

Continued domestic abuse facilitated by post-separation contact

July 23 2015, by Fiona Tyrrell

Contact between children and fathers in the aftermath of parental separation facilitates the continued abuse of women and children, according to new research focusing on the experiences of families with a prior history of domestic abuse conducted by social work experts at Trinity College Dublin

The research, which explored the experiences of post-separation fathering in families with prior history of domestic abuse perpetrated by the father against the mother, involved the completion of survey questionnaires 219 mothers regarding their 449 children as well as face-to-face interviews of 61 children, mothers, fathers and legal, health and social care professionals. The work was conducted by Dr Stephanie Holt, Assistant Professor at the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity and has been just published in the journal *Child Abuse Review*.

The findings highlight clear evidence of post-separation contact facilitating the continued abuse of women and children. The research also highlighted a lack of attention from support services to the parenting of [abusive men](#) who were struggling to realise their fathering aspirations.

The research also raised questions about whether contact should automatically be considered to be in children's best interests where there has been a history of domestic violence. The challenge, according to Dr Holt, is to promote contact in a way which delivers benefits to children while not jeopardising their safety or wellbeing.

The type of father-child contact reported by participants ranged from overnight and non-overnight visits, telephone calls, texting, e-mail, and the sending and receiving of photographs and letters. 68 per cent of mothers who participated in the study expressed child protection and welfare concerns for their children who engaged in contact with their fathers. The predominant concern was expressed for the emotional welfare of the children. Participants also described children's continuing exposure to the verbal abuse and denigration of their mother when contact was being arranged, at hand-over points and during contact.

Four of the six fathers who participated in the study acknowledged their abusive relationship with their child's mother. Their responses ranged from guilt and shame at what they had exposed their children to, to a sense of injustice and indefensible marginalisation from their children's lives.

Dr Holt commented: "The weight of both domestic and international evidence challenges those charged with professional responsibility for supporting, protecting or regulating the lives of the key players involved in the phenomenon of post-separation contact where there has been a prior history of male perpetrated [domestic violence](#), to focus on the reality of abusive men's behaviour rather than an ideology of involved fatherhood in children's lives. This demands a significant paradigm shift to prioritise the construction of fathers as 'risk' in the context of post-separation father-child contact. Doing so does not mean finding ways to exclude fathers from children's lives; rather what is critical is to find ways to ensure and be assured that children are safe and that abusive men can be 'good enough' fathers."

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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