling (Silverman, 2005). Suitable participants within this population were identified by the principal or agency head that provided them with an information sheet and gave permission for them to speak to the researcher if they chose to take part.<sup>29</sup> Those interested in taking part in the study were asked to contact the researcher directly to discuss their involvement in the study and to begin the consent seeking process. A total of 25 health and social care practitioners took part in the study ranging across a number of disciplines.

Data collection with this sample population included individual in-depth interviews with six practitioners and three focus groups involving 19 practitioners. Individual interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. In one case, two workers were interviewed together at their request for time availability reasons. Bearing in mind the need to remain flexible to the needs of busy services (Downes et al., 2014), focus groups were considered as a data collection method for the HSCP sample. The use of focus groups in the study was adopted for predominantly convenience rather than methodological reasons. A focus group interview was suggested if there were four or more practitioners in the one agency that wished to participate in the research. In such circumstances the agency head was given the option for a focus group to take part during a lunch period as opposed to four individual interviews. The option of a focus group was offered to agencies with consideration for time and staffing resources. Of the three focus groups that were conducted, two were with established teams of practitioners and one was a committee made up of practitioners working in different agencies. The group interviews

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<sup>29</sup> Appendix D



provided an informal forum for discussion on the topic (Becker, Bryman, Ferguson, & Swift, 2012), and also offered insight from the teams on the general views held by their profession which often had a different focus depending on their role.

**Table 1: Information on Participating Health and Social Care Practitioners (HSCP)**

<b>HSCP Participant Information</b>		
<b>Variables</b>		<b>Number of Participants (25)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>Male</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Professional Role</b>	<b>Children’s Support Worker</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Duty Social Worker</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>Social Work Team Leader</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Family Support Worker</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>Family Support Project Leader</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Community Project Worker</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Psychotherapist</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Specialist Domestic Violence Worker</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Domestic Violence Coordinator</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>Social Care Student</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>School Completion Coordinator</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Sector</b>	<b>Statutory</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>Voluntary</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Location</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>Urban</b>	<b>19</b>

The topic guides used in both the individual interviews and focus groups are contained in Appendix E. The topics for discussion were intended to ascertain practitioners’ views and experiences on working with families experiencing domestic violence and their contact with the police in this context. They were also asked to share their views on what a positive police response to children experiencing domestic violence would look like in practice.

- **Sampling and interviewing mothers**

A sample of 11 mothers who had experience of contact with the police as a result of being a victim of domestic violence were identified through seven separate sources, predominantly comprising of family support agencies, specialist domestic violence services and other community based services. It was not a requirement that mothers and children taking part in the study were related, as the research was not looking to examine a specific incident from the mother-child perspective, but rather to explore in more general terms, the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence from multiple perspectives. However, mothers were asked by gatekeepers to consider their child's participation when it was deemed appropriate. In three cases this resulted in mother and child groups participating in the study. Similar inclusion/exclusion criteria that were used for the children were also imposed for the sample population of mothers. The use of agency gatekeepers was maintained to ensure consistency of an ethical sampling approach.<sup>30</sup>

Interviews with mothers took place at different periods across the 11 months of data collection. Purposive and snowball sampling meant that mothers were recruited through a number of different channels. The researcher was eager to get a diverse group of mothers so continued recruitment throughout the fieldwork period.

11 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers who had experienced violence and abuse perpetrated by a male intimate partner that involved a police response either during the relationship or in the post-separation period. Apart from one interview which took place within the university setting, all other interviews with mothers were conducted in the service they were recruited through. Interviews with mothers lasted between 22 and 126 minutes. Two of the interviews with mothers were facilitated during a mothers group from which they took time out to be interviewed so were somewhat shorter in length than the others.<sup>31</sup> The majority of the women were in on-going contact with a support worker who had agreed to link in with them after the interview.

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<sup>30</sup> Appendix F – Information booklet and consent form for mothers.

<sup>31</sup> These interviews with mothers were shorter in length due to a request by the support worker for them not to miss out on the rest of the group work.

**Table 2: Information on Participating Mothers**

Mother Participant Information		
Variables		Number of Participants (11)
<b>Age</b>	18-20	1
	21-30	1
	31-40	4
	41-50	4
	Over 50	1
<b>No. of children</b>	1	4
	2	1
	3	4
	4	1
	5+	1
<b>Relationship to abuser</b>	Husband	3
	Male Intimate Partner	8
<b>Location</b>	Dublin	8
	Outside Dublin	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Irish	7
	Non-Irish	3
	Irish Traveller	1
<b>Police involvement</b>	During the relationship	5
	Post-separation	11

The topic guide used in the interviews with mothers is contained in Appendix G. The researcher took a person-centred and non-directive approach (Rogers, 2000) to interviews with mothers and as interviews progressed, set aside the topic guide in order to establish a more informal environment where the woman could feel safe in sharing her story (Downes et al., 2014). By taking this approach, many of the mothers often ended up speaking openly about their own experiences of abuse and the researcher provided a space for this to be listened to. The topic guide was often covered in a natural flow as the mother spoke and any areas that needed further clarification or that did not come up naturally were probed gently by the researcher. As interviews with the mothers progressed, the researcher became aware of the difficulty

that the women had in speaking about their child's presence in the home when the police were called. Many of the women either became upset during this stage of the interview or chose not to discuss it by moving the direction of the conversation elsewhere. Others reported that children had been sleeping when the police responded so had no contact with the police. Adopting a reflexive approach, the researcher began to recognise the gravity of how emotive this topic was for the women as mothers to discuss. Not having any personal experience with the topic nor being a mother, the researcher had underestimated the sensitivity and difficulty for the women to consider their child's experience of events. Questioning was thus approached more sensitively by acknowledging to mothers that it may be upsetting to talk about their child's experience both at the beginning and during the interview. This approach appeared to help establish a greater rapport with the mothers however, it did not always yield more information on the child's experience since mothers were often unaware of how their child(ren) had felt about the police intervention.

- **Sampling and interviewing children**

Initial aims of the research set out to include a sample of children and young people ranging in age from 5 to 21 years who had experienced the police responding to their home regarding an incident of violence or abuse perpetrated against their mother by a male intimate partner. However, getting access to children and young people who have experienced domestic violence, proved to be an onerous task, reflecting similar experiences of children's researchers in the field (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; A. Campbell, 2008; Katz, 2016; Øverlien, 2010; Øverlien & Holt, 2018). Central to the debate on children's participation in research is their status of 'child' (Powell & Smith, 2009). As mentioned earlier, the two services from which children were recruited from were very child-centred in their practice and were committed to including children's voices in research.

The resulting research included data collected from a sample of 10 children between the age of 7 and 10 years, and also included one young person age 21 years.<sup>32</sup> The majority of these young participants had experienced the police coming to their home due to a domestic violence incident involving their mother and father within the previous five years. Children were recruited through a specialist domestic violence

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<sup>32</sup> Katz (2016) experienced similar issues recruiting adolescents which resulted in a sample of one young person age 20 years and the rest between the age of 10 and 14 years, resulting in a similar gap in age and numbers in the present study.

service and a family support service. Both services had a particular focus on working with children who had experienced domestic violence and abuse in their home. Within the services, the children had engaged in either group work or individual work with a support worker around their experiences of violence and abuse in the home, and were receiving on-going support at the time of interview.

**Table 3: Information on Participating Children**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sibling Group	Mother Participated
Alan	Male	7	No	Yes - Eithne
Billy	Male	7	Yes - Debbie	Yes- Doreen
Conor	Male	7	No	No
Debbie	Female	9	Yes - Billy	Yes - Doreen
Ed	Male	10	No	No
Fiona	Female	9	No	No
Grace	Female	9	No	No
Mary	Female	21	No	Yes - Geraldine
Harry	Male	9	Yes- Joey	No
Joey	Male	8	Yes- Harry	No

In terms of recruiting adolescents and young people as was intended, the final sample of children included only one young person. A 21 year-old female was recruited along with her mother through a specialist domestic violence service providing outreach support to families effected by domestic violence. Recruitment and sampling strategies were reviewed and adapted to find suitable young people at various stages throughout the research process that continued right until the end of fieldwork.<sup>33</sup> From the limited pool of potential young people identified by gatekeepers who fitted the inclusion criteria, namely the requirement of dual parent consent, gatekeepers reported the young people declining for reasons such as; not wanting to ‘drag up the past’ that they wanted to move on from, fears around their safety and concerns about jeopardizing the work on rebuilding the relationship with the family. A mother and her five children had agreed to take part in the research, however excluded themselves for personal reasons that the family were dealing with. In another situation, two young adults over 18 years who were recruited through a residential care-home and a youth service, did not

<sup>33</sup> The researcher widened the net of potential recruitment sites to include services where young people might attend who had experience of domestic violence in their families. However, for a variety of reasons still failed to successfully recruit numbers of young people to take part in the research.

require parental consent, initially agreed to take part, but then due to unknown reasons did not follow up with the researcher when it came to organising an interview. There was also a report from one of the mothers who took part in the research that their child of 16 years would be willing to participate, however because of the need to have their fathers consent, they did not feel that this would be safe to do so.

At the point of interview, eight of the children were living with their mother in the community and two children were living with their mother and siblings in long-term supported accommodation for survivors of domestic violence. With the exception of one child, all of the children and the young person who participated had experienced the police calling to their home in relation to a reported violent incident on one or multiple occasions between their parents that took place in the home. The remaining one child, a 7 year-old boy who was part of the children's support group but had not experienced a police call-out to the home within the previous five years wished to take part in the research.<sup>34</sup> It was decided by the researcher and the child's support worker to include the boy as excluding him would have caused him to feel left out of the group from which the children were recruited on the day of interviewing. Even though this particular child had not experienced the police response to domestic violence in the previous five years, the data collected from him was included in the analysis as it still provided some insight into the child's views on the police response. Of the children who participated, two sets of children were sibling groups and three mother/child groups included four children. All interviews with children were carried out individually except in the case of three younger children whose support worker was present during the interview, at their request. Seven of the children who participated and two of their mothers were recruited from the same service. The coordinator of the service acted in a gatekeeper role and facilitated access to participants during two children's groups and one mother's group over two days during which the researcher spent time with the groups and was introduced. The two other young children were recruited through a children's support worker in a domestic violence service at the later stages of fieldwork. The only young person, a 21 year old female was recruited through a specialist domestic violence service that her mother was accessing support from. She had experienced the police calling to her family home throughout her childhood and teenage years as a result of her father's abusive and violent behaviour.

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<sup>34</sup> The boy's mother participated in the research and informed the researcher that her son was a baby when she had phoned the police in relation to domestic violence perpetrated against her by his father. However, she continued to experience emotional abuse in the post-separation period.

Individual interviews were used as the main research method with the children and young person. This method is considered to be more appropriate when exploring personal experiences of a sensitive nature as some participants may be reluctant to answer in a group setting (Greene & Hogan, 2005). It has proven to be an effective data collection method for researchers exploring children's experiences of domestic violence (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Morris et al., 2012; Overlien, 2013) and their experiences of the police response to it (Overlien & Aas, 2015). The group interview setting also has its merits in allowing children to feel safe among peers to discuss sensitive matters (Hennessy & Heary, 2005), and has been used with young people to discuss their views on the police response to domestic violence (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, it was decided to conduct individual interviews with the children in this study to allow them to construct their own individual story, using the vignette approach. Topic guides were created and adapted to the different age ranges of young participants. These were to be used with children over 12 years of age in an individual interview. However, as it was only children in the middle childhood range that were recruited, the vignette approach was used.

Vignettes were used as a research method to illicit the views and perspectives of children in the research study. Kirk's (2007) review of the literature on the methodological and ethical issues in conducting qualitative research with children and young people highlights the wide array of creative tools being used by researchers to enable children of all ages to share their views. Task-based exercises have become a popular method used by children's researchers and reflect a need to adapt interview techniques to meet the child's cognitive and developmental stage, whilst remaining cognisant of the individual child's level of understanding and needs (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Morris et al., 2012). Vignettes have been found useful in research with children to explore topics of a sensitive nature. By allowing the participant to speak in the third person, the participant chooses when and if they would like to talk about their own personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Neale, 2002; Suresh, 2014). For instance, scenarios or vignettes have been used successfully as a qualitative method to illicit children and young people's views on sensitive topics such as peer violence in children's homes (Barter & Renold, 2000), parental alcohol misuse (Hill, 2015), as well as children's experiences of the professional response to domestic violence (Barter & Renold, 2000; Radford et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2012). Barter and Renold (2000) found that the vignette approach helped young people who were not as comfortable answering direct questions about their personal experiences the opportunity to participate in a "less threatening" (p. 318) format.

The interview with the young adult did not use vignettes and rather explored in more general terms their views on the police response to domestic violence with children present. The topic guide used with the young person is contained in Appendix H.

- **Hearing children's voices through story-telling**

The researcher took a child centred approach to conducting interviews with the children, using colourful materials and a story-telling approach, guided by a vignette. The vignette that was used to guide the story-telling interview with children is contained in Appendix I. Unlike other studies (Barter & Renold, 2000) that have employed the use vignettes based on anonymised real events, the vignette that was used with the children in the current study was fictitious. The vignette was devised using findings from the literature on children's experiences of domestic violence (McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Stanley, 2011). Rather than reading out the vignette and asking children questions on it, the vignette became more of a starting point for an interactive story which the child co-constructed with the researcher. The children were presented with a set of images to help them to describe emotions and feelings throughout the story-telling. Using the flash card images, the children were prompted to devise their own characters for the story, taking the lead in this area. This was considered to be a safe and indirect approach to allow the children to talk about the police response to domestic violence. The researcher invited the children to help with a story (A transcript from one of the children's interviews is contained in Appendix J as a reference to how the story-telling approach was used). The researcher began the story with a police car calling to the home of a young boy and girl after their parents had been fighting. The use of language when speaking to the children was important and advice was taken from the support worker to maintain a neutral position on which parent in the story was the victim and perpetrator of the abuse.<sup>35</sup>

The researcher sat on the floor with the child and had the research materials and props laid out. The researcher toolkit included the following items;

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<sup>35</sup> The children's group facilitators were asked what kind of language they used with the children to talk about the violence and abuse that had happened in the home in order to use the same approach and know that the children were familiar with this. They described calling the domestic violence "hurting in the home" and said that they would never assume any blame to either parent and always remained neutral when speaking to the children about it.



- Bear cards – cards with pictures of bears displaying feelings and emotions to help the children identify emotions.
- Garda Colouring Book – available for the children to colour if they chose to.
- Colouring pencils and markers – available if the child decided they would like to colour in the Garda colouring book and to use to write their name on the assent form.
- Flash cards with pictures of three individual images of a house, three images of pets, a Garda car, a police officer, a little boy and a little girl.
- Assent forms
- Coloured stars – that children were invited to place on the assent form if they were happy to participate.
- Recording device

**Figure 1: End result pictorially of children’s story-telling interview**



Each interview with the child took between nine and 13 minutes. Initially there were some concerns by the researcher that this would not be long enough to establish rapport with the child and have sufficient time to conduct the interview or gather any valuable data. The timeframe was guided by the coordinator and calculated more on practical reasons and the length of time that the children would be in the group before

being collected to go home. It was also important for the children to attend the group so the ten minutes per child was agreed would suit this. In the end the ten minutes was sufficient time in most cases, (some went slightly over if needed), as the children did lose interest after a while and for others there was a sense that they were becoming a little uncomfortable (fidgeting etc..) which prompted the researcher to end it.<sup>36</sup>

On reflection, data collection methods with children could have been strengthened by repeat interviews with children to explore in more detail the emerging themes. However, due to the difficulty in recruiting children the researcher found themselves in many ways at the mercy of gatekeepers and did not pursue repeat interviews. This was mainly owing to the challenges in gaining access to suitable children in the first place, although perhaps would have been different had the researcher been more experienced in the field and confident in putting forward a case to gatekeepers for repeat interviews with the children who had taken part. In addition, the story-telling approach with children did not explicitly allow for them to discuss their own experiences of a police call-out to domestic violence in their home. Ethically, this method was considered by the REC to be a safer approach to explore their experiences. Notwithstanding these limitations, reflecting on the use of a story-telling approach with children in research, the following observations were made by the researcher with regard to the process.

Firstly, even though the children were being asked indirectly through the story what they would do or how the characters in the story might feel about the police responding to the parents fighting, they often when asked to name or give ages etc., chose things that were familiar to them in their own lives, giving an indication that their story was probably quite close to their own experience. Barter and Renold (2000) similarly found that the young people in their study at times decided to support “abstract” observations on the vignette with their own “personal” experiences (p. 319). This technique proved to be a safe way of exploring children’s views on the subject without directly asking them to speak about their own experiences of the events that happened in their families. The children however were able to decide for themselves on how much of their own story they shared or did not, demonstrating agency in how much they disclosed (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al., 2017). None of the children became visibly upset through the

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<sup>36</sup> The ten minutes was considered to be a safe length of interview for children of this age. It was not a long story so unless the child themselves began to add in more detail on the situation it generally arrived at a natural ending within the allocated timeframe.

course of the story telling, however some of the children showed some non-verbal signs (avoiding eye contact with the research and fidgeting) that they may have been uncomfortable at certain points. At the end of the story the researcher brought it to a close by asking the child to decide on how the story ended giving them an opportunity to re-create a better ending to their own lived experience. It was not considered appropriate for the researcher to follow up with any of the children afterwards as it was felt that boundaries were important and the relationship that they had with the facilitators and coordinator was best placed to deal with anything that might have come up for them (Øverlien, 2010). All of the children were provided with a small toy as a token of appreciation at the end of the interview. Feedback from gatekeepers on the use of a story-telling approach was very positive in terms of it being a safe way for an unknown adult to engage with the child on a sensitive subject.

- **Sampling and interviewing police**

A sample of members of the Irish police force - An Garda Síochána - was voluntarily recruited. The researcher followed An Garda Síochána protocol for external research and an application was approved to conduct individual interviews with members from various ranks. In terms of the recruitment of officers to the study, snowball sampling was used successfully through a number of existing contacts in the police and through a training event for police at which the researcher was invited to present. The latter activity proved to be very successful in that three officers were recruited which lead to snowballing of a further eight officers. The remaining three officers were recruited through other sources to increase diversity in the sample.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of data collection methods with police, case file analysis was not considered to be a suitable in the present study for two key reasons. Firstly, the recording of domestic violence incidents in Irish police systems as alluded to in Chapter Two has been notoriously poor and inconsistent across police regions. Reform is taking place in this area and police are now mandated to report every incident on the internal reporting PULSE system with information pertaining to each incident as well as on children's presence, however at the time of this research that had not yet been fully implemented. Secondly, Irish policing records are not easily accessed by outside agencies and independent researchers, and requests to use police data would have likely been refused. Individual interviews have been found to be a suitable method to gather a more detailed account of the police response to domestic violence, as opposed to

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<sup>37</sup> Appendix K: Police information booklets and consent forms

relying on police records which are often hailed to be lacking in detail (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Thus, in-depth interviews were the chosen method of data collection, and have been used elsewhere in research to successfully examine the police response to incidents of adolescent to parent violence (Condry & Miles, 2014). Individual semi-structured interviews were also suited to the shift hours that officers work and the logistical challenges of arranging a group interview with four or more police. In two cases, for convenience purposes, two officers who were familiar with each other were interviewed together. Aside from one police interview that took place over the telephone for logistical reasons, the researcher met with police for interview in person. Interviews took place at a venue decided by the officer and included settings such as; a police station, coffee shop and the university.

**Table 3: Information on Participating Police**

Police Participant Information		
Variables		Number of Participants (14)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	10
	Male	4
<b>Area of Policing</b>	Community Policing	3
	Protective Services Unit	3
	Child Protection Unit	2
	Regular/Front-line Unit	2
	Victim Services	1
	Other	3
<b>Location</b>	Dublin	10
	Outside Dublin	4
<b>Length of Service</b>	5-10 years	1
	10-14 years	7
	15-19 years	3
	20+ years	3

The interviews with police were completed towards the latter stage of fieldwork between August and December 2017. Police interviews lasted between 35 and 77 minutes. Drawing on principles from grounded theory, themes to emerge early on in the data collected from the other samples was incorporated into the topic guide used with police (Charmaz, 2006). The topic guide used with police is contained in Appendix K. The topics for discussion were intended to ascertain the experiences and views of police on responding to domestic violence with children present and more broadly the police perspective on this area of police work.

### **5. *Transcription and analysis of the data***

With the expressed permission of all except one participant, interviews and focus groups were recorded electronically. Due to slow periods in recruitment, there were often large gaps of time in between participant interviews which enabled the researcher to transcribe each transcript verbatim, thereby becoming familiar with the data. Data was coded and analysed thematically using an inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) maintains that thematic analysis is suitable for exploratory research when little is already known about a phenomenon. The social constructionist framework of the current study is compatible with the theoretical foundations of Charmaz (2006) constructivist approach to grounded theory. Key strategies of inquiry were borrowed from Charmaz's approach which included being inductive, comparative and iterative throughout the analytical process (Charmaz, 2006).

Once all of the data was collected, formal analysis began using the assistance of MAXQDA, a Qualitative Data Analysis (QDSA) programme. MAXQDA is one of a number of Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDSA) programmes available for the sorting, coding and storing of data. Whilst, such programmes have theory building capabilities, analysis and interpretation inherently lies with the researcher, who determines the final outcome of findings (Humble, 2012). In this case the QDSA was used for the purpose of coding and visually displaying and grouping data into themes, and querying. The programme also allowed to run searches for specific words that began to be seen across the participant groups. Such words included; 'hide\*', 'safe\*', 'attitude', 'normal\*'. By running a search for specific words or phrases it allowed the researcher to identify commonalities and differences across the four populations which then began a process of more in-depth analysis and triangulation. Triangulation across the data set from the four groups allowed for these commonalities to emerge and

helped in the building of main themes (Silverman, 2004). The phases of analysis will now be discussed in more detail.

An early process of informal analysis began after each interview. This involved the writing up of contextual information on the research setting, including any non-verbal observations made by the researcher during the interview, initial thoughts on emerging themes and aspects of the participants' narrative that evoked curiosity in the researcher. Transcription of interviews was carried out by the researcher, normally within a week of the actual interview taking place, which helped in the deciphering of certain words when participants had an accent and in the contextualising of the data. All transcripts were transferred to MAXQDA, through which initial open coding of line by line and segments of data was conducted (Birks & Mills, 2011).

This process resulted in a high volume of text and hundreds of codes which needed to be broken down into a more manageable volume. This was an important turning point in the analysis in that the positionality of the researcher as social worker and inclination towards maintaining a child centred approach to the study influenced the focus of analysis from this point. There was a vast amount of data pertaining to the adult experience of the police response to domestic violence which needed to be sorted and checked against the children's data. During this stage codes were sorted and re-sorted under major themes and sub-themes. Themes that related directly to the child's experience of the police response were given priority to avoid losing focus on the main research question. For example; themes such as 'inter-agency responses' and 'police notifications to social work' were not included in the next phases of analysis because although they are about children, they had not been present anywhere in the children's dataset.

The final phase in the analysis began a process of on-going comparison of data across the four populations to test out themes and increase reliability in the findings. During this process, interviews were listened to once but more regularly on multiple occasions and transcripts read and re-read as a way of getting closer to the data. Once the main themes had been identified the interviews were listened to a last time and additional notes were made on any observations regarding context that may have been missed in the initial coding. Gerund coding was applied where appropriate using the action verb, to include a sense of activity and process in the data, staying close to how participants described their feelings and actions (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis continued throughout the writing up of findings during which new insights emerged and a greater

conceptualising of the data was allowed to take place. During this final phase of analysis Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was applied as a framework to assist in answering the second research question: What influences how children living with domestic violence experience the police response to domestic violence? The model proved to be highly effective in sorting through the vast amount of data that related to this question and helped the researcher to understand the interconnectedness of themes emerging from the four populations.

## **Ethical issues**

Ethical considerations were a key aspect of the research design and strategy. The research was guided by the HSE National Consent Policy document, in particular the section where it relates to research with children (National Consent Advisory Group, 2013), and the main ethical principles of *respect, beneficence and justice* as laid out in the TCD Policy on Good Research Practice (2009). The process of seeking ethical approval from both within the university and from outside agencies, referred to already in this chapter, provided a number of opportunities for any ethical concerns to be raised and addressed by the researcher, resulting in what was considered to be an ethically sound study. Domestic violence is an emotive topic, and is often described as a sensitive research area, that requires upholding key ethical principles of 'consent' 'confidentiality' and 'do no harm'. Furthermore, the inclusion of children, often viewed as a 'vulnerable' population in research (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Morrow & Richards, 1996), demanded an even greater consideration of these principles and their implication on the overall research process. Researchers are faced with the challenge of finding a balance between respecting children's right to be heard whilst also ensuring no harm comes to them in doing so (Spratt, 2017), thereby fulfilling ethics committees demands which may in turn limit children's participation (Coyne, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009). The requirement imposed by the REC on legal grounds to seek consent from fathers in this research raised particular tensions between the child's right to participate and the rights of abusive fathers.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The legal footing under which the decision by the REC was made was considered by the researcher and academic supervisor too difficult and time consuming to challenge during this research as delays had already been incurred throughout the ethical approval process delaying fieldwork. It was decided therefore to proceed and revisit the issue outside of this PhD study with the committee at a future date when there was more time to put together a valid argument for one parent consent in extenuating circumstances such as research with children on domestic violence.

The following section will discuss the ethical issues that were raised during the course of this research. The key ethical principles of 'consent', 'confidentiality' and 'do no harm' will be addressed in this discussion giving priority to issues with children.

### ***Informed consent***

All adult participants were provided with an information sheet outlining all relevant details of the study and a consent form. Gatekeepers took on the role of speaking with potential mother participants about the study, using the relevant information sheet. Those that were interested in taking part were either telephoned by the researcher, who answered any questions they had about participation, or in some cases were happy to proceed without any prior contact with the researcher, and an interview was arranged directly through the gatekeeper. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher used the information sheets again to talk through the study and remind the participant that they could opt out at any time. Consent was only signed by participant and researcher once all questions had been answered. Obtaining informed consent for and from children was somewhat more complicated because of the need as mentioned already to obtain consent from both parents. This will be discussed in some detail as it raised serious issues for children's participation in domestic violence research.

### ***Seeking consent from the abusive parent***

During the process of applying for approval from the university REC, the requirement for dual parent consent was made, informed by a legal argument surrounding the right of both legal guardians to consent to their child's (under 18 years)<sup>39</sup> involvement in research. The decision of the REC raised a number of issues regarding firstly, the risks posed in approaching abusive fathers for consent (Cater & Overlien, 2014) and secondly, the need for RECs to be more familiar and sensitive to the ethical nuances that exist when it comes to conducting domestic violence research involving children (Morris et al., 2012). The need for signed consent from both the mother and the father for a child to participate in the research resulted in the under-representation of children of married parents who had experiences of the police response to domestic violence in the sample. As Liu, Cox, Washburn, Croff, and Crethar (2017) argue, rigid procedures around consent "runs the risk of losing the very subjects that are the target of their investigation or intervention" (p. 46). The question then, is whether a father's right to provide informed consent supersede that of a child's right to be heard in a research

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<sup>39</sup> Within Irish Child Care legislation a "child" is defined as under the age of 18 years. The Child Care Act, 1991; the Children Act, 2001.



capacity? In reality, a rights based argument for children's inclusion is not always strong enough to support a request to bypass fathers consent, even in circumstances where a child or young person has assented and has the consent of one primary care-giver which was found to be the case in this study (Hammersley, 2015).

There is very little discussion in the literature around the dilemmas faced by researchers seeking consent from a perpetrator of violence for their child to participate in research. In domestic violence research, it is commonly held that consent is sought from the non-abusing parent and assent from the child with further stipulation that they should not be living with the abusing parent (Morris et al., 2012). The factor of risk is echoed within Ireland's national consent policy which stipulates that one parent/care-giver consent is sufficient "unless the REC has found that the risks involved in participation require the consent of both parent(s)/legal guardian(s)" (National Consent Group, 2013, p. 71). In a situation of domestic violence, the risk therefore is posed to the child by the perpetrator, who in many cases is their father who they may still have continued contact with (Holt, 2015). From informal discussion with practitioners in the field, it appeared that this was more often the approach taken by them when it came to seeking fathers consent. A decision to not seek consent from a father was done very much at the discretion of the professional and the mother, who decided on the level of risk that asking or not asking a father would impose to the family. Seeking parental consent for children when there is a history of domestic violence in their family then becomes an ethical minefield that requires an intimate knowledge of each child's situation and an assessment of any possible risk, which may be posed by the perpetrator. In this study, the professional judgement of the gatekeeper was relied upon, in most cases the children's support worker, to determine whether it was safe for a child to take part. In the majority of cases, the children who did participate did not have on-going contact with their father, and their fathers had limited rights to consent due to the non-marital status between their parents.

In terms of seeking children's agreement to participate, as well as securing parental consent,<sup>40</sup> it was also important that children provided their assent to take part.<sup>41</sup> The gatekeeper used the relevant information sheet to discuss the research with the child once their mother had given permission to do so. At this stage then, the gatekeeper facilitated an interview time with the researcher for children that were happy to take part. On the day of the interview, the researcher once again talked through the

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<sup>40</sup> Appendix L – Parent/Guardian consent form for child

<sup>41</sup> Appendix M – Assent form for child

information sheet with the child. When the child first sat down the researcher introduced themselves in a friendly and smiling manner. Using age appropriate language the researcher described their role as similar to a storyteller who was interested in hearing children's views on important things. The child was informed that their mother had given permission for them to speak to the researcher but that it was now up to them to decide. The researcher then talked through the assent form with the child and again asked them if they were happy to participate. They were then asked to pick a colour from the markers to sign their name on the assent form and a coloured star if they were happy to continue, thereby providing informed consent.

### ***Confidentiality and anonymity***

In accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DCYA, 2011), there exists an obligation to report any disclosure to the Child and Family Agency made by a participant that indicates the harm of a child. Equally, should a participant disclose any thoughts of harming themselves, this would warrant a breach of confidentiality. To ensure a consistent approach was applied to incidents where confidentiality may be breached, a disclosure protocol was put in place.<sup>42</sup> Participants were fully informed both verbally and in writing of the necessary need to breach confidentiality if such a disclosure was made, in order to ensure that they were aware of and fully understood the limits to confidentiality.

Every effort was made to protect the anonymity of all participants. All data generated was anonymised, removing any identifying details such as identifiable data on the family unit, locations and services. Permission was sought from participants for the reuse of data beyond the PhD dissertation. Participants were made fully aware of the possibility of their data being used in conference papers, articles, agency reports and other academic material in the information leaflet provided to them and on the consent form.

### ***Ensuring no harm***

There is a justifiable need for greater ethical concern when including children in research on sensitive topics, however this can be outweighed when it is in the best interest of children that the research is conducted (Øverlien, 2010). In a discussion on domestic violence research with children, Øverlien (2010) argues that "research not

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<sup>42</sup> Appendix O – Disclosure protocol

only needs children, but children need research, and research can have an empowering effect on children in need” (p.90). The National Consent Policy states that “children should not be denied the possible benefits of research participation but instead should be afforded the opportunity to participate in research on matters that might affect them” (National Consent Advisory Group, 2013, p. 70). Every effort was made to ensure that the likelihood of any participant experiencing either psychological or physical harm through participation in the research was minimised and additional safeguards were put in place to protect participants under 18 years of age, acknowledging the sensitive nature of the research topic. The inclusion and exclusion criteria set out earlier in this chapter were one aspect to ensure the safeguarding of children who participated in the research. Alongside this, measures were put in place as a further means of addressing the need to conduct ethically sound research with children ensuring ‘no harm’ through participation.<sup>43</sup>

### **Reliability, validity and generalisability**

Seeking access to children through the use of adult gatekeepers who may have their own agendas, can lead to issues of validity and representativeness in samples (Cater & Øverlien, 2014). When recruiting from vulnerable groups for research purposes, it is more common for gatekeepers to talk about the research with potential participants and get their consent before the researcher is allowed to make direct contact (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al., 2017). This was the approach used in the present study, when agency gatekeepers were sought to assist with the recruitment of children, young people and mothers to the study. Aside from the use of the researchers’ information sheets, it is unknown how the study was presented to the individual by the gatekeeper or what influence their own opinions and understanding of the research had on whether the participant consented.

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<sup>43</sup> These measures included the following; Health and Social Care professionals acted in a gatekeeper role to identify suitable children and young people who they qualified met the inclusion/exclusion criteria to take part in the study;  
Interviews took place outside of the child’s home in an age-appropriate setting that was familiar to them;  
The child could choose to have their support worker present during the interview and was available to check in with the child after the interview;  
Consent was on-going and checked at several points throughout the research process. The child was made fully aware of their right to end the interview at any stage without reason;  
The researcher adhered to obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DCYA, 2011);  
The researcher was Police vetted and a registered social worker.

There is a need for researchers when in the field, to be flexible in their attempts to access participants, taking into account the pressure that agencies are often under and the continued challenges that survivors of abuse and their children can face in their everyday lives (Downes et al., 2014). As part of the process of seeking the support of gatekeepers, the researcher met with a senior member of staff within the agency and on most occasions was invited to attend a team meeting with workers involved in directly supporting families. However, this was not always possible which therefore resulted in some scenarios where the gatekeeper may not have fully understood the research process. They were often directed by a supervisor to distribute information sheets to their clients who met the inclusion criteria. It is unknown exactly how many individuals were spoken to about the research and declined or how many were even considered as suitable by practitioners and the level of sampling bias.

Triangulation of sources, in this case including different perspectives from actors who either have been directly involved in the case (children, mothers and police) or have interacted indirectly in the case and actors involved, in a professional capacity. Internal validity of the study is strengthened, particularly when views were shared across the different groups of actors. Differences were explored which expanded further the understanding of themes (Jentoft & Olsen, 2017).

## **Limitations**

The legal requirement for dual parent consent for children under 18 years to participate in research in Ireland, resulted in a small sample of children being recruited to the study. As a means of legally avoiding the dual parent consent requirement, children of unmarried parents and whose father was not a legal guardian were identified by gatekeepers and approached about participating at the exclusion of children of married parents. The study is also limited by the shortfall in young people's voices who for a number of varied reasons including the issue of parental consent did not participate. A further limitation is that parent's perspectives are limited to mothers only. It would be useful for future research to also include the perspective of fathers and ascertain the views of both parents on their child's experience of the police response to domestic violence.

Finally, it was not possible to speak to the responding officer and individuals involved in the same police call-out due to limitations concerning accessing police records and confidentiality issues. The findings are therefore limited in the sense that the study

gathers multiple perspectives on the police response to domestic violence involving children, taken over a number of years, brought together to provide some sense of what is happening in the Irish context and the views of those involved either in the response itself or in supporting families who have experienced domestic violence and abuse.

### **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and steps taken in carrying out the qualitative research design have been outlined. The study sought to explore children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence by seeking multiple perspectives using qualitative interviews with 49 adults including mothers/survivors of domestic violence, practitioners involved in supporting families impacted by domestic violence from voluntary and statutory sectors, and a range of police officers working in the Irish police force. Using creative techniques in the way of story-telling and interviews 10 children including one young person shared their views on how police can effectively respond to children at a domestic violence call-out. Conducting the study involved a long and rigorous ethical process, which presented certain challenges when it came to the recruitment of young voices to the study and have been discussed in this chapter. Notwithstanding such setbacks, a large quantity of data was collected that has been used to expand our understanding of the child's experience of this critical area of policing. A thematic analysis of the data borrowing principles of grounded theory was applied from which key insights that provide rich context to the child's experience will now be presented across three findings chapters.

## **Chapter Five: Responding to Children Present at a Police Call-Out to Domestic Violence: Multiple Perspectives**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is the first of three chapters presenting the findings of this current study exploring children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence. As outlined in the previous chapter, a qualitative case study methodological approach was applied for the purpose of gathering data that would adequately achieve the aims and objectives of this research; to provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. In-depth interviews and a smaller number of focus groups were carried out across the four sample populations; children, mothers, HSCPs and police, generating a large amount of qualitative data. These three chapters draw on the data set to discuss findings pertaining to the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence in the context of a police call-out and draw on the perspective of both child and adult to open up a broader understanding of what happens during the response and why.

This first chapter begins by exploring the context under which police are called to a domestic violence incident and the help-seeking behaviours of mothers and children, in addition to practitioner views on children phoning the police during an incident of violence in the home. The discussion then focuses on what happens during a police call-out to domestic violence with children present, and describes the actions of the child when the police arrive and their location in the home. Drawing on the main themes to emerge from the children's stories, children's views of a helpful response by police are presented alongside the adult perspectives. The chapter concludes with a discussion on what the children in this study associated with an ineffective police response and the importance of police recognising the individual and unique experience of each child living with domestic violence.

### **How police become involved in domestic violence**

Consistent with the literature (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; MacQueen & Norris, 2016), this present research found that phoning the police is not always the first course of help-seeking that a female victim of abuse will take. By the time the police become involved, patterns of abuse have already been well-established in the home, and children may

have been exposed to multiple forms of physical and non-physical violence (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). The effect that this can have on children's overall well-being and future outcomes has already been referred to in previous chapters, in looking at the potential cumulative harm to children in a domestically violent home. The police are, for many families, the first formal agency to respond, thereby shifting the hidden issue of domestic violence from the private to the public sphere (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Therefore, the police call-out as Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) posit, represents a "key moment" (p.221) in the safeguarding and welfare of children living with domestic violence. The following section draws on findings from interviews with mothers to examine the context within which police become involved in a domestic violence incident, barriers to phoning the police, and mother's and children's experiences of help-seeking.

### ***Mother's help-seeking***

Of the eleven mothers who participated in this study, only five phoned the police for help during the relationship, four of whom described doing so on multiple occasions and with mixed responses from officers. Echoing the experiences of mothers in existing studies (L. Kelly et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2011), the remaining six mothers in the sample revealed a similar set of reasons for not phoning the police during the relationship. These included; a mistrust of the police due to negative past experiences with the law, financial dependence on their abuser, and common to many of the mothers was a fear that police officers would not believe their allegations of abuse and/or recognise the threat posed to them and their children. Diverging from findings in other studies where mothers have described a fear of children being placed in out of home care as a reason for not disclosing (Berkman et al., 2004; Radford et al., 2011), interestingly none of the mother's mentioned any fear of social service involvement as a reason for not phoning the police. In fact, some of the mothers reported that they would have welcomed an intervention from social work, particularly when it came to supporting their children in the aftermath of the violence during the post-separation period.

In the next quote, Doreen, a mother of four, describes how she felt the police would be dismissive of her claims of abuse:

*"I'm just going to be told [by police], 'suck it up'! Basically deal with it... and 'don't be wasting my time'."*

Mothers' help-seeking behaviours have the potential to directly impact the child in the home (DeVoe & Smith, 2003) so it is important to identify the reasons why a mother might not involve the police. In this case and based on her past experiences, of police responses, Doreen's hesitation in phoning the police was due to her feeling that her experience of abuse would not be treated seriously. Doreen's sense that her complaint would be dismissed, is consistent with Diemer et al. (2016) finding that police can, over time, come to view domestic violence as a 'time wasting' area of police work. How police respond to both the adults and children at the domestic violence incident is therefore critical to future help-seeking activities by victims. There was evidence in the current study that children's presence during the incident increased the likelihood of police involvement (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Chang et al., 2010; MacQueen & Norris, 2016). For example, Helen, a mother of one, had negative experiences with the police in the past, when as a victim of domestic violence, she was arrested alongside her abusive partner. Helen described a distrust in the police after the incident and a lack of confidence in the police's ability to keep her safe from her abuser. However, in a different relationship some years later, during an incident when her partner physically assaulted her while she was holding their son, Helen phoned the police. When asked what was different this time to other occasions when she had not sought the help of police, Helen replied, "I had the child, it wasn't about me, I was scared with the child".

Police involvement post-separation was a common experience for the mothers in the sample, many of whom were still involved in judicial disputes around access with their ex-partners and continued to seek support from the police when it came to concerns of safety for them and their children. Doreen, a mother of three describes in the next quote, an incident involving her ex-partner (who continued to live close to her), when she was bringing their children to school:

*"I was trying to get the children to school and he (ex-partner) was actually taking them into the house, and I couldn't get them out so I started to panic... he started his commotions with me so I just drove off... the kids were roaring crying after it going into school and I was very upset, so I went into the Garda (police) station."*

Interestingly all of the mothers in the current study said that they had sought the help of police in relation to an incident(s) that occurred post-separation, which had directly or



indirectly involved their children. Police involvement therefore occurred both during the relationship but more commonly post-separation for the mothers and their children. Indeed, continued access with an abusive parent has been highlighted in the literature as posing a risk to both the non-abusive parent and the child (Holt, 2011), and was cited by mothers, practitioners and police interviewees in this study as a reason for involving the police. Indeed some of the practitioners and police participants who worked closely with abused mothers reported the police station being used as a safe location to hand over children for access visitation with an abusive parent.

Police involvement during the post separation period was also found in Richardson-Foster et al.'s (2012) study, where over half (54%) of incidents reported to police involved an incident between ex-partners where children were reported to be a contributing factor to the incident. There is a need therefore, as Myhill and Johnson (2016) found, for police to be able to identify when a dispute between two parents over child contact is situated in a larger pattern of abuse that might place children at risk.

### ***Children's help-seeking***

Although children living with domestic violence, especially younger children, are heavily reliant on their non-abusing parent to seek help, children are also actively involved in reaching out to services such as the police (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In the present study, three of the participating mothers provided examples of when one of their children had made the call to emergency services during a violent incident that occurred during the relationship, when the abuser was still living in the home.

Ann, a mother of three, described an incident when her partner at the time returned home drunk and began to physically assault her by strangling. Ann described how her eldest child, a daughter who was seventeen when the incident happened, had been downstairs watching television while her other two children were upstairs in bed. Ann's daughter physically intervened to protect her and phoned the police for help. In the following quote, Ann describes the actions taken by her daughter:

*"I don't even know how she rang the police. I don't know how she got the time between leaving me for that couple of seconds. How she just told the police, they were down in two minutes of her making the*

*call... She told them on the phone, 'he's going to kill her, you're going to come down and she'll be dead'."*

There was also evidence of younger children intervening to protect their mother and seeking help. Bernadette, a mother of three spoke of how her eight-year-old daughter was directly involved in an incident and was forced to take action to protect her and her siblings, in what she describes in the next quote as a life threatening assault against her by her partner:

*"The last time Amy [daughter] was in the kitchen and she actually tried to intervene and he [child's father] pushed her aside... he was shouting [to the mother] 'I'm going to kill you this time, I'm going to finish you off this time'... she was terrified and I just told her to get the boys [younger brothers] and go, go to her grandads... she didn't want to leave and I said 'but you can get grandad to help me' so then she ran."*

Children are often not given much attention by police when they respond to a domestic violence incident, and can remain focused on the adults involved (Mullender et al., 2002; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Geraldine and her daughter Mary (21) both participated in the research and spoke individually, about their experiences of the police responding to what they described as years of on-going physical violence and abuse in the home. As a teenager, Mary recalled phoning the local police for help on several occasions when her father was assaulting her mother. However, she found the police response to be inconsistent, as the following quote explains:

*"Sometimes they wouldn't come, and more times it would take them an hour or two to come. Depends on what guard... some wouldn't be nice, others would be nice."*

Mary's mother, Geraldine described a close relationship between them and spoke of the protective role that Mary played in the family to her younger siblings. Resonating

with Mary's experience of minding younger siblings and being a confidant in many ways to her mother, children in the literature (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016b; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Överlien, 2017) regularly speak of taking on a care-taking role in a domestically violent home. Mary remembered as a teenager phoning the police for help during an incident and opening the door to the police when they arrived. Mary described how the responding officer would always ask her where her mother was, but as she recalled "they [police] wouldn't say "who called?" or anything". When asked how she felt about having to answer the door to the police, Mary replied by saying:

*"I thought I was bigger... I thought I was a woman."*

Mary's action of phoning the police, answering the door to them and bringing the police inside the home, elevated her sense of maturity to womanhood and in her own words thinking she was 'bigger'. As a 21 year old now reflecting on these actions, Mary acknowledges the older role that she took on. Mary's experience resonates with Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016b) finding on children positioning themselves in a caring role in relation to siblings, which can give the child, or young person a sense of empowerment in an otherwise disempowering experience.

There are several accounts in the research of children phoning the police during a violent episode between their parents (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). It is unknown whether those children had completed any level of safety planning and been told to phone the police or if this was something they had done instinctively. All of the children who participated in this research had completed some level of safety planning with a support worker and were familiar with the idea of phoning 999 if they did not feel safe at home. The children in their stories demonstrated a need for the child to be acknowledged if they had made the call to police. In Ed's (10) story he suggests that the children would phone the police "if their parents start fighting again" and would like the officer to offer reassurance to them around what they had done by saying "thank you for calling, you're so brave".

### ***Responding to children who phone 999 in the context of domestic violence***

Similar to accounts of children's help seeking in the literature (Buckley et al., 2006; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), this study found that mothers accounts of children's help-seeking was in the context of an immediate threat to their mother's life. This further illustrates the serious conditions under which children seek help outside the immediate family for domestic violence, pointing to the need for police to be aware of the potential danger to children, both physically and emotionally in the home when they respond to an incident. Resonating with this finding, practitioners in the present study felt that it would take 'exceptional' circumstances for a child to make the call to police, as this practitioner explains:

*"I think they're [children] more likely [to phone the police] if they are really worried that someone is likely to get seriously hurt. The violence would have to be quite high before they did that. So if for example Dad is shouting and roaring at Mam, the child might leave the house. But if they think there is an imminent threat, I think that's probably when they might phone the guards, so I would be surprised if they phoned the guards unless the violence was quite exceptional."*  
(HSCP2)

Whilst there is therefore a need for a child, like in Mary's situation who has phoned the police, to be fully acknowledged by the responding officers, McGee (2000) found that phoning the police can also put the child at greater risk from the perpetrator if they are identified as responsible for phoning. Echoing findings from Øverlien and Aas (2016), practitioners in the present study felt strongly that if a child had phoned the police themselves, this should be dealt with by the police in a sensitive manner, either during the call or by following up. In the next quote, a practitioner considers how the police might respond differently to a child making the call:

*"You'd like to think as well that where there's incidents that the child has contacted the guards that they are particularly sensitive around that, and particularly reassuring around that, because obviously the risk of more harm to that child when they leave the house, the*

*consequence of that... and reassure that child that they have done the right thing.” (HSCP17)*

There is very little in the literature on police views of children phoning 999, but police response times reported in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study were often quicker when it was a child who had made the call and children stressed the importance of quick response times. One participating police officer in this present study pointed out that police dispatch may not necessarily inform them that a child had made the call to 999, suggesting a need for more consistency in reporting this important detail. Knowing that a child had made the call would surely influence the level of response, as this officer suggests:

*“I know if it came in yeah... you’d make every effort to get a car up there as quick as you could, I’d say it probably would be in the scheme of things dealt with differently.” (Officer 4)*

The findings presented so far have looked broadly, at who phones the police and the context under which they respond to an incident of domestic violence in a home with children present. It has been demonstrated that the level of violence has often escalated before a mother or child will phone the police for help. Therefore, police officers should be aware that when they respond, it is more likely not the first incident of violence that the child in that home has been exposed to. Furthermore, the experiences of Bernadette and Ann tell of children’s active involvement in protecting their mother, even from a young age, by physically intervening and seeking help. This finding is more consistent with children being conceived as active agents in the domestic violence home as opposed to a passive victim, and supports the need for a direct response by police to them (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Överlien, 2017).

## **Children's feelings and actions when the police respond to a domestic violence incident**

The children's stories in this research give a sense of what it is like from the child's perspective when the police arrive to a domestic violence incident. This section firstly discusses findings on children's emotional response to the police arrival at the home in relation to a domestic violence incident and then focuses more on the actions of children.

### ***Children's emotional response to the police arrival***

Resonating with Powell, Skouteris, et al. (2008) assertion that younger children will focus on the authoritative role of the police, the children in the present study perceived the arrival of the police in their stories as a sign that somebody was in 'trouble'. There was a general feeling of fear described by the children in their stories when their characters became aware of the police arrival to the home. For instance, Debbie's (9) characters in her story thought that *they* 'might be in trouble' when the police responded. Harry (9) said that his character was upset because 'his dad or his mum could go in jail'. Øverlien and Aas (2016) found the children in their study who had never experienced a police response were more likely to associate the police role with a punitive one. Whilst the majority of the children in the present study did not describe the police as using any physical force to stop the parents fighting, Debbie (9) suggested that her characters were 'happy that the guards didn't attack them'.

The police arrival to the home therefore is experienced with fear and anxiety for the child if they perceive the police as a threat to both them and the stability of the family, as this practitioner explains:

*"It's come up with kids that I've met, that fear that the guards were going to take someone away, and someone's in trouble and they're going to take them away, take their dad away." (HSCP18)*

A somewhat different response compared to the other children was described by Fiona (9) who said that her characters would have more of a mixed emotional response when the police arrived:

*“A little bit, maybe scared and a little bit em... kind of happy because they know maybe the fighting will stop.”*

The response to seeing the police arrive can be one of both fear and happiness felt simultaneously by the child, highlighting the complex emotional responses of children living with domestic violence. At the same time, Fiona is demonstrating the capacity to identify with a sense of safety in the authority that police can bring to the situation.

### ***Out of sight: Children’s actions when the police respond***

There is very little in the literature about the action taken by children when the police respond to a domestic violence incident (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). The story-telling with children in the present study helped to illuminate the action taken by children in this context. A dominant theme to emerge from the children’s narratives was the action of hiding. Two of the children in the present study described the fictional characters as already hiding when the police arrived to the home, echoing findings across the literature on children’s use of hiding to protect themselves during an incident of domestic violence (Callaghan, Alexander, & Fellin, 2016; L. Kelly et al., 2014; Mullender et al., 2002; Överlien, 2017). The rest of the children, when asked to describe what the characters in their story might do when they see or hear the police car arrive, responded without any hesitation, by saying that they would hide. Grace’s (9) hiding place for her two characters was “underneath the covers of the bed”, whilst Harry (9) explained that in his story, the children were already “in the bed upstairs asleep” when the police arrived, but were “covering their ears”, so they would not hear the “noise”. Similarly, Billy (7), Conor (7) and Ed (10) described their characters as hiding “under the bed” when the police arrive, some with their toys, pets and snacks for comfort. Other places where the children placed their characters quietly hiding in the home included the kitchen or as Debbie (9) described, in the “playroom amongst their toys”, hiding from the police.

The children in the present study spoke of hiding as going to their ‘safe place’, demonstrating children’s capacity for agency in the domestic violence home and the strategies children are involved to feel and stay safe (Alexander et al., 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). In the Callaghan, Alexander, and Fellin (2016) study, a young girl described hiding in a small space behind her bed where her father could not find her. Similarly, the children in the present study used small spaces such as under

the bed or amongst toys to feel safe during an incident and when they became aware of the police arriving to the house. For Billy (7) he described “under the bed” as a good hiding place as “No one will go upstairs”.

There are reports in the literature of sibling relationships and support roles they can assume to protect each other in the domestically violent home (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016b; Mullender et al., 2002; Överlien, 2017). In the present study, there was some evidence of siblings seeking comfort in one another by hiding together when the police responded. In Grace’s (9) story, she placed her older and younger sibling characters hiding in their bedroom together because as she suggested, “they might feel safer when they’re together”. This also involved siblings telling the other to “stay quiet... just in case the guards hear” Debbie (9). There is a sense that children seek comfort by a familiar hiding place where they can become invisible to adult attention. The hiding places are more commonly described by children in this study as upstairs in the home, which positions the child physically away from the incident downstairs. Although the child becomes out of adult sight, they remain aware that something is happening between the adults and are often curious to know what is going on.

Children in the literature (Hogan & O’Reilly, 2007; McGee, 2000) have reported being more frightened when they can only hear an incident taking place and not actually see what is physically happening and how severe the assault is. In the current study, the characters in the children’s stories were hiding, however several of the children positioned them close enough to see and hear what was going on. For instance, Joey (9) stated that in his story the children would “stay upstairs” when they see the police arrive and “look out the window” to see what is going on. Similarly, Fiona’s (9) characters remained out of sight upstairs in their bedroom but positioned themselves so that they could still hear what was happening downstairs between the police and the adults. Fiona suggested that:

*“Maybe they’re at the door... maybe with it open trying to listen to what they’re (parents and police) saying.”*

Interestingly, Harry (9), described the *not* ‘seeing’ the violence as a protective strategy. In Harry’s story his characters were initially hiding in their bedroom when the police car arrived but then later he decided, “they would go down to the stairs, the middle”, but not



fully downstairs, as he explained, “if they go fully, they might be in it”. Harry said that this was a way of his characters protecting themselves from seeing the violence or as he described being “in it”, something that he reported learning from his mum:

*“My mum said this to me, if you see it, it makes you sadder, if you don’t, it make you a little bit sad.” Harry (9)*

Children thus may take action and use their agency when they decide to go to a safe place in their home sometimes during a domestic violence incident and also when they hear or see the police respond to an incident of violence in the home. The action of hiding may be something the child has been told to do by an adult, or it might be something the child has learned to do instinctively as a protective strategy. The children in the present study as described earlier, had all completed some form of safety planning with a support worker on how to keep themselves safe during a domestic violence incident. This may account for the children’s use of hiding as a strategy employed by their fictional characters when the police arrived to the home.

Police interviews brought further light to the actions of children and their location in the home when police respond to a domestic violence incident. In the following quotes from police interviewees, they confirm what the children had described in their stories about hiding and children’s desire to know what is going on between the police and caregivers at the scene.

*“I don’t think I was ever at a call where the kids were sound asleep in bed. They were usually under the covers peeking out or on the landing looking around the corner.” (Officer 13)*

*“They [children] have ears cocked and they’re trying to hear every word. You might go up the stairs and they’ll be in bed with their eyes closed but you can be sure that when you weren’t looking they were trying to hear everything that was going on.” (Officer 12)*

Although quite scarce in the police literature on children's presence at a domestic violence call-out (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; Gjelsvik et al., 2003; Shields, 2008), there was one report of children "hiding under the bed" (p. 225), seen in the police records examined by Richardson-Foster et al. (2012). There was also evidence of children in their bedrooms distracting themselves during an incident when the police responded. One officer in the present study spoke of seeing older children upstairs in bed using technology and gaming as a way of blocking out what was happening downstairs:

*"Distracting themselves, eh under the covers, I saw that before, under the covers where they have the iPads." (Officer 7)*

This form of distraction with music and video, is what Øverlien and Hydén (2009) categorise as an avoidant coping strategy, and is cited in the literature as an activity used by children living with domestic violence to cope with strong emotions associated with their experiences of violence and abuse (Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009).

A tendency for younger children to "withdraw and hide away" during a violent episode was cited by several of the practitioner interviewees, which further corroborates this finding. So, whilst children may be out of sight from parents and the police during an incident of domestic violence, rather than this being perceived in terms of children's passivity, this is viewed as a strategy used by children that involves decision making and active reasoning on the best action to feel safe. This finding is more consistent with contemporary discourses of children experiencing domestic violence that recognises them as active agents as opposed to passive subjects (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015; Katz, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009). The conceptualising of children experiencing domestic violence and the impact such conceptions have on police responding to children, will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Seven of this dissertation.

### ***Dispelling the myth of children sleeping***

Children's use of hiding in the home questions how accurate mother's reports in the study are of children sleeping through an incident which involved the police. Police participants spoke of how they were regularly being told by parents when they respond that children were upstairs sleeping and had not witnessed the incident. The children's

narratives also pointed to the fact that children may be upstairs in bed when the police respond but awake and listening quietly to what is going on downstairs. Parents may therefore mistakenly take the silence and lack of visibility of a child at the scene for them sleeping through the incident. However, Ann a mother of three questioned whether her youngest child was asleep or in fact 'pretending' to be asleep when the police responded:

*"He could have pretended that he was asleep because the girls used to do it when they were smaller... I used to just say to them just pretend you're asleep if you hear him coming in, even if you're not asleep just pretend you're asleep." (Ann, mother)*

Pretending to be asleep or telling children to hide, which some of the children alluded to in their stories, may be encouraged by mothers as a protective strategy for children. Pretending to be asleep in essence can be viewed as another form of hiding that may be used by children to avoid unwanted attention from the abuser and the police when they respond to the incident.

Participating practitioners also cast doubt over reports of children sleeping through a domestic violent incident, as this next quote highlights:

*"It's quite incredible, we've had accounts of some of the most violent incidences from families who would assure us that children were fast asleep... screaming, things banging, things breaking, you know... glass breaking. I'd be very surprised if children slept through that." (HSCP3)*

Another practitioner who was a social worker also remarked on police notification that they received which regularly cited children as sleeping during a response to a domestic violence incident, and questioned the accuracy of such reporting:

*"I just find it hard to believe anyway that if there's an abusive incident where the Gardaí are at the house, that that child hasn't been*

*awake... I think a lot of the referrals we get where it says the children were sleeping, the children weren't sleeping." (HSCP15)*

The previous quote suggests that police may not always check on children who are reported by parents to be sleeping when they respond. Police notifications to social services in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study were described as lacking in any great detail on children's emotional state when they responded, suggesting officers had little engagement with children at the scene. However, the vast number of police participants in the present study were aware of children being awake during their response, suggesting a greater awareness for children, as the following quotes assert:

*"They're never asleep unless they're babies, they're never asleep."  
(Officer 1)*

*"The children were upstairs in bed but they were awake and you could know they were awake because they were calling 'mummy'"  
(Officer 11)*

Thus, rather than children being asleep, the evidence points strongly to not only children's awareness of the police responding to the home after an incident of domestic violence, but also that police are alert to the fact that children may be upstairs and awake at the scene.

## **Perspectives on police and child engagement at a domestic violence incident**

So far, the findings presented in this chapter have identified that while children may not always be visibly present at the scene when police arrive to a domestic violence incident, they may be hiding upstairs and are unlikely to be asleep, contrary to parental reports. Children themselves may hide when they see the police arrive but will in most cases, as this section show, welcome officers' efforts to check on their safety. In terms of the level of engagement between police and children at the scene, existing research demonstrates that children wish to be acknowledged and spoken to directly by police

when they respond to a domestic violence incident (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Building on the existing evidence base, the next section of this chapter focuses specifically on the type of engagement between the police and children at the scene and explores what actions police can take that are experienced as supportive by children. Themes to emerge from the children's stories are presented alongside the adult narratives, to provide a greater depth of understanding from multiple perspectives.

### ***Checking on children's safety***

Whilst children may be hiding at a domestic violence incident when the police respond, the children in this study largely still wanted to be found and spoken directly to by the police. Best practice emanating from US and UK police guidelines (Baker et al., 2002; HMIC, 2015b) recommend that responding officers should physically check on any children present at a the scene of a domestic violence incident. This includes speaking directly to children and going upstairs to check on them when parents report children to be upstairs sleeping (Baker et al., 2002; Berkman et al., 2004; Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System, 2004; HMIC, 2014). Elsewhere in the research, children have suggested that a helpful response to children at a domestic violence incident would involve the police going upstairs to talk to them separately and listen to their version of the events that have taken place as well as the adults (Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

In the present study, all of the children with the exception of one said that their characters would be happy if the police came upstairs to check on them. Indeed, in Harry's (9) story, one of the first actions that he described the police officer doing was to go "upstairs and see how the kids doing". Some of the children were not as quick to suggest this themselves and instead the researcher prompted them by saying what might happen if the police officer went upstairs to check on the children, in order to explore how they would feel about the officer doing this. It appeared from most of the children's narratives (apart from Harry), that the police coming upstairs to check on them was not an expected activity. However, as the following quote from a practitioner asserts, it should be part of police protocol to check on the safety of everyone in the home when they have been called, and they questioned why a domestic violence response should be treated any differently to any other emergency response by police:

*“I imagine if you looked at another kind of emergency in the home maybe say a chimney fire or... an accident or somebody maybe having a heart attack or something like that and you call them [police], that they are cognisant of everybody else in the house and why just in this kind of an emergency would you not, so I would feel strongly that they, they would as the first kind of responders if you like have to do some sort of a check.” (HSCP9)*

A core function of the police role is to ensure the safety of individuals. Front-line officers have a role to promote the safety of all individuals in the home when they respond to a domestic violence call-out, including children (HMIC, 2014). All of the practitioners in the present study agreed that the police had a role in checking on the safety of every person present in the home as part of their response to domestic violence, which included all adults and children.

The children in the present study showed an awareness of this aspect of the police role. Many of the children suggested that the police in their story would show concern for the children’s safety by asking, as Grace (9) stated, “are you okay, are you hurt or not?” Police participants were also very much aware of their duty to protect life and many of the officers spoke of children’s safety being the first priority when they responded to a domestic violence incident, as this officer explains:

*“You kind of think, well the injured party is an adult, they can leave or they can tell us, we can’t force them to do anything, but your priority would be the safety of the children.” (Officer 6)*

Police engagement with children at the scene was also seen as important to reassure children of their safety, as Debbie (9) explains in the next quote:

*“To check if the children are safe... just in case the guard walks in to the house and just leaves them there and they’re worried.”*

Echoing children’s views in the existing research (Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), Debbie is pointing to the need for the police to check on children’s

safety, as by simply 'leaving' them there as she suggests without any contact or assurances of safety, would cause the children to feel worried about the situation. By checking on the child, the police are also acknowledging children as important and valued beings who require a response. This was echoed across practitioner participant views:

*"I think that it's important to acknowledge it with the kids because I'd imagine that for children in those situations, it's really scary... so for guards to come to that and only deal with their parents and not acknowledge for them that this was quite scary and that now it's stopped, I think that that could be, could really impact kids even more." (HSCP7)*

Checking on children present and offering reassurance was also viewed by children in the present study as an important signal by police that the children were not in trouble, and that the police officer was there to help them. In Ed's (10) story, the children "start freaking out" and are "extremely scared" when the police knock on their bedroom door to check on them, because they fear something "bad might happen to them". Consistent with findings in the literature on younger children internalising and blaming themselves for the abuse (Thornton, 2014), children may also feel responsible for the police responding to the home and view the police as a threat. The purpose then of police contact with children present at the scene might be to explain to the child why they are there and reassure them that they are not in 'trouble' as Ed (10) explains in the following extract:

*RE happy, why would they be happy then?*

*Ed because they (the children) know... nothing bad is going to happen to them.*

*RE yeah, how would they know that?*

*Ed because he (police officer) said 'are you okay?' 'can you come out please?'*

*RE okay, so what do you think they'd like the Garda to say to them then when they come out?*

*Ed you okay? did anybody, are you okay? did anything hurt you.. are you okay?*

In this extract, Ed identifies with the police officer being a person of safety by their concern for the child's safety. A simple gesture of "are you okay?" signals to the child that the officer is not a threat and that it is safe to come out from under the bed. Furthermore, the question "did anything hurt you?" shows that the officer recognises the potential risk to the child in the domestic violence home and acknowledges their experience as an individual. Echoing findings from both seminal studies in the area of children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), the children in this study demonstrated a need for police to reassure them of their safety and to fully acknowledge them at the scene.

### ***Police checking on children: a safeguarding measure***

There were several examples from police participants of good practice when it came to officers physically checking on children. This was particularly in the context of when they had been told by parents that children were upstairs sleeping. In the next quote an officer explains the reason they would always check on children upstairs:

*"I'd peep my head in the door just to make sure because some people will tell you that they're upstairs and asleep, but you could go up there and you could have a child that's sitting on the bed, balling crying, who knows everything that's after happening, but because of what's after happening, the parents haven't actually been able to go up, because you know, when we go sometimes they're still in the middle of their row, they don't know that the kids are asleep, they*



*don't know that that child could be hiding under the bed, terrified.”*  
(Officer 8)

The police officer quoted above recognises the need to check on children as a safeguarding measure in the context of domestic violence when parents might be too caught up in the abusive episode to know whether a child has slept through the incident. Concurring with research by Radford and Hester (2006), mothers, practitioners and police in the present study recognised that parenting may be compromised in a domestically violent home and was a key reason for the police to check on children who were reported to be sleeping.

*“They should definitely check on children and see if they're okay.. definitely... some parents kind of neglect their parent role with kids when they're going through so much.”* (Eithne, mother)

Interestingly, the officers in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study agreed that they had a duty to physically check on children to ensure they were not injured. However, beyond physically checking on the child, police had mixed views on whether that role included speaking directly to children. Indeed, officers were described as not seeing much of a role with children at the scene unless they were witnesses or a direct victim (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). It is worth noting that the research was conducted between 2007 and 2009 in the UK before which reports prioritising the safety of children as victims of domestic violence were published (HMIC, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Findings in the present study which highlight a greater awareness by police of children at the scene, may be reflective therefore of more risk-averse approaches to children's welfare and changes that have occurred in the Irish context discussed in previous chapters.

Mirroring such changes that place the welfare and safeguarding of children firmly on the agenda, there was strong consensus from all practitioners in the present study that the police should always check on children present at a domestic violence incident, framing this within a child protection remit of the police, as the following practitioner explains:

*“I think at that stage it’s probably a risk. It’s a child protection risk potentially and by not checking, I mean you don’t know what’s gone on before you’ve been there, so I would think absolutely check.”*  
(HSCP7)

This is also reflective of a mandatory reporting system introduced recently to Ireland, which places a statutory obligation on police as well as practitioners to report any children suspected to be at risk of harm. The police in the present study reported that parents were more often than not willing for them to go upstairs and check on children once they had explained to them that they were doing so to ensure their child’s safety. Interestingly and similar to findings from the most recent review on police response to domestic violence in the UK (HMIC, 2015b), very few of the mothers that were interviewed recalled the police going upstairs to check on children that were in bed during an incident. In one case, a mother reported that her teenage daughter, who was present at the scene, was asked by the responding officer to check on her younger sibling who was in bed asleep. In terms of whether police should wake a child up who is sleeping, there was some diverging views, echoing findings from the police interviewed in the Richardson-Foster study (2012), who similarly felt that it was not appropriate to wake up a child who was sleeping upstairs.

### **Communication between police and children at the scene**

Interviews with police officers revealed somewhat varied approaches to engaging with children at a domestic violence incident. There was general agreement by police participants that when possible, one of the responding officers should check on children to ensure their safety. However, the practice of speaking directly to children and their understanding around the purpose of this engagement, varied greatly amongst police officers interviewed. If children were, as one officer described, ‘in the middle of it’, then efforts would be made to move the children to another room in the house while the officers dealt with the adult parties. For many of the officers, this involved asking the mother to bring the children upstairs to bed and away from the immediate scene, so that the officers could speak separately to the adults downstairs, as this participant explains:

*“If the kids are there you send them upstairs out of the way... you wouldn’t have any real interaction with them, you just tell the mum*

*'put the children to bed'... you'd never really speak to the kids.'*  
(Officer 9)

Police participants in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study were similarly found to not perceive children to have a role in the incident that required a response by police, unless they were physically injured. Indeed, the officers cited not wanting to talk to children as this was seen as “dragging them into it” (p. 231). However, this type of response fails to acknowledge the child at the scene and renders their experience of living in the domestic violence home invisible. The children in their stories provided a number of ways that will now be presented of how the police can effectively engage with the children in a supportive way, recognising their need to be responded to at the scene.

### ***Explaining why the police have been called***

Emerging clearly from the children's stories and as reflected in the next quote, was a need to 'name' the violence when police spoke directly to the children and to inform them why they were there:

*“He (police officer) tells them (children) that there was a little bit of fighting going on.” Fiona (9)*

The children also pointed out that the characters in their story might be confused as to why the police had called to their home and so by explaining to them the reason, this in turn would help children to make the link between the police arrival and the parents' fighting. Supporting the children's views on the need for transparency, practitioner participants strongly agreed on police explaining to children at the scene why they have been called to the home. In the next quote, a practitioner explains how this could be done and what it can offer the child:

*“In simple terms, explain what's happening, obviously you don't have to go into very much detail or use bananas language but by just explaining to them what's going on, it gives them [children] more confidence and reassurance in this situation.” (HSCP4)*

It became evident that officers who had specialised training were more child-centred in their response and provided positive examples of listening to children and responding directly to them at a domestic violence incident, as this officer describes in the next quote:

*“We sat on the stairs and just chatting to them... explaining to them why we were there and listening to them, and their main concern was, was their father going to be arrested.” (Officer 10)*

The approach taken by the officer in this quote is closely in line with what the children described as a good response in their stories and demonstrates an awareness of the child as a ‘victim’ at the scene. This level of response to children is reflective of best practice approaches within the literature and marks a recognition of children at the scene and the provision of a direct response to them (Baker et al., 2002; HMIC, 2015b).

It was more common however for the police to report taking a less direct approach to speaking with children, keeping the conversation, as one officer suggested, “very light” by not discussing the incident with them. Further examples of engagement with children provided by police involved chatting with a child about school and asking them about friends and hobbies or a simple wave, hello and a smile. Echoing the views of police participants in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, some of the officers in the present study felt that it was important to go as far as withholding the truth about why they were called to the home as a way of protecting the child, or at least not feeling it was the appropriate time to discuss the situation between their parents with them. Other officers spoke of telling lies to the children about why they were in the home, with one giving an example of how they would say to a child “oh your mam and your dad are helping us with something downstairs”. This officer felt strongly that it was not “fair” for children to see what is happening and so felt that withholding the true nature of why they had been called would protect the child from the reality of the abuse. This resonates somewhat with the views of police in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, who felt that by speaking to children at the scene, they would be “dragging them into it’ or ‘bringing them in” (p. 231). However, the failure to acknowledge the violence with the child sends a message, as some practitioners

suggested, that this is something we do not talk about, thus keeping the secret hidden. The police's silence therefore fails to avail of this 'key moment' (Richardson-Foster, et al., 2012, p. 221) in service response when the private and hidden violence can become public.

### ***Police reassuring children***

Children in their stories showed how the police could reassure the fictional characters by speaking openly to them about not only why they were there, but also about what was going to happen next. For some, this involved the police officer reassuring children of their own safety as Billy (7) states, by telling the children "someone's going to look after ya". For other children, they felt it was important for the police officer to reassure the child as Harry (9) suggested, of their parents safety by saying to the children "everything is okay with the parents, they're a little bit angry at each other... they're gonna be okay". In his story, Harry's characters were afraid that the police might arrest somebody, so suggested that police officers could reassure the child by saying "Your parents are not going in prison or anything". This finding is consistent with the views of children in previous research (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), who spoke of the need to be included in the response and for police to explain what was going to happen next and offer reassurances around their safety. Indeed, the children demonstrate a clear ability to articulate what a positive police response would look like, which includes the children as well as the adults in the response.

Children who have witnessed the violence and abuse against their mother were seen as particularly in need of their experiences to be validated, as this practitioner explains:

*"The children are as important in that equation as the Mum and Dad because Dad might have assaulted Mum but those children have seen their Mam being hurt and someone needs to reassure them and validate it for them." (HSCP19)*

Within the literature, reassuring a child at a domestic violence incident is viewed as a positive step towards building trust for the child that the police are recognising their needs and that somebody outside of the home cares for their safety (Baker et al., 2002; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Concurring with this, practitioners offered that the police could acknowledge how scary the situation must have been for the child and ask

them if they are okay, as well as telling them what would happen next and if their father was being arrested or not. There was a strong sense from practitioners that children needed to be included in and kept informed about what was going on as a means of building some predictability into what was an already a chaotic life for them. This finding supports what children were saying in their stories and in the existing literature (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Radford et al., 2011; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012) about police speaking directly to the children and explaining the process to them. As described earlier, the police participants in this study mostly spoke of responding to children but avoiding directly talking to them about the incident between their parents. Reassurance was viewed by many of the officers as telling a child that ‘everything’s fine’, as this officer describes:

*“Listen you’re fine, we’re going to be grand here now, we’re just gonna sort out things, we’re gonna be gone here in a few minutes.”*  
(Officer 11)

The type of reassurance illustrated by the officer in the above quote does not fully validate the seriousness of the event for the child and in many ways is quite dismissive of the child’s experience. As already demonstrated in the children’s stories and previously mentioned research (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), this type of response does not go far enough in supporting the child and acknowledging their experience of abuse.

### ***Identifying a protective adult***

The children also identified in their stories the role that the police can take in keeping them safe by bringing them to a person of safety. For some this was a family member such as an aunt or a grandparent, as Fiona (9) described in her story:

*“There was some fighting going on and we would rather be in my granny’s or grandad’s house.”*

Fiona was able to clearly communicate in her narrative what the children in her story would say to the police and how they could keep them safe. For many of the children, being reunited with their mother once the police had stopped the fighting was viewed

as a helpful response. Grace (9) suggested that the police might “take them downstairs to their mummy” and for Harry’s characters at the end of his story, they wanted a “hug with their mum and their dad” to make them feel happy again. Mary (21) also supported this finding and felt that the child’s mother was the best person to offer support to children, as she explains in the next quote:

*“Because kids just look up to their mother... They feel comfortable around their Mum.” Mary (21)*

Best practice identified in the US literature suggests that police should make efforts to allow the protective parent to comfort the child at the scene (Berkman et al., 2004). While domestic violence has been described in the literature as an attack on the mother-child relationship, the significance of that relationship is hugely important for children’s recovery from the situation (Katz, 2015; Lapierre, 2008). The ways in which police participants in the present study spoke of this, was more in the context of asking a mother to take the children upstairs away from the scene, or in some situations when an officer did not feel it was safe for the children and mother to remain in the home, they sought a refuge bed for them. Other officers spoke of how they might suggest that the mother and children stay with a friend or family member for the night.

### ***Giving advice on support services and how to stay safe***

Some of the children said that the police officer in their story would give the children advice on how to stay safe, by saying as Debbie (9) suggests: “stay in your safe place”; or Billy (7) “stay away if they’re (parents) fighting”. Children thus may be happy for police to do some basic level of safety planning with them. Police safety planning with children has been reported in the literature as a positive practice approach that police can offer children at a domestic violence incident and one that officers should be encouraged to use more (HMIC, 2015a). In the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study, safety planning with children was also recognised as a positive police response.

Providing information and advice on support services has been found by parents and children to be part of a helpful response that police can offer, but availability of appropriate services is often poor or non-existent in some localities (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). The lack of local support services for children was viewed by officers in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study as a reason for not

talking to children about the abuse, for fear of opening a 'pandora's box' and having no information on supports to offer families. Indeed, the shortage of services tailored to support the needs of children impacted by domestic violence is well documented in both the national and international literature (Bracewell, 2017; Buckley et al., 2006; Radford et al., 2011).

Provision of information on support services and legal orders to victims of domestic violence is seen as a best practice response to domestic violence victims and is regularly cited by police in the literature (Balenovich et al., 2008; Swerin et al., 2018) in terms of action taken. In line with this, all of the police that were interviewed spoke of providing victims with general information on legal orders and some mentioned specialist domestic violence agencies that they would refer victims on to. There were a small number of officers in the present study who gave examples of positive initiatives taken by supplying families with information on local support services for the children. The examples provided by officers were located locally and on the initiative of the individual officer who was familiar with the service. Suggested services included a youth mental health agency and a group tailored for younger children and their mothers who had experienced domestic violence. Officer 5 spoke of leaving the young person their business card and saying, "ring me if you need anything".

### **Police use of authority at the scene**

A dominant theme to emerge from the children's stories was for the police to use their authority to 'stop the fighting' between the parents. None of the children described the police in their story using any physical force in their response and many instead referred to the police talking to the parents and being able to 'calm' the situation down with their arrival. In the following quotes from the children's stories, they explain how the police might use their authority to stop the fighting:

*"Maybe when the woman opens the door the Gardaí tells them to stop and maybe takes one of them outside to calm them down."*

*Grace (9)*

*"The guard goes downstairs to the mother and father and they talk to them and they find out, the guard asks them 'was there some fighting*



*going on' and they say 'yes' and so they talk to him and then they, they calm the person who had started the fighting down." Fiona (9)*

*"He (police officer) takes one of the parents away and then brings them back later and tries to make them back friends." Debbie (9)*

In terms of the police using their authority to make an arrest, only one of the children Billy (7) mentioned that the police would use their power of arrest by saying that "one will get arrested and one will stay". Billy suggests here that 'one' of the parents will be arrested but does not identify either 'one' as the offender. It was common for the children to maintain a neutral stance in their stories and speak in general terms of the 'parents' fighting or 'one' being removed by the police. However when it came to deciding what the police might do to resolve the fighting between the parents, Harry (9), Grace (9) and Fiona (9) all suggested that "daddy" might be "taken away" or "outside", to "have a talk... not in jail" (Harry, 9). Holt et al. (2008) found that children's understanding of blame and responsibility varied between developmental stages, with younger children up to the age of 12 being less inclined to identify either parent as being responsible for the violence and may sooner blame themselves or their mother's behaviour for their father's action. Similarly, only a few of the children in the present study referred to the "daddy" in their stories as being the one who the police took away and this was still spoken of rather tentatively by the children. However, as children move into a later stage of development they show a clearer sense of who is to blame and who should be held responsible, as Mary (21) demonstrates in the following quote:

*"I think the father should be put out or whatever like arrested or whatever that's for him, but for children I don't think they should leave their own home... it's not fair to leave your own home for nothing, like what did you do!"*

### ***Making an arrest***

Arresting a perpetrator of domestic violence was generally viewed by police officers in this study as a way they can use their authority to help keep a family safe from further harm, and welcomed new legislation that extended their powers of arrest in domestic violence cases. Swerin et al. (2018) found that children's presence at a domestic

violence incident was a factor in whether police made an arrest. The police in this present study mostly said that a child's presence in the home would not affect their decision to make an arrest, although they recognised that it is not always the easiest decision to make when there are children present:

*"I think if you've got to arrest him you've got to arrest him and that's it... It mightn't be nice but you've got to do it and you mightn't feel, you might feel, Jesus do I need to arrest him but you have to arrest. Guards know they have to arrest him, that's the policy, it's a pro-arrest policy." (Officer 14)*

Officers commented on the traumatic effect that arresting a perpetrator can have on children who witness it:

*"A lot of them are crying they're upset they're shouting 'don't take daddy' they... would probably have a distrust of us afterwards, especially if they see what's going on, like you're in uniform going into a house and you're removing one of their parents from it and taking them away, in a lot of cases you have to put handcuffs on them if they're still violent, in most cases there is alcohol involved, do you know what I'm saying, so it's not nice for the children." (Officer 9)*

This sentiment was echoed by practitioners who noted that the majority of children want the police to stop the fighting in the home but do not necessarily want them to put their father in prison. However, children's response to witnessing the arrest of their father at the scene is not always the same, and can be one of upset but also relief depending on the child's individual experience, and their understanding of the abuse (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). For many of the mothers in the present study, they recalled not wanting their child to see their father being arrested as they felt that this would have a lasting impact on their child; in terms of seeing the police in a negative light and the trauma of witnessing their father being arrested. In the following quote, an officer describes how an arrest can be made less traumatic for a child by explaining to them what is happening and reflects back the need for officers to reassure children:

*“I suppose if we do have to remove a parent from the house, it’s to do with, in the most or in the least traumatic way possible. I think by explaining why it is happening maybe better than anything else, because if you’re removing we’ll say the father who may be very violent at the time and we have three guards inside holding their father on the floor with handcuffs on and he’s kicking and roaring and screaming and then I’m outside and I’m trying to explain ‘look this is why it’s happening’ ‘there’s nothing bad is going to happen it’s for his safety, for your safety, for your mums safety and we’ll take care of him, we’ll bring him to the Garda station we’ll take care of him there he’s not going to be staying there, it’s just until he calms down’.”*  
(Officer 10)

### ***Making a referral to the Child and Family Agency (Tusla)***

In terms of protocol around children and domestic violence, while all of the police participants spoke of the need to send in a referral to social work, there was however some variation on what exact circumstances were needed for this to happen. For some police, it was procedure to make a referral to the child and family agency if a child had witnessed the incident, for the majority it was if there were children in the home when the incident took place, and interestingly, it was police officers working in more specialised units that said reporting was a requirement for all domestic violence incidents where there were children known to be in the family, whether present at the scene or not. In interviews with social workers, several concerns were raised around the quality of the information sent in with police referrals and the police were rather critical of the notification process. This will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter.

### **An ineffective police response**

The previous section of this chapter presented findings from the children and adults on what a positive police response to children living with domestic violence would include. This final section of the chapter examines briefly, what the children said about an ineffective police response. Many of the children described their characters as feeling ‘happy’ when the police had left the home and the parents had stopped fighting, but for others there was cause to be nervous. Fiona (9) in her story also showed an awareness that the police response does not always mean that the fighting will end. In

her story, she described the police calling to the children's home on previous occasions when the parents were fighting but said that they did not take any action, as she explains in the next quote:

*"Maybe they didn't really do anything about it...I don't think anybody got in trouble and it kept on going on and on."*

Fiona's narrative resonates with children's reports in the research on witnessing the police respond to the home on numerous occasions with no end to the violence and abuse (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). In the Finkelhor & Turner (2015) study, children's trauma levels were significantly lower when the offender was made to leave the home by the police after an incident, whilst higher levels of trauma in children were associated with the victim being removed by the police. It is important therefore that the police make every effort to identify whom the main aggressor is and act accordingly, as this child participant explains:

*"Maybe they're (the children) nervous that, like somebody will be blamed (by police) for something that they didn't do or somebody might get in trouble for something that they might not have done."*  
Fiona (9)

Here Fiona is suggesting that the police may not identify the correct offender, leading to some ambiguity around who the real victim is at the scene. This finding reflects children's fears that the wrong person will be arrested and is significant in terms of the message police can send to children when they have difficulty identifying who the aggressor and victim are. Police officers referred to this in their interviews when describing the difficulty they face in determining a response when both adults claim to be a victim, which Officer 4 explained can result in a "he said she said" scenario.

Indeed, police participants all spoke of the need to speak to both adult parties individually as a standard approach taken, with the aim being to identify the main aggressor and make an arrest if necessary. There was a sense from many that they had to remain neutral at an incident and focus on gathering the facts as opposed to making a judgment, as this officer explains: "we're not the judge and we're not the jury"

(Officer 10). However, as described in earlier chapters, this is complicated for police when there is no physical evidence of a crime having been committed and they hear two diverging stories.

However, the experience of the participating mothers supports concerns from the children that the police do not always identify the correct victim, resulting in many mothers not feeling believed by the officers, particularly when officers did not recognize what was happening as domestic violence. Jane, a mother of two describes in the next quote, an incident that occurred during handover of the children for access, when she phoned the police and her husband falsely claimed to have a safety order against her:

*“My husband told that guard that he had a safety order out against me and that guard came to me and told me that the situation was I had a safety order out against him, he had a safety order out against me, this was a bad break up with two abusive parents that didn't think of the children, didn't treat the children properly and basically we had to get our act together.”*

The officer in this case was portrayed as showing concern for the children being caught up in what he had determined was a 'domestic dispute', however the complexities of Jane's situation were difficult to identify as domestic violence when two parents were both alleging to be victims of each-others abusive behaviour.

There is also a role that police can have in helping children unravel the complexity of blame and responsibility and their mother's victimization and the confusion that children often have around loyalty to either parent. When the police, as an authority figure, do not believe a mother who has reached out for help from them, then this can only further add to confusion for children. Younger children especially may already be confused about who to blame for the violence and abuse, particularly if they have never seen their father hit their mother and it is predominantly coercive control being used; police not believing their mother further adds to the child's confusion. The child therefore can become even further marginalized, as they do not know which parent is the safe and trusting adult to seek comfort and support from. Thus, a key thing the police can do to support the child at the scene, is to show their support for the abused parent, as Jane explains in the next quote:

*“I mean if the guards could say that simple statement “your mum was very brave to call us and we believe her”, I think that little thing would help the kids immensely because in the absence of that, my 8 year old son right now has to be the judge and jury himself and try and assess and figure out which one of his parents is lying, but if the guards came to him and said “ya know what, we believe your mum” “she’s not perfect, she’s having a really hard time but we’re glad she called and we believe it”, I imagine that could transform that child’s world.” (Jane, mother)*

### **The importance of recognising the child as an individual**

Not all children in the same household will experience the abuse in the same way (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; Mohr et al., 2000). This in turn can lead to children and even close siblings having very different experiences of the police response to domestic violence. In the present study, both Joey and his brother Harry took part in the research and although close in age, had two very different narratives in their stories. Of note was Joey’s (9) story which marked a clear divergence from not only his brothers’ story but also from the rest of the children’s narratives. In his story, Joey used the analogy of the children’s fairy-tale “Jack and Jill” by naming his characters after them and described how they would play a trick on the police man when he came to their bedroom by throwing a bucket of water over him. In Joey’s story, his characters were portrayed as having no desire to want to talk to the police officers and did not want the police in the home nor did he want them to return. In contrast, Joey’s Brother Harry was much more receptive to the police and demonstrated this in his story by suggesting that the police would “come upstairs and see how the kids doing”. Harry’s characters were portrayed as seeing the police as a person of safety as opposed to a threat and someone who could help to stop the parents fighting. In Harry’s story, when asked whether he thought the characters might have seen the police before, he replied by saying “a lot, because the parents might be fighting a lot”, but for Joey’s characters, it was the first time they had seen the police come to the home and told how they would not return again.

Police therefore need to be aware that not every child will respond to seeing them in the same way. Children’s perception and understanding of the police role is subjective,

and can depend on a child's exposure to police figures in the media and other contexts (Low & Durkin, 2001; Powell, Skouteris, et al., 2008; Powell, Wilson, Gibbons, & Croft, 2008). The police uniform may represent to some children a person of safety and authority whilst others may immediately perceive it in a more threatening manner (Durkin & Jeffery, 2000). These and a number of other factors that influence how the child experiences the police response will be looked at in some detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter describes from multiple perspectives what happens during a police-call to domestic violence with children present. Concurring with existing research, the findings paint a clear picture of the central role that children play in the domestic violence home, by developing strategies to protect themselves and others including phoning the police and seeking help outside the family. Children often remain out of sight during a police response, presumed to be in bed sleeping; however, the children in this study illustrated children's active awareness of the events taking place. The police arrival to the home can be a frightening experience for the child but also represents an opportunity for an authority figure to resolve the immediate incident and reassure the child by acknowledging them and validating their experience. While the officers in this study all showed an awareness of the need to ensure the safety of children present at an incident, there was variation in police views on how to communicate effectively with the child. Findings on positive engagement between the police and children at the scene can be summarised into four simple steps:

1. Ask the child if they are okay;
2. Tell the child the reason why the police are there;
3. Explain in simple terms what will happen next;
4. Offer information on how to stay safe.

It is important to note however that not all children will respond in the same way to seeing the police in their home, and even siblings as Harry and Joey's stories demonstrated can have different perceptions of the police thus impacting on how they experience the police response to domestic violence. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework, the next chapter explores some of the contextual factors, which exist in the child's immediate and external environment that can contribute to their understanding, and experience of the police response.

## **Chapter Six: The Child's Experience of the Police Response to Domestic Violence: An Ecological Systems Perspective**

### **Introduction**

As stated earlier, this research is interested in exploring children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence. The previous chapter used multiple perspectives to describe what happens when the police respond, and what the children described in their stories as a supportive police response. This next findings chapter moves beyond the *'what'* and begins to answer the *'why'*, by adopting a social constructionist lens to enable a greater understanding of the social and structural forces that influence the way in which the child makes sense of, and experiences the police response to domestic violence. The child's experience does not occur in a vacuum; rather it is within the context of a wider set of actors and political forces that directly and indirectly impact on the individual child's understanding of their experience of domestic violence and police intervention to it. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) is drawn on in this chapter as a framework to explore the interconnectedness between the child and the systems that make up their immediate and wider environment, which may influence how the child experiences the police response to domestic violence. Grounded in a social constructionist perspective, Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model is considered as a suitable framework from which to explore the overlapping and interconnectedness of the child's systems, shedding much needed light on the processes within the child's environment that influence how the child experiences the police response in the context of domestic violence. Within this framework, the cultural context through which shared meanings of reality are understood is key, in that attitudes and expectations of individual actors have influence over the other, in what Payne (2015) refers to as the *'circular process'* (p. 3) inherent in social constructionism.

The chapter begins by introducing Bronfenbrenner's theory and how it applies to this thesis. It will then take the family as a starting point from which to explore the interconnectedness between the child and the surrounding systems that have influence over their experience of domestic violence and the police response to it. Firstly, the construction of domestic violence as a hidden issue in families will be discussed and the impact this has on children's willingness to talk about their experiences of domestic violence outside the family unit, including with police officers when they respond. Children's understanding of the police role will then be examined, returning to the role

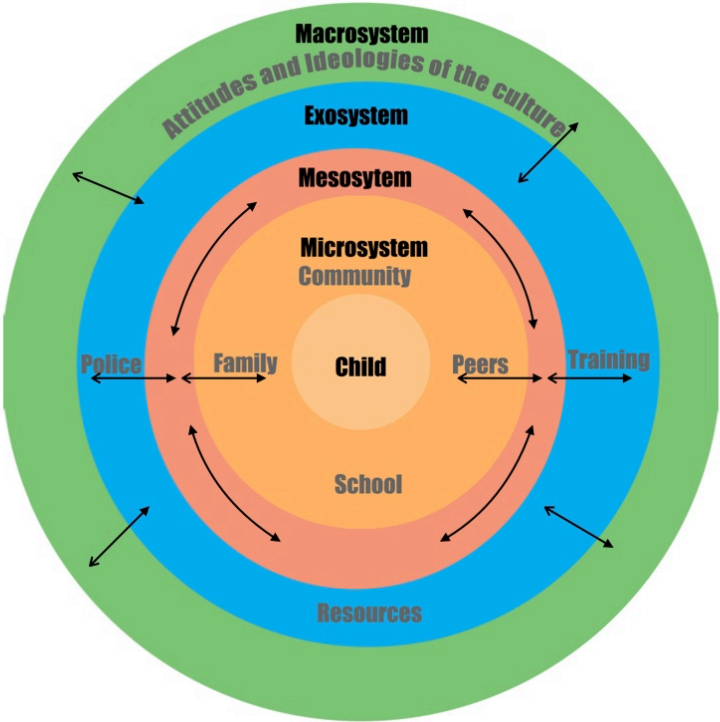


of family and its influence in shaping children's perception of the police role as an authority figure. Moving beyond the child's immediate microsystem, the discussion moves to the role of community in potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes that some children can have of the police, and also the counter effect that positive community policing initiatives can have on presenting a different face of the police to children. The construction of domestic violence in police work is then explored alongside officers understanding of their role when it comes to responding to children living with domestic violence. This, combined with individual traits including the gendered nature of police work with children and families, will be examined to consider what influence policing culture and individuality may have on the child's experience. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion on some of the cultural factors existing in the outer layer of the child's system.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

Heise (1998) applies an ecological approach to examine the etiology of domestic violence, which she maintains, "conceptualises violence as a multifaceted phenomenon, grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors" (pp. 263-264). Rather than directly using Bronfenbrenner's theory for its original use as a conceptual framework for understanding child development, the main concepts are applied here in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the child's personal, social, and cultural environments and their experiences of the police response to domestic violence. This framework allows for a richer contextual analysis of the phenomena, a feature of qualitative research that separates it from quantitative approaches. The child's relationships with individuals in their environment, for instance with their parents, is a two way process; the child is influenced by their parents belief systems and values, but the child also has influence over their parents behaviour. This bi-directional influence operates at all layers of the child's system but is said to be strongest at the core of the microsystem where they have direct contact with their immediate environment (Ryan, 2001).

Figure 2: Ecological Systems Framework



Bronfenbrenner’s theory fits well with the theoretical principles of social constructionism that underpin this study. Social construction theory understands reality to be constructed through a set of shared meanings and assumptions about the world, but that those meanings can change over time and context (Burr, 2003). For the purpose of understanding how the child experiences the police response to domestic violence, Bronfenbrenner’s theory offers a framework from which to consider the multiple ways the child may be influenced by factors existing within, and outside of their immediate environment. A systems perspective illuminates the interconnectedness between the layers of actors and the processes that exist to influence how the child understands and experiences the police response to domestic violence.

**The Microsystem**

According to Bronfenbrenner’s theory, the family exists within the child’s immediate environment in the closest layer to them that forms the microsystem. Regarded as the most influential of the systems, the microsystem is where the child is in direct contact with those that make up their immediate surroundings, such as; family members, friends, school and the neighbourhood in which they live. The family exists at the core of the child’s microsystem is where immediate caregivers and siblings play a key role in

shaping how the child understands and experiences the world around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The next section begins by focusing on the 'family' using a systems perspective to look critically at the role family plays in a broad sense in the development of the child's understanding of violence in the home and the police role in responding to it.

### **The Family: A place of secrets and loyalty**

Marianne Hester (2007) and Stanley (2011) reviews of children's experiences of living with domestic violence, speak of the hidden nature of violence and abuse within families. The violence and abuse is not only hidden from those outside the family but also when parents try to hide what is happening from the child to protect them (Humphreys & Stanley, 2006). In the current study, the hidden nature of domestic violence was mentioned in all of the practitioner interviews, referring to the sensitivity needed in raising the issue with children, particularly when it had never been discussed within their family. As the previous chapter has shown, children although out of sight, are almost always aware of the conflict between their parents. Indeed, from their experience of working with children impacted by domestic violence, practitioners had seen how the child can learn from an early age to keep the violence a secret within the family. Keeping family secrets becomes part of the child's life, as they actively develop strategies to avoid drawing outsiders attention to what is happening at home. The following quotes from practitioners capture the secrecy that exists in the child's world:

*"Once you [the child] go out the front door it's the normal day, because what happens in the house, stays in the house." (HSCP19)*

*"Most kids that we meet aren't dishevelled looking children, most of them are average kids, and they've just lived and coped with a huge amount of secrecy in their lives." (HSCP13)*

Children may be less likely to engage with the police if they feel they have a secret to keep. Police then only add to this secrecy if they respond to children with lies about why they are there or do not speak to children and acknowledge the real reason why

they have responded to the home. Police can help by naming it for the child and being transparent about why they are there in an age appropriate way.

Practitioners in the present study all agreed that the police response represented an opportunity to break the silence and begin a process of naming the violence and abuse, by directly engaging with children at the scene, as these practitioners explain:

*“Once the guards come into the house, the guards are in the house; the cats out of the bag, like the Genie’s out of the bottle. The guards are here, it’s time for everyone in this house to have an awareness about why the guards are here.” (HSCP18)*

*“If it is just a brief intervention that the goal of that should be breaking the secrecy, naming what has happened as not appropriate and encouraging children to talk when necessary.” (HSCP2)*

This idea moves very much away from conceptions of the vulnerable child or passive bystander to recognising the child as a social actor and including them in the response. Indeed, transparency by police with children as to the reason they have been called to the home was also evident in the children’s narratives when Fiona (9) suggested that ‘he [police officer] tells them [children] that there was a little bit of fighting going on’.

### ***Children’s loyalty as a factor in police engagement***

Police participants in both key studies in this area of police response (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), cited children’s loyalty to a parent as a reason for not wanting to engage with children at a domestic violence scene. Swanston et al. (2014) contend that a child’s loyalty for a parent can compound the secrecy of domestic violence even further, if they fear that a disclosure could result in the break-up of the family unit. There was some evidence of children’s loyalty in the narratives presented in the previous chapter, highlighting how the children were slow to identify either one parent as the main aggressor in their stories. Indeed, the story ended for several of the children with the police reuniting the parents. Children’s continued love for an abusive parent, particularly younger children who may be unsure of who to

blame for the conflict (Stanley, 2011), may compromise their ability to speak openly to the police about a parent in a negative way, as this officer explains:

*“There is a loyalty there, that even though their [the child’s] brain knows that something is wrong, that’s still their mum and that’s still their dad, and I think they might not inherently, don’t want to be disloyal to either.” (Officer 5)*

Police might be fearful that children may find it difficult to talk to them about what has happened and do not want to put the child in a position where they are required to take sides. Mary (21) echoed this when she said that children “don’t want to be stuck in the middle” and might be scared that police would ask them questions about the incident. This finding raises the question as to whether police assumptions over children’s incapacity to decide what to or what not to disclose (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al., 2017), prevents police from engaging directly with children at an incident and will be explored further in the next chapter.

Echoing the findings of Richardson-Foster et al. (2012), the police arrival to the domestic violence home presents an opportunity for the private to become public. As practitioners in the present study have described, the family can be a place of secrets for the child experiencing domestic violence. The ‘hidden’ aspect of the child’s experience of domestic violence was evident also in the children’s stories when they described the many ways in which their fictional characters would hide upstairs in the home, away from the adult’s downstairs. Images of the child hiding under the bed or pretending to be asleep when the police respond portray the isolation felt by the child and the secrecy that surrounds the child’s experience of living with domestic violence. Police views that children may not want to be disloyal to either parent may well be accurate for some children, however there could still be space to allow the child an opportunity to talk about their experience if they choose to do so. When the police respond to an incident of domestic violence and fail to acknowledge the abuse for the child, this continues the thread of secrecy around it, and the child’s experience of living with domestic violence thus remains hidden.

## **The Mesosystem**

The previous section focused on the family that exists at the core of the child's microsystem and is said to have the strongest influence on the child's learning and development. For the purpose of this thesis, the family has been shown to be a place where children learn to keep their experiences of domestic violence hidden, which may impact then on how much they are willing to engage with police when they respond to an incident. Moving beyond the close connection between child and family, the mesosystem is the layer in which the structures in the child's microsystem connect and interact with one another to form mesosystems. Mesosystems are made up of two or more systems connecting the child and are still influential but less so than dyadic connections between child and family (Ryan, 2001). These connections will now be discussed in relation to how they shape the child's perception of the police role.

## **Family and community influences on children's perception of the police role**

The previous section looked at the role that family can play in shaping the child's understanding of the violence and abuse; something which should be kept hidden inside the family. The police have the potential to break the silence of domestic violence for the child by including them in the response (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Radford et al., 2011). However, a dominant theme to emerge in the present study was the negative stereotyping of police by children and young people, which it was felt would impact on how much of a support role they perceived the police to be. The implications of children's negative view of the police role were further discussed by participants in the context of the police responding to their home in relation to domestic violence. This section looks at the influence that family and community thus have in shaping children's understanding of the police in society.

### ***Family interaction with the law***

Police participants in the present study spoke considerably about criminality and other adversities that exist in some families that they find themselves regularly responding to, resonating with D Finkelhor et al. (2011) theory on polyvictimisation. For some children, encounters with the police happen from an early age, where they might witness the police entering their home in relation to criminal activity within the family, leading to a negative perception of the police role, as the following officer explains:

*"I think for some families, the only interaction they have with guards is negative, or coming in searching their houses, arresting their parents, their brothers, their sisters, their only interaction is on a negative basis." (Officer 6)*

A parent or sibling's criminality may affect the child's experience and understanding of the police. By witnessing family members arrested or the police enter their home in a forceful way to carry out a search; the child learns to view the police as a threat. Similarly, the young people in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study reported negative past experiences with the police in other contexts which had contributed to their distrust in the police. The police are constructed in a negative light as the officer explains, and this then becomes the norm for the child who has no other alternative view of the police. Both practitioner and police participants felt strongly that children's attitudes to the police was something that they considered was learned within families, as this officer describes:

*"It all depends on families I suppose and their attitude to guards and that's passed on to kids." (Officer 13)*

For certain families, the police pose a bigger threat than others, and often it is in the context of families experiencing multiple adversities in their lives, where domestic violence is just one of many issues that they are dealing with (D Finkelhor et al., 2011). In the next quote, an officer explains how the perceived threat that the police pose to the family unit, is a factor in whether the police are seen in a negative or positive light by family members:

*"If they're [parents] afraid the guards will want to come and take the kids for whatever reasons, they don't want to see guards coming, whereas in the house that doesn't have that... a guard coming to the door isn't necessarily a bad thing, or seeing a guard is not a frightening thing, they're there to help you, they're there for safety, it's just a different attitude I suppose they've [children] been brought up with." (Officer 12)*

A fear of the police in this sense was reflected in one of the children's narratives. Debbie (9) when asked what the scariest part of the police response was, said that it would be to 'Get taken away from the home'. Debbie's fear is consistent with the views of children and mothers in the Radford et al. (2011) study, who reported a fear of social services as a clear barrier to making a disclosure of abuse and as discussed earlier, may further compound the secrecy of domestic violence for children. Findings support Berkman and Esserman's (2004) assertion when responding to children at domestic violence call-out, the police should be aware that children will react differently to seeing the police in their home, dependent on past experiences and perception of police.

### ***'Mixed messages' from parents to children about police***

Police participants agreed that parents have a strong influence on shaping the child's view of the police role. Many of the police participants spoke of times when they overheard a parent threaten children with the police, as a way of managing a child's behaviour. Police participants felt that this 'message' from parents only served to build a fear of the police in children and could prevent a child from seeking help from police when they needed it. Similarly, one of the mother participants, Eithne, remembered how her own parents used the police as a threat when she was growing up and had resulted in her continued fear of the police:

*"When we were younger we were brought up with that if you're not good, you'll be brought to the guards, so you constantly have a fear of them."*

In other situations, police participants gave examples of when a parent portrays the police in a negative light as a person to avoid, as one officer recalls in the next quote:

*"I remember walking down the street one day, and a kid waved at me, and the mother wacked the child on the arse, and told him not to be talking to guards." (Officer 13)*

Similarly, many practitioners spoke of the negative view of the police that even young children can have, which some put down to the messages that children were picking up from parents about police.



*“I’ve had children as young as three in my car who would see a Garda car and would speak as negatively as you can about someone, and they obviously hear things that their parents say”. (HSCP 7)*

In contrast to this, there was an awareness amongst some of the mothers in the sample of the negative stereotype that children can have of the police, which had lead them to speak more positively about the police to their children, as Karen describes in the next quote:

*“It was very important for me that the children didn’t get the wrong impression of the Gardaí, so I’ve been really building up to my children that the Gardaí are protecting us and they care about us.”  
(Karen, mother)*

Practitioners felt strongly that parents had a role in portraying the police in a more positive light and challenging children’s negative stereotypes of police. One practitioner explained that even in a family who might ordinarily have quite a negative view of authority figures, if the mother explained to the children why she had to involve the police for protection, then the children would respond more positively to seeing them in the home:

*“The mother would have spoken to her children openly about if something happens she has to call the guards, so they would know that that was a safety measure or protection piece and I think a guard could have had a very positive role.” (HSCP7)*

Portraying the police in a positive light as a person of safety was seen as critical when it came to safety planning with families as this nearly always involved phoning the police. The messages about the police that children receive from parents is important therefore, in shaping how they experience the police response in a crisis situation such as an incident of domestic violence. What this means then for the police when they

respond to a home with domestic violence, is a need as one practitioner explains in the next quote, for officers to be aware of the dynamics within a family:

*“I think it’s about acknowledging that it is different when you walk into a family home and children are very influenced by their families... if my dad, my mam, my older brother are saying this about them [police]... what little younger child is going to pipe up and say ‘please help me’ in this situation, ‘I’m in trouble here’, so I think an understanding that when you walk into a family home it’s different, the dynamic is different and to recognise the children who are maybe saying one thing but something else is going on.” (HSCP6)*

There is an opportunity for police in their response to children at a domestic violence incident, to demonstrate to the child different aspects of the police role that go beyond the punitive or authoritative element and challenge negative stereotypes that children may have of the police.

*“That we’re not monsters... we can help you, we’re here to listen.”  
(Officer 1)*

The first step to help break any fear that a child may have of the police in that situation, is as the children suggested in their stories, by acknowledging the child at the scene and police showing concern for their safety.

## **The role of community in shaping the child’s perception of the police**

Outside of the family unit, the child’s community is an important system comprising key actors in the child’s life such as friends, neighbours, extended family, community services including the police and the school setting. In the present study, the role of community in shaping the child’s understanding of the police was a common theme to emerge and will be explored further in this section. Many of the participants spoke about a culture of not talking to the police that can be spread across some communities and be imparted to children from an early age. Particularly for participants who had

experience working or living in areas with high rates of crime and poverty, they described the ways in which children can learn to have a negative perception of the police role. Isabelle, a young mother of one, explains in the next quote how negative stories about the police are passed down through peers:

*“You hear it from the older kids and the younger kids are like hearing it and then they’re passing it on to the other younger kids.”*

Isabelle went on to describe her own experience of this in her community and the implications of it:

*“People were like, ‘if you call the guards you’re a rat’... like especially telling young kids that, I think that’s really bad because growing up with that kind of creates a bad standing, that it’s bad to call the guards.. they’re not seen as good people, they’re more seen as people who’ll get you in trouble really.”*

The ‘What’s the story’ project (Whelan, 2011) with Irish youth and police referred to in an earlier chapter, supports this finding that young people may have a negative perception of the police and are less likely to engage with police in their community. Indeed, in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, the young people were critical of the police, which some based on encounters with them in other contexts. However, concurring with findings from Richardson-Foster et al. (2012), whilst it was agreed by police and practitioners in the present study that there are communities where children and young people hold a more negative view of the police, practitioners felt that a young person would still view the police as an authority figure that they would seek help from in a crisis scenario (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). There was a sense then as this practitioner asserts, that children were being given mixed messages about the police role but were still capable of deciding when it was appropriate to seek help from police:

*“I think it’s back to a little bit of mixed messages going to children... because sometimes I think it is a lot of bravado and they’re just repeating what they’re hearing in terms of what they’re saying about*

*the guards.... Because young people often present to Garda stations when they're in difficulty." (HSCP6)*

In interviews with police participants, they were very aware of the barriers that exist in some communities where there are high levels of crime and poverty, for people to engage with them. The role of community police was regarded highly by participants in the present study, as a valuable mechanism to break down potential barriers between the police and the public. This was suggested to begin by introducing children to the positive aspects of the police role through their interaction with police in the community and will now be discussed.

### ***Community police***

B. Smith et al. (2001) US study found several positive examples of interventions by community police with children experiencing domestic violence. The police in the present study spoke a lot about the role that community police play with children. A core function of the community policing role in Ireland is to speak to children in the school setting. A common view held by adult participants in this study, was the importance for the child to have the opportunity to see the police and interact with them in an environment that is not threatening and does not involve a crisis. A large number of the officers in the present study had experience working as community police and many spoke fondly of the role and the chance that it gave them to help address negative stereotypes of the police. Police viewed the school talks with children as an opportunity for the child to ask questions which helped to clarify the police role for them. Police participants also felt that it was an effective way of presenting themselves as a person of safety for the child who may ordinarily associate the police role as being a threat. In the next quote, an officer explains how the school talks with children can be used to challenge any negative stereotypes children may have about the police:

*"You're talking to them, and you're giving them time, and you're telling them about the job that you do, and why it's important to have somebody there to keep you safe, and I think that's really important because they don't get that at home." (Officer 6)*

The role of the police is 'demystified' as one practitioner described when the child has an opportunity to speak to police and ask them questions in an informal and safe setting amongst their peers. The child's familiarity with the police role and having opportunities to interact with them in a neutral setting, were both considered influential in promoting a less traumatic experience for the child when the police respond to a domestic violence incident in the home. One officer describes in the next quote, how their own experience working in the community helped them in their role when responding to a domestic violence incident with children present:

*"You would go to the domestic, you might even be in the house where a child would say 'oh you were in my school' or 'the guards were in my school during the week' so the community policing side of it helped with the domestic side of it sometimes, and the child might recognise em, wouldn't be afraid of the uniform coming in, because they [police] had been in the school." (Officer 12)*

The value of community policing in instilling in children a positive perception of the police was viewed by the majority of the adult participants as key. Many of the adult participants referred to children having positive engagements with police in their communities such as local football tournaments, summer projects, day trips and police station open days. These were all seen as opportunities for children to see the police in a different context and again to challenge any negative stereotypes that children have of police. Practitioners felt that this was particularly salient for children who were growing up in criminal families:

*"Especially for those kids who have grown up with lots of criminal activity in their family and there's a very negative perception of the guards, so when they do see them in a human scenario or more positive interaction, then it kind of gives them a different perspective as to what they've grown up with." (HSCP5)*

A general view of the practitioners was the need, to in some manner dilute the authority aspect of the police so that children will see them as more approachable and a person of safety.

*“I suppose it just puts them on a more kind of, I suppose children will probably see them as this kind of mysterious authority figure maybe, but if they’re just there as a normal person chatting away... It humanises them and takes the mystery out of them for a child.”*  
(HSCP4)

It was considered by some police in the sample, important for this to happen from a young age with children to help build the relationship and a level of trust in authority figures. One police participant felt that this became much more difficult to do with children once they had reached their teenage years, as the following quote highlights:

*“A bit of trust there as well so that’s important because if you come in when they’re 14, 15 years of age you’ve no hope really with them.”*  
(Officer 2)

Building such relationships was felt by one officer as easier to achieve in rural communities where the local officer has much closer ties to the community. The next quote is from an officer describing the relationship that children have with a local community guard in a rural area:

*“They grow up knowing him as a person they don’t grow up knowing him as a uniform and I just think that has such a huge impact on how you will view all guards, you’ll always have a little bit of a healthy respect, a healthy fear maybe of the uniform because we are there to enforce the law so we don’t want to be the big cuddly teddy bear either but you do want them to understand that you’re a person”*  
(Officer 8)

The younger children who took part in this study were not specifically asked about the experiences with police in other contexts, however because of their age many of them would have seen the police during a talk in their school. Mary, the young person who

participated, was asked directly about her interaction with the police in her community and spoke highly of the local community police:

*“Garda Byrne was the community guard when I was in school but he’s older now so John is younger, he’s the new community guard, he comes in and out all of the time, he’s very nice. “ Mary (21)*

Children in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study who had experienced domestic violence but had never experienced the police responding to their home, were more likely to focus on the punitive and powerful role of the police, in line with Powell, Skouteris, et al. (2008) assertion and is similar to findings reported in this thesis. Indeed, children learn about the police role from portrayals of police force and brutality which they observe in the media (Powell, Skouteris, et al., 2008), as well as the language and discourses commonly associated with negative police stereotyping which they hear from family, peer and community settings. This negative stereotyping of police can prevent children from seeking help when they need it in relation to domestic violence (Øverlien & Aas, 2016). However, there is evidence from the narratives of children in the present study and elsewhere (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012) that the police will still be called upon by the child when they fear for their own or a family members safety. The findings here suggest then, that there is an opportunity in the community policing role to provide all children with a balanced view of the police as both an authority figure but also a person of safety who they can feel confident in reaching out to for help.

## **The Exosystem**

Moving beyond the inner layers of the child’s microsystem and mesosystem, the exosystem has more of an indirect function in the child’s immediate system. The structures that exist within the exosystem however still have influence over the child’s experience, in this case of the police response to domestic violence. Some of the ideas discussed in this section cross over with the macrosystem such as police culture; however culture is included in this layer as it influences how police understand their role in responding to domestic violence and thus the actions they take, which directly impact the child.

## **Constructions of domestic violence and police culture**

This section focuses on the police, and illuminates how individual police attitudes to domestic violence impact on the response to it. Underpinning the discussion to follow, is an understanding that the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence is closely connected to, and directly impacted by, constructions of domestic violence in police work, and also what they perceive their role with children to be in this context. Drawing on a social constructionist perspective, police frameworks are built from a common discourse on domestic violence as an adult issue, as well as officers own personal biographies and understandings of children and childhood (James et al., 2004). How children experiencing domestic violence are conceptualised by adults will be examined in the next chapter. This section looks at police constructions of domestic violence as an issue in a more general sense, which can influence the child's experience.

Consistent with findings in the literature (Berkman et al., 2004; Myhill & Johnson, 2016), there was full agreement from police participants in the present study, that responding to a domestic incident is risky and often dangerous. Officers spoke of the unpredictability in this area of police work, not quite knowing, as one officer explained, "what you're going to get" (Officer 4). Although officers recalled responding to domestic violence incidents involving female aggressors and same-sex partners, the vast majority of the cases mentioned involved male to female perpetrated violence when children were present, supporting existing research in this area (Gjelsvik et al., 2003). In terms of the seriousness of the cases, some officers asserted that the police were often only called "when it becomes extreme" (Officer 14), and the abuse within that particular home has escalated to a level that requires a police response. Indeed, Hoyle and Sanders (2000) reported a similar finding on the police often being called as a last resort, echoing the views of police participants in the present research.

Whilst several of the police participants were critical of the police response in the past to domestic violence, they felt that improvements had been made, as this officer explains:

*"It's not perfect, I don't think personally we're doing enough for domestic violence victims full stop, but I think it has improved greatly."  
(Officer 13)*



Concurring with Jennett's (2012) findings on police frustration in dealing with domestic violence incidents, officers in the present study all referred to the frustration that can build, when a victim chooses not to pursue a case against their abuser. In the following quote, an officer describes the process of responding to a domestic violence incident and the mounting apathy that can result in officers:

*"A call would come in for a DVSA, domestic violence sexual assault and it would nearly be a case of everyone going silent, who's going to take it, because nobody wanted to take it." (Officer 4)*

This view of domestic violence as a 'time wasting' area of police work was also found among police in the Diemer et al. (2016) study. Similarly, police participants in the present study spoke of the annoyance they and their colleagues felt when they responded to the same homes on repeat occasions, only for the victim to not proceed with a complaint, as one officer explained:

*"A lot of guards would think that the area of domestic violence is just a huge waste of time, because they think we respond to those incidents, we arrest this person and then the complaint is withdrawn, and there's very little understanding I think as to what has led to that point or what could be going on behind it all, they're just thinking I have ten calls to do, and this is a waste of my time." (Officer 6)*

Another officer pointed to the limitations of the police role and frustration when a victim does not seek help:

*"I think within a couple of days she [victim] was back with him [abuser], she took none of our advice, see at the end of the day we're not marriage counsellors." (Officer 3)*

Over time this contributed to a "get in and get out" approach taken by some police, as this officer explains:

*“I have seen guards who just want to get in and out of the house as quick as possible, if there’s no complaint they’re like ‘okay there’s nothing more I can do here’, ‘you have all the numbers [DV support lines], I’m gone’.” (Officer 6)*

Similar to findings on police resources from Myhill and Johnson (2016), this ‘in and out’ approach to domestic violence was also spoken about by officers in the context of limited resources which added pressure on front-line officers to move to the next call. Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) found that whilst police participants agreed that domestic violence was a priority call, a “target-driven approach” (p. 228), placed pressure on officers which may impact negatively on time spent with victims and family and the quality of that contact. For the front-line officer, a sense of urgency to move to the next call and fulfil a ‘role’ to restore order as quickly as possible, was a reality when responding to domestic violence incidents leaving little time to engage with children at the scene, echoing findings from police in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study. What this comes down to is often limited resources and manpower that places additional pressure on front-line staff. Some of the macro factors pertaining to the police response to domestic violence will be looked at again later in this chapter under the heading ‘resources’.

### ***Police use of discretion***

Resonating with findings from Ballucci et al. (2017) on the need for a different approach by officers in policing domestic violence, officers in the present study with more specialist training, felt that traditional policing models did not fit with domestic violence cases and required a sensitivity to the complex dynamics within domestic violence families:

*“There’s a lot of layers that have to be looked at, it’s not just all black and white.” (Officer 11)*

The increased recognition of non-physical forms of violence and the impact on children as reported by Katz (2016), was also evident in this study. Practitioner participants raised the need for police to recognise the signs of coercive control and non-physical violence, but at the same time acknowledged the great difficulty in responding to this

form of abuse, when there is no physical injury to provide evidence of. As described in the last chapter, many of the mothers in the present study referred to feeling like they needed evidence to show the police, so that they would be taken seriously, and believed this prevented them from contacting the police for help. Police are often called upon to use their discretion in such scenarios when both parties are claiming to be victims of each-others abuse and several of the mothers in this study reported feelings of not being believed by officers when there was no physical evidence to show them. Resonating with findings from Myhill and Johnson (2016), police were not always reported to use discretion in a positive way and mothers gave examples of officers failing to identify their complaints as evidence of a wider pattern of abuse perpetrated by their partner.

The discretionary nature of police work was also seen in how police participants appeared to interpret their role differently when it came to engaging with children at a domestic violence scene. Consistent with findings from Øverlien and Aas (2016) and police participants in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study, the officers in the present research were aware of the limitations of their role with children when they did not have any formal training in the forensic interviewing of children. However, some officers used discretion when they felt it was appropriate to talk to children at an incident, overriding the need for a specialist interviewer when they saw fit to intervene. Still conscious of not impeding any future investigation, some officers gave examples of how they would use the opportunity to make a quick assessment on whether the child was in any immediate danger by speaking informally to them about school and hobbies. The officers spoke of being careful not to ask any leading questions that related to the incident that they had been called to. Other officers interpreted their role more rigidly, stating that they were not 'allowed' to talk to children at an incident, viewing the only purpose of engagement with the child as investigating them, as a witness that they were not qualified to do. There was therefore some ambiguity among officers, similar to findings in the existing literature (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), as to what the purpose of engagement with a child was at the scene; to check on their safety, interview them as a witness or simply to gather basic information to pass to social services to carry out an assessment.

When it came to discussing their role with children, police participants referred back to the Child and Family Agency as being the main providers of statutory support to children at risk. As the next quote explains, many of the officers felt that once they had

made a referral to social work, then their role with supporting the child in the domestic violence home was complete:

*“Our job is really quite simple in that we go, we deal with the situation, we deal with him, we refer the kids... it’s not that the guards don’t have any feeling for the kids, but you can only do so much, and the best thing you can do is make sure that it’s flagged, and that people who, I suppose are most expert, are there to deal with it.” (Officer 14)*

The officer in this quote is making the distinction as many of the officers did in their interviews, on the difference between the authoritative remit of the police and the welfare and safeguarding role of social work, who they position as ‘expert’ in this field. Concurring with police views in the existing research (Heinonen & Ellonen, 2016; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), officers in the present study were clear to point out that ‘police are not social workers’ and their role with children at a domestic violence incident is thus limited in terms of the police remit in responding to children.

### ***The police officer as an individual***

The inconsistent response by the police to victims of domestic violence is well documented in the literature (Dempsey, 2004; HMIC, 2014; Stanley et al., 2010). The mothers in the present study all spoke of very mixed responses from the police when they reported an incident of domestic violence during either the relationship or post-separation. Practitioners also reported quite varied levels of interaction between police and services supporting families experiencing domestic violence. Both groups of participants gave examples of supportive responses to families experiencing domestic violence and others that were not so good, which in some cases, participants reported put the family at even greater risk from the perpetrator. Emerging from discussions with participants around the lack of consistency in how police engaged with victims and children at the scene was that police are not a homogenous group. Whilst officers may all wear the same uniform and represent the same law enforcement agency, they bring to the job their own personal histories and value systems that influence how they construct and make sense of the events to which they respond (Paoline III, 2003). Indeed, many of the police participants themselves referred to it almost as an innate interest in that aspect of the role that certain officers would have and others would not.

This finding resonates with research from Balenovich et al. (2008) who found that some officers were more inclined towards the welfare or 'social work' aspect of the police role when it comes to domestic violence. The idealism of new police recruits that the officer in the next quote alludes to is something that stays with the officer even amidst the frustration that domestic violence work can bring:

*"I would say a lot of the newly fresh ones [police] out of Templemore [police training] would be going in and trying to save the woman and save the child, but I'd say the more you've been back and you've done all the hard work and you've gone to court and the woman withdraws it on the last day, the less and less engaging the guard will be, but I'd say probably not with the children do you know what I mean, I'd say their level of engagement whether you're straight out of Templemore, if you're that way inclined that level is going to stay."  
(Officer 1)*

The first part of this quote echoes the findings of Jennett (2012) and Diemer et al. (2016) on officers frustration in not getting the 'result' they want from a domestic violence case. However, there is a sense that some officers have an ability to see beyond the frustration and continue to practice in a victim-centred way when they have a genuine interest. Police participants agreed that the approach taken was often related to the individual officers personality, and level of interest in domestic violence work, and/or comfort in dealing with children, as this officer suggests:

*"In the vast majority of cases I think guards are really good when it comes to kids, you're always going to get one that's just not able to, either isn't aware fully of the law, or isn't comfortable dealing with domestic violence incidents, or isn't comfortable dealing with kids."  
(Officer 13)*

Many of the police participants referred to their own experience of being a parent influencing their response to children at a domestic violence incident. Prior to becoming a parent, one officer recalled not really considering children's presence at a domestic

violence scene and focusing the response on the adults, as they explain in the next quote:

*“I suppose I’m a mother now myself... so you’re a lot more mindful of the kids, whereas before that you wouldn’t be, you just go in, you talk to the man, you talk to the woman, if the kids are there you send them upstairs out of the way.” (Officer 9)*

*“It [being a parent] definitely has changed my perspective of speaking with children.” (Officer 10)*

Police participants mostly agreed that having experience as a parent, or having young children in their family was helpful in feeling comfortable communicating with children at a domestic violence incident. Several of the officers gave examples of ways they respond differently when they know there are children present, such as; giving the child an activity to do while they speak to the adults, speaking to the parents away from the children, avoiding using any force including pepper spray, as well as using measures to prevent a child from witnessing their parent being arrested, all of which they put down to a greater awareness of children at the scene.

### ***Police gender***

Based on findings from the interviews with police participants, there appeared to be a gendered aspect to how officers approached the response to a domestic violence incident. Ten of the police sample in the present study were female officers. Almost the entire police sample agreed that when there was a male and female officer responding to a domestic violence incident, that the female officer would take on the role of speaking with the mother and if appropriate, check on the children. This finding is not surprising and is reminiscent of the prominent role that women historically played in responding to victims of sexual and physical abuse in Irish policing (Buckley, 2002). This was not described as standard police procedure, yet it was a common approach taken at a domestic violence incident and also reflects the gendered nature of soft skills in policing, which McCarthy (2013) contends has created a tension with more traditional masculine constructs of police work.

When asked about the preferred gender of responding officers, some of the mothers in the present study said that a female presence would have provided a more calming influence at the scene and felt that their children would have responded well to seeing a female officer. The children however did not appear to have the same view and when asked in their stories if it would make a difference whether it was a male or female officer, Debbie (9) was the only child to prefer a female officer 'because girls are like way like nicer and boys are more stricter'. This view of female officers being perceived as more approachable to children was echoed by a female police participant in the next quote:

*"Some kids will talk to a female quicker than they will talk to a man, I don't know do they see a man as more authoritative, I don't know but they will sometimes speak to a girl more openly." (Officer 8)*

However, other officers felt that the gender of the officer was not as an important variable as individual personality and attitude, as this officer explains:

*"It all comes down to the personality of the guard really as opposed to the gender, you'll have some who are maybe dismissive of domestic violence or just maybe it's their hundredth time calling to that house, and then you might have a guard who's just maybe better informed and more supportive of an incident so I don't think gender plays a role but the attitude maybe of the guard might." (Officer 13)*

Whilst there is some evidence in the literature to suggest that female officers take on more of a proactive role when it comes to domestic violence cases (Chu & Sun, 2014; Jennett, 2012), there was rather mixed experience from the mothers who participated in the present study when it came to male or female officers and were more inclined to attribute a supportive response to the individual personality of the officer. Consistent with Coulter et al. (1999) research on the importance of police attitude and knowledge in responding effectively to domestic violence victims, findings in the present study although requiring further investigation, pointed more towards police attitude rather than any clear gendered element.

## **The Macrosystem**

Within the outer most layer of the child's environment exists the macrosystem. Socially constructed cultural values and norms exist in this layer that surrounds the entirety of the child's system (Hayes et al., 2017). Culture became a dominant theme to emerge from the interviews with adults in the current study and so is discussed here as it pertains to the general response to domestic violence in Irish society and how it has for a long time, been constructed as a hidden issue.

### **Domestic violence: A “culture of hiding it”**

Whilst Ireland has witnessed constitutional changes that impact on the family unit, historically the family unit in Ireland has been constructed as a private space, protected by the Constitution and with minimal State intervention (Hayes, 2002).<sup>44</sup> The teachings of the Catholic Church that were once deeply ingrained in Irish society, were said to have provided a moral compass for Irish family life (Inglis, 1987). Whilst Irish society has vastly changed over the last few decades, becoming in many ways more secular and liberal (Inglis, 2007), findings in the present study revealed a perception among some participants that a culture of secrecy still remained within families. Indeed, secrecy and the hidden nature of domestic violence was a dominant theme found across all participant groups in this study, and as the first section of this chapter has demonstrated, can deeply influence a child who learns early on not to talk about their experiences. The construction of domestic violence as a taboo subject was still seen to exist in Ireland, as this practitioner explains:

*“People tend to turn a blind eye around domestic violence, and find it awkward, maybe broaching it with somebody if you suspect, and families keeping things very private, and we know about the history in Irish families, of keeping things secret and keeping things quiet.”*  
(HSCP2)

The construction of domestic violence as a private issue was found by MacQueen and Norris (2016) to be a normative factor impacting on low reporting to police of the issue, and was echoed by police participants in the current study when they referred to the reluctance of members of the public to report the issue, further contributing to the

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter one of this dissertation for a more in-depth discussion on family in Ireland.



hidden nature of violence in families. A culture of 'out of sight out of mind' that had been passed down through generations was said by one police participant to be keeping the issue behind closed doors:

*"Is that something that socially became acceptable years ago, that if it happened behind closed doors and nobody hears about it or sees, that we're just going to carry on with our lives anyway." (Officer 10)*

Similarly, some of the mothers in the present study reported a history of keeping domestic violence a secret within families. Eithne, a mother of one, described growing up in Ireland in a home where there was domestic violence, and referred to it as being "hush hush back then". Eithne in the next quotes refers to the perceived social norms that exist when it comes to not disclosing domestic violence and involving the police:

*"I know a lot of people probably... try to hide what happens in the home, so I didn't ring the guards."*

In addition to a culture of keeping domestic violence hidden, practitioners also spoke about a cultural shift in the positioning of children in society and the wider discourse of child protection, which living with domestic violence was now considered under. However, some of the practitioner participants felt strongly that the legacy of provision for the family unit in the Irish Constitution and the protection afforded to it in Irish statute, was still evident in a largely non-interventionist approach to domestic violence and child abuse, as the following quotes illustrate:

*"We think about Ireland and our cultural history, our constitution, the role of the family, the status the family is afforded, I think that has a massive impact, not just on domestic abuse but child abuse as well... the unwillingness of services to get involved." (HSCP6)*

*“There is a tolerance of domestic violence and there is a tolerance of violence towards children... our thresholds are high and getting higher.” (HSCP2)*

### **Police can help change the cultural narrative around domestic violence**

It was suggested by practitioners that police have a role as an authority figure in society to help break cycle of violence in families, by sending the message to children from a young age that there are consequences for the abusers’ action.

*“It gives them a message that violence or abuse to their partner is not okay and there is a consequence.” (HSCP1)*

Indeed, the children in this study and elsewhere wanted the police to take some form of action by removing the perpetrator from the home. Children who grow up with domestic violence and see the police continuously being called but nothing in their situation changing, are as practitioner 14 described, “inadvertently getting a message that hitting someone in the home is not as bad as hitting someone in the street”. There is evidence that a cycle of violence exists in some families and is compounded by multiple other adversities, as David Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Turner (2007) contend, can place the child at further risk. One officer in the current study felt that by responding effectively to children at a domestic violence incident, this could begin a process of change:

*“I think it all lies with the children... if we had guards going in when talking to them [children], and they were being offered help and saw a different side to the guards... and that this [domestic violence] was not acceptable, maybe we’d have better outcomes and that’s how we start the re-training and breaking the cycle.” (Officer 1)*

There is a general awareness of the broader cultural norms that exist around domestic violence and the level to which it can become normalised when children see no consequences for an abuser’s actions. There is a role therefore as the officer in the previous quote suggests, for police to use their authority to send a message early on to children, that no level of violence is acceptable in the home or elsewhere in society.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter sought to explore some of the broader situational, social and cultural factors that might influence how the individual child experiences the police responding to their home in the context of domestic violence. Findings reveal how the police response for the child is situated within a complex interplay of systems that operate within the child's environment. The messages that children are given about the police role within their communities, through their interactions with peers and the police themselves, as well as what they learn about them from within the home, can be seen as important in understanding how the child living with domestic violence perceives police involvement. If the child has a negative perception of the police role, and has learned to not trust the police, they may be less likely to engage with a police officer when they respond, or to see the police as a point of safety. In another situation, where a child has had positive experiences with the police in their community, and has interacted with them in a non-crisis driven setting, then this child may look on the police as a source of protection for them and their family. Community policing represents an opportunity for children to see the police in different contexts that can help challenge perceptions of the police as a threat and position them more as a person of safety who can support the child living with domestic violence. The individual officer however, plays a central role in what the response looks like for a child, and is an integral part of their overall experience of the response, bringing with them their own personal views and value systems. Finally, a culture and practice of hiding the issue of domestic violence and child abuse surrounds the entire system, which can be seen operating at multiple layers of the system; family, community, institution, which the police have the potential to address by acknowledging the domestic violence as unacceptable and with consequences. However, as the previous chapter described, communicating and engaging in meaningful contact with children at a domestic violence incident can be challenging for police and there is some disparity on police approaches to ensuring the safety of children at the scene. The next chapter moves the discussion on from this point to examine how children experiencing domestic violence are conceptualised by adults, thus informing the response in practice to them.

## Chapter Seven: Conceptualising the Child Victim of Domestic Violence

### Introduction

This third and final findings chapter continues with an exploration of the *why* in terms of achieving the main objective of this study, to explore children's experience of the police response to domestic violence. In this chapter, data pertaining to police perspectives on responding to children at a domestic violence call-out, is presented in light of children's repositioning in the literature as agentic. In order to understand how police and other adults in the lives of children conceptualise their victimisation of domestic violence, a framework consisting of four separate yet overlapping ways of viewing the child in a domestic violence home has been constructed in order to illuminate and explore the complex and dynamic constructs of children that impact on how they are responded to by police. This framework was constructed by the researcher from the literature, influenced predominantly by the work of James et al. (2004) and James and Prout (1997). The theoretical framework underpinning this thesis is embedded in principles within social constructionism and new sociological understandings of children and childhood and has been applied throughout the analysis of the findings. Through a social constructionist lens, it is understood that police conceptions of the child victim of domestic violence are not operating in isolation to other professional constructs of children. Therefore, societal constructions of the child victim of domestic violence that takes account of other adult perspectives are also included in this research.

The four constructs are listed below alongside key words that describe how the child is perceived and thus responded to, based on each construct.

1. The invisible child – non-adult, uninjured, irrelevant, ignored;
2. The passive bystander – inactive, observer, emotionally detached, secondary;
3. The vulnerable innocent – needs protection, welfare, pity, shelter from adult world;
4. The involved actor – agentic, capable, strategist, acknowledged, 'seen'.

In the chapter each construct will be discussed separately, however it is important to note that they are not fixed conceptions of the child and rather police participating in the study demonstrated an ability to move fluidly between constructs, depending on the situational context.

## **Construct 1: The Invisible Child**

Historically, domestic violence has been constructed as an adult issue (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). It is not until recent years that policing practice and policy in the area of domestic violence has begun to recognise the impact on children living in a domestic violence home (HMIC, 2015a, 2015b). Whilst recent findings from a study in the US by Swerin et al. (2018) demonstrate an improvement in police awareness of children at a domestic violence incident, the issue continues to be constructed largely through an adult centric lens that renders the child invisible in the police response (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

Consistent with Swerin et al.'s (2018) findings, police participants in the present study showed a good awareness of the need to ensure the safety of children present at a domestic violence scene. However, the continued construction of domestic violence as an adult issue was evident when it came to how officers approached an incident, in that the focus of the response is more likely to be centred on the adult victim and perpetrator, rather than the child, as the officer in the next quote explains:

*“The guard going there really thinks domestic violence issue, oh between the husband and wife or two partners.” (Officer 4)*

Within the literature (McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Stanley, 2011), there are reports of parents under-acknowledgment of children's involvement and awareness of domestic violence. In the present study, children's invisibility at the scene was also apparent in the narratives of mothers. Very rarely were any of the mothers able to give examples of police speaking directly to children at an incident. At the very least, mothers reported police asking about children present in the home, but more often not physically checking on a child when a mother reported them to be sleeping. The question over whether in fact a child had slept through an incident involving a police response has already been examined in this thesis, with the evidence pointing more towards children's awareness as opposed to their ignorance.

During interviews with mother participants, they frequently became upset when the researcher asked about their child's location in the house when the police arrived. Many of the mothers reported that because the violence happened mostly during the night, children were asleep in bed and did not appear to waken with the police arrived

to the home. However, mothers who had believed children to be sleeping through an incident, or who had put young children in another room away from the violence to protect them from it, often became upset when they tentatively considered that their child was perhaps aware of much more than they had thought at the time. Indeed, with the exception of the few mothers who reported their children to be unaware of the violence in the home, the remainder found it exceptionally difficult to talk about their child's experience of the abuse, often becoming upset and unable to answer questions asked in this regard by the researcher. Others simply responded as Jane, mother of two, did by saying "I have no idea how my children have perceived it" and reflected the invisibility of children's experience of living in a home with violence and abuse.

In addition, as described in Chapter Five, children themselves may actively engage in strategies to become 'invisible', such as hiding under a bed or pretending to be asleep, thereby avoiding unwanted adult attention. Consistent with Øverlien and Hydén (2009) and Callaghan and Alexander (2015) findings on children's use of invisibility as a protection strategy in the domestic violence home, the children's narratives in the present study also reflect the importance of making oneself invisible. In this way, the child is actively involved in creating its own invisibility, thus becoming the 'invisible child'.

Police at the scene render the child invisible therefore when the response is solely focused on the adult victim and perpetrator. In this context, the 'invisible child' is made so conceptually by police based on their status as non-adult (Qvortrup, 1994b). In addition, the child's invisibility is compounded further by adult caregivers, whose ability to see the child victim is obstructed by their own victimisation of abuse, resulting in a failure to recognise the degree and magnitude to which the child is impacted by the violence. Finally, the child is actively involved in creating their own invisibility when they engage in activities of hiding and silencing.

### ***A criminal justice lens: Getting the 'job' done***

Children are also rendered invisible through the criminal justice lens. A core function of the police role is undoubtedly criminal investigation, however police are becoming increasingly required to also consider the welfare aspect of the role which requires the use of soft skills including listening, empathy, rapport building and a certain degree of police discretion (Diemer et al., 2016). Findings from both the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) and Øverlien and Aas (2016) studies revealed that police officers understood

their role as minimal with children unless a child was physically injured or had made an allegation of abuse. Several of the officers in the present study reported similar views on their role with children at a domestic violence incident. In the following quote, an officer explains that the lack of engagement with children at a domestic violence incident is because of a need to get the 'job' done, which does not include children:

*"I know it sounds very cold but when we arrive we've a job to do... You have your Garda hat on, you know this is what I have to do, find out what's going on and the children are irrelevant really unless they have been assaulted." (Officer 9)*

Similar to what Berkman and Esserman (2004) refer to as officers taking on a 'narrow' interpretation of the police role, the focus here is on the criminal aspect and investigation as opposed to the welfare function that is becoming increasingly called upon by officers. There is a sense from this officer that by having the "Garda hat" on, they must focus on the criminal aspect, most likely involving the adults, thus almost blinding the officer to the emotional needs of children present. Children in this scenario are perceived as 'irrelevant' in the police response, since no crime has been committed against the child for them to be conceived of as a victim. In the previous chapter, police described how becoming a parent had made them more aware of children at the scene; however the "Garda hat" in this sense almost enforces a limit to the level of empathy for children at the scene and how far they go to support a child, when responding to the child is not perceived as part of the "job". Similar to what P. Williams (2016) found on police becoming hardened to the job over time, there is sense that the police hat is also symbolic of a certain level of emotional detachment that is required to stay focused on getting the result needed.

When entering a domestic violence incident, police participants in this study spoke of the main goal of the response being to remove the perpetrator from the home with the least amount of disruption possible, thereby ensuring the immediate safety of the adult victim. The job was considered done by officers when the perpetrator had been arrested and the victim was provided with information on how to protect themselves through legal orders. Hence, the officer approaching the situation through a criminal justice lens does not feel it is their role to respond directly to children if they are not seen to be a direct victim of the abuse. In this way, children become invisible as they

are seen neither as victim or as witness, therefore requiring no formal criminal justice response by police.

Once a child has not been directly injured, then the officer in this setting perceives there to be no crime committed against them. Within this framework, officers stick closely to a more rigid and less fluid construction of their role with children at a domestic violence incident:

*“We’re dealing with the criminal side of it so if you’re hearing mammy and daddy fight, there’s no criminal element there to that. If Mam or Dad are turning around and telling you you’re a worthless piece of whatever, that’s a different kind of emotional abuse and we can investigate, but the majority of the ones regarding domestics are children witnessing, that’s not really a Garda problem because it’s not criminal, but it makes things complicated.” (Officer 1)*

Traditional policing discourses on domestic violence are dominated by constructions of adult victim and adult perpetrator (Ballucci et al., 2017). Once they are identified, police have a clear path of action to follow in order to fulfil the duties of their job. However, identifying a clear victim is not always straight forward, especially in the context of non-physical violence (Robinson et al., 2016). Commentators (Katz, 2016; Nordham & Pritchard, 2018; Stark, 2012) have criticised the ineffectiveness of police focusing solely on physical violence, as it fails to encompass the full extent of the abuse and more subtle forms of non-physical violence that perpetrators can engage in. Consistent with Myhill and Johnson’s (2016) findings, identifying even the adult victim can be challenging for officers without the knowledge and training specific to domestic violence. So too then are children difficult to identify with as victim or an injured party when they perceive no crime to be committed against them, therefore no legal response is perceived to be required. In this regard, officers in the present study focused on what Katz (2016) refers to as the “physical incident model”, which is problematic as it does not account for non-physical forms for violence that are a common feature in domestic violence homes, impacting on the lives of children.

The child is invisible through a criminal justice approach when an officer observes there to be no ‘criminal element’. However, all of the police officers in the present study were



aware of their statutory duty to notify the Child and Family Service of children at risk.<sup>45</sup> Once a referral is made to social work, who are considered a more appropriate service to assess and respond to children's needs, then the 'job' when it comes to children is essentially done, as two police participants explain:

*"At the end of the day the guard's role is criminal investigation, we are not the social workers." (Officer 1)*

*"Our job is really quite simple in that we go, we deal with the situation, we deal with him, we refer the kids... it's not that the guards don't have any feeling for the kids but you can only do so much... and the best thing you can do is make sure that it's flagged and that people, who I suppose are most expert are there to deal with it." (Officer 14)*

Concurring with Balenovich et al. (2008), findings here suggest that officers tend to focus on the "legalistic issues" (p. 25) when responding to domestic violence, thereby focusing on the criminal investigative role. There is quite a definitive line drawn by police who take this approach, between the police role and a welfare role that is best served by social work. The emotive and chaotic situation that often surrounds the police arrival to a home for domestic violence related issues, can position the needs of children somewhere in the background of adult caregivers and police. It is argued here, that the construction of the 'invisible child' within this context begins therefore when police, responding to a domestic violence incident, do so within a narrow interpretation of not only domestic violence as an adult issue, but also of who is perceived to be an injured party at the scene.

There is a lack of status afforded to the child by police when they do not present as an obviously injured party. The child might appear to front-line officers to be unharmed by their experience of living in a domestic violence home when they do not present in a way that is fitting with normative constructs of injured 'victim'. Research evidence shows how children rarely present as physically injured when police respond to a domestic violence incident between two parents (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015). The

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<sup>45</sup> In accordance with Children First legislation, police in Ireland are mandated to send a notification to the Child and Family Agency when they suspect a child is at risk.

physical incident model that fits with traditional policing responses to domestic violence (Ballucci et al., 2017), and a legalistic approach (Balenovich et al., 2008), does not allow for the complexities and nuances that exist in domestic violence homes to be taken into account and the cumulative harm to children living in abusive and controlling home environment (Katz, 2016). Within this construct, the child is perceived as an object of the adult/parent relationship in which the violence takes place, and there is no appreciation of the child's lived experience as a subject in the domestic violence home. Furthermore, the 'objectified status' of the child allows no room conceptually "for children to assume any agency of their own" (James et al., 2004, p. 199). Within this setting the child continues to be viewed merely as what Peled (1998) described so many years back as 'collateral' damage, suggesting little has changed in the response by some police to children experiencing domestic violence.

## **Construct 2: The Passive Bystander**

Continuing with a dominant discourse of policing domestic violence that relies on evidence of physical injury, it became clear when speaking with officers in the present study, that they rely heavily on their sense of sight, looking for visible clues to identify the child as a victim. Children who are perceived to not outwardly display any such clues are constructed as passive or uninjured by the officer. However, what will be argued is that children's perceived passivity is in fact resignation used by the child as a coping strategy and evidence of the child's capacity for agency in the domestic violence home. Early studies in the field of children's experiences of domestic violence by authors such as Mullender et al. (2002) and McGee (2000), brought to light the active involvement of children in the domestic violence home, challenging any notions once held of the child as a passive bystander. The term passive bystander is used in this study to represent a construct of the child at the police response to domestic violence, who is perceived as showing no emotion and is understood more as an observer than an active participant in the domestic violence home. In agreement with Naughton et al. (2015), who found that abused mothers did not fit with family courtroom judges' expectation of the stereotype of an abused passive victim, children too do not always present as an obvious victim or injured party to police when they respond. In this section, processes leading to the construction of the child as 'passive bystander' are examined. This section ends by exploring this process of resignation further and how it might also apply to police officers when they become desensitised to domestic violence incidents, thereby impacting on how they conceptualise and respond to children at the scene.

### **Visual clues**

In the present study, children at a domestic violence incident were described by police officers in terms of how 'upset' they presented at an incident, often using visual clues as a marker in the officers assessment of the child's level of need:

*"I remember seeing a young lad standing at the top of the stairs and he was visibly, visibly upset... he was crying." (Officer 10)*

The officer in this quote is using the young boy's tears as a visible clue of his distress at the scene, which was followed by the officer speaking directly to the child and responding in a child-centred way. However, when a child displayed no visible clue such as crying, then police appeared to find it more difficult to recognise the child's need for emotional support. This finding echoes reports from police in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) study who did not recognise the child as a victim at the scene unless they were directly injured. In the next quote, an officer recalls responding to a serious domestic violence incident where three young children and their mother had to be brought in the squad car to a refuge for safety. The officer describes being unaware of the children's level of upset until noticing after, that two of the children had soiled themselves in the back of the police car:

*"We actually never realised till we were coming back, the kids sat in the back of the car... it was only when we were going back we realised , not one but two of the three kids actually had wee'd themselves in the back of the car, they were so disrupted." (Officer 3)*

Therefore, it was only after the officer saw a visible clue that they realised the impact that the police response and events, which had taken, place in the home had on the children. When the child is perceived to display little to no emotional response by police arrival in the home, the child is viewed as a 'passive bystander'. Children may visibly appear to not be impacted by the violence, however, there may be more non-verbal clues that police are not attuned to, involving a rather complex set of strategies that the child is engaging in to cope with their experiences of living with domestic violence.

***“Like she was watching it on EastEnders”: The child’s perceived immunity to the violence***

Children living with domestic violence can also be exposed to parental drug and alcohol misuse, poor mental health, poverty and criminality in families (D Finkelhor et al., 2011). In the present study, police participants and practitioners agreed that children experiencing domestic violence were almost always exposed to other adversities in the home. As described in the previous chapter, several of the officers recalled responding to the same families on multiple occasions for domestic violence as well as criminal matters involving alleged crimes committed by family members. Ann, a mother of three, recalled in her interview how the police response became “second nature” to her teenage children, who had witnessed them responding to an incident of domestic violence on so many occasions throughout their lives. The over exposure to seeing the police in the home for some children, is described by this officer in the following quote:

*“You see this wouldn’t be the first call the guards have arrived at, it wouldn’t be the first time for me to go into the house, they [children] kind of get used to you and they get used to other guards calling to the house because it’s very rare that it’s just a one off incident.”*  
(Officer 2)

The police officer in this quote is showing an awareness that domestic violence is more often than not an isolated incident, supporting the view that children living with domestic violence will have endured much more than they perhaps are understood to be aware of by parents and police. The portrayal alluded to here of the child as ‘used to it’, implies a certain level of normalcy associated with the event for both the child and the officer. Indeed, continuing with the construction of the child in this way, several of the police participants in the present study, spoke of children’s perceived ‘immunity’ to the violence and abuse when they responded to an incident. Phrases such as ‘used to it’ and ‘normal’ were often used by police officers in interviews when describing the perceived lack of emotional response by children at a domestic violence incident. For some police participants, children appeared to be showing no visible signs of upset by their arrival to the house or by what was happening around them, as these officers describe:

*“All the kids were just, I mean they were just sitting on the sofa, just watching television, normal, there was no, it was just like a normal day, mother and father screaming at each other.” (Officer 4)*

*“They [children] weren’t traumatised they were just and weren’t even, they just, it [father assaulting mother] happened.” (Officer 11)*

A clear example of this was provided by one police participant who recalled attending a serious assault against a mother perpetrated by her male partner. Officer 11 described how the couples’ teenage daughter was “in the middle of it”, watching the police have to forcefully remove and arrest her father at the scene. The teenagers’ response to seeing the events taking place was compared by the officer to her “watching it on EastEnders”. The perceived passivity of the young person is suggested here by the analogy of her watching this traumatic event in her own life as something happening in a soap opera from which she is far removed and a mere observer of. When asked during the interview about the emotional state of the teenager, the officer responded by saying that she did not display any visible signs of being upset, instead appearing to be immune:

*“No she was completely immune to it, she was completely immune to it, she wasn’t upset.” (Officer 11)*

Whilst this was a common view held by many of the officers, there was also some distinction made in terms of the age of children and how they presented during a police call-out. There was a sense held by officers in this study that younger children would react differently to witnessing their father being forcefully arrested. Some of the officers gave examples of children crying out ‘please don’t take my daddy’ and being ‘traumatised’ by seeing their father removed by police during an incident. The difference in children’s reaction may be explained by younger children’s difficulty in attributing blame and responsibility to either parent (Peled, 1998). As discussed in earlier chapters, there was evidence of the younger children who took part in this study showing some reluctance to place the blame on either parent in their narrative when they remained neutral in their story-telling.

This can perhaps be explained by a process of resignation that occurs over time when the child grows more familiar with such scenes in the home and loses hope that police or anyone else can do anything to stop the violence. This finding supports Katz (2016) assertion that observing children's experiences of domestic violence through a physical incident model, does not account for the impact that living in an environment of coercive control has on the child. Indeed, it is the cumulative impact on children that poses a greater risk to them in the short and long term (Artz et al., 2014). Katz (2016) maintains that children act with purpose in the domestically violent home. Supporting Katz's view, like children's active role in making themselves invisible through hiding, the child can also demonstrate a level of agency by using passivity as a purposeful strategy of survival in the domestic violence home. This will be examined in more detail in the next section.

### ***A process of resignation: purposeful passivity***

Building on findings from Ornduff and Monahan (1999) on children's emotional disengagement as a coping strategy in the domestic violence home, this next section examines how a process of resignation might be used to explain the lack of emotional response by children that police described. There is some evidence within the existing literature (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2000; Överlien, 2017), of resignation being used by children experiencing domestic violence as a coping strategy. Resignation, more commonly used by teenagers, occurs over time when the child grows more familiar with such scenes in the home and loses hope that police or anyone else can do anything to stop the violence (Cunningham & Baker, 2007).

As the violence and abuse becomes an everyday part of the child's life, they may engage in such a process which involves them actively resigning. When it has reached this point, practitioner participants felt that children might not even consider phoning the police as the violence and abuse becomes so ingrained in everyday life, that there is no purpose in phoning the police unless it is a life-threatening situation (Överlien, 2017). The child may have witnessed the police respond in the past but the violence and abuse continued (Øverlien & Aas, 2016).

However, by recognizing the child's capacity for agency in the domestic violence home, children's resignation can be viewed as a sign of resilience, as this practitioner suggests:

*“I think sometimes the behaviours are so normal, like the violence is so normal that it doesn’t faze, or especially kids who become quite resilient to it, then eventually they kind of see it as what normal is and what happens”. (HSCP5)*

Indeed, resignation may also be used as a coping strategy by the child to deal with complex emotions and feelings towards a father whom they love and fear simultaneously. Such emotions may be too overwhelming for a child, which can result in what the police then witness at the scene as ambivalence or passivity by the child who does not display obvious signs of upset. Purposeful passivity is perhaps a strategy employed by the child, if they have not been able to talk openly about their experiences of domestic violence, which this practitioner suggests:

*“It’s way too much to process so they are more likely to just get on with it, especially if it’s been normal from an early age.. it’s amazing what a child can live with.” (HSCP4)*

Resonating with children’s experiences elsewhere (Øverlien & Aas, 2016), the children’s narratives demonstrated an awareness of the limitation of police presence in ending the violence and abuse. Some of the children in the present study said that the police had called to the home of their characters before but that the violence had continued. If that same child grows up in a home where the police are called regularly and remove their father, only to see him return again and continue abusing their mother, then the police response for the older child, however still upsetting, becomes less of an event that triggers a visible emotional response (Hogan & O’Reilly, 2007). There was evidence of this in Mary’s (21) narrative when she described seeing the police come to her home throughout her childhood. Mary spoke of how as a young adult she would open the door to the police and bring them into the home, showing no visible signs of upset.

So, what the police are perceiving as a child who appears acculturated to an environment of violence and abuse, is in fact a victim whose experiences of living with domestic violence have been rendered invisible, and supports findings in the research

on children's use of resignation and disengagement as a coping strategy in the domestic violence home (Cunningham & Baker, 2007; DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2000; Ornduff & Monahan, 1999). The older child's perceived 'immunity' is on the contrary, the very opposite, as by that stage the effects of domestic violence have taken hold after living in a controlling and abusive environment throughout their childhood. The child learns to disengage, as practitioners suggested as a means of coping with the emotional trauma and often neglect that they experience, sometimes due to the unavailability of both parents to provide the emotional support they require and to acknowledge their experiences as victim (Swanston et al., 2014). The child's perceived passivity has the effect of positioning them as 'passive bystander', resulting in a police response that views the child as 'secondary' to the adult victim and perpetrator at the scene.

Purposeful passivity or resignation is observed here as an act of agency used by the child living with domestic violence, and supports findings in the above mentioned studies on children's resignation as a coping strategy. The term resignation implies that the child had something to begin with, which they have decided to give up. The 'giving up' or resignation in this case is an active process that the child engages in over-time. Indeed, drawing on the work of Callaghan, Fellin, Alexander, et al. (2017), children's resignation in this context could also be interpreted as a form of quiet resistance being used by the child. The process or action through which children resign, leads them to purposefully act passive, thus actively becoming the 'passive bystander'.

### ***Police immunity to dysfunction***

An interesting finding that runs concurrent almost to the child's perceived immunity to the violence and abuse, was how police officers may also become less emotionally responsive to this aspect of police work. The police participants in this study could be seen to almost become desensitised to the dysfunctionality that can exist in families where domestic violence is but one of many social issues that children are exposed to in that home. One police participant in the next quote, explains how officers themselves can become desensitised to the level of chaos they encounter when entering people's homes:

*"Some of the houses you go into, dysfunctional is not the word... you nearly get immune to it after a while." (Officer 3)*



The officer in the previous quote is using an Irish way of saying that referring to the house as “dysfunctional” is not an adequate enough word to use and portrays the often chaotic environments that police find themselves in. This is consistent with P. Williams (2016) findings on police officers becoming ‘hardened’ to the job over time, an aspect of policing culture that is required of officers who see and deal with serious traumas in people’s lives. In a similar way, family members too, may come to regard the violence and abuse as a part of daily life, something which the children in Hogan and O’Reilly (2007) study spoke about in their narratives of growing up with domestic violence. However, listening to and witnessing a parent or care-giver being abused is still a traumatic experience for a child, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The process of normalising the violence and becoming desensitised may be a strategy to cope with something that they learn has no quick solution, particularly when they have witnessed the police respond to multiple incidents and yet the violence continues. The children in the present study showed an awareness in their narratives of the limited power of the police to stop the violence. The child, therefore sensing that nothing can be done by even the law to stop the abuse, may find it easier to just accept it as part of their life. Thus, the child victim of domestic violence does not always present as an obvious victim to police when they have limited understanding of the impact of domestic violence on children. The crying child at the scene who shows signs of physical injury or makes a direct allegation of abuse, fits closer to normative constructions of a victim of child abuse, and triggers an immediate response from police to investigate further as there is a more tangible crime committed. Thus, the child as ‘passive bystander’ in this study is situated similar to what Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) found; on the ‘side-lines’ of the police response.

### **Construct 3: The Vulnerable Innocent**

Having explored the ways in which the child may be constructed as the ‘invisible child’ and ‘passive bystander’, the next section examines the construct of the child as ‘vulnerable innocent’. In this way, the conception of the child experiencing domestic violence is grounded in a welfarist discourse that positions children as dependent and vulnerable, thus requiring the protection of adults (James et al., 2004). Adults are presumed to act and make decisions which are in the best interest of the child. Normative conceptions of what an ideal childhood is (free from responsibility and decision making), influence adult decision-making on whether children should be listened to and included in the police response (James et al., 2004). The approach

taken is paternalistic and continues to situate the child separate to the adults' experience of domestic violence. The child is 'innocent' in the sense that they are perceived as holding no blame for the violence that is occurring in the home, yet are indirectly impacted by their mothers victimisation. The protection of the 'innocent' is done through a process of covering up and collusion between adults by not talking to the child about what is happening in the home. Similar to the two previous constructs presented in this chapter, the 'vulnerable innocent' is not recognised as having agency and continues to be perceived as a passive subject. The conceptualising of children in this way was evident throughout the research findings and will now be examined in some depth before concluding this chapter by presenting the construct of the child as 'involved actor', which this thesis argues is the most encompassing of the child living with domestic violence.

### ***Protecting the innocent: hiding the truth***

Police officers may choose not to say too much to children at a domestic violence incident as a way of protecting them, particularly when there is uncertainty around whether an arrest will be made (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). In the present study, a common theme to emerge from interviews with police participants was the need to protect children from 'seeing' or 'knowing' what was happening at a domestic violence incident between the police and adults involved in the abuse. For some officers in the study, this was done by hiding the true nature of the police presence from children at the scene. Several police participants, whilst being very child-centred in many ways, and showing a good understanding of the negative impact that domestic violence has on children, still felt that they were in essence protecting the child by hiding the truth about why the police had been called to the home. An officer explains this in their practice response to children at a domestic violence incident:

*"I would tell lies that 'oh your mam and your dad are helping us with something downstairs', 'they said to go up and check on you'... you know this kind of lies... it's not fair letting them see what happens."  
(Officer 7)*

The officer is acting on the assumption that the child is not aware of the violence between their parents, however as previous chapters have shown, the child is more likely to be aware of much more than adults believe. The police officers "lies", which the child potentially also knows to be false, may lead children to question whether the

police can be trusted and serve to further marginalise the child from any formal professional response. The child's presumed innocence and vulnerability is factored into the decision whether to speak openly to them about the abuse, with the conclusion being for this officer that it is not 'fair' to involve the child. Other officers gave examples of this in their practice when they described telling children things like "everything's grand" or "we're just having a chat with your parents", both of which undermine the child's capacity to understand and make sense of what is happening when the police respond.

In the same way as the police made attempts to hide the true nature of their presence from children at a domestic violence incident, mothers may also try to cover up the abuse from their children as a way of protecting them. Consistent with findings from Nixon et al. (2017), hiding their experiences of abuse was used as a protective strategy by some of the mothers in the present study. In particular, Jane, a mother of two, used various strategies to hide from her children the fact that she had called the police on their father. In the next quote, Jane recounts an incident when the police responded to her home post-separation when she felt threatened by her children's father during access handover:

*"I spent a lot of time saying can we just speak quietly here, the children don't know I've called the guards, the children are in that room they have earphones on, but... it wasn't part of their (police) practice at all, the other thing he said was... "what do you want us to do, will we take your children down to meet their dad?" and I said "no I don't want that"... like the impact on my children to be escorted by the guards and also that their mum called the guards against their dad." (Jane, mother)*

Unlike families referred to in the previous chapter, where the police may be calling to the home regularly, Jane described her family as having no other dealing with the police. This meant that her children were less familiar with the police, so seeing them in the home she felt would mean that something was wrong. Consistent with findings from (M. Hester, 2006), involving the police was not a straight forward decision for Jane as it meant having to speak to her children about the reason why she had sought their help and implicate their father as an abuser, which she did not necessarily want to do.

Interestingly, children are often a key deciding factor in an abused mothers reason to call the police (Chang et al., 2010), but this is more so the case when children have been exposed to physical violence and the mother perceives them to be at risk (MacQueen & Norris, 2016).

Jane's attempt to hide the police response from her children, can be viewed as her attempt as a mother to protect the innocence of her children and shelter them from their father's true nature as an abusive man. In reference to Jane's earlier quote where she describes not wanting the children to be escorted by the guards, she wants to protect the children from the shame and stigma involved in the police being called to the home and having to be escorted by police to meet their father for access. Echoing Marianne Hester (2007) finding that mothers experienced difficulty talking to their children about an abusive father, Jane did not speak openly about her husband's abuse to her children. Because of the lack of physical violence against her, she perceived her children to be much less aware of her victimization. In Jane's interview, she later remarked that her own ability as a parent to make rational decisions was compromised when she herself was so 'immersed' in dealing with her ex-husband's abuse. In the next quote, Jane reflects on this and whether hiding the police response from the children was the right decision:

*“Do I have the skill as a mother to know how to help my children, I don't know. I have no idea what they've been through, how they've seen it, what's gone on, I have no idea. I now understand that while I think having the guards come in might have made them feel worse about the situation, maybe it would have made them feel better, I have no idea, maybe it would have made them feel someone's noticed.” (Jane, mother)*

This finding is in keeping with the literature where mothers often do not fully acknowledge the child's lived experience of the abuse until they are living away from the abuser (Swanston et al., 2014). Indeed, both parents may be so 'immersed', as Jane put it, in their own experiences of the abuse, that they are unaware of children's active involvement as victims of the violence and abuse too (Stanley, 2011).

### ***Compounding vulnerability***

A common course of action described by officers in the present study was to ask the mother to bring the children, if awake at the scene, upstairs or somewhere 'out of the way' from what is happening between the police and adults. This was viewed by officers as a measure to avoid causing distress to children by what they might 'see' during the response, as the following officer explains:

*“At the end of the day you need that child out in the back kitchen or upstairs or minimise the response that he’s going to see or she’s going to see.” (Officer 11)*

Approaches to empower children and recognise agency were undermined by techniques used by some officers that only further compounded children’s vulnerability. Sensing that children were being “ignored” at the scene, one officer gave an example of how they would get the children to do an activity in another room as a way of calming the child and distracting them from what was happening downstairs:

*“It relaxed them... they’d something to focus on and think about aside from what was going on in the home.” (Officer 9)*

Whilst the officer in this situation is recognising the child at the scene and wants to provide them with something that will put the child at ease, practitioners felt that children needed to be spoken to more directly by police about why they were there. Whilst practitioner participants agreed that it was important for children to be ‘removed’ from the situation when the police arrived, they also felt that police still had a role in speaking directly to the child and being transparent about what was happening:

*“I think it is better when, so if this is happening in the sitting room, that the children are brought to the kitchen and they’re not just distracted but things are explained to them... Don’t ever kind of push the child to the side or ignore that they are there or send them kind of somewhere else to be left with all these thoughts and ideas and not know what’s going on.” (HSCP5)*

Consistent with best practice guidelines (Baker et al., 2002; Berkman & Esserman, 2004; College of Policing, 2015), practitioner participants agreed that it was important to remove children from the scene when the police respond, by bringing them into another room, ideally with a safe adult to support them, and that the children should still be spoken to by police and explained in an age appropriate way what is happening. An activity might be used more effectively by police as a tool to build rapport with the child and speak to them in an age appropriate way about why the police have been called to the home and to reassure them of their safety. Responding in such a way is more reflective of the positive response from police that the children in this study and others have illustrated (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). By using the activity as a distraction technique alone, it continues to render the child victim of domestic violence as silent and although well-intended, it is dismissive of the child's experience and involvement in the domestic violence home. Interestingly, children may use distraction techniques such as listening to loud music or reading which Øverlien and Hydén (2009) refer to in the literature as an 'avoidant coping strategy'. There was some evidence in the present study of children using distraction techniques in their stories such as Joey's characters playing games. However, when adults use such techniques with children, it only further compounds the child's vulnerability.

### ***The untrustworthy witness***

Historically, the law does not treat the child as a reliable witness, owing to their presumed incompetence and capacity as child (King & Piper, 1995). Indeed, children's statements or allegation of abuse can come under additional scrutiny in assessing whether they are telling the truth or not (Hughes-Scholes, Powell, & Sharman, 2014). Nordham and Pritchard (2018) maintain that police have adapted investigative techniques to include speaking to older children separately from parents during domestic violence incidents as a way of getting closer to the truth. There was some evidence of this in the present study when participants spoke of children's increased vulnerability to being manipulated by an abuser, which in their eyes made the child an unreliable witness, thus demanding 'wariness', as this officer explains:

*"You have to be cautious because kids might not necessarily tell you the truth... I suppose it depends on the kids but I'd always be a little bit wary of what I'm being told." (Officer 4)*

Katz (2015) argues that we can acknowledge children's vulnerability to manipulation as we do adult victims of domestic violence, but we need to approach it by recognising children's capacity to also "resist such manipulation" (2015, p. 74), thereby viewing them as social agents with the ability to construct their own meaning. This conceptualises the child as weak and as being easily manipulated by the adult, who is expert. The focus therefore is on the adult as expert and the child becomes an untrustworthy witness.

In the children's narratives, only one child suggested in their story that the police might want to speak to the child as a witness to the events which took place between the parents. The purpose of the police checking on the characters in Conor's (7) story, was "to ask the children what happened". In this scenario the police officer values the child's perspective and is interested in hearing their version of events, acknowledging their presence at the scene. This finding is consistent with children's wish to be spoken to directly by police and for their experiences to be taken seriously (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, viewing the child as a 'witness' is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the official requirement for a specialist trained officer to interview a child whose evidence will be used in court, can prevent officers from speaking directly to the child for fear of negatively impacting a future case. Indeed, the need for a specialist interviewer was referred to by all of the police participants and seemed to create some ambiguity as to what level of communication could occur between the front-line officer and children at the scene. The fear of doing the wrong thing that might jeopardize a case was also found among police officers in the Øverlien and Aas (2016) study. The second issue with police viewing the child as witness is that it continues to operate within a criminal justice lens, as discussed previously in this chapter.

The child as witness in the context of a police call-out to domestic violence is not solely for the benefit of gathering evidence to build a case that is prosecutable. Communication with the child is with the purpose of acknowledging their experience as an individual and recognises that the child's perspective of events is as important and will be listened to for the purpose of validation and support. Finally, officers that view the child as witness must decide as the officer in the quote earlier suggested, whether the child's version is trustworthy. This decision will then impact on the child's sense of being taken seriously by officers which is associated with a positive police response (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

However, if it is done in a manner that values the child's perspective of events and listens to their concerns, responding to them as both credible witness and direct/indirect victims, then this begins to reflect a conceptualisation of children experiencing domestic violence that is more closely aligned with the 'involved actor'. Operating from a protectionist stance contradicts participatory approaches that involve children and support the child to have agency. Conceptualising the child as 'vulnerable innocent' compounds the 'invisible child' and 'passive bystander' approach. Although they are separate perceptions or constructions of the child experiencing domestic violence, they are actually quite interlinked as all three constructs see the child essentially as passive. Each one makes the presumption of incapacity as a starting point and therefore does not account for the capacity for agency.

#### **Construct 4: The Involved Actor**

Having already presented in this chapter three ways of conceptualising the child at the domestic violence scene as passive, the final construct observes children's capacity for agency. The construct of the child as 'involved actor', encompasses evidence of children's actions and decision-making and acknowledges them as a key actor capable of constructing their own meaning in their lived experience of domestic violence. In chapter five children were positioned as central in the domestic violence home through examples of children intervening in an incident to protect a parent and seeking help by phoning the police. In the post-separation period of a violent and abusive relationship, mothers have explained how children continue to be involved in the perpetrators patterns of abuse during access and contact arrangements. Children are much less passive than once conceived and are actively involved in the domestic violence home.

Echoing findings of Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al. (2017) on children's use of agency in how they disclose their experience of domestic violence, the children in the present study demonstrated agency firstly by the way they managed their own disclosures of abuse through the story-telling process. This was evident through children's decision making on how close to their own lived experience of abuse they would narrate their story as research participants. Children therefore engaged in a process of deciding what to disclose and what not to disclose as part of the story-telling. At the same time, the children constructed narratives that depicted children as 'involved actors' in the domestic violence home. The children who took part in this study therefore conceptualised the child who experiences the police response to domestic violence not as passive and weak, but as an active agent with capacity to construct meaning from



what is happening around them. Hence, the children were firstly demonstrating their agency through their individual story-telling and the way they managed their own level of sharing that was personal to them, and also by how they characterised the children in their stories as agentic social actors.

The act of hiding by children was discussed in Chapter Five. Children's use of hiding as a protective strategy resonates with findings by Callaghan and Alexander (2015), who also describe children's use of small spaces to hide as a way of feeling safe during a violent episode. This activity echoes Katz (2015) assertion that children take action 'purposefully' in the domestic violence home. Through their story-telling, although the children became out of sight and consciously hid when they heard the police car arriving, they also described the ways in which they employed different strategies to distract themselves and/or listen and find out what was happening between the adults and police. In addition, children demonstrated a capacity to tell the police what they needed to feel safe, once given an opportunity to do so. However, when the child is conceptualised in a way that fits closer to the previous three constructs presented in this chapter, then they are more often not given the opportunity to tell police how they can help them to both feel and stay safe. The child's presumed vulnerability thus renders them invisible at the scene by police.

### ***Adult recognition of children as social actors***

As described in chapter one of this thesis, there has in recent years been a repositioning of children in Irish society through the enactment of legislation affording children greater rights as citizens whose voice should be heard (Hayes, 2002). Indeed, there was evidence in the present study of adults' awareness of the conceptual shift from the passive silent child to active citizen and valued actor. The following quotes from a police participant and mother are illustrative of the changes that have taken place in children's visibility as they compare their own childhood experience of not having a voice:

*"When I was growing up we were always told 'you don't say anything'... like children weren't really listened to or respected in the sense that they should be now, you should listen to children, they're the future." (Officer 7)*

*“They (children) have a voice they should be heard.. because children for a long time were not listened to or heard and the same way women for years and years weren’t heard, they were listened to but they weren’t heard.” (Ann, mother)*

Fellin et al. (2017) maintain that when adults recognise children’s capacity for agency even through their victimisation of domestic violence, they can begin to respond more effectively to support the child. In the present study, while police participants to some extent were in agreement that children growing up in a home with violence and abuse were as such ‘vulnerable’, there were a smaller number of officers who recognised children’s ability to understand and make sense of their experiences of domestic violence. One officer in particular, demonstrated a clear awareness of children’s capacity to understand and pick up on subtle changes in their parents behaviour and emotions even when they have not directly witnessed an incident of violence, as the next quote shows:

*“It’s very hard to get stuff past kids... kids are very clued into even the emotions of the parents, they know from the way they’re behaving that something’s different or something’s after going on.” (Officer 8)*

There was a sense however that children’s capacity to understand was not fully regarded by adults as the following police officers illustrate:

*“I suppose we probably underestimate children sometimes, they’re very clever little creatures and they’re well able to understand from a certain age what’s going on.” (Officer 13)*

*“Kids have a voice, we should listen to them, they’re no fools.” (Officer 7)*

Many of the police participants when they spoke about children in the domestic violence home, referred to their age as a marker of the child’s capacity to understand or to be a reliable witness of an event. Police in the Richardson-Foster et al. (2012)

study also referred to the age of children in the home being a reason for not engaging with them; police were often more comfortable speaking to adolescents as opposed to younger children. Interestingly an officer in the current study remarked on younger children's ability to sense a police officer's discomfort in speaking to them.

*"They're [some police officers] uncomfortable with kids and if you think of a 4 or 5 year old, if you're uncomfortable talking to them, they know." (Officer 8)*

The child's ability to identify with the adults (parents and police) emotions and adapt to this, is symbolic of their position as 'involved actor' and further supports the relational aspect to children's agency in how they manage relationships in the domestic violence home (Callaghan, Fellin, Alexander, et al., 2017; Katz, 2015; Överlien, 2017).

Interestingly, the officers who recognised children's capacity to understand, did not always respond to children in a way that reflected this. Many of the same officers gave examples of not speaking openly to children about why the police had been called, therefore while they recognised children's capacity to understand, they did not afford children the opportunity to be acknowledged in this way. Although the quotes demonstrate a shift in how children and childhood is constructed, it does not correspond with approaches taken in practice with children. Tacit assumptions about children and the need to protect them from adult issues runs paradoxically to adult recognition of children as social actors. Without the knowledge on the best response to children at a domestic violence incident, police respond to children in a way that is perceived as 'normal' to talk to children by not exposing them to adult concerns.

### ***Acknowledging the child's lived experience of domestic violence***

Similar to findings elsewhere in this field (Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012), police participants working in more specialist areas of policing in child protection and domestic violence showed a greater understanding of the need for officers to speak directly to children at the scene. These officers were more likely to speak of the cumulative harm to children growing up in a domestic violence home:

*“I know a lot of guards are reluctant to speak to the children because they feel that they’re going to scare them more if they see all these guards bursting into their house, but I think it does help to kind of reassure them and just talk to them and make sure they’re okay, and I think it establishes maybe a point of contact that if they wanted to ever disclose anything or talk to somebody that they’ve talked to a guard before and it’s not that scary or hopefully not that scary.”*  
(Officer 6)

In the literature children report feeling left out of the police response and that their experience as victim is not recognised by police (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Aas, 2016; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Involving the child in the police response was considered key by practitioner participants to supporting the child in the domestic violence home as the following quote illustrates:

*“I suppose if they’re not acknowledged they’re not going to see themselves as important in the situation and they’re not going to see themselves as someone whose opinion needs to be taken into account. So, if they don’t feel like the guard wants to know about what happened then they’re not going to be forthcoming with talking to a guard and they are equally the victim along with mum.”* (HSCP4)

Responding to the child as ‘involved actor’ demands an honest approach from police who are willing to listen to children’s concerns and give them answers to their questions in a respectful and truthful way. Practitioners from both positions felt that children will develop a mistrust of the police if they are not truthful about what is happening and if an arrest has to be made.

*“Upset or not they (children) will ask questions and the thing is that you have to answer them... The answers have to be truthful.”* (Officer 10)

*“So really kind of... what’s happening what happened what’s happening now what’s going to happen... what’s going to happen when you return, why we’re here... there’s no point in lying to kids.”*  
(HSCP5)

The ability for officers to respond in such a way to children at a domestic violence incident is achievable and was clearly evident in the responses provided by one of the police participants who in fact modelled what best practice guidelines say about responding effectively to children at a domestic violence scene (Baker et al., 2002; Berkman & Esserman, 2004; College of Policing, 2015). This officer provided examples of sitting with children at their eye level and addressing any of their concerns in a child friendly way that took account of the seriousness of the event for the child. When an arrest had to be made, the officer made sure to explain to the child where they were taking their father and why action was being taken.<sup>46</sup>

Evidence of police responding to the child as ‘involved actor’ was also provided by Karen, mother of three, who explained how the police looking after her case post-separation, had worked alongside her in supporting the children to feel safe. This involved the police arranging to call to the family home to meet specifically with the children and reassure them of their safety and what to expect from officers if an incident arises and police have to arrest their father. In the following quote Karen recalls why she felt this was a positive approach taken by the police:

*“I think that they [children] did really get security from it, he treated them like adults, like even though (youngest child) was only 11, he didn’t baby anything down... he was realistic about it... the Garda actually said “I know your dad’s putting on a front of being charming and I know he’s not”, so it just gave them belief that somebody believes them.”* (Karen, mother)

Karen went on to describe the subtle changes that she had observed in the children’s behaviour after the police had spoken with them. She regarded the validation offered by police as helping build the children’s confidence and their ability to “walk taller” in knowing that somebody believed them and was taking their experience seriously.

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<sup>46</sup> The full quote from the officer can be found in Chapter Five.

Safety planning with children was mentioned briefly in chapter five and is raised again here as it is relevant in a discussion on children's perceived capacity and agency. Mullender et al. (2002) found that children will more often want to feel like they are doing something to protect their parent and that safety planning with children should recognize that they are capable of making calculated decisions on what is the best course of action to take. This view is supported by Stanley (2011), who refers to children's own development of personal safety plans which they sometimes do instinctively, which should be recognized and supported. Indeed, moving forward and responding to children requires adults to move conceptually from treating children in domestic violence homes as vulnerable and passive to social actors with agency. However, in the current study, there was some contention in how the construction of the agentic child in the domestic violence home was responded to in practice, in terms of how involved they should be in safety planning. There was concern raised by some practitioners whether particularly young children should feel responsible for their own safety and that of family members. Some practitioners felt that if the child's efforts failed to keep a loved one safe that this could have an even greater negative impact on them emotionally. There was also a sense that the adults should be held with the responsibility when it came to the child's safety which was more in line once again with protecting an 'ideal' childhood, one that is free from responsibility (James et al., 2004).

*"When we're talking and safety planning with children around ringing the Gardaí, it is a tricky balance, because you clearly don't want the message being that they're responsible for getting help." (HSCP12)*

However, this tension can be managed as one practitioner argued, by involving children in the safety planning and asking them directly what feels appropriate for them. The response below from practitioners recognizes children's agency and capacity for decision making in the domestic violence home and the need for them to be included:

*"I'm not saying they [children] should have any responsibility but give them a role in it, let them have a bit of ownership over it. They've no control over the adults, they barely have control over their lives so why wouldn't you let them be a part of something that hopefully will keep them safe." (HSCP5)*

*“There’s a piece there for children to be allowed, be allowed to have ownership over what’s going to keep them safe.” (HSCP19)*

## **Chapter summary**

Positioned against the backdrop of research and practice interest on childhood and children’s experiences, and reflective of the core ethos of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), this thesis reflects a construction of childhood that appreciates children as competent social actors (Emond, 2008), whose thoughts and opinions are worthy of consideration (Bosisio, 2012). However, despite legal obligations under the UNCRC and an evolving consensus that recognises children as competent actors, this rhetoric has struggled to achieve translation into meaningful practice reality (Skjorten, 2013), as this chapter has demonstrated. Normative constructs of the weak and vulnerable child in need of adult protection dominate, and adults decide what is in the child’s best interest. This is seen through children being hidden by adults in the practice response to domestic violence. This poses the question then as to what hurdles children have to jump over to be seen as a victim by police at the scene? Will children’s positioning as victim in domestic violence policy result in greater inclusion of the child in the police response or does there need to be a reconceptualising of the child victim in order for change to occur? The four constructs of the child that have been presented in this chapter are not mutually exclusive, nor are they profession specific, rather they are positions taken at conceptualising and understanding children’s experiences. Even though there were examples of police to some extent ‘seeing’ the child as victim at the scene and their active involvement in the domestic violence home, they continue to respond to children in a way that fails to fully appreciate the child’s victim status and need for inclusion. One might say that with proper training or guidance to build officers skills and confidence there would be less reluctance by officers to engage with children at the scene, however there appears to be a greater disconnect than skills which training alone cannot provide. The final chapter in this doctoral research explores how the discourse on children as vulnerable continues to exist, preventing children from being seen and heard in both research and practice settings. The thesis argues for a greater connection between research, policy and practice that recognises children’s agency and can begin to develop a stronger evidence base to inform responses that best serve their needs.

## **Chapter Eight: Discussion and Conclusion – Moving Forward**

### **Introduction: Revisiting the Irish context**

Through a social constructionist lens, Ireland's history of child abuse and the legacy which has remained, is an important factor to consider when examining police perceptions of children experiencing domestic violence in Ireland. Chapter One applied McGregor's (2014) "history of the present" framework to situate this doctoral research firmly within an Irish context. A historical approach demonstrated how the silencing of women and children in Ireland through the use of strict institutional regimes and the failure of the State to intervene in allegations of abuse, provides the backdrop to a current welfarist discourse around children. A mandatory reporting system is one such tool, introduced by the State under the Children First Act 2015 to protect children in Ireland who are at risk and prevent past wrongdoings against children are not repeated. The once strong church-State bond that dominated Irish society has now been replaced by more secular views (Inglis, 2007). When it comes to children, the socio-political landscape of Ireland has vastly changed in recent decades, marking a growing awareness and a repositioning of children as important subjects and holders of rights (Hayes, 2002). Such developments as the Child and Family Agency, the introduction of an Ombudsman for children, and constitutional reform recognising the rights of the child, all contribute to a greater awareness of the needs of children in Ireland and their rights to participate in social and political spheres. However, such welcome developments reversely may also provide a context within which the child is the subject of increasing protection, with expanding restrictions being placed on their participation in various forms, by concerned adults. Throughout the undertaking of this doctoral research, this was evident by the many barriers that needed to be overcome to include children in this study, which still resulted in a small sample size of young children and the failure to include young people's voices. The introduction of mandatory reporting to Ireland and a growing protectionist ideology around children's welfare, contradicts in many ways, the aims of research that seeks to provide children and young people with a platform to be listened to and contribute to the development of an evidence base that may guide practice responses to them.

This final chapter begins by presenting an overview of the research process and the key findings from the study. It then moves on to examine the disconnect between how children are conceptualised in policy, research and practice settings, by focusing firstly on conceptions of the child victim of domestic violence in practice responses by police,



followed by a discussion on children's participation in research, which can create a robust evidence base to inform more inclusive policy and practice with children. Finally, the chapter provides a synthesis of the key findings and asserts some concluding comments.

### **Reflections on the research process and summary of findings**

This thesis sought to explore the child's experience of the police response to domestic violence in the context of a police call-out, by drawing on multiple perspectives including children and adult actors, in order to provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon. This was achieved by a qualitative case study methodology that used the individual and focus group interview as the main source of data collection involving a total of 60 participants, including children, mothers, police and a range of Health and Social Care practitioners. A vast amount of qualitative data was collected and analysed thematically to produce a contextually rich dataset. In this study, children were facilitated through a story-telling process, to share in an ethically safe manner, their views on the police response to a domestic violence incident from their own perspective. In line with a common discourse on children as active agents (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2015; Överlien, 2017) in the domestic violence literature, the children in this study demonstrated agency, not only in their capacity as story-tellers in how they managed personal disclosures (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al., 2017; Evang & Øverlien, 2015), but also by how they illustrated their characters as strategic decision-makers. Children are not just exposed to domestic violence or passive witnesses of their mother's abuse, they are involved actors in the home who pick up on the subtle differences in their environment and the tension that is left in the aftermath of an incident. When the police respond to the home after a violent episode, the findings highlighted that the children may be out of sight, often having already gone to a safe place, usually somewhere upstairs in their bedroom where they can hide and block out the sounds of what is happening downstairs. This research found that the police arrival to the home is experienced as frightening for the child, with them raising questions such as are mummy or daddy hurt?; Is someone in trouble?; will they be arrested?

The children's strategy of 'staying out of sight' was found to be used alongside efforts to listen, positioning themselves on the stairs, behind doors or under the covers pretending to be asleep. When police make an effort to check on children and respond

in a way that lets the child know they are there to protect them and keep everyone safe, the children in this study reported that this can help to reassure the child and diminish some of their fear. The children in this research illustrated the importance for police to provide children with the opportunity to be seen and heard in their response. While children perceive the police arrival as a frightening experience, they also have the capacity to identify the police arrival as an authority figure who can take action to bring calm to the situation by removing the abusive parent and bringing them to a safe adult for comfort. However, for children who have seen the police respond on repeated previous occasions only for the violence to continue, they come to realise that the police arrival does not always mean an end to the violence which can leave the child feeling anxious and worried in the aftermath. When police respond therefore, they must do so in a supportive way that recognises both the children and adults in the home and understands the purpose of engaging with children at the scene, identifying them as injured party even when there are no visual clues to make their victim status obvious. Children in this study highlighted the need to be invited to engage with the police and to be allowed the opportunity to have their experience as victim validated by an authority figure.

In exploring children's experiences of the police response to domestic violence, this thesis adopted a wider stance than has yet to be taken elsewhere in the literature by considering what are the broader factors that might influence the child's experience. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework allowed for an exploration of the child in the context of their immediate and external environments. Findings demonstrated the interconnectedness between factors such as family, community, peers and cultural and political forces that all play a role at some level in the child's life. Cultural norms around the secrecy of domestic violence were seen to prevail. While domestic violence is a more prominent as a public policy issue than it once was, this study found that practices of not telling and keeping it a secret are still common in Irish society. Practitioners, in particular family support workers, spoke of how domestic violence does not always present as the main issue that families seek help for and that it can take time to help family members feel safe in breaking the silence of abuse. It is critical therefore, for the police in their response to domestic violence, to recognise that this is not the first incident and the children have potentially been living in an abusive environment for a number of years before the police have been called (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). A mothers help-seeking is closely intertwined with the child's ability to seek and receive the support they need to feel safe in the home, and the police, as an authority figure, bring with them in their response, an opportunity for the child to be

heard. Phoning the police is often only done in the context of a serious life threatening incident (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Mullender et al., 2002; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). It is at this point at which the violence has escalated that police are entering the lives of children who have more likely lived with the secrecy of domestic violence for years without any formal support. The hidden nature of domestic violence and the shame and stigma attached to living in a violent home is often enough for families to not report, but it is at the point of desperation when a child makes the decision to phone the police for help.

Purposeful and meaningful engagement between police and children at the scene is therefore considered key. The purpose of this engagement is twofold – firstly as a safety and welfare concern to check on the physical and emotional state of the child, which by doing so can also help to shift children's perception of the police as a threat, to a point of safety. At a systemic level, positive police engagement with children at the scene can position the police as a source of safety and not a threat, addressing any negative perceptions that the child may have towards the police role in society. This gesture also importantly demonstrates to the child that they have been 'seen' and included in the response by police who recognise that they are also impacted by their experiences of living with domestic violence. Secondly, this study asserts that it is not just the immediate response that is important to the child, but equally the life-long impact on children who grow up thinking that violence and abuse in intimate relationships is normal and is something that the police are unable to stop. The findings of this study therefore conclude that the purpose of engagement by police therefore presents an opportunity for an authority figure and an arm of the law, to send a clear message to the child that violence in any form is unacceptable and has consequences. If they are ignored and responded to in ways mentioned in the previous chapter that conceptualise the child as passive and/or vulnerable, this fails to acknowledge them as involved actors, and subsequently the secret remains hidden or at the very least, the child's experience does. By responding to children in a way that is more closely aligned to conceptualising the child as involved actor in the domestic violence home, it potentially can interrupt a process of resignation for the child who comes to accept a certain level of violence and abuse as normal in their everyday childhood (DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011; Donaldson et al., 2000)

The conceptualisation of children as involved actor put forth in this thesis, understands the child's actions as strengths as opposed to a deficit perspective, which is more closely aligned to a vulnerable child discourse mentioned earlier. The findings in this

study thus recognise children as active agents in the domestic violence home and are firmly grounded in theoretical understandings of children and childhood aligned with a social constructionist lens and the 'new' sociology of childhood from which such conceptions have emerged (James & Prout, 1997). The remainder of the chapter draws on the main findings of this study to offer a final discussion on how to move forward by including children in the police response to domestic violence, but highlights some key tensions that need to be addressed in the reconceptualising, recognising and responding to children before this can effectively happen and children are fully seen and heard in research, policy and practice.

### **Reconceptualising the child 'victim' of domestic violence**

The shift in thinking that has occurred in response to a children's rights discourse emanating from the UNCRC, as well as new sociological understandings of children and childhood that position them as social actors as opposed to passive objects, has not fully been translated into research and practice settings. James et al. (2004) discuss what appears to be a disconnect between policy and legislation on children's right to have a voice and how that is achieved in practice. Normative constructions of an ideal childhood, perceived in terms of the lack of responsibility that is afforded to the child, are somewhat in tension they argue, with the child's right to have a say in matters effecting their lives. This is discussed in the context of children's voices being heard in family law proceedings, where James et al. (2004) found that practitioners often used developmental markers such as age of the child and their own childhood experience as a benchmark when deciding what was in the child's best interests. This resulted in practitioners not recognising the child's capacity for agency in that situation and the child's wishes not fully being heard by the courts. Indeed, the same can be found in this study, when police failed to acknowledge the domestic violence with children by deciding that it was in the child's best interests to not talk openly about the reason why the police were in the home, protecting their innocence by hiding the truth from them. However, children are already in the adult space, thinking and acting and responding to the events in the home with purpose and agency (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2016; Överlien, 2017).

In agreement with Callaghan, Alexander, et al. (2016a), this study has found that the construction of the 'vulnerable' child in domestic violence discourse is problematic as it does not account for children's agency, and can lead to a protectionist approach that limits the child's involvement in research and practice settings. Houghton (2018)

asserts that children are perceived as vulnerable, firstly because of their status as child, but that this vulnerability is compounded further when they are a child who has experienced domestic violence. Over the last twenty years, an increasing bank of empirical research incorporating the lived experiences of children who have grown up with domestic violence, has helped to raise their status within the domestic violence debate (Stanley, 2011). Children are now positioned within the debate as less peripheral and more centre stage. However, the dominant discourse that Saunders (1995) referred to so many years back when writing about children's experiences of domestic violence that "it is better not to discuss upsetting events with children" (p. 1) continues to prevail.

Burnham (2018) speaks to the need for the invisible to become voiced whereby a process of relational dialogue begins to open up new ways of connecting with clients in a therapeutic setting and allows for the reconstructing and broadening out of the narrative of the lived experience. This is applicable in the context of all dialogic interaction between individuals and is useful here in discussing the silencing of children in their experience of domestic violence. In the current study, it was found that children's presumed vulnerability was instrumental in adult attempts at hiding the truth from them about the reason for the police calling to the home. The assumption of children's incapacity or ability as a child to be meaningfully included in the police response, sometimes prevented police from speaking openly to children about why they had been called to the home. Police chose therefore to avoid 'voicing' or 'naming' the issue of violence in the home to which the child is an equal victim of, if not more due to their dependency on their parents. This assumed or presumed vulnerability because of their status as 'child', creates an environment within which both police and parents underestimate the child's ability to understand, not just the punitive but also the welfare and safety role that police play as authority figures. The assumption made that the child at the scene will be scared by police if they go upstairs and talk to them, only adds further to the trauma of the incident, preventing the child being seen. This, according to Burnham (2018), renders the child invisible as their obvious experience of living with domestic violence is avoided being discussed and their presumed vulnerability silences them.

This type of response fails to recognise the child's agency and involvement as strategist in the home, keeping themselves and others safe. By analysing the data gathered in this study, as Överlien (2017) suggests from the perspective of children's actions and not just the emotional impact of living with domestic violence on children,

this moves the analysis to a place where children are viewed as *involved actor* as opposed to *passive victim*. By observing the actions of children, we begin to notice the complex strategies used by children in response to living in a home where the repercussions of physical and non-physical forms of violence permeate their everyday lives (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Katz, 2016; Överlien, 2017). In reflecting on children's presentation, particularly older children at a domestic violence incident, police in this study often referred to the lack of visible emotional response which they felt was incongruent with the highly emotive event taking place. For example; seeing the police enter your home and arrest your father for abusing your mother would not be construed as a normal everyday event in a child's life. However, some of the children and young people who the police had come across in policing domestic violence, appeared to them, to be what they described as "just used to it". This implies a sense from police that the children had become normalised to the violence and to seeing the police respond to their home. However in chapter seven, it was proposed that what the police were observing as a lack of emotional response by children, was a strategy of purposeful passivity that involved a process of resignation when the child had, over time, come to accept that little could be done to end the violence. In this way, being upset serves no purpose for the child and children instead find other, more useful strategies to deal with the emotional trauma, such as distracting themselves with music and games or, as the children in this study illustrated, by staying out of sight but watchful and listening behind closed doors or at the top of the stairs. These responses by children challenge normative constructions of the child victim as crying and cowering in a corner somewhere in the home when police arrive. A process of resignation makes the child in this context, a less obvious victim to police as there are no visual clues to rely on in the identification of a crime being committed against them which would warrant a criminal justice response. Herein lies the crux of the issue – children's strategies to resist victimhood, which paradoxically may both intentionally and unintentionally lower their victim status, means that when police respond through a criminal justice lens, they fail to be identified as victim and are not included in the response in the same way as an adult victim is. There is a need therefore as Fellin et al. (2017) argue, for children's capacity for agency even through their victimisation to be recognised.

### **Recognising the child victim: Moving beyond a criminal justice lens**

There is a much greater awareness of the risk to children living in a domestically violent home and a recognition of the need for police vigilance regarding the potential danger

to children when they respond to a domestic violence incident. Indeed, the result of this can be seen in increased levels of reporting by police to social services of children found to be living in a home where domestic violence and abuse is a feature (Stanley et al., 2011). This was also found in the present study by social work practitioners who referred to the vast majority of referrals made to them by police, relating to children known to be living with domestic violence. Indeed, all of the police participants were well informed of their duties in this regard, in accordance with national guidelines and legislation on the reporting of children at risk. While such progress is welcomed and in many ways is evidence that children are being regarded as in need of a response, the role of police often stops here unless a child has been physically injured, makes an allegation of child abuse, or is considered to be a direct witness to the incident which police have responded to, all of which require a formal criminal investigation by police. However, based on findings from existing research in this area, the majority of children that are present at a domestic violence incident when police respond, are found to not have been physically harmed (D Finkelhor & Turner, 2015; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012).

This approach to policing domestic violence is recognised more along the lines of a traditional model of policing that focuses on the criminal and investigative role and does not reflect expanded definitions of domestic violence that identifies forms of non-physical violence (Ballucci et al., 2017). Police participants in the current study who demonstrated an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence, spoke of how a different approach was required if victims were to be effectively supported, beginning with police understanding their role in much broader terms:

*We have a responsibility that far exceeds just criminal investigations, and that's the reality. I think... that still needs to be borne out more that our role... especially with domestic abuse... has to be beyond more than just prosecution and going to court. (Officer 5)*

The officer in the last quote is challenging what Berkman and Esserman (2004) refer to as a “narrowly focused definition of the police role” (p. 6), which they argue is somewhat redundant if police are to respond effectively to the complexities of domestic violence. Balenovich et. al’s (2008) differentiation between roles assumed by officers in domestic violence cases demonstrates how the “strict enforcer” as it is referred to,

remains focused on the criminal aspect of the call and that this is still the most popular approach taken by police. They posit that what is required is a more fluid approach in the response that combines elements of the “strict enforcer” with the “service officer” to provide a more integrated response to victims that addresses both the legal needs but also the welfare needs by signposting to services and taking time to listen to victims at the scene rather than focusing solely on making an arrest (Balenovich et al., 2008).

In the present study, this need for a more integrated approach was recognised by some of the officers. Officer 5 described the “humanistic” and “holistic” approach that is required of officers if they are to take into account the complexities of domestic violence. A holistic response included an officer providing emotional support to victims and being available, even in a situation when a formal complaint is not being made. Interestingly, terms such as ‘holistic’ and ‘empathy’ were also used by some of the practitioners and mothers who took part in this study, when they spoke about how police could respond in a more supportive way to families experiencing domestic violence.

There is a need therefore as Katz (2016) argues, to look beyond the “physical incident model” of domestic violence by also recognising non-physical forms of violence, that is coercive control and the impact that this can have on all members of the family when they respond. The recognition of coercive control within domestic violence legislation now demands a more progressive approach to policing, that recognises patterns of abuse rather than simply responding to a single incident (Stark, 2012). A physical incident model of domestic violence means that children who have not been directly injured, fail to be conceived of as a victim and essentially fall through the gaps when thresholds of abuse are also too high for them to receive any formal social work intervention (Stanley et al., 2011). The emotional harm to the child living in a controlling and abusive environment is not recognised when there is no perceived immediate risk to the child. There is need therefore to look at the cumulative harm to victims, including children; and not solely responding to single incidents but understanding that there have been multiple incidents before police respond. This would then widen the police response to include children by recognising that they too are victims of the abuser and have a right to be acknowledged in that role, in the same way that police regard their role in responding to the adult victim.



## **Responding to the child victim: Connecting research, policy and practice**

Over the last number of years, the policing of domestic violence has been given much attention in the literature. New policy and practice procedures in the UK prioritise the delivery of a more victim-centred approach to domestic violence, and recognise the needs of children living in a domestic violence home (HMIC, 2014). Best practice mentioned in this thesis in the US and UK, give clearer direction to police in how to respond to children present (Berkman & Esserman, 2004; College of Policing, 2015). In the present study, adult participants suggested that training should inform police of the “life-long impact” of domestic violence on children. There was also a sense from some officers that basic training was needed to help familiarise officers with speaking with children and in some way demystify this aspect of the role for police who did not feel confident in doing so. Practitioners felt positively about the specialisation of police work, including a more strategic response to domestic violence that was taking place in Irish policing. However, one officer who had completed specialist training in domestic violence, mentioned that it did not specifically inform officers on how to deal with children in the home and remained centred on the adults involved. There is clearly a gap in officers’ knowledge therefore on what is the best approach to take with children who are present at a domestic violence incident. Officers in the present study showed a genuine concern for children in domestic violence homes, however were not fully confident on what the best approach to take with children is, often fearing as described in previous chapters that they will cause more harm to the child, and wanted to know what the correct response was.

Whilst specialist training in the area of domestic violence and child protection was regarded as an important step towards improving the police response to domestic violence, there was also a strong sense from participants that the personal attitude (Ballucci et al., 2017), as described in Chapter Six, of individual officers was as important. This was seen in examples of officers taking a special interest in certain cases and going above and beyond their main remit to support families experiencing domestic violence. Whilst training alone was not viewed as the answer to improving the response to children in domestic violence homes, it was attributed by some practitioners working in the field with improvements they had noticed over the last year or two when it came to police being more responsive to engaging with victims and taking domestic violence seriously.

Police in Ireland receive no formal guidance in policy on how to respond to children at an incident other than to report concerns of risk to the Child and Family Agency (An Garda Siochana, 2017). Indeed, Shannon's (2017) audit referred to in Chapter One found that the police in Ireland are generally very sensitive to the needs of children and make special efforts to ensure a child is not traumatised further by contact with police. However, the report also found that police in Ireland receive no formal training in child protection. When it comes to responding to children present at a domestic violence incident, communication between the officer and child is at the discretion of the individual officers, unless the child has been injured and makes an allegation of abuse or was a direct witness, in which case officers are guided to refer the case to a specialist interviewer (An Garda Siochana, 2017). There were some positive initiatives that police officers in this study described using in their local areas, which demonstrated a clear recognition of the needs of children living with domestic violence. It seems that the response that children get from an officer at the scene is often dependent on an officer's personal characteristics and attitude to the role. This can be down to the officer being a parent themselves or having done additional training in the area of domestic violence and/or child protection and shows a genuine interest in this area of policing. There is a gap therefore between research evidence and policy that can inform a practice response that is evidence based. Holt et., al (2018) contend that greater links between research, policy and practice is critical in creating effective responses to domestic violence. A knowledge base that reflects the current experiences of those experiencing domestic violence in the context within which the policy is being employed is paramount to addressing practice needs. The remainder of the discussion in this chapter therefore returns to the starting point to explore how children's voices can be captured in research that builds a scientific knowledge base which can be used to improve policy and provide greater guidance to those on the front-line.

### ***Hearing the child's voice in research and policy***

Edleson's article titled "Children's witnessing of domestic violence" published in the Journal of Interpersonal Violence in 1999 was one of the first to make recommendations for more first-hand accounts from children in research to broaden our understanding of the child's experience as separate to that of the mothers. Since then, a growing number of studies using qualitative methods, regularly cited in this study, have included children and young people as participants in research on the child's experience of domestic violence and the professional response to it (Buckley et

al., 2006; Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016b; DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011; Eriksson & Nasman, 2012; Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007; Katz, 2016; Øverlien, 2014; Radford et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2012). The inclusion of children in policy development has been more difficult to achieve but there are some positive examples of this happening elsewhere. In Scotland, a group of young people known as 'Voice Against Violence' (VAV) played a key role in informing domestic violence policy, positioning the voice of the child in the political sphere (Houghton, 2015). Voice Against Violence (VAV) successfully used their voice and agency to make a significant change to domestic violence practice and policy making in Scotland (Houghton, 2015; 2018). Policy makers, academics and service providers in the domestic violence arena would now more widely agree with the need to conduct more participatory research with children that includes larger samples that are more representative of both a refuge and a community population (Kimball, 2015). However, including children and young people in research particularly on sensitive subjects, as this study found, is not without its challenges.

Internationally, researchers sharing the same goal of including children's perspectives and voice in research, are faced with a similar set of challenges (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015b). There is a justifiable need for greater ethical concern when including children in research, especially when it comes to more sensitive topics and fears around re-traumatisation. However as Overlien (2010) suggests, risk may be outweighed when it is in the best interest of children that the research is conducted, and argues that "research not only needs children, but children need research" (2010, p.90). In addition, children may wish to participate for altruistic reasons in a desire to help their peers in similar situations but are not given the opportunity when adults decide in their best interests that doing so may put them at risk (Eriksson & Nasman, 2012). Research ethics committees represent the child's best interest however, as this study found can overshadow children's right to be heard when legal concerns over parental consent trump that of the child. Researchers must put forward a convincing argument to ethical boards outlining the contribution to knowledge that children can make versus the potential risk (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Morris et al., 2012). They are then faced with the challenge of finding a balance between respecting children's right to be heard whilst also ensuring no harm comes to them in doing so (Spratt, 2017), thereby fulfilling ethics committees demands which may in turn limit children's participation (Coyne, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009).

The recruitment of children to research is challenging when researchers as was the case of this study, must rely on relationships with gatekeepers to open the door to access. There is a tendency to err on the side of caution when it comes to children's participation, who are inherently considered to "inhabit risky spaces" (Farrell, 2005, p. 3). The perceived threat of harm that may come to children by adults in general, in line with a greater child protectionist discourse that has emerged in the last few decades, places more emphasis on the vulnerability of children as research participants (Farrell, 2005). The recent introduction of a mandatory reporting system to Ireland provides for a more risk-averse setting in which discourses around 'welfare' and 'protection' when it comes to children's participation, remain at the centre of the debate, whilst simultaneously provisions in policy are made for children's voices to be heard, which in practice do not always translate. Children are therefore protected in research by adult gatekeepers, under the assumption that the adult(s) acting in proxy (Coyne, 2010), holds the child's best interests at the forefront of their decision-making, particularly when it comes to practices around consent.

### ***Issues with parental consent***

Across European states there are variations in practices on ethical obligations and consent procedures for researchers seeking to engage with children in research (Cater & Overlien, 2014). Each country is guided by legal frameworks and ethical codes of conduct specific to that jurisdiction, often made at a local level by individual ethics committees and boards. The need for informed parental consent can diminish as young as 13 years, however in the majority of European countries, parental consent is required up to 16 years, after which the child may consent without written consent from a parent. Similar to a number of other jurisdictions, Ireland legally provides for a child over the age of 16 years to consent to medical treatment<sup>47</sup> without the consent of their parents, however there remains no provision for a 'mature minor' rule to be applied which might facilitate children's participation in all other research without the need for parental consent up to 18 years (Coyne, 2010). Ireland's conservative approach to children's consent procedures, when compared to other European states, has been slow to respond to changes elsewhere in Irish legislation that recognises the capacity and rights of the child separate to that of their parents. At the very least, it seems plausible that a child over 16 years would be allowed to consent to take part in research, if they wish to and once safe to do so, without the need for written parental consent (Coyne, 2010). However depending on the context, this may be considered to

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<sup>47</sup> The Non-Fatal Offences against the Person's Act 1997

undermine the parents authority (Morris et al., 2012), and create a tension between the child's right to "independent choice and the parents right to protect the interests of their child" (Spratt, p. 60).

The issue of parental consent for children's participation in research is located against a backdrop of a much broader discussion on children's capacity and agency. The voice of the child is referred to in national policy and frameworks for improving children's lives in Ireland (DCYA, 2014). However, it appears that how children are conceived as in policy has not caught up in research and practice when dominant discourses pertaining to children's vulnerability prevail and prevent children's inclusion. Adolescents in particular are constructed as responsible adults in certain legal settings, yet they continue to require in this jurisdiction, the consent of a parent to participate in research up until the age of 18, which can render them voiceless in research that informs the development of policy and practice that serves to address their needs. In the present study, it was the requirement imposed by the REC for written consent from both the mother and the father of children up to the age of 18 years to participate in research concerning their experiences of the police response to domestic violence, that left this group without a voice in the research.

There has been a call in recent years for children to be provided with the same victim status as adults in domestic violence policy and for the development of a more strategic response to children living with domestic violence by police and other professionals (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). However, at the same time challenges to conduct more participatory research with children on their experiences of domestic violence which can inform policy and practice responses, prevent any real progress being achieved in this regard (Houghton, 2015). Paradoxically, attempts in research to include children's views on how we can help to keep them safe, are curtailed by a risk-averse approach to their inclusion by adults who control the decision-making on the best interests of the child. Domestic violence is still largely conceived in policy and practice as an adult issue with the needs of children viewed merely as secondary to that of the adult victim (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a). Furthermore, a failure to recognise children's capacity for agency, and persisting notions of the 'vulnerable' child can limit their opportunities to be heard in research, rendering them voiceless (Callaghan, Fellin, Mavrou, et al., 2017).

## **Concluding comments**

This dissertation cannot claim to be truly child-centred or by any means participatory research with children. Children were not involved in the development of the research design or consulted formally. Frustration lay with the researcher and perhaps naivety around recruiting children. Although agencies voiced their support for the study and agreed that children's views should be listened to and used to inform more child centred responses to domestic violence, there was still a reluctance in practice to assist in achieving this goal. As an early career children's researcher I am content that at the very least this study was successful in capturing the voice of even a small number of younger children. The methods used allowed the child participants to elicit their views in a safe manner given the researcher was a stranger to them. On reflection, if conducting the study again a wider recruitment strategy would be employed earlier on to access more young people to the study and those over 18 years who do not require consent and could perhaps provide retrospective accounts. Findings from this study however could be used as a springboard for further researcher that is participatory in nature involving young people at a much earlier stage in the research design with the researcher taking on more of a facilitator role.

Despite such limitations, this thesis has responded to a significant gap in the empirical knowledge base providing new insights into the police response to children experiencing domestic violence in the context of the police call-out. While existing research has identified that police and child engagement at a domestic violence incident is nominal relative to children's involvement in the domestic violence home and their experience as victim, this study presents findings that help explain the variation in police response to children by exploring conceptually how children are understood as victims. This thesis has adopted a wider stance than has yet to be taken elsewhere in the literature by considering what are the broader factors that might influence the child's experience. Findings reveal how the child's experience does not occur in a vacuum; rather it is within the context of a wider set of actors and political forces that directly and indirectly impact on the individual child's understanding of their experience of domestic violence and police intervention to it. McGregor (2014) argues that "an attempted 'discursive shift' in itself will not result in the transformation of social and cultural attitudes, intellectual perspectives on the family and institutional and organisational practice or indeed politics" (p. 777). From policy, practice and research perspectives, there is a general consensus that eliciting the views of children and adolescents who experience living with domestic violence is a crucial step towards

responding most appropriately to their needs. However, for a variety of reasons, this rhetoric has struggled to achieve translation into meaningful practice reality.

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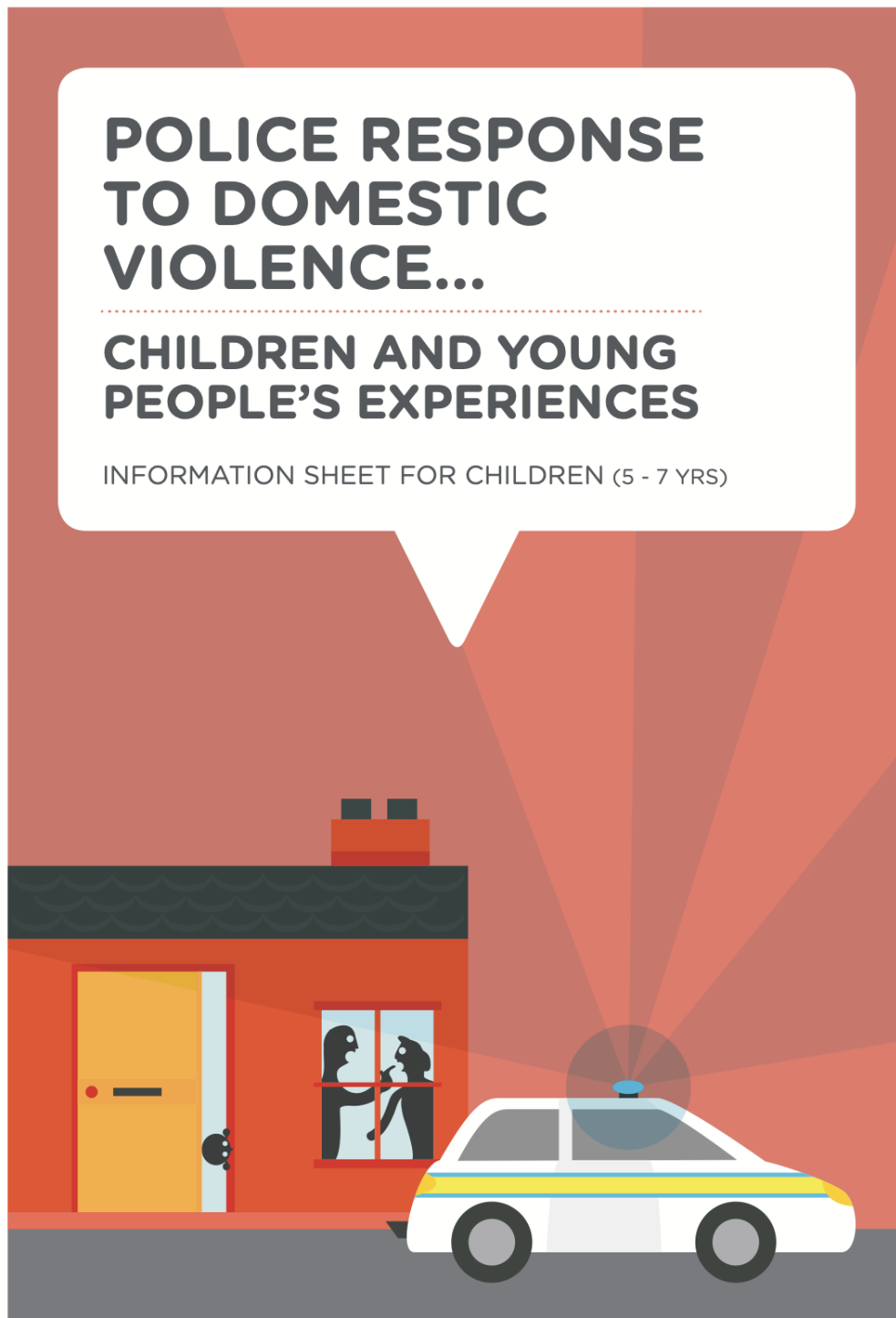
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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Children's Information Booklets



## WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?



This project is interested in learning more about what it's like for children and young people when An Garda Síochána call to their house when the grown-ups are arguing.

## WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Ruth and I am a student at Trinity College Dublin. I'm doing this project as part of my PhD studies.

## WHAT DOES TAKING PART MEAN?



I will ask you to answer some questions.



If it's okay with you I will either record us talking or take handwritten notes, your choice. This is so that I can remember everything you say.



Talking to me will take no longer than 30 minutes and we can take breaks whenever you like.



You can choose to have your support worker sit in the room while we talk.



You can choose to stop talking at any time and I won't mind.

## YOUR CHOICE!

If you decide not to take part, this is absolutely fine as it's your choice to decide and nobody will mind.

### Other important stuff for you to know about taking part!

- ! You can decide at any time to change your mind.
- ! I will write about some of the important things we talk about but you can choose a different name so nobody will know what you have said.
- ! I won't tell anybody else what we talk about unless you tell me something that makes me worry about your or someone else's safety, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. If this happens I will talk to you first before I tell anybody else.
- ! If you decide to have your support worker sit in then she will also hear everything that you say to me but just like me she won't tell anyone unless you say something that makes us worry about you or someone else but we will both talk to you first before we tell anyone else.
- ! I will give you a STOP and GO card so that you can decide when and when not to talk.
- ! You don't have to answer any question that you don't want to.
- ! Talking to me might bring back some sad memories and you might get upset. If this happens you can choose for us to take a break from talking or you might decide to stop completely and I will understand.
- ! Your support worker will check in with you after we talk to make sure you are okay.

A good thing about taking part could be that you can tell your story and this might help the grown-ups including An Garda Síochána to learn more about how they can help children to feel and stay safe at home.



## HOW DO I TAKE PART IN THE PROJECT?

Your parent/guardian has already said that it is okay for you to talk to me but taking part in the project is **your** choice! Take some time to think about it. If you say yes to taking part your support worker will arrange a time before the interview so that you can meet me in person and ask me any questions you might have about the project. If you decide then not to take part that's okay and I will understand. If you are still happy to take part, we will sign some forms and arrange a time the following week to meet again for the interview. But remember, you can still change your mind about taking part at any time.

## HOW TO CONTACT ME

You can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: elliffr@tcd.ie

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: sholt@tcd.ie

## SUPPORT

It can be really frightening and confusing when you see someone you love get hurt. It might help to talk to the person who was hurt or you can contact Childline and they will listen and believe whatever it is you have to say.

### **Childline**

Free phone 1800 66 66 66 open 24 hrs a day

### **Childline Online**

Open 10am - 4am everyday

[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie) and click on 'Chat to us'



# **POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR CHILDREN (8 - 12 YRS)



## WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?



This project is interested in learning more about what it's like for children and young people when An Garda Síochána call to their house when the grown-ups are arguing.

## WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Ruth and I am a student at Trinity College Dublin. I'm doing this project as part of my PhD studies.

## WHAT DOES TAKING PART MEAN?



I will ask you some questions about what it's like for children when An Garda Síochána call to their house when the grown-ups are arguing.



If it's okay with you I will either record us talking or take handwritten notes, your choice. This is so that I can remember everything you say.



We won't talk for any longer than 45 minutes and we can take as many breaks as you like.



You can choose to have your support worker sit in the room while we talk.



I will give you a STOP and GO card so that you can decide when and when not to talk.

## YOUR CHOICE!

Your parent/guardian has said that it's okay for you to talk to me but taking part is your choice! Have a think about it. You can talk to them or another grown up if you're unsure about anything on this information sheet. If you decide not to take part, this is absolutely fine as it's your choice to decide and nobody will mind.

### Other important stuff for you to know about taking part!

! Both your parent/guardian and you must give me permission for you to take part. You can both decide at any time to change your mind.

! I'll write about some of the important things we talk about, that other people will read but you can choose a different name so nobody will know what you have said.

! I won't tell anybody else what we talk about unless you tell me something that makes me worry about you or someone else's safety, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. If this happens I will talk to you first before I tell anybody else.

! If you decide to have your support worker sit in then they will also hear everything that you say to me but just like me they won't tell anyone unless you say something that makes us worry about you or someone else's safety, but we will both talk to you first before we tell anyone else.

! Talking to me might bring back some memories that make you feel sad and you might feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If this happens you can choose for us to take break from talking or you might decide to stop completely and I will understand.

! Your support worker will check in with you after we talk to make sure you are okay

A good thing about taking part could be that you can tell your story and this might help the grown-ups including An Garda Síochána to learn more about how they can help children to feel and stay safe at home.



## HOW DO I SAY YES TO TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT?

Your parent/guardian has already said that it is okay for you to talk to me but taking part in the project is **your** choice! Take some time to think about it. If you say yes to taking part your support worker will arrange a time before the interview so that you can meet me in person and ask me any questions you might have about the project. If you decide then not to take part that's okay and I will understand. If you are still happy to take part, we will sign some forms and arrange a time the following week to meet again for the interview. But remember, you can still change your mind about taking part at any time.

## HOW TO CONTACT ME

You can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: elliffr@tcd.ie

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: sholt@tcd.ie

## SUPPORT

It can be really frightening and confusing when you see someone you love get hurt. It might help to talk to the person who was hurt or you can contact Childline and they will listen and believe whatever it is you have to say.

### Childline

Free phone 1800 66 66 66 open 24 hrs a day

### Childline Online

Open 10am - 4am everyday

[www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie) and click on 'Chat to us'

# **POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUNG PERSON (18 - 21 YRS)



## WHAT IS THE PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

An Garda Síochána are very often the first professional to come in contact with a family who are experiencing domestic violence, perhaps due to a concerned neighbour calling them or a family member themselves who is frightened and does not feel safe in their home.

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with An Garda Síochána when they and their mother were at risk from domestic violence.

## WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

My name is Ruth, I am doing this research project as part of my PhD degree at Trinity College Dublin.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

I would like to invite you to an interview to talk to you about your views and experiences of contact with the Gardaí especially when you and your mum did not feel safe. I'm also interested in what you think could be done by the Gardaí to help children feel and stay safe at home.

The interview will take about one hour with breaks whenever you need one. If you feel at any point that you would prefer not to continue with the interview then that is okay. I won't mind and there will be no excuse necessary or negative impact for you by stopping. It really is **your** choice.

## IS WHAT I TELL YOU PRIVATE?

I will ask your permission to audio-tape the interview or I can take handwritten notes if you prefer. This allows me to give you my full attention during the interview and it also means I won't forget anything you have said to me which is important. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, this means that I won't tell anybody else what you say unless you tell me something that means you or someone else might get hurt, in which case I will have to act within Children First Guidelines and tell somebody else. But, if this does happen then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell.

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY INFORMATION?

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for my PhD. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

## WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART?

Talking with me might bring back some memories that make you feel sad and you might feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. This is okay and you do not have to share anything with me that you are not happy to. We can stop at any time and if you want to finish the interview we can do that too and I or anybody else won't mind.

A benefit to taking part could be that you have a chance to share your story. I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children and young people who have grown up in a home where there was domestic violence so that we can find better ways to support them to feel safe and stay safe.

## DO I HAVE A CHOICE?

Taking part is your choice! Take some time to think about what being involved might be like for you. You can decide at any time either before, during or after the interview if you are not comfortable and would rather not take part. This is absolutely fine. It's your choice to decide and nobody will mind.



## HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

If you are interested in taking part in the project or have any questions then you can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: elliffr@tcd.ie

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: sholt@tcd.ie

## SUPPORT

Growing up in a home where there is violence and abuse can be very frightening and confusing and those feelings can often stay with a person even after the abusive relationship has ended. Below is a list of useful contacts for young people who might need some support;

**Jigsaw**  
[www.headstrong.ie](http://www.headstrong.ie)

**Spunout**  
[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

**Samaritans**  
Free phone 116 123 (24 / 7)  
Email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)  
[www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie)



## Appendix B: Agency Information Pack

**POLICE RESPONSE  
TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE...**  
.....  
**CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

### AGENCY INFORMATION SHEET

This study seeks to explore children and young people's experiences of the response of An Garda Síochána to domestic violence. The study will involve interviews with children and young people (aged 5 - 21), mothers, health and social care professionals and members of An Garda Síochána in order to gather multiple perspectives and provide a richer understanding of the topic.

The following outlines important aspects of the project and the role of agency gatekeeper. The safety and well-being of all participants including both children and adults is paramount to the study and for this reason the gatekeeper role is an important part of the project in order to carry out recruitment in an ethical and safe manner.

#### **Children, young people & mothers**

As a gatekeeper, you will be asked to distribute information sheets on the study to children, young people and mothers who meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation in the study (a list of inclusion/exclusion criteria is attached). Once parental/guardian consent is in place for children and young people under 18 years of age, the gatekeeper will be asked to talk through the information sheets and the consent process with them and to act as a contact person between the young participant and the researcher until the day of the interview. This would include liaising between the participant and researcher around a suitable time and venue for the interview to take place and to be available to offer support on the day to the young participant if they wish to have a support worker present for the interview. For participants over 18 years the gatekeeper will be asked to simply distribute information sheets to those who meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria and they will then be asked to make contact with the researcher directly if they are interested in taking part in the project. With your permission, I would ask that interviews take place in a suitable room within your service.

#### **Health and social care professionals**

I am also interested in speaking with members of your support team. This will involve their participation in an individual interview or if it is deemed more appropriate to interview members of a team together we can conduct this through a focus group. The interviews will last between 60 and 90 minutes. During the interview I will ask practitioners about their own professional experience of working with children and families who have been impacted by domestic violence and explore the role of the Gardaí in responding to children who are present at a domestic violence call-out. As a gatekeeper I would ask that you distribute information booklets to members of your team whom you feel would have something to contribute to the topic. Those who are interested can then contact me directly to arrange an interview time and location that best suits them. If there are a number of people within a service who are interested in sharing their views then it might be more convenient to arrange a focus group during a lunch period where lunch will be provided by the researcher.

#### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is an important aspect of the project that will be discussed with all participants before beginning an interview. Any third party participating in the study must have Garda clearance and is required to maintain the confidentiality and follow up with disclosures in accordance with Tusla policy. The researcher will act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) and will report any concerns for a child's safety and well-being to the Child and Family Agency. All of the information that participants provide in a group or individual interview will be treated as confidential unless they disclose any information that causes concern for them or anyone else. Should this occur, I may need to talk to someone else. Prior to doing so, I will talk to the participant first.

Regarding anonymity, the source of individual commentary will not be identified in the final text. It is important to point out however that an individual may be recognised unintentionally in the text through opinion or experience. Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity of participants.

## Police response to domestic violence... Children and young people's experiences

### Inclusion/exclusion criteria (for gatekeepers)

*Participants under 18 years of age must meet the following inclusion / exclusion criteria to take part in the study;*

- a) No longer be living with the perpetrator of the violence and abuse.
- b) Be accessing on-going support from a domestic violence support worker, family support worker, social worker or other relevant professional for at least 12 months.
- c) Only children identified by a gatekeeper to have experienced a police call out to a domestic violence incident in their home will be included.
- d) Have an adequate level of English.
- e) Be in stable accommodation.<sup>1</sup>
- f) Be considered capable of providing informed consent and meet the criteria to participate in the project by a gatekeeper.
- g) In a situation where a father is a legal guardian of the child and his consent must be legally sought for the child to participate in the study, then the researcher will seek the advice of the gatekeeper. Where a gatekeeper identifies that it would not be in the best interests of a child to seek consent from their father to participate then the child will be excluded from the study.
- h) The length of time since the incident must be a minimum of 18 months for children and young people to be included. For children under the age of 7 the length of time will be shortened to 12 months to take account of their younger age at the time of incident and their ability to recall from memory.

*Participants over 18 years of age must meet the following inclusion / exclusion criteria to take part in the study;*

- a) No longer be living with the perpetrator of the violence and abuse.
- b) Be accessing on-going support from a domestic violence support worker, family support worker or social worker for at least 12 months.
- c) Have an adequate level of English.
- d) Be in stable accommodation.
- e) Be considered capable of providing informed consent and meet the criteria to participate in the project by a gatekeeper.
- f) The length of time since the incident must be a minimum of 18 months.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants must not be accessing emergency homeless accommodation including refuge but may be housed in a transitional setting that offers longer term stability and supports or currently residing in their own home.

# POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

### CONSENT FORM - AGENCY

I .....

voluntarily agree on behalf of the agency to help facilitate this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will assist by facilitating interviews to take place within the agency, distribution of information sheets and act as a liaison between participants under 18 years and the researcher providing support as needed.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to in this study.
- I understand that all data collected in this study is confidential and anonymous.
- I understand that any third party participating in the study must have Garda clearance and is required to maintain the confidentiality and follow up with disclosures in accordance with Tusla policy
- I understand that I am free to contact the researcher and supervisor to seek further clarification and information.

Lead Researcher: Ruth Elliffe  
Phone 086 406 4959  
Email: elliffr@tcd.ie

Supervisor: Stephanie Holt  
Phone 01 896 3908  
Email: sholt@tcd.ie

I believe the gatekeeper is giving informed consent on behalf of the agency to participate in the study.

Signed (Gatekeeper  
on behalf of the agency) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster for Young People

# HELP NEEDED!

## Research into children & young people's experiences of Garda involvement in domestic violence

My name is Ruth. I am a PhD student in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, and as part of my studies I am undertaking research on children and young people's experiences of Garda involvement in domestic violence.

I am interested in talking with young people, up to the age of 25, who have experience in the past of the Gardaí calling to their home because of domestic violence in their family.

Perhaps you work with a young person who grew up in a home where there was domestic violence and abuse?

Or you yourself have had contact with the Gardaí as a result of domestic violence in your family.

If this sounds like you, then I would love to hear your views and opinions on how the Gardaí can help children and young people who are growing up in a home where there is domestic violence feel safe and stay safe.

What could the Gardaí do that would be helpful?

What do they currently do that might be unhelpful?

This research has been given ethical approval from TCD, Tusla and An Garda Síochána.

I am hoping that the research will help us learn more about how the Gardaí can respond to children and young people growing up in a home where there is domestic violence.

## YOUR OPINION IS SO IMPORTANT!

If you think you might be interested in having your say then you can contact Ruth directly for more information on **0864 064 959** or email her at [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

The interview will take no longer than one hour, and will be **in the strictest confidence**. Young people who participate will be given a small token of appreciation for their time.

# **POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRACTITIONERS



## THE PROJECT

An Garda Síochána are very often the first professional to come in contact with a family who are experiencing domestic violence, perhaps due to a concerned neighbour calling them or a family member themselves who is frightened and does not feel safe in their home.

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with An Garda Síochána when they and their mother were at risk from domestic violence.

## THE RESEARCHER

My name is Ruth Elliffe. I am doing this research project as part of my PhD degree at Trinity College Dublin. I am a qualified social worker and currently work part-time in homeless services.

## WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- Mothers, children and young people aged 5 – 21 years who have had contact with the Gardaí as a result of domestic violence.
- Members of An Garda Síochána
- Family support workers, domestic violence support workers, social workers and any other practitioner who is involved in working with families experiencing domestic violence.

## WHAT IS INVOLVED?

### Individual interview

In the individual interview I will ask you some questions about your professional experience of working with children and families who have been impacted by domestic violence and your views as a practitioner on what the role of the Gardaí should be when responding to a domestic violence call-out where children are present.

### Focus Group

It may be more appropriate to hold a group interview if there are a number of professionals in the same agency that are interested in sharing their views on the topic.

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

I will ask your permission to audio-tape the interview or if you prefer I can take handwritten notes. This allows me to give you my full attention during the interview. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, however if you tell me something that indicates to me that you or someone else is at risk of harm then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell. Reporting obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to should concerns be raised for the safety of a child.

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?**

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for my PhD. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

This research supports the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the EU Victim's Rights Directive. Findings from the research will offer us a better understanding of the needs of children who are experiencing domestic violence and may be used to guide best practice in this growing area of professional response.

## **HOW TO CONTACT ME**

If you or a colleague would like to know more about the project, or have any questions, you can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse and needs support, the following services may be able to help;

### **Women's Aid Helpline**

For women experiencing domestic abuse.  
Freephone Helpline: 1800 341 900.  
[www.womensaid.ie](http://www.womensaid.ie)

### **Amen**

For men experiencing domestic abuse.  
Helpline: 046 9023 718.  
[www.amen.ie](http://www.amen.ie)

### **Túsla**

Child and Family Agency: support for children and their families. Phone: 01 771 8500.  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)



**POLICE RESPONSE  
TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE...**

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

**CONSENT FORM - PRACTITIONER**

I .....

agree to talk to Ruth Elliffe (PhD student, Trinity College Dublin) as part of the above named project.

- I have read the information sheet provided and consent form.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my participation in it.
- I understand that all information collected will be treated as confidential except in the case when someone is identified as being at risk of harm.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to in this study
- I understand that the data will be anonymised and may be used in other forms such as presentations, training workshops, lectures and written material without the need for any further consent.
- I understand the interview will be audio taped and transcribed for accuracy and no other purpose.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any time without reason or penalty.

Signed (Practitioner) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## **Appendix E: Practitioner Topic Guide**

### **Topic Guide – Health and Social Care Practitioners**

#### **1. Explore professional experience and understanding of the role of An Garda Síochána in responding to children present at a domestic violence incident**

- Tell me about your work with families experiencing domestic violence?
- Understanding of the role of An Garda Síochána in keeping children safe/domestic violence?
- What might be a helpful/unhelpful response from the Guards?
- Should Guards speak directly to children at a scene? Explore
- How do you think the Gardaí could offer support to children at a scene?
- What do you think children want from the Gardaí in this situation?
- Explore children calling police directly, what circumstances?
- What contact do you have with the Guards in your work with families?
- What could the Gardaí do to support you in your role?
- How could the Gardaí and professionals work together to support children who are experiencing domestic violence?
- If Garda commissioner was here now what do you think they would need to hear?

### **Practitioner Focus Group Topic Guide**

- a) Children living with domestic violence – what are their needs?
- b) The role of the Gardaí in responding to children found to be living in a home where there is domestic violence – what is it?
- c) What does a helpful response/unhelpful response from the Gardaí look like that supports children living with domestic violence?
- d) How can the response from An Garda Síochána help you in your role supporting children who have been impacted by domestic violence?
- e) How do you think practitioners such as the police, social workers, refuge workers, family support can work together with families to support children and young people experiencing domestic violence?

## Appendix F: Mother's Information Sheet & Consent Form

# POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

INFORMATION SHEET FOR MOTHERS



## WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?

An Garda Síochána are very often the first professional to come in contact with a family who are experiencing domestic violence, perhaps due to a concerned neighbour calling them or a family member themselves who is frightened and does not feel safe in their home.

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with An Garda Síochána when they and their mother were at risk from domestic violence.

As a mother who has experienced abuse at the hands of a partner, I want to hear from your point of view what it was like for your child or children when the Gardaí were called to the house after an incident.

## WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

I am doing this research project as part of my PhD degree at Trinity College Dublin.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

I would like to meet with you to talk about your views and experiences as a mother of contact with the Gardaí when they were called to your home in relation to domestic violence. I am also interested in what you think could be done by the Gardaí to help children feel and stay safe at home.

The interview will take about 1 hour with breaks whenever you need one. If you feel at any point that you would prefer not to continue with the interview then that is okay. I won't mind and there will be no excuse necessary or negative impact for you by stopping. It really is **your** choice.

## IS WHAT I TELL YOU PRIVATE?

I will ask your permission to audio-tape the interview or I can take hand-written notes if you prefer. This will allow me to give you my full attention during the interview and it also means that I won't forget anything you have said to me which is important. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off.

What we talk about during the interview is confidential, this means that I won't tell anybody else what you say unless you tell me something that means you or someone else is at immediate risk of harm. But, if this does happen then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell. If you tell me something that makes me worry about the safety of a child then I must act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011).

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?**

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for my PhD. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

## **POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART**

Talking with me might bring back memories of a difficult time in your life and you might feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. This is okay and you do not have to share anything with me that you are not happy to. We can stop at any time and if you want to finish the interview I will understand.

A benefit to taking part could be that you have a chance to talk about you and your child's contact with the Gardaí at a time when you both did not feel safe and to offer your own opinion. Overall, I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children who have been or are still exposed to domestic violence so that we can find better ways to support them to feel safe and stay safe.

## **YOUR CHOICE**

Taking part is your choice! Take some time to think about what being involved might be like for you. You can decide at any time either before, during or after the interview if you are not comfortable and would rather not take part. This is absolutely fine as it is your choice to decide and nobody will mind.

## HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

If you think you might be interested in taking part in the project or if you have any questions, you can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

### **Women's Aid Helpline**

For women experiencing domestic abuse, open 24/7.  
Freephone Helpline: 1800 341 900.  
[www.womensaid.ie](http://www.womensaid.ie)

### **Safe Ireland**

[www.safeireland.ie](http://www.safeireland.ie)

# POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

### CONSENT FORM - MOTHER

I .....

agree to talk to Ruth Elliffe (PhD student, Trinity College Dublin) as part of the above named project.

I understand that...

- Ruth is interested in learning more about how children experience the police response to domestic violence. She will ask me some questions about my own child(ren)'s experiences and my personal views on the topic.
- My participation is entirely voluntary. I am free to end the interview at any time and I do not have to answer any question I do not feel comfortable with.
- Ruth will record the interview on an audio-tape.
- The information gathered will be written up in a final report and may be later used for presentations, training and other written material. All information I give to Ruth will remain confidential and my name and other identifying information will be changed to protect my privacy.
- If Ruth is told something that indicates that a child might be in danger of harm, she may need to talk to somebody else about this. If this happens such information will be discussed with me before it is discussed with anybody else.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to in this study
- I can change my mind about participation in the project at any time without reason.

Signed (Mother) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## Appendix G: Mother Topic Guide

### Topic Guide – Mothers

#### 1. Previous experience/contact with police

- a) Prior to the incident what would your earlier experiences with the guards have been like?
- b) What kind of contact would you have with local Gardaí in your community?
- c) What kind of contact if any do your children have with Gardaí in community?

#### 2. Perception of Garda role with children

- a) What you think the Guards role is in keeping children safe?
- b) What would you consider a helpful/unhelpful response by the Guards to children at a domestic violence incident?
- c) How do you feel about the Garda speaking directly to children at an incident?

#### 3. Personal experience of Garda involvement in DV

- a) Can you tell me about a time when the Gardaí came to your house in relation to a domestic violence incident?
- b) Who phoned the Guards on that occasion?
- c) Where were your child(ren) at the time?
- d) What did the children do when the Gardaí arrived?
- e) If in the home can you tell me where in the house you remember them being?
- f) Can you talk me through what happened when the Gardaí arrived?
- g) Did the Gardaí ask about any children present? If so, how did they do this and why do you think they did this/ or why not?
- h) If so how did you feel about the officer checking on your child(ren)?
- i) Can you remember if the children were spoken to by the Guards?
- j) Do you think the Gardaí should ask the child what happened (version of events)? When should they do this? Where should they do this?
- k) What actions if any did the Gardaí take to ensure your child(ren) were safe?
- l) Which if any other services were involved?
- m) What was the follow-up by the Gardaí like?
- n) If your child was here what do you think they would say about the Garda response to that incident?



## Appendix H: Young Person 18-21 years Topic Guide

### Topic Guide – Young people (18-21yrs)

#### 1. Explore understanding of police role

- a) What do you think the role of the Gardaí is in keeping children safe?
- b) What do you think the role of the Gardaí is in responding to domestic violence where children are present?
- c) What do you think the role of the Gardaí is in supporting children who are living in a home where there is domestic violence?

#### 2. Explore personal experience

- a) Can you tell me about a time when the Gardaí called to your house after your parents were arguing?
- b) Where were you in the house?
- c) Tell me about the officer(s) who came?
- d) What was the outcome of that incident?
- e) How did you feel at the time? And after the Gardaí left?
- f) Could the Gardaí have done anything differently?
- g) Was there more than one occasion? How were they different?
- h) Have you ever called the Gardaí when you did not feel safe at home? Why/why not?

## Appendix I: Children's Vignette

### Vignette – Children (7-10yrs)<sup>48</sup>

Lucy is 7 and she lives with her little brother Tommy, he's 5 and her mum and dad. She has a pet (ask child to pick a pet for them). The other night things got crazy and the police came to Lucy's house after the grown-ups were arguing. She could see bright flashing lights and loud sirens (ask child to help make the sound effects) and then a police car parked up outside her house. Her little brother came running in to her room and got in to bed beside her. They could hear someone coming up the stairs and into the bedroom. Lucy peeped a look and saw a lady in a bright yellow jacket who she thinks was a police woman. Lucy and Tommy pretended to be asleep and stayed really quiet until they heard them go away but now Lucy is wondering if she should have told them she was scared.

#### Questions to explore:

- How do you think Lucy felt when she saw the police car outside her house?
- Why do you think Lucy and Tommy pretended to be asleep when the police woman came to the bedroom?
- What advice would you give Lucy?
- How do you think the police could help make Lucy and Tommy to feel safe? Is there anyone else that might be able to help?

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<sup>48</sup> This vignette was devised as a guide for the researcher which was only loosely applied as a research instrument. Instead the researcher took a more interactive approach whereby the story was co-constructed with the researcher and child allowing more space for the child to tell their own story.

## Appendix J: Transcript of Children's Interview

Child 7 – Female Tipp

Pseudonym: Grace

Age: 9 years old

Date: 17/06/17

Duration: 11.19 mins

RE = Researcher

G = Grace

Grace chooses the names Tom and Sophie for her characters who she says are 13 and 9 years old. She picks a house and pet cat from the selection of images to use in her story. I begin the story by saying that one day a police car arrives to the children's home after the parents have been arguing.

RE So they live in this lovely house and then one day, what time of the day do you want to say it is?

G 7pm

RE So it's 7pm in the evening and there's been some arguing downstairs with the grown-ups and there's been some fighting and some hurting then next minute Sophie and Emmanuelle hear the sirens of the police car

G mmmmm

RE The car comes and it drives up and it parks outside their house and there's flashing lights. What do you think they're feeling? Do you want to use the bear cards to tell me how they're feeling when they see the car outside

(Grace looks through the bear cards)

G em, they're scared

RE yeah

G em, they feel, what does this one?

RE I don't know?

G left out?

RE yeah maybe left out

G they feel sad

RE sad okay, so will we say, do you want to give one to each of them or they both feel both things?

G both

RE yeah yeah so they're feeling scared and sad okay why do you think they're feeling that when they see the Garda car?

G because they might think something bad might happen to one of their parents or the adults and they feel sad because, because the fighting is going on and they don't want anyone to get hurt

RE so they're sad and they're kind of scared. Yeah of course they are. So what do you think happens next in the story Grace?

G the Garda knocks, he comes out of the car and knocks on the door

RE okay so here he is, do you think it's man or a girl guard?

G a man

RE okay so he comes out and he knocks on the door and say one of the grown-ups or who do you think answers the door?

G em, the woman?

RE the mummy of the house, yeah? And what do you think the Garda does next?

G em, I'm not sure

RE yeah so say in the story he comes into the house and where do you think Emmanuelle and Sophie are?

G in their bedroom

RE okay so will we put them in this bedroom?

G yes

RE okay so this is their bedroom, and where do you think in the bedroom they might be?

G em, they might be hiding underneath the covers of the bed

RE yeah, do you think they're in their own bedroom or do you think they're in one bedroom or their own bedrooms?

G one bedroom?

RE so do you think Sophie or Tom has gone into one of the other bedrooms? Why do you think they'd do that?

G because then they might feel safer when they're together

RE oh yeah, that's makes sense doesn't it that makes a lot of sense okay so they're hiding under the covers

G yes

RE okay they're hiding under the covers and maybe the pussy cats with them?

G yeah

RE so they're all hiding under the covers because the Guards have come and do you think they've seen the Guards before?

G em, not really since they're scared

RE okay so they've always hidden do you think on the guards?

(Grace nods)

RE yeah yeah, if the Guards have called, so say then next thing in the story, what do you think happens?

G maybe when the woman opens the door the Gardaí tells them to stop and maybe takes one of them outside to calm them down

RE yeah very good, that sounds like a good thing to do doesn't it

(Graces nods)

RE I think it does and say maybe there's two guards and maybe one goes upstairs and he knocks on the bedroom door and he comes to check on Tom and Sophie. Do you think they'd like that?

G mmmmm, yes

RE yeah and what do you think they might like him to say, what do you think the Garda might say to them?

G are you okay, are you hurt or not?

RE okay, and would they say something back would they talk to him?

G I think they might talk to him

RE yeah they just might, what do you think they could say to him?

G we're not hurt we're all okay

RE we're all okay, and what do you think they'd like the guard to do next? What would help them to feel safe

G if one Guard took the one person outside like the daddy took him outside for a walk to calm them down then the Garda might take them downstairs to their mummy

RE and then they'd feel safe with their mummy

G yes

RE and their mummy could talk to them and give them a cuddle

G yes

RE and say everything is going to be okay. Do you think anything else might happen in this story?

G I'm not sure

RE and what about if something like that happened again. I wonder would Tom he's 13 and Sophie's 9 do you think they'd call the Garda themselves?

G em, yes

RE yeah they wouldn't be too scared?

G no

RE what would they say to the Garda?

G excuse me, could, could you, I please talk to the Garda and if the Garda comes they might be like em, my mummy and daddy are fighting and we need the Garda and could you please come

RE very good so they'd have a plan in place that if they didn't feel safe that they'd ring the Guards and they'd give them the information and the Guards would come and help them to feel safe. Would that make them happy do you think? Do you want to pick out some bear cards to show how they feel?

(Grace looks through the bear cards and chooses one)

G and after when everything was calm?

RE yeah, after the Guards have left

G happy and... I think that's it

RE and is there anything Grace that you would tell Tom and Sophie? Is there any advice you would give them if their mummy and daddy were arguing a lot

G Keep calm and stay together

RE Keep calm, that's brilliant advice. Thank you so much for the story you did a great job.

(Interview ends)



# **POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR MEMBERS OF  
AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA



## THE PROJECT

An Garda Síochána are very often the first professional to come in contact with a family who are experiencing domestic violence, perhaps due to a concerned neighbour calling them or a family member themselves who is frightened and does not feel safe in their home.

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with An Garda Síochána when they and their mother were at risk from domestic violence.

## THE RESEARCHER

I am doing this research project as part of my PhD degree at Trinity College Dublin. I am a qualified social worker and currently work part-time in homeless services.

## WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

I am interested in gathering multiple perspectives to offer a rich understanding of the topic. For this reason I would like to speak to:

- Mothers, children and young people aged 5 – 21 years who have had contact with the Gardaí as a result of domestic violence.
- Members of An Garda Síochána
- Family support workers, domestic violence support workers, social workers and any other practitioner who is involved in working with families experiencing domestic violence.

## WHAT IS INVOLVED?

I will ask you to take part in an individual interview which will last no longer than an hour. During the interview I will ask you some questions exploring the role of An Garda Síochána when responding to a domestic violence incident where there are children present. You will not be asked to speak about any specific case or outcome of a case which may identify a victim. Answers should be given in more general terms about this area of police work.

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

I will ask your permission to audio-tape the interview. This allows me to give you my full attention during the interview. If you want me to stop recording at any time I will turn it off. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, however if you tell me something that indicates to me that you or someone else is at risk of harm then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell. Reporting obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to should concerns be raised for the safety of a child.

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?**

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for my PhD. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

This research supports the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the EU Victim's Rights Directive. Findings from the research will offer us a better understanding of the needs of children who are experiencing domestic violence and may be used to guide best practice in this growing area of professional response.

## **HOW TO CONTACT ME**

If you or a colleague would like to know more about the project, or have any questions, you can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse and needs support, the following services may be able to help;

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### **Amen**

For men experiencing domestic abuse.  
Helpline: 046 9023 718.  
[www.amen.ie](http://www.amen.ie)

### **Túsla**

Child and Family Agency: support for children and their families. Phone: 01 771 8500.  
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**POLICE RESPONSE  
TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE...**

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

**CONSENT FORM / GARDA**

I .....

agree to talk to Ruth Elliffe (PhD student, Trinity College Dublin) as part of the above named project.

- I have read the information sheet provided and consent form.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my participation in it.
- I understand that all information collected will be treated as confidential except in the case when someone is identified as being at risk of harm.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to.
- I understand that the data will be anonymised and may be used in other forms such as presentations, training workshops, lectures and written material without the need for any further consent.
- I understand the interview will be audio taped and transcribed for accuracy and no other purpose.
- I have received a copy of this consent form.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any time without reason or penalty.

Signed (Member of An Garda Síochána) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## **Appendix L: Police Topic Guide**

### **Topic Guide – An Garda Síochána**

#### **1. The Role of An Garda Síochána**

- a) Can you tell me about your role within An Garda Síochána?
- b) What do you consider the role of An Garda Síochána to be in keeping children safe?
- c) When responding to children present at a domestic violence incident, what is the role of An Garda Síochána?
- d) What are the protocols and policies that guide An Garda Síochána in their response to children present at a domestic violence incident?

#### **3. Experience of responding to children in the context of domestic violence**

- a) How common is it for members of An Garda Síochána to respond to a domestic violence incident in a home where there are child(ren) present?
- b) How would a Garda member go about determining whether there are any children present in the household?
- c) From your own experience of responding to domestic violence can you talk me through what you would normally do when there are children known to be present?
- d) What are the reasons a member of An Garda Síochána might talk directly to a child at a domestic violence incident?
- e) What skills do you think are needed by a Garda member to engage with children at a domestic violence incident?
- f) How equipped do you feel in your role in talking directly to children in the context of domestic violence?
- g) What are the challenges An Garda Síochána face in this line of work with children?

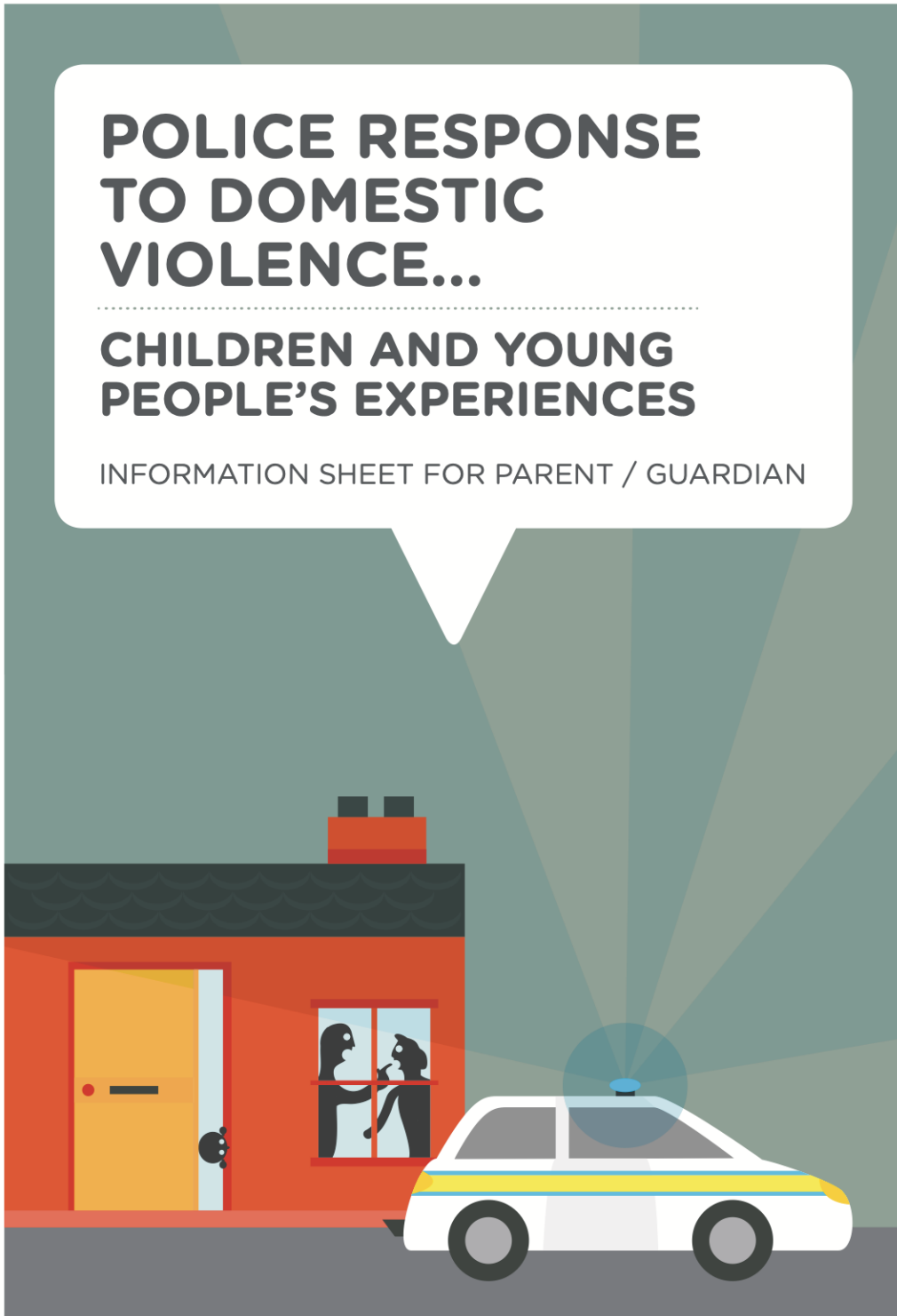
#### **4. Inter-agency response**

- a) Tell me about the other services that An Garda Síochána might call on to protect children who are experiencing domestic violence?
- b) How do you think An Garda Síochána and other services could work together to support children who are known to be living in a home where there is domestic violence?

# **POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...**

## **CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT / GUARDIAN



## **WHAT IS THE PROJECT ABOUT?**

An Garda Síochána are very often the first professional to come in contact with a family who are experiencing domestic violence, perhaps due to a concerned neighbour calling them or a family member themselves who is frightened and does not feel safe in their home.

This project is interested in learning more about the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who have come in contact with An Garda Síochána when they and their mother were at risk from domestic violence.

As a parent/guardian I would like to ask for your permission for your child to take part in the study. I would like to hear from your child's point of view what it was like for them when the Gardaí were called to their home in relation to a domestic violence incident. As well as speaking to children and young people aged 5-21 years about their experiences, I will also be speaking with mothers, members of An Garda Síochána and health and social care professionals about their views on the topic.

## **WHO WANTS TO KNOW?**

My name is Ruth and I am doing this research project as part of my PhD degree at Trinity College Dublin.

## **WHAT DOES TAKING PART INVOLVE?**

Only when you have given your permission will a support worker talk to your child about the project. They will be given some time to think about taking part and both you and your child will have the opportunity to meet with me and ask me questions about the project before the interview takes place. Once you and your child both agree to them taking part in the study we will organise a time for the interview to take place. But, you can both change your mind to taking part at any time and I will understand.

The interview will take no longer than an hour and will take place in a child friendly space in the service that your child is attending. Their support worker will be available to sit in with them if they like and will be checking in with them again after the interview.



## **PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will ask for your child's permission to audio-tape the interview or take hand-written notes if they prefer. This will allow me to give them my full attention during the interview and it also means that I won't forget anything they have said to me which is important. They will be in control of the recording device so can stop it any time if they wish to.

What your child talks to me about during the interview is confidential, this means that I will not tell anybody else what they say unless they tell me something that means they or someone else is at risk of harm, in which case I must act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011).

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION GATHERED?**

The information gathered for the project will be written up in a final report for my PhD. I will change the names of all participants so that people who read it will not be able to identify who they are and what they have said. The findings from the research may also be used in conference papers, articles, agency reports, briefing papers and other academic material.

## **POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS TO TAKING PART**

Talking with me might bring back memories of a difficult time in your child's life and they might get upset or feel uncomfortable in answering some of the questions. They can stop at any time and do not have to answer anything that they are uncomfortable with. Their support worker will be checking in with them after the interview to make sure they are okay. Other children who have talked about their experiences of domestic violence in research have benefited from the experience of feeling listened to and sharing their views on the subject.

By hearing from the children and young people themselves, I hope that this research will help us learn more about the experiences of children who have been or are still exposed to domestic violence so that we can find better ways to support them to feel safe and stay safe.

## FURTHER INFORMATION & CONTACTS

If you have any questions about the study or would like to arrange a time to meet to discuss your child's participation in this project, you can contact me or my supervisor by telephone or email. Here are our contact details:

**Ruth Elliffe** (Researcher)  
Phone: 086 406 4959  
Email: [elliffr@tcd.ie](mailto:elliffr@tcd.ie)

**Stephanie Holt** (Supervisor)  
Phone: 01 896 3908  
Email: [sholt@tcd.ie](mailto:sholt@tcd.ie)

## SUPPORT

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse and needs support, the following services may be able to help;

### **Women's Aid Helpline**

For women experiencing domestic abuse.  
Freephone Helpline: 1800 341 900.  
[www.womensaid.ie](http://www.womensaid.ie)

### **Amen**

For men experiencing domestic abuse.  
Helpline: 046 9023 718.  
[www.amen.ie](http://www.amen.ie)

### **Túsla**

Child and Family Agency: support for children and their families. Phone: 01 771 8500.  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

# POLICE RESPONSE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE...

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES

### CONSENT FORM - PARENT / GUARDIAN (for child's participation)

I .....

agree that Ruth Elliffe (PhD Student, Trinity College Dublin may seek my child's permission to participate in this project.

- I have read the information sheet provided and consent form.
- I have had the opportunity to ask Ruth questions about my child(ren)'s participation.
- I understand that everything my child(ren) talks to Ruth about is confidential.
- If my child(ren) tells Ruth something that indicates that he/she might be in danger, Ruth may need to talk to somebody else about this. If this does happen, Ruth will firstly:
  - ✓ Talk to my child(ren) and tell my child(ren) about her concern;
  - ✓ And where appropriate talk to me and let me know what the concern about my child(ren) is.
- I understand that obligations under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011) will be adhered to in this study.
- I understand that my child(ren)'s names and any other identifying details will be changed in the final report and they will remain anonymous.
- I understand that the information Ruth gathers may also be used for training seminars/presentations and other written material.
- I understand the interview will be audio taped or handwritten.
- I have received a copy of this consent form.
- I can change my mind at any time about my child(ren)'s participation.

Signed (Parent / Guardian) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## Appendix N: Children's Assent Form

**POLICE RESPONSE  
TO DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE...**

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**CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES**



### ASSENT FORM - CHILD (ages 5 - 12 years)



Ruth is a student doing research. I know that she wants to find out more about what it's like for children when the police call to their house when the grown-ups are arguing.



Ruth will record what I say so that she doesn't forget anything.



I can stop talking to Ruth or take a break whenever I like and she won't mind.



Ruth said that I can use a different name so nobody will have to know what I said except her.

If I tell Ruth something that makes her worry about me or someone else then she will have to tell another grown up, and she will have to follow procedures under Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011).



If I choose to have my support worker at the interview then they will also hear what I have to say but like Ruth they won't tell anyone else unless I say something that makes them worry for mine or someone else's safety, but they will both speak to me first.



I am happy to talk to Ruth about myself and the time the police came to my house when the grown-ups were arguing.

Signed (Child) ..... Date .....

Signed (Researcher) ..... Date .....

## Appendix O: Disclosure Protocol

<b>Disclosure Protocol</b>
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This protocol is for responding to a disclosure made by a participant during the course of the research process. Throughout the research process the researcher will act in accordance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children, 2011. The researcher is aware of obligations to report to the Child and Family Agency any concerns that a child is at risk of being abused or neglected or may have been in the past. The researcher will be guided by Appendix 1 of Children First (2011) for examples of how to recognise signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect.

### ***During the interview***

Should a participant disclose to the researcher any thoughts of harming themselves or others, then the researcher will talk to them about their concerns and the possible need to inform a third party. If the researcher gets a sense that the participant may be about to disclose abuse then the researcher will remind the person again of the limits to confidentiality and the reasons why the researcher may have to inform others.

If a disclosure of abuse is made the researcher will be guided by Section 2.5 of the Child Protection Welfare Practice Handbook (2011) and will take the following steps;

- Allow the participant to speak without any interruption and listen empathically.<sup>49</sup>
- When the participant has finished talking, determine whether it is a first time disclosure or if anybody else is already aware of the abuse and who they are.
- In the case of retrospective disclosures by an adult, establish whether there are any children at risk and if the abuser has been named.
- Make notes of the disclosure verbatim and read back to the participant to check that the information gathered is correct.
- Discuss with the participant the need to inform their assigned support worker or the Designated Liaison Person within the agency of the abuse and the reasons why.
- The researcher will then be guided by the child protection protocol of the agency and will refer to the Designated Liaison Person of the agency in

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<sup>49</sup> As experienced children's researchers on domestic violence, Cater & Overlien (2014) suggest the researcher assumes a position of "closeness and distance", close enough to empathise with the child's situation and needs, whilst maintaining enough distance to make a professional call on what those needs are and who is best to meet them, this means not becoming the counsellor in the situation (p. 75).

accordance with Children First Guidance, 2011 to determine what course of action to take and ensure the safety and best interests of the child.

***Post interview***

The researcher will inform their academic supervisor if a disclosure was made without providing any detail that would mean breaking confidentiality. They will consult on any impact that this might have on the future of the study. Additionally, the researcher will practice good self-care techniques by accessing supports such as the Student Counselling Service at Trinity College if needed.