

Domestic abuse and speech and language therapy

Domestic Abuse, Statutory Guidance, July 2022

- *People with speech, language, and communication needs may be actively targeted by perpetrators or experience abuse for longer periods of time because of difficulties they face in explaining what has happened to them, asking for help, and accessing the support available. Services, including local authorities should ensure that good practice includes the identification of, and appropriate support for, communication needs, including:*
 - *the links between domestic abuse and speech, language and communication needs;*
 - *the impact of witnessing domestic abuse on children's speech, language and communication; and*
 - *the services available to support people with those needs, including children (this may involve ensuring the availability of independent interpreters).*
- *Many speech and language difficulties are unidentified and undiagnosed. Services should seek to understand the needs of people with these difficulties, including the risk that they may not be, or have been, taken seriously in their reports because of the way that they communicated them.*
- *Speech, language, and communication needs can be a risk factor and are often hidden. They can result from lifelong or acquired conditions and for children and young people they may be part of a special educational need or disability.*

Background and Context

- Domestic abuse and speech, language and communication needs are deeply intertwined.
- Communication difficulties can impact both victims and perpetrators and can act as a barrier to both parties accessing support services.
- Speech and language therapists have a crucial role to play in supporting both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, and the professionals working with them.

Victims

- Disabled people - including those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) – are more likely to experience domestic abuse at a greater severity for longer periods of time, in part because they may be specifically targeted.ⁱ

- Their communication difficulties may prevent them from understanding what has happened to them, communicating it to others, and act as a barrier to accessing service, support and justice.
- Children and young people who witness domestic abuse are classed as victims under the Domestic Abuse Act (2021). The Statutory Guidance to the Act highlights that, 'Domestic abuse has a significant impact on children and young people of all ages (up to 18 years old).'ⁱⁱ The Statutory Guidance identifies that one of the impacts of domestic abuse on children is, 'Delayed development or deterioration in speech, language and communication'ⁱⁱⁱ. This can have lifelong consequences, affecting their educational attainment, ability to form positive relationships, employment prospects, physical and mental health and wellbeing, and their life chances.

Perpetrators

- Perpetrators may exploit communication difficulties, prolonging abuse and undermining victims' credibility.
- Some perpetrators of domestic abuse may have SLCN which may not be identified or supported. This can impact their ability to access rehabilitation and prevention programmes, which may increase the risk of further harm and risk of reoffending.

Speech and language therapists

- Speech and language therapists have a crucial role to play in supporting both victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, and the professionals working with and supporting them.
- Current support models rarely include communication expertise, such as speech and language therapy, potentially leaving victims without accessible routes to safety, recovery, or justice.

Why This Matters

- Domestic abuse affects many people. The Crime Survey for England and Wales estimated that:
 - 2.3 million people aged 16 years and over (1.6 million women and 712,000 men) experienced domestic abuse in year ending March 2024.
 - 4.8% of people aged 16 years and over (6.6% of women and 3.0% of men) experienced domestic abuse.^{iv}
- 60% of young people in contact with the justice system have unidentified communication needs, and abuse is a factor in many of their lives.^v
- Without tailored support, victims with SLCN are less able to escape abusive situations, access services, or participate in the justice system – and perpetrators

with SLCN may not benefit from programmes designed to prevent them committing abuse.

- Failure to act risks perpetuating abuse, increasing reoffending, and escalating long-term costs across education, health, justice, and social care.

The Case for Action

1. The issue

- Abuse affects people across society, but those with communication needs are especially vulnerable.
- Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including communication disability, difficulty, or difference, may not be able to report abuse or understand healthy relationships without specialist support.
- Adults with conditions such as learning disability, brain injury, autism, or dementia may be unable to recognise or articulate abuse or be disbelieved when they do.

2. Barriers to Support and Justice

- Victims with SLCN often cannot understand safeguarding materials, report effectively to police, or engage with court processes.
- Perpetrators may claim victims lack capacity to testify or give credible evidence. Where services – such as CAMHS and youth justice – do not have commissioned speech and language therapy provision, needs can be unidentified and unsupported.

3. Commissioning and Workforce Gaps

- Abuse services are not systematically commissioned with accessibility in mind.
- Few multi-disciplinary teams include speech and language therapists, despite evidence of their role in supporting disclosure, recovery, and rehabilitation.
- Frontline staff lack training in recognising communication needs, increasing the risk of missed safeguarding opportunities.

Recommendations

Accessibility Requirement

- Domestic abuse strategies and action plans must include an accessibility and inclusion strand, explicitly covering communication needs.

Strengthen the Workforce

- Commission speech and language therapy provision into abuse, safeguarding, CAMHS, and youth justice services.
- Ensure all those working in domestic abuse services undertake Communication Access UK training.^{vi}

- Provide specialist training for frontline staff (social workers, teachers, police, health professionals, and others) to recognise and respond to communication barriers.
- Ensure children and young people with SEND, including those with SLCN, receive accessible teaching on consent and healthy relationships.
- Extend speech and language therapy input into early intervention and prevention programmes, particularly in schools and community services.

Accessible Support and Justice

- Ensure all abuse services and justice processes provide information and materials in inclusive, accessible formats.
- Support victims and witnesses with communication needs to give evidence safely and credibly, using specialist adaptations such as intermediaries, Talking Mats (a visual communication framework which supports people with communication difficulties to express their feelings and views), visual aids, and the use of whichever form of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (for example, signing, body language, facial expressions, equipment or resources, such as communication boards, books, objects, charts, apps, tablets, and computers) that suits them best, and for those who use British Sign Language, the provision of appropriate support.

More information

For more information contact peter.just@rcslt.org or see our dedicated webpage on domestic abuse and speech and language therapy which also includes information on the links between controlling or coercive behaviour and SLCN:

<https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/guidance-for-delivering-slt-services/domestic-abuse/#section-1>

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References

i

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a806673ed915d74e622e3c8/Disability_and_domestic_abuse_topic_overview_FINAL.pdf

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1089015/Domestic_Abuse_Act_2021_Statutory_Guidance.pdf

iii Ibid.

iv

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2024>

v Bryan, K., Freer, J., & Furlong, C. (2007). *Language and communication difficulties in juvenile offenders. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 42(5), 505–520.

vi Communication Access UK is a short, free, online course, designed as a first step in increasing understanding of speech, language, and communication needs, and how to respond. It can be accessed via:

<https://communication-access.co.uk/>