


Learning Network & Knowledge Hub | Webinar Series

# Understanding Coercive Control Against Children: Impacts and Supportive Responses

Presented by Emma Katz and Catherine Lawler

November 22, 2022  
1:00 to 2:30 pm ET

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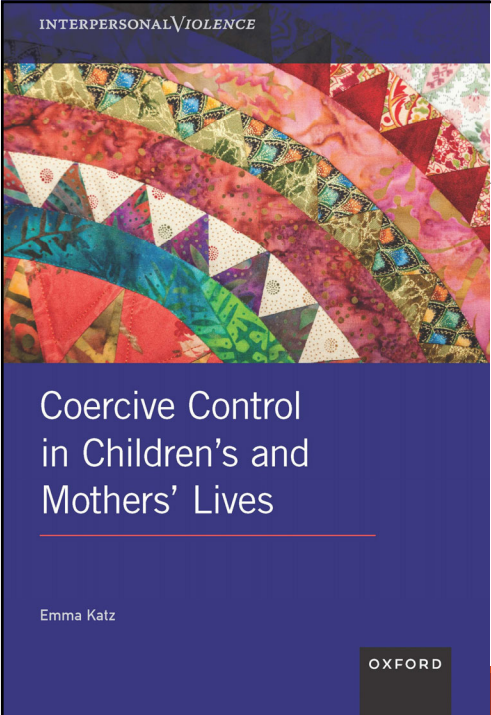
# Understanding Coercive Control and its Impacts on Children

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**Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives**  
Oxford University Press, 2022

The first book ever published on children and coercive control.

Turns the focus to perpetrators and the ways they abuse their children as well as their partners. Demonstrates how it is the coercive controller's actions that are directly harming the child's world, their experience of life, and what they can and cannot do each day.

Shows positive outcomes for mothers and children during the post-abuse recovery process, where mothers and children who received timely and appropriate supports were able to build new family lives based on reciprocal care and mutual respect.

Calls for children and their survivor parents to be seen as co-victims and co-survivors.

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## The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

Coercive control involves situations where somebody subjects another person/s to **persistent, wide-ranging controlling behaviour** over a long period of time and **makes it clear that standing up for themselves will be punished**, i.e. 'do what I say, or else...?'

Punishment may take many forms; it is not always violence, but it will be something the victim dreads, such as cruel verbal putdowns, hurting loved ones, coercing the victim into unwanted forms of sexual activity, or economically abusing the victim.

By repeatedly punishing the victim for non-compliance, the perpetrator intends to **demoralise and terrorise the victim into a state of permanent obedience** (Stark, 2007).

Not all intimate partner/domestic/family violence and abuse involves coercive control. Coercive control is particularly severe and serious. It causes high levels of harm and is a key risk factor for intimate partner femicide (Monckton Smith, 2020).

**97%** of perpetrators convicted for controlling and coercive behaviour in England and Wales in the year ending December 2020 were male (Women's Aid, 2021).

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## The lives and freedoms of victims are seriously limited

The perpetrator is motivated by their **deeply held and harmful drive to obtain control over the other people in their family** and to maintain that control indefinitely (Monckton Smith, 2020). It's **not** about passion or lost tempers, it's about a perpetrator believing they are **entitled** to control others in ways that strip them of their normal **rights** and **liberties**.

For perpetrators, their drive to control is so strong that it tends to **dominate** their whole life — much of their time is spent pursuing, upholding & enjoying the control they seek, and developing a **positive public reputation** that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will ever believe or rally around the victim/s, should the victim/s ask for help (Monk, 2017).

The **impacts** on the family will include fear, confusion, self-doubt/self-blame, low self-esteem, trauma, PTSD, depression, anxiety, illness, deprivation, the feeling of always 'walking on eggshells', trying to please the perpetrator, and not being able to exercise self-determination over key areas of their lives (Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Crossman et al, 2016).

There may also be attempts from victims to **fight back**, resist, speak the truth about what is happening, and protect themselves and the other victims in the family from further harm (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).

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## Coercive control occurs pre- and post separation, and includes:

- control of **time** and **movement**, and the **micro-management** of the victim's everyday life & self-expression
- **emotional** and **psychological** abuse against the victim and their loved ones (including pets)
- **manipulation** of the victim, including through periods of strategic 'niceness'
- **sexual coerciveness** and **rape**, **paranoia** about infidelity, intimate **image/video abuse** and **reproductive coercion**, and harming the victim's ability to protect their **sexual health**
- **economic abuse**, including interfering with the victim's employment, preventing them from having money/assets, refusing to contribute to bills, creating debt for which victims are liable, and taking them to court vexatiously so their money and assets are drained by legal proceedings
- **isolation** from sources of support, including family, friends, communities and professionals
- **monitoring**, **harassment** and **stalking** (including via technology)
- **manipulating others** (including children) to upset, marginalise and disempower the victim
- using and manipulating **legal processes** and **institutions/systems** to threaten, harm, impoverish or discredit the victim
- **physical violence**, **physical abuse**, **intimidation**, and **threats** of violence against the victim, their loved ones (including **pets**) and their **property**



(Dragiewicz et al, 2022; Gutowski et al, 2022; Sharp-Jeffs, 2022; Spearman et al, 2022; Tarzia and Hegarty, 2022; Monk and Bowen, 2021; Tarzia, 2021; Monckton Smith, 2020; McDonald et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Pittman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Miller et al, 2010; Stark, 2009; Stark, 2007.)

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## It is continual multi tactical abuse, not isolated incidents of violence

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Professor Evan Stark's (2007) book *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life* argued that our responses to coercive control-based domestic violence were **failing** survivors because they **wrongly** see domestic violence as discreet incidents or episodes of violence, and 'virtually all domestic violence research and intervention is based on this model' (Stark, 2009, p. 293).

This **overlooks** that coercive controllers are using many other abusive tactics besides physical violence – including emotional abuse, monitoring, isolation, stalking, economic abuse, legal abuse and the manipulation of systems and professionals – and **they are using these tactics continuously**.

Survivors are therefore being **constantly abused**, even if there has not been an incident of physical violence for months (or ever).

We must avoid shaping our responses around the history of violence, and avoid assuming the abuse is now over because the last incident of violence was not recent. Instead we must look more **comprehensively** at **all** the tactics of coercive control the abuser is using.

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## DARVO

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When a survivor attempts to break free, raises concerns about the abuse and seeks safety for themselves and their family members, the perpetrator typically responds by **justifying, minimising**, or outright **denying** their abusive behaviour, and by attempting to turn the blame on the survivor by making **counter accusations** against the survivor (Harsey and Freyd, 2020).

Common counter-accusations from the perpetrator in these circumstances include that the survivor has caused the children to dislike the perpetrator and has 'alienated' the children from the perpetrator, that the survivor is 'crazy' in some way, or that the survivor is the violent and abusive one (Meier et al, 2019; Monk, 2017).

This tactic is known as **DARVO**: **D**eny the abuse, **A**ttack the credibility and character of the survivor, **R**everse the narrative about who is the **V**ictim and **O**ffender, and about who is the abusive parent and who is the safe parent for the children (Harsey and Freyd, 2020).

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## Child co-victims/co-survivors

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Children are not only harmed by ‘witnessing’ or being ‘exposed to’ incidents of physical violence.

Children are harmed by the **whole regime of coercive control** that the perpetrator is imposing on their family. The lives of everyone within the family are greatly **distorted** and **damaged** by the regime of coercive control the perpetrator is imposing due to their drive and determination to assert and maintain control. This is the case **both pre- and post-separation** of the parents/divorce.

Family life becomes **distorted**, and children’s and mothers’ **ordinary behaviours** and **liberties** become **limited** and **shrunk** in harmful and distressing ways.

Children’s and adult’s experiences of coercive control are so similar that children can best be understood as **co-victims and co-survivors** (Katz, 2022).

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## Every tactic of coercive control harms children too (pre-separation)

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‘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’ (Shannon, age 10).

‘I would be sort of quiet, I didn’t shout-out or run around.’ (Bob, age 12)

‘[The kids] couldn’t have any friends round because he’d kick off or something. Kids’ parties were another problem because he’d be accusing me of trying to [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn’t do any after school clubs because [he insisted] I had to be back [home] by a certain time. Me and the kids weren’t allowed to go round to see their grandparents.’ (Isobel, mother).

‘He’d tell us [me and my son] that we couldn’t touch the food in the fridge, that we weren’t allowed to eat, he’d lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn’t get out.’ (Eloise, mother)

‘If I wanted to go shopping then I had to take a speaking child with me, he would ask them where we’d been and what we’d been doing.’ (Isobel, mother)

‘[My son] wouldn’t do things like make his own sandwich, he’d be too scared of doing it wrong.’ (Sybil, mother)

‘It got to the point where the kids were talking to me like dirt, and ignoring everything I said, because that’s all they saw from their dad. It was so stressful. ... Anything I said to the kids he would override on purpose. I was nothing in that house.’ (Bella, mother)

‘Once I got home a few minutes late. He started banging my head against the wall, calling me all these names, saying: “where have you been you bitch?” and [my daughter] Shannon was just shaking like mad and crying.’ (Ellie, mother) (Katz, 2022)

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## Every tactic of coercive control harms children too (post-separation)

'He used to bring some other men and try to break into the house, and me and my brothers feared for our lives because he used to smack on the doors, and I used to hide.' (Vince, age 13)

'My dad's injunction ran out, he kept turning up at the house... Then he wrote something on the back door, he wrote "dead bitch", and my mum tried to get it removed before we could see it, but I saw it before it got removed.' (Roxie, age 11)

'[During our family court ordered weekend visits to him] he'd say "oh your mum makes me cry, your mum makes me do this stuff; I can't see you because of your mum", he'd just paint such a bad picture of her... he blamed her and us for everything... I felt very small and bad... [After our weekend visit with our father, my sister Zoe] would be off school most Mondays because she felt so ill, she was on the sofa being held by mum and crying... I was just so drained and I felt like crying all the time.' (Grace, age 14)

'The first time I pressed charges, he got a few months for battery and he got let out after just a few weeks. He started to stalk us. . . . [The children and I] used to stay out of the house and away from him for as long as possible... then when we'd come in we'd lock the gate, pull the curtains across, lock all the doors, put the alarm on, and then go upstairs out of the way. We'd just live upstairs and then try and get out when we could. [This only came to an end when] he attacked me again and [was arrested again].' (Isobel, mother)

'He's still really putting them through it emotionally. He told them that if we moved here [to our new house] they'd get shot and stabbed because that's what happens in our area, things like that, so he's really still hurting them emotionally. ... When they come back [from contact visits], they're awful. Their behavior's really bad, and normally I'm getting verbally attacked by my son who's having a go at me.' (Marie, mother) (Katz, 2022)

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## Understanding coercive control

Coercive control can best be seen as a multi-stranded type of abuse that occurs in the most serious cases of intimate partner/domestic/family violence and abuse.

'Coercive control is a phenomenon that includes many strands of abusive behavior that harm both adults and children. It encompasses abusive acts toward the victimized parent, abusive acts toward children that would be categorized as child abuse and child neglect, and many other harmful behaviors.' (Katz, 2022, p. 105).

Perpetrators usually continue their campaigns of coercive control post-separation, so separation/divorce should not be seen as the end of the abuse. It is very likely that the abuser is still abusing and the adult and child victims-survivors are still being abused post-separation.

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## Impacts on children

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The perpetrating parent's on-going choice to subject their family to coercive control day after day, year after year, and the lack of action from professionals, institutions and courts to put effective and lasting barriers in the way of the perpetrator continuing to abuse, were negatively effecting children's:

well-being, welfare, mental health, physical health, educational achievement, development, economic position, housing stability, social and community ties, and their faith in justice, institutions and the rule of law (Katz, 2022; Carlson et al, 2019; Artz et al, 2014; Øverlien, 2010; Holt et al, 2008; Kitzmann et al, 2003).

Key sources of resilience that might normally help children in adversity – e.g., access to healthy adults in their wider family, a close bond with their safe parent, a sense of community belonging – could be wholly or partially unavailable to children because of the nature of the coercive control (Katz, 2022)

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## Children's relationship with their abusive fathers

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How children felt about their abusive fathers depended on several factors, including how their father behaved towards them and to extent to which his abusiveness was obvious/covert.

Some children were very clear that their father was an abuser and they very reasonably hated him, others felt more confused and uncertain, some longed for their father's love and attention, and some wholly aligned with their abusive father and were very hostile towards their survivor mother (Katz, 2022)

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## Children's relationship with their abusive fathers

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Proximity to perpetrators meant that children were living within the distorted version of reality that perpetrators create around themselves at all times (Williamson, 2010), with harmful consequences for children.

Within this distorted version of reality, norms around emotionally healthy behaviour were suspended. Children struggled to convert their own lived experiences into accurate assessments of what was happening around them, and were unable to express their authentic selves (Katz, 2022).

Part of recovering from coercive control involved children breaking free from this:

'I stopped seeing him a couple of years ago... I've spoken to two counsellors. One gave me these exercises to help me see what Dad was doing [being emotionally abusive], and how people around me were trying to help me. That helped my confidence... [After I stopped contact] I could just be, I suppose, *me* again, because before I had really low confidence and stuff. So, I suppose I've come out of my shell a lot more and I can talk to people more. (Grace, age 14)

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## Children's relationships with their siblings and survivor mothers

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Relationships between children and their siblings and survivor mothers could be very variable – ranging from very close and supportive to very strained and distant, depending on exactly what had happened in each family.

Post-separation from the abuser, factors that helped to strengthen these relationships included:

- Being able to live a life that included minimal or no post-separation abuse (achieving this usually required very limited or no on-going contact between children and perpetrators).
- Having a safe and suitable place to live, and having sufficient money to live on.
- Having access to the psychological, emotional and practical support they needed to recover from the psychological, emotional physical, sexual, social, and/or economic harm that the perpetrator subjected them to, and to build new lives.

(Katz, 2022)

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## Children's relationships with their siblings and survivor mothers

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When timely and appropriate supports were available to survivors, and perpetrators were no longer a significant presence in their lives, long term results could be transformational:

[Our new home] may not be a mansion, but I like it. I love it here. It's nice and cosy. It's just better and the best. (Shannon, age 10)

I think [the recovery program] did Bob the world of good. . . . It sort of gave him an understanding so we could talk about things, like a common sort of bond. . . . It sort of helped me as well, because I knew that he got why things had happened. . . . We're at a stage now where the children understand what's happened, and it's not their fault or mine. (Isobel, mother)

[Me and my brother and my mother] just love life at the moment because then we were all dull and didn't like life much and now we're all happy. We feel we can do anything we want. (Katie, age 12)

I'd say we are considerate of each other, we're sensitive to each other's feelings and emotions, and I'd say we have fun. (Isobel, mother) (Katz, 2022)

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## Conclusion

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Coercive control is a severe form of abuse, and perpetrators of coercive control cause high levels of harm.

Coercive control perpetrating fathers tend to subject their children to coercive control in ways that directly and profoundly harm the children's day-to-day experiences of life.

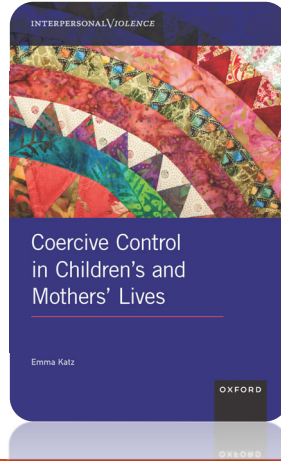
Mothers separating from fathers is unlikely to be enough to make the children safe, as fathers tend to be determined to continue their coercive control post-separation.

The problem lies within the perpetrator. Tackling the problem means **tackling the perpetrator**, holding them **accountable, curbing their ability to continue abusing**, and **helping the adult and child victims/survivors to be safe: really safe**, not just safe 'on paper'.

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## My book

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## Thank you

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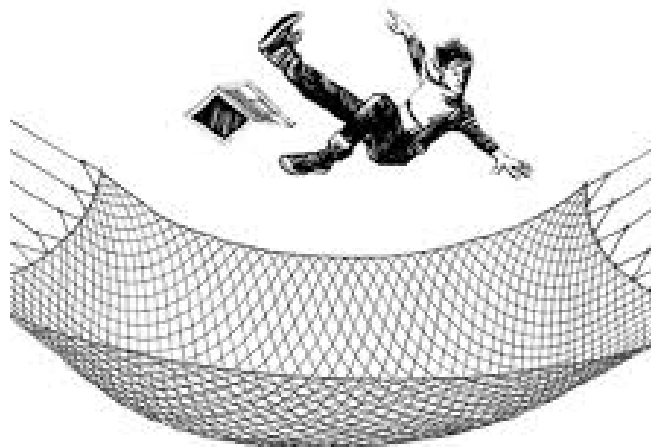
**Catherine Lawler**

Floss and the Boss/Luna Little legs  
Helping children learn about domestic  
abuse and coercive control

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## Trauma informed approach

- Early phase- helps children feel safe and comfortable with the helping adult.
- Middle phase- eco maps, art work, family drawings etc
- End phase- preparation for session termination, goals and future planning



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## fear

- Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control is frequently driven by fear conditioning, keeping another person in a state of chronic fear does not require physical violence to be used all the time, or at all.
- Fear is not just a by-product of domestic abuse; it is a key element that keeps it going. Unlike generalised fear chronic fear builds incrementally via experience it is often about trying to predict and avoid harm.

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## Fear cont.:

- We will all have had fears in our childhood, monsters under the bed, the dark .However children who experience and perceive the world as a dangerous and threatening place are likely to experience prolonged activation of the body stress response system and be easily triggered, hyper/hypo vigilant.

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## Attachment, what we already know

- Children are born with an innate need for safety and attachment. Their brain, the right brain limbic system, enables connection with mums right brain limbic system, communicating without words but with a cry, or facial and body movement, that something is needed
- Not being able to meet these needs is distressing for both baby and mother

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- **Bowlby** noted that the securely attached child is more likely to approach the world with confidence. For many children living with domestic abuse and coercive control the adults in their life may not / not be allowed to provide consistent attuned emotional responses to them.
- **Erikson** talked of basic trust, consistency, continuity, and sameness of experience. Domestic abuse and coercive control by its very nature undermines this. For children living in a highly controlled environment, home can be stressful and unpredictable.

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## Attack on the child parent relationship

- 'Children and young people [describe] a catalogue of fathers' cruel and emotionally abusive behaviour towards them, such as destroying school work, school reports and toys, **harming pets**, not allowing children out of the house, **not allowing them to speak to their mothers** and not allowing friends to phone or come to the house. Some fathers are shown to deliberately emotionally abuse children and young people, insulting them and humiliating them in a similar way to their mothers.'
- (Harne, 2011)

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## Roles children may play in families

- Mothers confidant
- Abusers confidant
- Abusers assistant
- Referee
- Caretaker
- Scapegoat

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## Bat eared children

- Swanston et al (2014) describe children living with domestic abuse as '*miniature radar devices*' who would attempt to predict the perpetrator's behaviour and response, despite this often being unpredictable.
- This was mirrored in Callaghan et al's (2015) research. Children discussed how they would attempt to read the situation at home. One young person talked of attempting to read the perpetrator's mood and how he was likely to react to whatever she might say, however innocuous. She described herself as 'always thinking ahead'. Another child described how she would manage her day in preparation for the perpetrator coming home from work. She would keep an eye on the clock, watching for 'coming home time' when she knew she would have to limit her self-expression.

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## Language - “Its all my fault”

- **Having a conversation with a child**
- Ellie aged 9 came to see me today after an incident of domestic abuse the previous evening. Ellies dad punched her mother in the face, after her mother was verbally defending Ellie for dropping her tea on the floor which was an accident. Ellie was present when the assault happened.
- She has stated it was her fault that mummy got hurt because she dropped her tea
- Ellie has experienced repeated incidents of domestic abuse
- Lets think about how we can respond to Ellie

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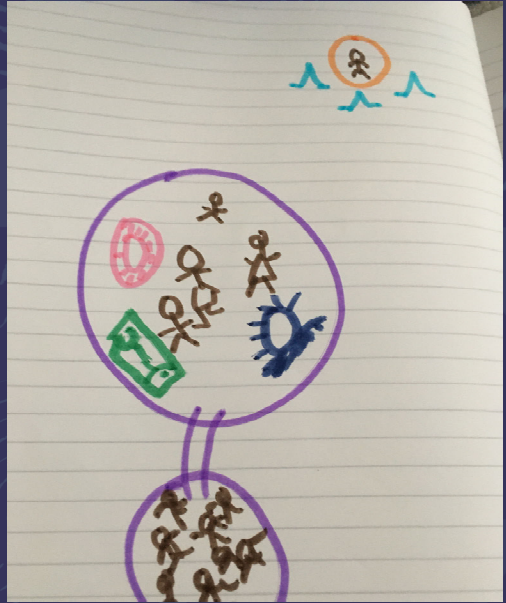
## Possible response

- Daddy has hurt mummy before
- When daddy hurt mummy before did you drop your tea then?
- Is it okay if I share my idea with you?
- It sounds like daddy hurt mummy before even when you didn't drop your tea
- I see, so daddy has hurt mummy lots of other times
- I'm wondering if daddy is trying to blame other people for his hitting and hurting?
- My idea is that isn't not your fault because no one should do hitting and hurting even if they dropped their tea and no one can make people do hitting and hurting

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# King/queen of the Island billy

- Let me tell you about Billy and what happened next



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## Floss and the Boss Story Book a bit about the inspiration and ending

The abuse of animals and abuse of people is often intertwined

Floss is a real life dog from a real life family , none of them had it easy

Traumatic experiences and how we respond to them are as unique and individual as we all are

However whilst acknowledging this we are also aware there are some commonalities, Flosses story mirrors some of these

The ending- reflects the reality of many children living with and experiencing domestic abuse in that they remain at home

Simplicity is key

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## Floss's Eco Map

- Tell me about this figure?
- If that figure could talk what would they say?
- What is the figure feeling?
- What would this figure say to that figure?

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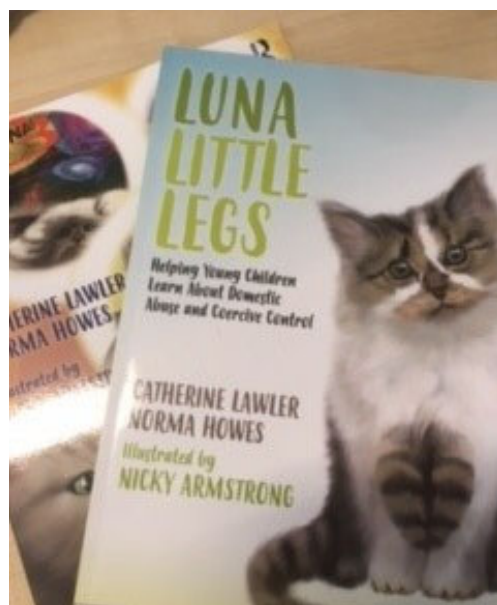
## Floss ,safety planning questions

- Where could floss go in her house when boss is being scary?
- What could floss do whist she is there ?
- Who could floss go to if she has uh-oh or wobbly feelings?

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## Luna little legs

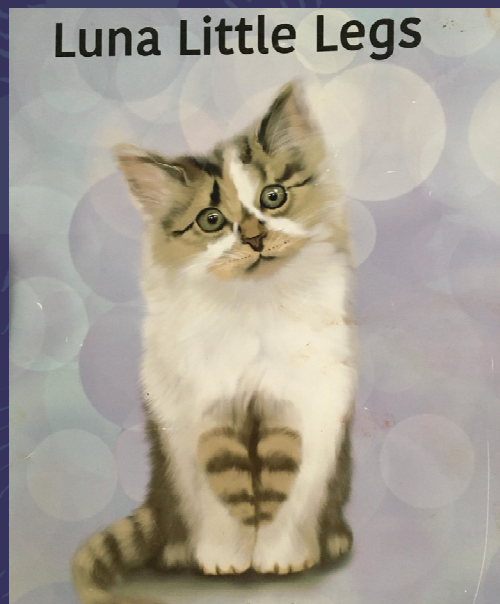
- Created to help young children
- Using age-appropriate rhyming language
- Three potential endings
- Professional guide



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## Lunas brain as a super power

- Luna is walking in a wood, along a beautiful path surrounded by beautiful trees. Suddenly she goes round a corner and come face to face with a great big grizzly bear!
- Using pens and pencils draw or write on the Luna picture where or what she may feeling in her body when she see that bear!
- I wonder what Luna would do?
- Now for the science bit !




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## Some activities

- Paw prints / sticky notes to identify safe people/places
- Paw Patrol
- Mindfulness
- Butterfly hugs
- bubbles and breathing
- Lunas paw breathing



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### Moving to Refuge and Loss

**Backpack activity**

**A denial message-** its better here because you are safe

**A trauma informed message-** it sounds like you are so sad that you can't see Cookie, Ringo and Mittens anymore ( Lunas friends)

It feels like Ringo, Cookie and Mittens are important to you, I would love to know more about them

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## Thank you

Questions

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