# Coercive Control: How It Affects Children in Many Different Ways

By Emma Katz\*

Imagine a child who is allowed no fun, no playtime. She does not have anyone to sit and brush her hair. She cannot shout, cannot go to friends’ birthday parties or after-school clubs, or family days out. Is this a child in a juvenile detention cell? No, it is a child suffering a regime of coercive control in her own home, and the regime is usually being created by her father or father-figure.

For ten years, professionals in the domestic violence field have begun to recognize the impacts of coercive control on adult female victims.1 We have understood that domestic violence is more than physical violence; it is a regime of coercive controlling tactics that includes emotional abuse, control of time and activities, isolation and financial control. In England and Wales, we have reached the stage where coercive control was made a criminal offense in December 2015. What has been missing from our understanding is that the children of these adult victims are experiencing coercive control too; they are not just being exposed to physical violence.

This is a core message of my recently published study: a message that children are impacted by coercive control; something that no study has focused in detail on before.2 Understanding that children are impacted by coercive control creates a far deeper understanding of what is harming children, and what help they need to recover, than a one-dimensional focus on physical violence alone. This is a real breakthrough: a big leap forward in understanding how children living with domestic violence are harmed by it, but also how they are able to resist and recover from it.

My study was based on qualitative interviews with children and mothers with past experiences of domestic violence. There were 30 interviews in total, with 15 mothers and 15 children from 15 families. Children and mothers were recruited through voluntary-sector organizations that support survivors of domestic violence.3

How Does Coercive Control Affect Children?

### Children were affected directly by perpetrators’/fathers’ control of time, movement and activities within their home. This was especially the case when perpetrators/fathers demanded attention from mothers and forcibly redirected mothers’ attentions away from children. Shannon, aged 10, reported how ‘lots of times when Mum was giving me attention, he’d tell her to go over to him so she’d have to leave me to play by myself.’ Similarly, Marie discussed how, when her daughter wanted to spend time with her, this was not allowed because the perpetrator/father would be jealous: ‘He’d say: “You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?”’

One of the pivotal features of coercive control was how it reduced children’s freedom for action, both directly due to the behavior of perpetrators/fathers and also by children themselves as they tried to avoid abuse. For example, one mother, Lauren, described how her children could not shout or make noise or ‘be children’ around the perpetrator/father ‘unless it was on his terms.’ Lauren reported that her daughter Zoe (aged 0–3 while living with the perpetrator/father) had experienced delayed speech and had not begun to speak regularly until she and her mother had been living apart from the perpetrator/father for many months. It may be that living in an environment where the perpetrator/father often demanded that Zoe be quiet led to Zoe constraining her own voice as a survival strategy. This is a novel interpretation: Zoe’s muteness would usually be linked to her exposure to physical violence.

An especially insidious tactic used by several perpetrators/fathers was to control mothers’ movements outside the home. It is important to be aware, though, that this not only affected mothers; it also restricted children’s social lives by preventing them from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities. For example, one mother discussed how children’s parties were impossible because ‘he’d accuse me of trying to “get off” [have sexual relations] with one of the dads’, and they could not attend after-school clubs because the perpetrator/father demanded that she be home by a certain time. Another mother reported how her children missed out on days out, family trips, and socializing with people, and reflected on how “children don’t make as many friendships if you can’t mix with other moms.” The isolation that children lived with limited their social skills development, as well as their opportunities to develop resilience-building relationships with non-abusive people outside their immediate family.

However, a crucial aspect of the study is that it shows children and mothers actively resisting perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control. They took opportunities to resist these non-violent abusive behaviors in many ways within the limits placed on them by perpetrators/fathers, using whatever space for action he left them with. The point to remember here is that their actions went beyond attempts to prevent, and protect each other from, physical violence.

How Did Children Resist Coercive Control?

Some of the most interesting cases occurred when children and mothers together resisted control and financial abuse by leaving their homes and experiencing periods of freedom and liberty. Eloise pointed out how, 2–3 times a week, she and her son John ‘did things together.’ Going to the cinema, or shopping, they could just ‘let our hair down and do what we wanted to do.’ Eloise and John also used these opportunities to hide their purchases from the perpetrator/father: “[Eloise:] We used to throw the shopping bags over the hedge. [John:] Into the garden, so he wouldn’t see them.”

Seizing opportunities to resist control of time, movement and activities was a cornerstone of some children’s and mothers’ resistance within the home. Times when perpetrators/fathers were absent from the home or were sleeping were especially useful. Katie, aged 12, commented how some days the perpetrator/father would be out, and she and her mother would watch a movie and have some time together. Ellie, one of the mothers, explained how the perpetrator/father would always make her young daughter sleep on her own even though this scared her, but they would wait for him to go to sleep and then “I’d get into bed next to her or she’d get in next to me.” These acts of resistance helped to maintain elements of normal life and prevented perpetrators/fathers from gaining total control over them. Children and mothers were able to preserve some of their autonomy and freedom.

What was central to children’s resistance was giving their mothers emotional support. Such support was often woven into everyday life, rather than happening as the result of a particular ‘incident’ of abuse. Bob, aged 12, discussed how: “If I saw Mom was upset I’d give her a cuddle or something like that, try and make her feel happy.” Alison commented how: “[my daughter] Jane really did get me through it. There were lots of hugs and she’d make me pretend cups of tea with her plastic kitchen set.”

The emotional supports given by these children show the important roles that they were playing in maintaining their mothers’ well-being. Commonplace and ‘age appropriate’ actions from children, such as making their mother a drink with a plastic kitchen set, though seemingly trivial, gave mothers a sense of being cared for that partly countered the emotional abuse of perpetrators/fathers. In some cases, this helped mothers ultimately to break free from abuse.

What are the Implications?

## Practitioners, policy-makers and leaders of organizations must begin to recognize how children who have lived with coercive control-based domestic violence will likely have experienced highly restrictive and un-free family lives, with limited opportunities to develop personal confidence, a sense of independence and competence, and social skills. Their support needs may be more complex than those of children who are only exposed to physical violence between their parents; what Johnson calls ‘situational couple violence.’4 Ultimately, interventions and support programs for children exposed to domestic violence will need to take account of the particular needs of children who have lived with coercive control.

## Practitioners wanting to understand how coercive control has affected the children they work with could ask children and mothers about the constraints that are placed on their movements, their activities, and who they can engage with inside and outside the home. Practitioners could also talk to children and mothers about whether there are things that they do, or refrain from doing, because of the reactions of perpetrators/fathers, and how this might be affecting children.

It is essential that perpetrators/fathers should be held accountable for the harms that coercive control has on children: The all-too-common practice of mother/victim blaming must be avoided.5 Mothers face many barriers to separating safely from perpetrators/fathers, including the likelihood of increasing violence and abuse from perpetrators/fathers, lack of alterative housing, and emotional abuse by perpetrators/fathers that convinces mothers that separation is not possible.6 Rather than needing to be blamed or pressured, mothers need effective supports from professionals and services to free themselves and their children from perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control.

Practitioners working with children with current or past experiences of coercive control should make empowering children an aspect of their work. Like women/mothers, children experiencing coercive control-based domestic violence may live with narrowed space for action, less ‘voice’ within the family, disempowerment, reduced confidence and reduced sense of freedom. In order to counter these negative impacts, placing ‘empowerment’ alongside ‘safety’ and ‘protection’ on the children and domestic violence agenda would be a real step forward.

Shifting from a physical incident model of domestic violence to the concept of coercive control will make a difference. It can help to provide knowledge and practice that is in-line with children’s lived realities and support needs. This shift may also help to fight the myths that domestic violence between adults does not affect children, or that unless children have witnessed physical violence between their parents, then they have not been impacted by domestic violence. These myths are particularly harmful in custody cases.7 Using a coercive control-based definition in future children and domestic violence work, and moving beyond a physical incident model, would help us to build deeper understandings of these children’s lived experiences and support needs.

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