

CHILDREN EXPERIENCE COERCIVE CONTROL: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Through anti-violence campaigns and legislative efforts, public awareness of coercive control has increased in recent years. Expanded conceptions of violence have illuminated how social structures, institutional processes, and psychological manipulation interconnect with physical violence to produce deeply harmful forms of power and control in abusive relationships.¹

In Canada, the *Divorce Act* was changed in 2021 to recognize coercive control as a form of family violence, and attempts have been made to incorporate it into the *Criminal Code* (Bill C-247, no longer active). These legislative efforts reflect the growing awareness and motivation across the country to address the multi-dimensionality of violence, particularly in contexts involving intimate partners and family members.² Amidst the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and advocates to end gender-based violence sounded the alarm on a “shadow pandemic” of domestic violence and coercive control in intimate relationships.³

However, while advocates make clear that both adults and children may be targets of coercive and controlling behaviours, less public attention has gone to the specific impacts experienced by children. This leaves potential gaps in how children’s experiences of coercive control are interpreted and supported.

This issue directs specific focus to the ways children may experience coercive control by a parent. This includes not only how children may be direct targets of coercive control but also how they may become implicated in such behaviours in the context of IPV. Both the direct and indirect experiences of coercive control are harmful to the well-being of children.

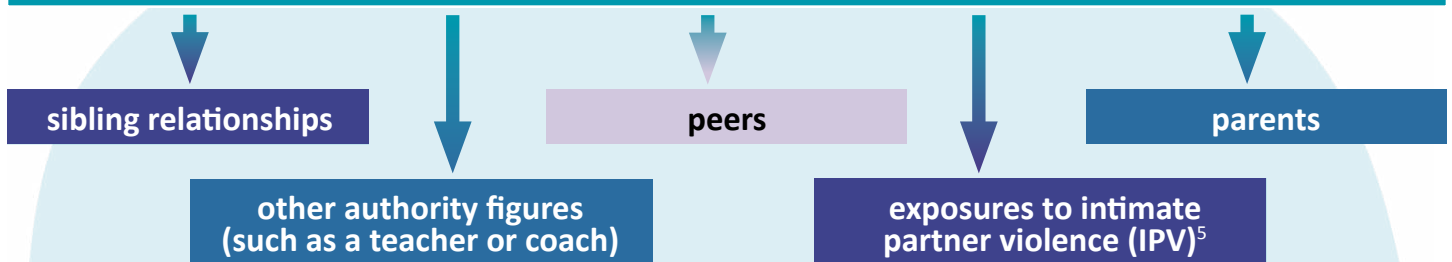
Because coercive control involves an “entrapment” of persons into a power relation that restricts their freedom, it also warrants critical examination from a human rights perspective.⁴ Supporting the agency and best interests of children requires that institutions, front-line practitioners, and parents are able to recognize and address threats (both violent and non-violent) to children’s freedom and well-being and promote the recognition of children’s voices.

This Issue-based Newsletter focuses on the processes by which children experience coercive control by a parent. The Issue will:

- Examines some of the contexts in which children may become implicated indirectly in the coercive control of one parent over another
- Illustrates how children are impacted by coercive control
- Explores how coercive control tactics often interconnect *by design* with broader systems of oppression, structural violence, and institutional barriers that already jeopardize a child’s well-being
- Highlights current legislation concerning coercive control in Canada’s revised *Divorce Act*

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CHILDREN MAY EXPERIENCE COERCIVE CONTROL IN A RANGE OF SOCIAL CONTEXTS, PARTICULARLY IN SITUATIONS WHERE POWER RELATIONS MAY BE UNEQUAL, SUCH AS:



CHILDREN'S VULNERABILITY TO COERCIVE CONTROL

Children's experiences of coercive control may go unrecognized because they differ from conventional ideas about what "violence" looks like.

The concept of coercive control casts exposure to family violence in an important light. It enables us to adopt a more holistic view of how violence is enacted, perpetuated, and experienced. It also challenges prevailing ideas that focus solely on *physical incidents* of violence experienced by children but not the various forms of "entrapment" that they may experience in the context of family violence.⁶

Coercive control involves:



VIOLENCE THAT IS NOT ALWAYS PHYSICAL

Coercive and controlling behaviour may incorporate violence (or the threat of violence) as a technique for restricting another's freedom, but it may go unrecognized when the violence consists of indirect, occasional, or "low-level" assaults. Carmen Gill and Mary Aspinall note that "there may not be any form of physical violence or a threat of physical violence, but the fear for the victim is real."⁹ Accordingly, children may suffer significant emotional and psychological harm from a coercive and controlling parent even if they are not the direct target of the violence or threat of violence.



AN ONGOING PATTERN OF ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Coercive control encompasses those "*repetitive* tactics of abuse that include exploitation, isolation, and the micro-regulation of everyday life."¹⁰ Its results may therefore appear cumulatively, making it difficult for survivors and support workers to address its harms in a straightforward, one-size-fits-all manner.¹¹ For children, this may mean that their experience is difficult to understand and explain to a trusted adult.¹² They may feel responsible for the negativity they are experiencing, and fear speaking about it at all.



A RESTRICTION OF FREEDOM

Evan Stark's conceptualization of coercive control extends beyond the direct interactional relationships between survivors and those who commit violence. It also encompasses the broader "'condition of unfreedom' that is experienced as *entrapment*" by survivors.¹³ This broader understanding of coercive control is important because it highlights the continuum of violence that survivors often experience. Parents and children escaping family violence may face coercive and controlling tactics such as legal bullying, withholding child support payments, cyberstalking, threatening child welfare interventions, or disobeying parenting time agreements. This violence may continue, or even escalate, in the post-separation context—indeed, the risk of domestic homicide is often highest during this period.¹⁴

Coercive control is a gendered form of violence

Although "coercive control" describes a process of violence that may be perpetrated by persons of any gender, its conceptual and empirical foundations lie in a recognition of the disproportionate rates at which IPV is perpetrated by men against women.⁷ In the context of children's exposure to coercive control, this gender disparity is reflected in the ways that mothers and children experience (and are impacted by) fathers' violence.

When coercive control is exercised against mothers, the likelihood of harm to children is high. Researchers, advocates, and survivors have shown how children can be directly targeted as subjects of coercive control or as a means of exercising coercive control over a partner. Children are also indirectly harmed by the multifaceted effects of coercive control on mothers.

Traditional gender roles serve to distort the realities of coercive control and are thus a frequent tool in the context of fathers' family violence. Mothers face a catch-22 when they are blamed for failing to protect children from a father's violence but then accused of "parental alienation" and uncooperativeness when they (or their children) do attempt to leave a violent situation.⁸

Coercive and controlling parenting can take different forms

Coercive control often involves a combination of hostile and endearing behaviours to exercise power over others. Behaviours often associated with abuse (e.g. violence, threats, stalking, emotional manipulation) are also “interwoven with periods of seemingly ‘caring’ and ‘indulgent’ behaviour as part of the overall abuse.”¹⁵ Supporting survivors of coercive control requires us to recognize how manipulation is also directed outwardly to people outside the relationship who might otherwise provide support or intervention.

A coercive and controlling parent may utilize “impression management” strategies to conceal or distort the presence of family violence. This can look like:

- Preparing for future custody disputes by curating a misleading record of events and correspondences (through recordings, emails, etc.)¹⁶
- Spreading misinformation in the community, the courtroom, or online (e.g. by misrepresenting facts about childcare payment, parenting time, or a co-parent’s competency)¹⁷
- Privately provoking a child or partner into public displays of anger, refusal, or hostility to undermine their credibility¹⁸
- Appealing to “friendly parenting” norms or accusations of “parental alienation”¹⁹

Coercive control may be exacerbated at intersections of systemic oppression

Systemic oppression can reduce the sense of trust and safety that some survivors feel toward institutions like police, hospitals, family courts, governmental programs, and even anti-violence agencies. Adult survivors of coercive control report how their partner would often exploit existing systemic barriers to exhaust, discredit, distress, intimidate, or further control them.²⁰

That is, the vulnerabilities to harm created by multiple axes of oppression are often deliberately targeted by coercive and controlling parents precisely for the fact that supports are weakest—or even harmful—at these intersections.²¹ Thus, the unfreedom and entrapment wrought by *systemic* violence against survivors are compounded by corresponding *personalized* violence inflicted by a parent who commits harm.

Children are thus exposed to the combined harms of coercive control and intersecting systems of oppression. For example:

- The disproportionate rates at which Black and Indigenous children are taken by Child Protective Services increases the power and gravity that come with threatening mothers or children about involving Child Protective Services in a dispute.²²
- Co-parents who are migrants, who have a disability, or who do sex work may be targeted with the threat of losing parenting access. The realities of the precarity and systemic marginalization they face may be exploited to prevent either the child or the parent from trying to escape family violence.
- Threats of “outing” a child who is 2SLGBTQ to family or community members may be used to keep children in the closet and/or in an unsafe or abusive family situation.
- Survivors of family violence who have lower incomes or who live in rural, remote, or northern communities may face legal bullying tactics in family courts when seeking supervised access or other protections from a co-parent. Coercive and controlling behaviours such as filing frivolous lawsuits, deliberately misfiling documents, or “conflicting out” lawyers (e.g. in a small community) may all be used to exacerbate the economic and geographical barriers the parent and child face in accessing legal representation.²³

Despite important progress led by advocates and activists, culturally responsive trauma- and violence-informed practice remains the exception rather than the norm for many survivors seeking support. The onus often falls on adult survivors to provide multiple disclosures of their trauma, to submit to culturally inappropriate questions, and to maintain composure in the face of victim-blaming that often contorts the harms inflicted on the child by an ex-partner as evidence of their own inability to provide a safe home.²⁴ Meanwhile, children find themselves in confusing situations where their agency may be largely disregarded (such as in determinations of their “best interest”) and/or where they feel deeply responsible for the dissolution of the family.

Learn More: “Will Canada’s new *Divorce Act* keep women and children fleeing abuse safe?”

Pamela Cross’s weblogs for Luke’s Place provide a detailed discussion of coercive control in the family law context. This includes a series discussing the “pros,” “cons,” and “gaps” in Canada’s amended *Divorce Act*.²⁷



IMPACTS OF COERCIVE CONTROL ON CHILDREN

Exposure to family violence or IPV poses a risk of harm to children, irrespective of whether a child is the direct target of violence.

Anti-violence advocates make clear that research and legislative changes addressing coercive control must address harms experienced not only by intimate partners but also by children. Children living in families with IPV are vulnerable to both direct and indirect forms of coercive control—and often a combination of both forms.

CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE COERCIVE AND CONTROLLING BEHAVIOURS OF A PARENT MAY:

Learn
“destructive patterns about the use of violence and power in relationships,” which may be carried into adulthood and transferred inter-generationally.²⁵

Experience
“isolation from sources for support” whose presence helps foster social skills, confidence, learning, and language development, as well as model non-abusive social behaviours.²⁹

Internalize victim-blaming attitudes and/or harmful views about unequal power relations between men and women.²⁶

Experience
“narrower space for action” (a limitation on their freedom to say and do things), which may compromise development.²⁸

Be at higher risk of severe injury, death threats, and/or homicide.³⁰



Children are often used by fathers as a core tactic in harming mothers

In a U.S. study of 156 mothers who had survived IPV, 88% reported that children were abused as a control tactic against them. Some of the most common purposes of this abuse were:³¹



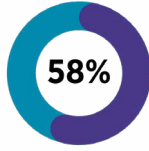
Keeping her in the life of the abusive partner



Keeping track of her



Harassing her



Intimidating her

Mothers and children are often “co-victims” of coercive control

Conceptualizing coercive control as a process of gender-based violence can increase understanding of how mothers and children both experience harm from certain tactics. For example:

- Domestic homicides are committed at disproportionately higher rates by fathers than mothers, particularly in situations where children are killed in a domestic violence context.³²
- Strain in mothers–child relationships may be deliberately induced by various means, such as weaponizing the children’s presence in her life, sabotaging children’s contact, placing the children in the middle of relationship disputes, or conditioning the children to supplant the mother and elevate the father as the primary caregiver.³³
- Post-separation violence and stalking create security risks in the home, including the potential need to relocate or seek shelter.³⁴
- Withholding financial support can leave basic services (e.g. phones, laundry, or transportation) and educational opportunities (e.g. field trips, school supplies, after-school programs) inaccessible for children.³⁵
- Interference with parenting practices (e.g. constant calling) creates parenting interruptions as well as risks of trauma responses that can impede mothers’ day-to-day parenting duties.³⁶

Learn More: Children’s literature and companion professional guide for children experiencing coercive control, Catherine Lawler & Abigail Sterne³⁷

Helping Children Learn About Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control: A Professional Guide provides supplementary context for the children’s book, *Floss & the Boss*. Both resources address the experience and effects of coercive control for children.

In addition to a wide-ranging examination of processes through which coercive control (toward a child or the child’s parent) impacts the child, the Professional Guide also provides an extensive list of support strategies that “key adults” occupying various roles might utilize when providing support. These include various age-appropriate activities relating to therapeutic play, safety planning, and approaches to promote self-regulation



ISSUE SPOTLIGHT: TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED COERCIVE CONTROL



A parent may engage in technology-facilitated coercive control tactics such as:³⁸

- Demand access to their child's devices to surveil and control the co-parent
- Use devices to monitor their partner and child
- Insist on purchasing devices in their own name and/or setting account passwords themselves
- Spread or threaten misinformation or negative disclosures online about the partner's parenting
- Use children to find out passwords, relay messages by proxy, or transport GPS-enabled tracking devices
- Impersonate others (including children) to contact and/or intimidate a co-parent or child



Coercive and controlling behaviours involving technology might be rationalized with appeals to:³⁹

- The "safety" of a child or partner
- "Communication" and "cooperation" with a former partner, especially in coordinating parenting times
- Superior technical know-how in setting up or using the software
- Reciprocity for having purchased a new device

These behaviours often continue (or even intensify) post-separation.⁴⁰ While this remains an area for further empirical investigation, they are therefore likely to co-occur with a heightened risk of physical violence and domestic homicide.

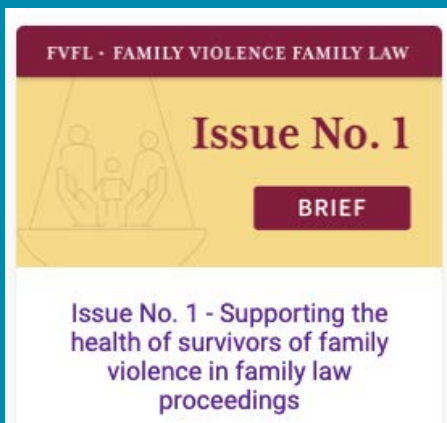
Tracking applications such as "find my phone" can serve as helpful safety features for users who are in unfamiliar company or locations, but they can also become a tool for surveillance when used as a form of coercive control against a partner or child.

COERCIVE CONTROL AND THE LAW

Recent changes in the *Divorce Act* have included coercive control in its definition of “family violence.”⁴¹ This implicates coercive control as a critical factor in family court proceedings that seek to determine the best interests of the child. The task of developing trauma- and violence-informed approaches to this legislation is currently underway among legal professionals in Ontario and across Canada,⁴² and there is much potential for cross-sectoral collaborations among jurists, advocates, researchers, and survivors.⁴³

However, adult and child survivors of family violence remain vulnerable to coercive control in various ways:

- **Expectations of “friendly parenting” within the family court system leave survivors vulnerable to continued family violence.** Parents who commit family violence may portray the protectiveness of their ex-partner or the fears of the child as evidence of “parental alienation.”⁴⁴
- **Parental decision-making responsibilities are granted to the parent that the child is with at the time.** Children are therefore left vulnerable to direct or indirect forms of family violence by a parent with a history of coercive control.⁴⁵
- **The *Divorce Act* applies to families where legally married partners are seeking a divorce.** It may therefore not apply to families in which the parents are in a common-law partnership or are not seeking a legal end to the marriage.⁴⁶
- **Coercive control is not currently addressed in the *Criminal Code*.** While efforts to criminalize coercive control have been supported by some advocates to end gender-based violence and researchers, others have cautioned that, without broader systemic change, such legislation carries risks of perpetuating the disproportionate institutionalization of Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized individuals.⁴⁷



Learn More: The [Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence in Family Law Proceedings](#) project supports the establishment of five regional Communities of practices through the [Alliance of Canadian Research Centres on Gender-based Violence](#).

It aims to identify emerging issues relating to the support of family violence survivors engaging in the family law sector and to enhance training opportunities for gender-based violence and family law specialists in trauma-informed practice.

Readers can also view a recent webinar on [Bridging the Gap between the needs of survivors of family violence and the realities of family court](#), featuring Linda Baker & Pamela Cross.



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The conceptualization of coercive control has, since its early iterations, emphasized the “‘condition of unfreedom’ that is experienced as *entrapment*” by survivors.⁴⁸ This entrapment can be most pernicious when it forms a pattern of “ongoing, historical, frequent” forms of abuse, and thus departs from conventional ideas about “violence.”⁴⁹ It is especially harmful to children who may neither understand the treatment they are experiencing nor possess the language (or credibility) to articulate these processes.

By implication, the “deprivation of victims’ liberty, and the violation of victims’ right to security, dignity, and autonomy” that comprises coercive control can be viewed as a violation of survivors’ human rights under both the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.⁵⁰ The harms of coercive control upon children extend these violations further to implicate the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.⁵¹ The harms discussed in this issue highlight a few of the ways that coercive control may be understood as contrary to the best interests of the child (Article 3) and a violation of their right to life, survival and development (Article 6).

While the full extent of such human rights concerns is beyond the scope of this Issue, they are vitally important to ensuring that the issue of coercive control is addressed not only in terms of the individual-level behaviours of those who harm but also in terms of the social and moral implications that this form of violence has for those who are being targeted, as well as for society at large. Understandings of coercive control—and violence more generally—must therefore go beyond a reductive view of harms against one family member as separate and distinct from the harms experienced by others (namely, children). They should also expand to addressing the unique contexts in which children experience coercive control beyond the family violence focus discussed in this Issue (e.g. bullying).

Tailored responses to the specific constellation of coercive and controlling tactics experienced by each survivor are needed in various sectors including:



- Gender-based violence support work and safety planning
- Family law proceedings and client screenings
- Medical and mental health supports
- Law enforcement
- Public awareness

Addressing coercive control requires us to confront the continuum of violence that adult and child survivors often experience, and the corresponding need to support the whole person who is experiencing coercive control. Children’s sense of agency, identity, and self-worth—as well as the social barriers they may face in accessing safety and healing—must all be considered when forming appropriate supports, and not simply the isolated “problems” of the child–parent relationship.

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THE LEARNING NETWORK

Linda Baker, Learning Director, Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Robert Nonomura, Research Associate, Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Dianne Lalonde, Research Associate, Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

Jassamine Tabibi, Research Associate, Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Diana Corredor, Communications Coordinator, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children, Western University

SUGGESTED CITATION

Nonomura, Robert; Baker, Linda. (2022). Children Experience Coercive Control: What You Need to Know. Learning Network Issue 37. London, Ontario: Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children.
ISBN: 978-1-988412-57-3

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vawln@uwo.ca

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ENDNOTES

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³⁹ Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Salter & Harris, 2021

⁴⁰ Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Salter & Harris, 2021

Douglas, H., Harris, B., Dragiewicz, M. (2019). Technology-facilitated domestic and family violence: Women's experiences. *British Journal of Criminology*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azy068>

⁴¹ The *Divorce Act*, Section 2(1) states that:

Family violence means any conduct, whether or not the conduct constitutes a criminal offence, by a family member towards another family member, that is violent or threatening or that constitutes a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour or that causes that other family member to fear for their own safety or for that of another person—and in the case of a child, the direct or indirect exposure to such conduct—and includes

- a. physical abuse, including forced confinement but excluding the use of reasonable force to protect themselves or another person;
- b. sexual abuse;
- c. threats to kill or cause bodily harm to any person;
- d. harassment, including stalking;
- e. the failure to provide the necessities of life;
- f. psychological abuse;
- g. financial abuse;
- h. threats to kill or harm an animal or damage property; and
- i. the killing or harming of an animal or the damaging of property

⁴² Canadian Bar Association. (July 21–August 18, 2021). Family violence: An essential series for every family lawyer. https://www.cbapd.org/details_en.aspx?id=on_on21fam09x

⁴³ Nonomura, Poon, Scott, et al. 2021

⁴⁴ Cross, May 26, 2020

⁴⁵ Cross, P. May 26, 2020; Nonomura, Poon, Scott, et al. 2021

⁴⁶ Nonomura, Poon, Scott, et al. 2021

⁴⁷ Hayes, Renzetti, & Grant, 2022

⁴⁸ Stark, 2007, p. 205. Quoted and discussed in Stark & Hester, 2019, p. 89

⁴⁹ Stark, E. (2010). Do violent acts equal abuse? Resolving the gender parity/asymmetry dilemma. *Sex Roles*, 62(3–4), 201–211. P. 207.

⁵⁰ Chambers, L. (2021). What is coercive control? Submission for Bill C-247. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/432/JUST/Brief/BR11101619/br-external/ChambersLori-e.pdf>. P. 5

⁵¹ Government of Canada. (2017). Rights of children. Ottawa, Ontario: Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-children.html>