



Hi, my name is Suzie and I am an adviser at [Family Rights Group](#). We are the charity that works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home.

I'm writing this advice blog to answer some of your questions about children's services (social services) involvement with families who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence.

Before I answer the questions which were sent, let me explain what domestic violence is and why it's harmful to children:

Domestic violence can involve physical or sexual abuse, rape, emotional abuse and isolation, coercion, threats, intimidation, economic abuse, financial control, forced marriage and honour-based violence. It can happen online as well as offline. People who experience domestic violence may have a range of responses to it - fear, anxiety, isolation, depression, drug or alcohol misuse – and too often they feel blamed.

In this blog I refer to survivors of domestic violence as "the mother" or "she" and the abuser or perpetrator as "the father" or "he". I've used this language because it reflects the situation in the majority of cases. However, Family Rights Group does recognise that men can also be survivors of domestic violence and that domestic violence can occur in same sex couples.

These questions were drafted with input from the Traveller Movement

Research shows that witnessing domestic violence can be very harmful for children and this is specifically included in the legal definition of [significant harm](#).

And now to answer the specific questions which were sent in...

I have been contacted by a social worker because they are concerned about how domestic violence is affecting my children. What can I do?

It can feel scary when you are contacted by a social worker and you may worry that they could remove your children. However, the main job of a social worker is to provide help to enable families to safely stay together. This [triangle](#) shows different ways that children's services might become involved with families. Only the family courts and the police have the power to remove your children without your agreement. The police will only use their power of '[police protection](#)' to protect your child in an emergency where there is no time for children's services to go to court. The police must believe your child will suffer serious harm if they don't use the power.

When you are contacted by a social worker, it is first important to ask why they are contacting you. They may think your children are '[in need](#)' of help or they may also be worried that your children are 'at risk of [significant harm](#)'. I will explain a little more about what these terms mean below.

The social worker is talking about 'child in need', 'child protection' and 'significant harm'. What does this all mean?

Children will be considered 'in need' if they have a disability and/or need services in order to be healthy or to develop properly. If the social worker thinks your child may be 'in need' they should discuss with you what help you and your family may need and explain what kind of help is available. The amount and type of help for families will differ between different local authorities. You do not have to accept the help that is offered to you as these sorts of services are voluntary.

If children's services might think your children could be at risk of [significant harm](#) due to domestic violence they will start making [child protection enquiries](#). Where there is a child protection concern, children's services will carry out an assessment whether or not you agree to it. However, the social worker who works with your family should always:

- Carry out enquiries in a sensitive way to minimise any distress and worry for you and your children
- Get a good understanding of your family's strengths and the help you already have
- Consider all children and parents as individuals

- Respect your family structures, culture, religion, ethnic origins and other characteristics
- Be aware of the effects of racial harassment and discrimination on you and your family
- Be careful not to stereotype you or your family.

What could happen when a social worker contacts me?

When children's services receive information that makes them think children may not be safe and well cared for, this is called a 'referral'. When there is a referral about domestic violence, the social worker will want to carry out an [assessment](#) to see whether your children are safe and their needs are being met. The social worker should explain what the assessment involves and why it is being carried out.

I feel worried about talking with, and working with, the social worker.

If a social worker contacts you, try to work with them as best you can. Just ignoring the social worker won't help. Try to be open and honest with them and talk through any anxieties you might have about the assessment or their involvement with you.

If you don't agree with something the social worker does or says then raise it with them in a polite manner. You can ask the social worker as many questions as you need to help you understand what you are being told or what is being said about you and your family.

During meetings the social worker may take notes. This is to help them keep an accurate record of what is being said. You can also make notes while the social worker is speaking, or ask them to provide you with a note of what's been discussed. You could also ask if you can have an [advocate](#) with you or ask if someone you know can sit in to make notes and give you some help.

All child care social workers should have had some training in domestic violence and the impact it has on children, but some may not have much experience of it in practice.

Sometimes women say that they feel blamed for the situation, or disbelieved, or that they are being judged as a bad mother. Try to talk about your feelings directly with the social worker, who may not realise how you feel.

If you have a specialist domestic violence advocate, they can talk to your children's social worker and give more specialist information about domestic violence if the social worker doesn't have this knowledge. Make sure that your safety and that of

your children is planned for if/when you separate and afterwards as risks can continue or escalate after separation.

What exactly will happen during the assessment?

1. The social worker will want to speak to you about the referral.

This is your chance to talk about the domestic violence but also generally about your children. The social worker will also want to see your children and if your children are old enough. It is usual for the social worker to want to speak to them alone:

- They should ask you before they do so unless there are exceptional circumstances (for example if they are concerned that you might threaten your children, try to make your children stay silent, or your children don't want you involved)
- If you have ideas about where you think your children would feel most comfortable talking with a social worker do let them know
- You may also want to suggest that a friend or family member is at the meeting, to give reassurance to your children.

2. The social worker will also want to speak to other professionals who know the children.

For example, teachers, their GP, their health visitor and the police.

Before the social worker discusses your children's situation with other professionals you should be asked if you agree, unless they think that asking you would place your children at risk of [significant harm](#) in which case they can share the information without your agreement.

Many parents find this difficult. It may help if you discuss with the social worker why they want to speak to certain people and see if you can agree on how this will happen. For example, you may want to limit what information the social worker gives to the other person about your family. The social worker should talk to you about this and it is usually best if you co-operate as much as you can.

3. The social worker will want to see your home to check that it is suitable for children.

They should ask about the help you have from family and friends. At the end of the assessment, the social worker will show you a written copy of the assessment. If there is anything in the written assessment report that is factually incorrect or that you disagree with, make sure the social worker either amends the report or records any difference of opinion.

4. The assessment should be finished within 45 working days of the referral.

During the assessment ask your social worker to be open with you and to keep you

informed and updated about the assessment and plan for your children. Do ask questions if you need to so that you fully understand the issues.

What about after the assessment is finished?

If the social worker feels there is no serious risk to your children but that either your children or your family need extra help, a [child in need plan](#) should be drawn up with you. This could include help from a domestic violence support services for you.

If the social worker is worried that your children are suffering harm or are at risk of being harmed there may be a [child protection conference](#). You can find out more about what happens at a child protection conference by watching the [films](#) on our website.

If the social worker is worried your children are at risk of experiencing domestic violence they might ask your partner to leave the family home. If this is not possible, they should help you to find safe accommodation for you and your children. This might be emergency housing or a place in a refuge. If you have friends or family who you could stay with, you could also suggest this. The most important thing is to keep you and your children safe and together.

Could my children be removed from me?

Removing children from parents can be very traumatic for them, so will only be considered as a last resort. If it is deemed necessary, and you have [parental responsibility](#), social workers can ask you to agree to your children being provided with [accommodation](#) by children's services. This is known as 'voluntary accommodation' or a 'section 20 agreement/arrangement'.

The family courts and the police however do have the power to remove children from their parents' care, even without their consent:

- A court would only order children to be removed if they were being harmed or in danger. A court would want to know what help has been offered by children's services to help you keep the children safe at home. If your children are involved in [court proceedings](#) you (as their parent) are entitled to a free solicitor to advise you and to represent you or arrange for a barrister to represent you in court.
- In an emergency, if the police or social workers were worried about your children's immediate safety and children's services do not have time to apply to court, the police can use their powers of [police protection](#) to remove your children for up to 72 hours. After that time, if children's services feel it is not safe for your children to return home, they must apply

for a court order or ask you (or others with [parental responsibility](#)) for their agreement to the children being accommodated.

After my partner was violent, the social worker told me I had to leave him or the children would be removed from my care. We separated for a while but now we want to get back

Sometimes, after assessments have been completed, your children's social worker may say that your partner should leave the home and have no further contact with your children. If you do not agree with this, try discussing this with a domestic violence support worker. If you have not already been referred to a domestic violence agency, you should ask for a referral or contact a domestic violence agency yourself. (See FRG's "[where to get further advice](#)" page).

After discussing your situation with a domestic violence professional, you may change your mind about what is in the best interests of the children.

If you still do not agree, you should ask the social worker to be clear with you what the consequences would be if you do not co-operate. They may tell you that under these circumstances, the Local Authority will start [care proceedings](#) to remove your children from your care.

At this stage, the Local Authority would give you a [letter before proceedings](#). If you receive a letter before proceedings, it is really important that you see a solicitor specialising in children's law immediately. Children's Services should send you details of local specialist solicitors. You should give your solicitor a copy of the letter you have received – this will mean you do not have to pay the costs of them helping you negotiate with Children's Services.

Alternatively, as the social worker's concern is the safety of the children, you may be able to agree arrangements for you to keep in contact with your partner, so long as the children are not involved. Of course, you will not be able to do this if there are legal restrictions, such as bail restrictions or injunctions, in place.

I am scared to contact the police or the social worker as I don't want the situation to be held against me.

If you are in a situation that is making you worried for your safety or for your child's safety it is important that you contact the police. The most important thing is you are all safe. It is never your fault that you have suffered domestic violence.

If you are worried about the possible consequences of reporting the domestic violence, contact an independent specialist advice service such as [Family Rights Group](#), [Rights of Women](#) or a domestic violence agency for advice and assistance.

If you don't report the violence, the social worker might think you are not properly protecting your child. This can feel like a very difficult situation. On one hand, if you don't call the police or your social worker, then you'll be seen as failing to protect your children; on the other hand, if you do call them it will demonstrate that your children continue to be at risk. It is a dilemma. However, keeping your children safe is the most important thing. Specialist advice organisations can help advocate for you to children's services so that you won't be blamed for doing the right thing.

My partner has told me the children will be taken from me if I report the violence.

It is common for partners who are violent to make this kind of threat. It's very important that it does not stop you from seeking help. You can discuss how to manage your situation by contacting a domestic violence helpline such as [Women's Aid](#).

Everyone I know thinks that social workers will take your children if you report a beating. I don't want to lose my children. When my husband has been violent towards me I feel that I can't go to the police anymore because of these MERLIN reports. What are they?

Merlin is a database run by the Metropolitan Police that stores information on children who have become known to the police for **any** reason at all. Other police forces use other databases.

If the police receive a report of domestic violence that has occurred and there are children living in the home, they will notify children's services. Children's services will then decide what steps to take in, including whether to carry out an assessment. The assessment should make sure that the right professionals are supporting you and your children to help you all be safe.

Going to social services would be a shameful thing for me to do. People in the community will think I'm a bad mother.

Even though you may feel ashamed about going to children's services for help, it is important to remember that families experience difficulties. Some families need help from children's services. If you don't get help it could make things more difficult for you and your family.

This [triangle](#) shows different ways that children's services might become involved with families. Usually, a social worker's involvement with a family will be short term. You are not alone. There are women just like you who have experienced and survived domestic abuse. There is no shame.

I don't want people knowing my business! I live on a site and new people are always stared at. Sometimes letters even go to the wrong trailer or to the wrong person. This makes me feel worried about social workers getting involved. What can I do?

A family's confidentiality is very important. By law, social workers must take every step to ensure that this is protected. There are rules about discussing a family's personal information with other people including professionals.

As I mentioned earlier, before the social worker discusses your children's situation with other professionals you should be asked if you agree, unless they think that asking you would place your children at risk of [significant harm](#) in which case they can share the information without your agreement. In addition, no individuals (including wider family or friends) have a right to receive information about you or your children.

If you are worried about letters from the social worker going to the wrong person or wrong trailer, you should tell the social worker so you can agree how else letters could get to you. You could suggest any of the following if they work for you:

- That letters are delivered to you by hand and only given to you in person;
- You could agree to collect letters from somewhere such as their office or your children's school;
- If you are confident that your email is secure, letters could be emailed to you;
- If you have an advocate, letters could be sent to their office.

I live with my in-laws and they listen in to my phone conversations. Even my childer repeat things I say on the phone. Can we agree a 'safe' word or phrase if I'm not on my own?

Yes, it is a good idea to agree a safe word or phrase with the social worker. A safe word or phrase can be used on the telephone to let the social worker know that you are not alone and that it not safe for you to talk. Here are some examples of what you could say or do:

- Use an agreed phrase such as, "Did you talk to the teacher?" "Is your mother feeling better?" or "Let me call you back";
- Pretend a tradesman is calling;
- Say "you have the wrong number";
- Call them by a different name.

In addition, you could ask your social worker only to call you at set times (unless there is an emergency) and tell them when the best time of day to contact you would be, for example, if you are walking home after taking the children to school and you know you will be alone.

If you know nobody else will see the message, you could also ask the social worker to text you before they call, to make sure you are alone. You could then reply using the agreed safe word or phrase, which will let the social worker know when it isn't safe to call you.

To find out more about this, you can look at Women's Aid website, which includes information on making a safety plan - www.womensaid.org.uk

I don't read and write and I get mixed up with my letters. I don't know who's writing to me. I need help from others to explain things to me. I depend on other people's help.

If you find it difficult to read and write or need things to be explained to you, then it is important that you tell the social worker. They can then make sure that they spend time explaining things to you. They should give you information about local advocacy services who may be able help you with the letters and reports.

Let the social worker know that you need enough time to go through reports/other written information and to ask questions about anything that is not clear or that you do not understand. Never be afraid to ask for more time to finish going through a document or for an explanation of something you don't understand.

The social worker may suggest you have an assessment of any possible learning disability, to make sure you get the right help. The law is very clear that parents must have assistance so they can be involved in any decisions that are made about their children.

I have no money of my own and I have seven children. I can't even afford the bus fare. I can't leave! I'm not allowed to save. My husband doesn't give me anything. How will I get to a shelter or to a meeting with a social worker or domestic violence worker?

It is very important that you let the social worker know that you have no money of your own. They can help you get emergency money directly from children services (for example money to help you get to meetings or feed your children until state benefits come through). The social worker or an advocate may be able to help you apply for state benefits such as universal credit. If you do not have a bank account then the social worker or your independent domestic violence advocate can help you to open one.

For more help and information about what benefits you might be entitled to, see the [Citizens Advice](#) and [Direct Gov](#) websites.

I have answered all the questions which were sent and I hope the answers are helpful. If you'd like to know more, you can:-

- call our advice line,
- check out our discussion boards
- go to our website whether there is [domestic violence FAQs for mums](#); [FAQs on domestic violence for dads](#) and a leaflet we have produced called [Information for mothers involved with Children's Services because of domestic violence](#).