



centre for research on  
families and relationships

## **Centre for Research on Families and Relationships' response to Scottish Government's consultation on National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland**

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The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) welcomes the opportunity to comment on National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland. Over the last 9 years we have conducted a number of research projects that uncover issues about children's lives and adult survivors lives which have highlighted issues about abuse. Over these projects there are some key themes emerging that are very relevant to this consultation.

CRFR produces, stimulates and disseminates high quality social research and commentary on families and relationships. We are a consortium research centre whose main office is at the University of Edinburgh, with partners at the University of Aberdeen, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, UHI Millennium Institute and the University of Stirling.

CRFR undertakes social research on families and relationships across the lifecourse using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Our research programmes encompass diverse themes and inform policy, practice and debate in Scotland, the UK and internationally.

1. The key theme emerging across our research base is that children have problems with trusting the adults in their lives. Particularly:

- Children do not trust adults with their confidences
- Children feel if they tell adults about abuse that their lives will be taken out of their control and they will not be properly consulted on decisions which affect them
- Children do confide in friends who can be a key source of support. Friends are not however included in policy either as a source of support or a source of disclosure about abuse, and when children's lives change friends are often left behind.

2. The Child Protection guidance should be redefined to fit in with the aims and values from GIRFEC. By stating some aims and principle, children can be placed at the centre of the CP system, rather than the current guidance which focuses on responding to extreme cases rather than the overall response. GIRFEC values that are relevant here include:

- To protect children from harm, abuse and neglect
- To do so in ways which at all times respect their dignity & intelligence, and minimise their distress
- To identify harm to a child, and those committing it, early as possible
- To respond in all our processes to the way children actually behave, think, feel and speak at different stages of their development

## **Focus on supporting disclosure**

Disclosure rates are very low and there is a huge mismatch between the numbers of adults disclosing a history child abuse and the current number of children being identified. We know that children don't want to disclose because of the issues outlined above, but these issues are not being addressed in this guidance.

- There should therefore be much more emphasis on the process of disclosure and what happens to children who disclose abuse, than on sharpening the procedures to be followed.
- There needs to be more flexibility within the system to allow for procedures to unfold at the child's pace to enable them to retain control and have confidence in the system, rather than the current focus of what agencies should be doing.
- If we are serious about the GIRFEC approach and we really want children to be at the centre, we need more ways of responding to disclosure in order to get it right for the children concerned.

## **Models for supporting disclosure**

Routine enquiry is being rolled out for domestic abuse to increase disclosure. The same approach could be taken to child abuse to allow more opportunities for children to disclose and to normalise openness to disclosure for those working with children.

## **Support for young people**

We welcome the recognition of additional forms of abuse and the recognition of the need for long term counselling. We also welcome the focus on children and their own needs.

A section on advice for practitioners about how they might reach out to a child who is experiencing abuse and on how they can link to helplines and think about support from friends would benefit the guidance.

## **Supporting drug and alcohol using parents**

Parents who are substance abusers often have their own childhood and other traumas. They need support in order to fulfill their parental responsibilities which is often missing, especially support to address their own issues.

## **Guidance on consulting children**

There are specific measures for children with disabilities in the guidance which are welcomed. However there is no guidance on how you talk and listen to children at different ages and stages of development.

More guidance needed on the basics about not asking questions in front of parents/carers and not asking inappropriate questions (e.g don't you like your dad?) However, perhaps there needs to be more guidance on how professionals talk to children in general.

## **Recognising the role of voluntary sector**

There is no recognition of the role of voluntary organisations (145) role in educating and informing the public about abuse issues.

## **Specific issues in relation to domestic abuse**

### **Being more directive / explicit**

The guidance on domestic abuse (DA) overall is not strong enough in relation to the child protection needs of children in cases of domestic abuse. It is widely reported in the domestic abuse literature that core principles of child protection interventions should be centred on:

- Safety and protection of children
- Empowerment and safety of women
- Responsibility and accountability of perpetrators

and more recently to also include:

- Strengthen the relationship between child and non-abusing parent

It would be useful to make principles like this explicit in the child protection guidance and would perhaps give a little more direction to practitioners.

### **Perpetrator is invisible**

A common criticism of child protection work in the context of DA has been that it focuses on mothers (constructing them failing to protect) rather than fathers (who are being abusive). It is positive that the guidance has shifted the focus so that mothers are understood to be adult victims who may benefit from support. However, the guidance does not address perpetrators at all - leaving them invisible. This is concerning as it the perpetrator's behaviour that is the root of child protection concerns. Addressing the perpetrator and holding him accountable for his behaviour should be mentioned here - links should be made to perpetrator programs as well as criminal justice responses to DA as way of protecting children and mothers and making the perpetrator more visible

### **Children's needs**

It is sometimes easy to conflate women and children's needs. Whilst women protection and child protection are linked, it is also important to think about children's needs separately from their mothers. Talking to children and thinking about their needs has been a big part of the domestic abuse delivery plan that is referred to in the guidance and a link with this document would be sensible.

### **Risk Assessment and Safety Planning**

The guidance could be more explicit about what risk assessment would be used in circumstances of domestic abuse. Risk assessment is necessary - but there is a lack of clarity amongst practitioners about how this should be done. Having a common approach to risk assessment (that addresses the needs of both children and women) is important for multi-agency collaboration. This should have a focus on: the risk posed by the perpetrator and safety planning for children and women. (Perhaps look at models like MARAC or DA Pathfinders).

### **Other measures to help protect**

It would be useful to also talk about other civil measures that can ensure safety and protection (as well as allowing women and children to remain in their homes) e.g. interdicts and exclusion orders. These are measures that can support child protection.

### **Understanding DA**

We welcome the inclusion of recognition of the continuation of abuse after separation. This will help practitioners think more carefully about how to adequately support families and protect children whether or not the couple separate.

### **Conclusions**

We welcome this chance to comment and suggest that a rethinking of the principles and values of this guidance is undertaken to meet children's needs and fit in with the GIRFEC

approach. For further information about our research see [www.cfr.ac.uk](http://www.cfr.ac.uk). Particularly relevant work includes:

- It's my body: calls to ChildLine Scotland about sexual health and wellbeing. (2007)  
<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/reports/rb34.pdf> CRFR Research Briefing 34.
- Children's concerns (2005)  
<http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/1842/2790/1/rb22.pdf> CRFR Research Briefing 22
- Cool with Change: young people and family change. (2006)  
<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/reports/rb26.pdf> CRFR Research Briefing 26
- Cool with Change: young people talking about support (2007)  
<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/reports/rb31.pdf> CRFR Research Briefing 31
- Care and support needs of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse (2009)  
<http://www.cfr.ac.uk/reports/rb%2044%20web.pdf> CRFR Research Briefing 44
- Young people's attitudes about violence (forthcoming)

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