

The Safe Contact Model: Should We Use It?

An exploration of clients and social workers' experience of participating in a new risk assessment aimed at protecting children in domestic abuse cases

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The Safe Contact Model is a new assessment tool which is designed to be used by experienced professionals to look at whether contact is desirable for children in cases where there has been domestic abuse in their parents' relationship. Its particular focus is on ensuring the safety of mothers and children who have previously been exposed to domestic abuse.

For this initial piece of research we looked at the reasons why the Safe Contact Model is being piloted in Scotland and sought the views of a family who had agreed to take part in an assessment to discover how they experienced the process and their responses to the outcome.

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- Children are put at risk during contact with an unsafe parent
 - Children tend to report conflicting feelings towards their fathers, including fear, anger, sadness and loss. They express fear and frustration at not being listened to and their views not being respected in relation to contact
 - Simplistic assessment of the abusing parent's risk can lead to unsafe contact being awarded, or potentially positive contact not taking place
 - There is a lack of awareness amongst practitioners about the nature of domestic abuse and the risks around child contact
 - Some women are further abused through their children having contact and therefore there is continued risk of significant harm to children and young people
 - The different systems involved in making arrangements about contact are confusing and are not integrated

This was an exploratory piece of research with only a very small number of participants and this phase was considered a starting point and an opportunity to begin evaluating this way of working with families. However the review of the literature has clearly demonstrated the need for systematic assessments by well-trained and experienced professionals in deciding how best to proceed with contact in such cases. While further research is obviously necessary, the Safe Contact Model with its ethos of being 'a compromise without compromising safety' seems likely to be a positive way forward.