

# NOWHERE TO TURN FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Documenting the journeys of children  
and young people into refuges



**women's aid**  
until women & children are safe

## Report author

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## Acknowledgements

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## Dedication

This report is dedicated to the children and young people whose journeys while seeking safety from domestic abuse are documented in this report.

**All names and identifying features used in the report have been changed to protect survivors' anonymity.**

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 45 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of nearly 180 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national dataset on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat help service, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

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# Foreword

In the months since Women's Aid carried out the interviews featured in this report, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the lives of children and young people in many ways. This includes their experiences of domestic abuse. Our recently published report *A Perfect Storm* (available at [www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications)) outlined how women, children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse have intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures. Children's and young people's experiences of abuse have got worse, contact arrangements have been used to further abuse, mothers are worried about the consequences for their children if they themselves fall ill, and it has become harder for children and young people to access support. While many children and young people returned to school, college or university this month, the pandemic is ongoing and its impact on child survivors of domestic abuse will likely be felt for a long time to come.

The forthcoming domestic abuse bill will recognise that children and young people living with domestic abuse experience that abuse in their own right, rather than being witnesses to someone else's experience, and this report is further testament to the importance of this recognition. This report clearly shows the extent to which children and young people fleeing abuse with their mothers are impacted by the shortage in refuge provision this country is facing. Their stories and illustrations of staying in hotels and over-crowded houses during their family's search for a refuge space,

their worries about not having enough to eat during this time, or going without gifts on their birthday, are deeply troubling. Based on our findings reported in *A Perfect Storm*, we know that children and young people's journeys into refuges have, if anything, become even more challenging during the pandemic.

When reading this report, I was struck by the significance of the bond between the children, their mothers and other non-abusive family members. The experience of abuse can have a significant effect on both adult and child survivors' relationships with others, yet this report clearly demonstrates how the children, their mothers, siblings, grandparents and other family members protected and supported each other through the most difficult times. This report also highlights the strength that children and young people conjure during their journeys into safety. Their courage is heartening, and may give hope to other children and young people, as well as their parents and others reading this report. As is pointed out in the introduction, children and young people are often excluded from debates around their needs. This report illustrates powerfully the need to listen to children and young people, and the insights they can offer when given a platform to do so.

**Nicki Norman**  
**Acting Chief Executive**  
**Women's Aid**

September 2020

# Introduction

## Children and young people fleeing domestic abuse

One in seven children and young people under the age of 18 live with domestic abuse at some point during their childhood (Radford et al. 2011). Historically, domestic abuse was viewed by the law and the courts as only affecting the adults involved. In 2000, a landmark case dispelled this myth and set out clearly the detrimental impact and consequences that domestic abuse can have on children<sup>1</sup>, and children and young people will be included in the statutory definition of domestic abuse in the forthcoming domestic abuse bill.

Domestic abuse has been found to be a factor in two-thirds of the serious case reviews where a child has died (Hester, 2006; Brandon et al. 2010).<sup>2</sup> While experiences of living with domestic abuse inevitably vary according to an individual's circumstances (Jaffe et al. 2008), the adverse emotional, physical and social effects it unavoidably brings with it are now widely acknowledged (Stanley 2011). Seeing or overhearing violence in the home is recognised by law as potentially detrimental to children's welfare (The Adoption and Children Act 2002). There is also a body of research which highlights the traumatic effects of living with coercive control (Callaghan et al, 2018),

how abuse of the non-abusive parent is in itself harmful to children, and how some children are used by the perpetrator in the enactment of abuse (Thiara and Gill 2012). While these phenomena may be better captured by the statutory guidance associated with the forthcoming domestic abuse bill, they are currently not sufficiently captured by the law on harm to children, which does not specifically recognise coercive control.

Whilst there is an increasing body of literature on the harmful effects that domestic abuse may have on the children who experience it, and the forthcoming domestic abuse bill recognises the experiences of children in their own right, it is widely acknowledged that children and young people have not been given sufficient priority in public discourses and policies on domestic abuse (Laming 2009; Munro 2012). We rarely hear the voices of children and young people fleeing domestic abuse and making the difficult and sometimes long drawn-out journeys to safe spaces, with those from Black and minoritised backgrounds overlooked even more commonly (Izzidien 2008)<sup>3,4,5</sup>. While children and young people make up more than half of those who live in

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1 See [https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Picking\\_Up\\_the\\_Pieces\\_Report-2012l.pdf](https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Picking_Up_the_Pieces_Report-2012l.pdf)

2 For further information on the harm that domestic abuse causes children also our 2016 Safe article 'A significant failure in parenting'.

3 See also the report 'Supporting Black and Minority Ethnic Children and young people experiencing sexual exploitation'. Available here: [https://www.csepoliceandprevention.org.uk/sites/default/files/cse\\_guidance\\_bame.pdf](https://www.csepoliceandprevention.org.uk/sites/default/files/cse_guidance_bame.pdf)

4 See also the report 'Unequal regard, unequal protection'. Available here: <https://www.equallyours.org.uk/sisters-for-change-report-unequal-regard-unequal-protection/>

5 See also Imkaan's (2020) paper on to the absence of the voices of Black and minoritised girls during the Covid 19 pandemic, available here: <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/covid19-position-paper>

refuges<sup>6</sup>, specialist support for children and young people is not always available<sup>7</sup>, and children and young people scarcely feature in public conversations on refuge life, journeys into them, the barriers that they face on these journeys, and the specific needs that they and their families have. Assessing their needs is an essential first step in ensuring that policy and services deliver the support required. Since a focus purely on child protection can result in the needs of the child's mother being disregarded, and children's needs tend to be overlooked when the focus is solely on the parent, it is important to gain insight into the experiences and needs of children and young

people, as well as adult survivors of domestic abuse.

This report brings together original research findings on the specific needs that children and young people have when fleeing domestic abuse during their family's search for a safe space to live. It is part of our Nowhere to Turn series, which is linked to Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project. While it is important to acknowledge that young people can experience domestic abuse in their own romantic relationships, this report focuses on those children and young people fleeing with their mother.

## The No Woman Turned Away project

The No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) project has been funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) since January 2016. It provides dedicated support to women who face barriers and structural inequalities in accessing a refuge space<sup>8</sup>. Until the end of October 2019, all referrals into the project were made via the National Domestic Violence Helpline. Since November 2019, when the National Domestic Violence Helpline contract holder changed and referrals to the project through this route dropped, the project receives referrals from a wider range of sources, including Women's Aid members, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) organisations listed on Routes to Support<sup>9</sup>, Victim Support, and the British Red Cross. Of the 243 women who engaged with the NWTa project and finished their support between the 12th January 2019 and the 11th

January 2020, approximately half (123 women; 50.6%) were fleeing with at least one child<sup>10</sup>.

Alongside the practical support offered by the NWTa specialist practitioners, we conduct detailed monitoring and analysis of survivors' experiences. This involves tracking information such as the number of referrals, and the barriers and structural inequalities faced by those who are referred. In addition, as a research project, the NWTa project seeks to explore these barriers in more depth, and aims to offer a platform for those affected to share what these barriers and structural inequalities mean for their lived experiences. Given the scarcity of domestic abuse research directly involving children and young people, offering such a platform to children and young people is all the more important.

<sup>6</sup> Our *Domestic Abuse Report 2020* shows that 11,489 women and 13,787 children used a refuge listed on Women's Aid's case management and outcomes monitoring system On Track in the previous financial year.

<sup>7</sup> See our report *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*. Available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report/>

<sup>8</sup> Referred women met one of the following criteria: drug use support needs; alcohol use support needs; mental health support needs; previous eviction from a refuge; no recourse to public funds; history of violence; history of arson; criminal conviction; language or cultural support needs; disability; women with male children over the age of 14; women with large families; women from travelling communities; unable to access refuge accommodation for another reason.

<sup>9</sup> Routes to Support is the UK-wide directory of violence against women and girls. It is run in partnership by Women's Aid Federation of England, Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland, Scottish Women's Aid and Welsh Women's Aid.

<sup>10</sup> See *Nowhere to Turn 2020: Findings from the fourth year of the No Woman Turned Away project*. Available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

## Methodology

This report utilises a range of statistical data sources to give an overview of children and young people's journeys into safety. In addition, we built on our survivor-led research with adult women<sup>11</sup> and worked closely with children and young people, who took part in interviews and produced artwork to document their experiences, to ensure that their voices are at the heart of this report.

We focus specifically on the journeys into safe spaces of children and young people<sup>12</sup> who have been affected by domestic abuse, the barriers and structural inequalities that they encounter, and their specific support needs during this time. We explore what it means to children and young people when finding a safe space to live is further complicated by a national network of refuge services which faces significant challenges<sup>13</sup>, and which falls short of the standards recommended by the Council of Europe Convention (2011) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Specifically, the report draws on the following data sources:

- ▶ Statistical data and case studies on the women and children supported by the NWTa project between 12th January 2019 and 11th January 2020. Data was recorded by the NWTa specialist practitioners on On Track<sup>14</sup>.
- ▶ National On Track data pertaining to children and young people under the age of 18 years who accessed domestic violence

services in England, and who ended their support between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020. This data was collected by 57 domestic abuse organisations which run accommodation-based services (refuge or resettlement services) and which used On Track between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020<sup>15</sup>.

- ▶ Snapshot data of all domestic abuse services in England listed on Women's Aid's online services directory Routes to Support<sup>16</sup> on 1st May 2020.
- ▶ Artwork provided by six children and young people which focuses on their experiences whilst their family was searching for a safe space to live.
- ▶ Interviews conducted with five of the children and young people who took part in the arts-based methods.

We have given all participants pseudonyms in this report to protect their anonymity. Of the six children and young people who took part in art-based methods and interviews, three were female and three were male. The age range was 11 to 17 years. All participants were living in a refuge at the time of research recruitment. Four of the children and young people were White British (one of whom took part in the art production only, i.e. did not take part in the interview), one was from another White background (other European country), and one was from a mixed Black Caribbean and White background. All children identified as cis-

**11** See *Nowhere to Turn 2019: Findings from the third year of the No Woman Turned Away project*. Available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

**12** Children and young people are for this report defined as those under the age of 18 years.

**13** See our report *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*. Available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report/>

**14** On Track is Women's Aid's case management and outcomes monitoring system.

**15** 72 organisations used On Track between the 1st of April 2019 and the 31st of March 2020, 57 of which offered accommodation-based service.

**16** Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation of England and Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland.

gendered. None of them reported a disability. Our findings are therefore not representative of many minoritised groups, and further work

is needed to offer a platform to a more diverse range of children and young people.

## Involving young people in the research

Building on last year's report *Nowhere to Turn, 2019*, this report incorporates a participatory approach with children and young people. Not only did young people take part in in-depth interviews and were involved in creating artwork for the report, they were also given the opportunity to review the ways in which their data was used.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stresses respect for the views of children, and The Council of Europe (2012) highlights the importance of the inclusion of children and young people in research. However, despite these guidelines, children and young people are rarely given the opportunity to express their views to influence policy and practice, especially outside of organisations dedicated to children and young people.

Using art in addition to interviews is an effective way through which children can be given a platform to share their experiences and for their agendas to be integrated into research (James 2007; Mand 2012). Moreover, art may put the child at ease in the researcher-child relationship, by utilising established ways of working, and can therefore be understood as a route to empowerment and participation (Barton 2015).

We used artistic means of expression not only as a way to represent the experiences of children and young people, but also as a way to elicit young people's personal journeys in interviews. In addition, while young people spoke about how taking part had been difficult and sometimes brought up difficult emotions, several of them also spoke about the therapeutic effects. Jade, a pre-teen girl, told us the following:

**“[I had] put everything to the back of my mind and it brings stuff up. When I was doing it, it let things out that I didn't tell anybody.”**

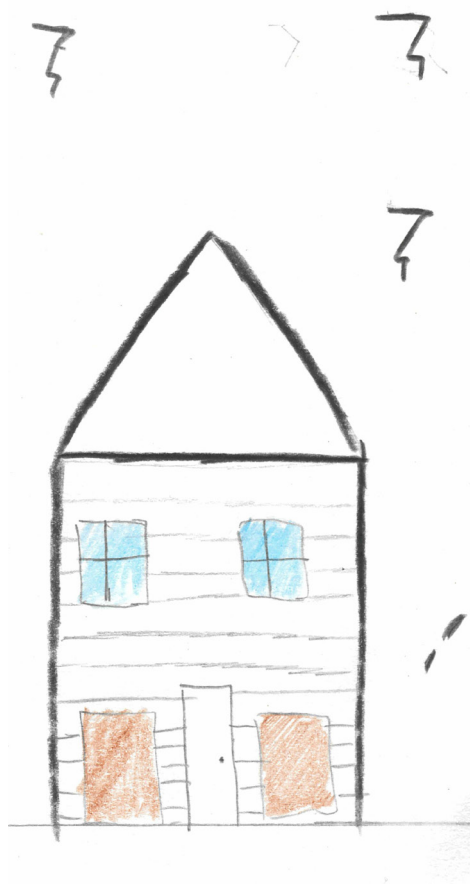
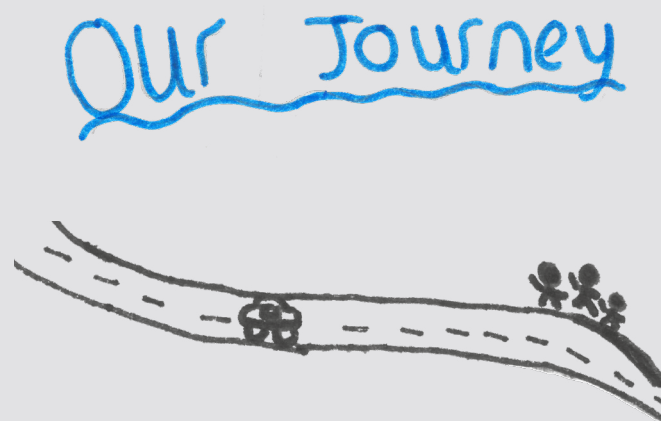
Jade thought that the process had been a positive one overall. The children's worker in her refuge agreed and has continued using art in her sessions with the young people that she supports.



# Part 1: “An upsetting life”

## The journeys of children and young people into refuge

Our research revealed that children and young people often had to deal with a host of practical and emotional difficulties when fleeing an abuser, and that families with children have a range of specific support needs when attempting to access a refuge space. The quote in the title of this part of the report is taken from an interview with a boy who chose the title “an upsetting life” for his artwork about his family’s search for a refuge.

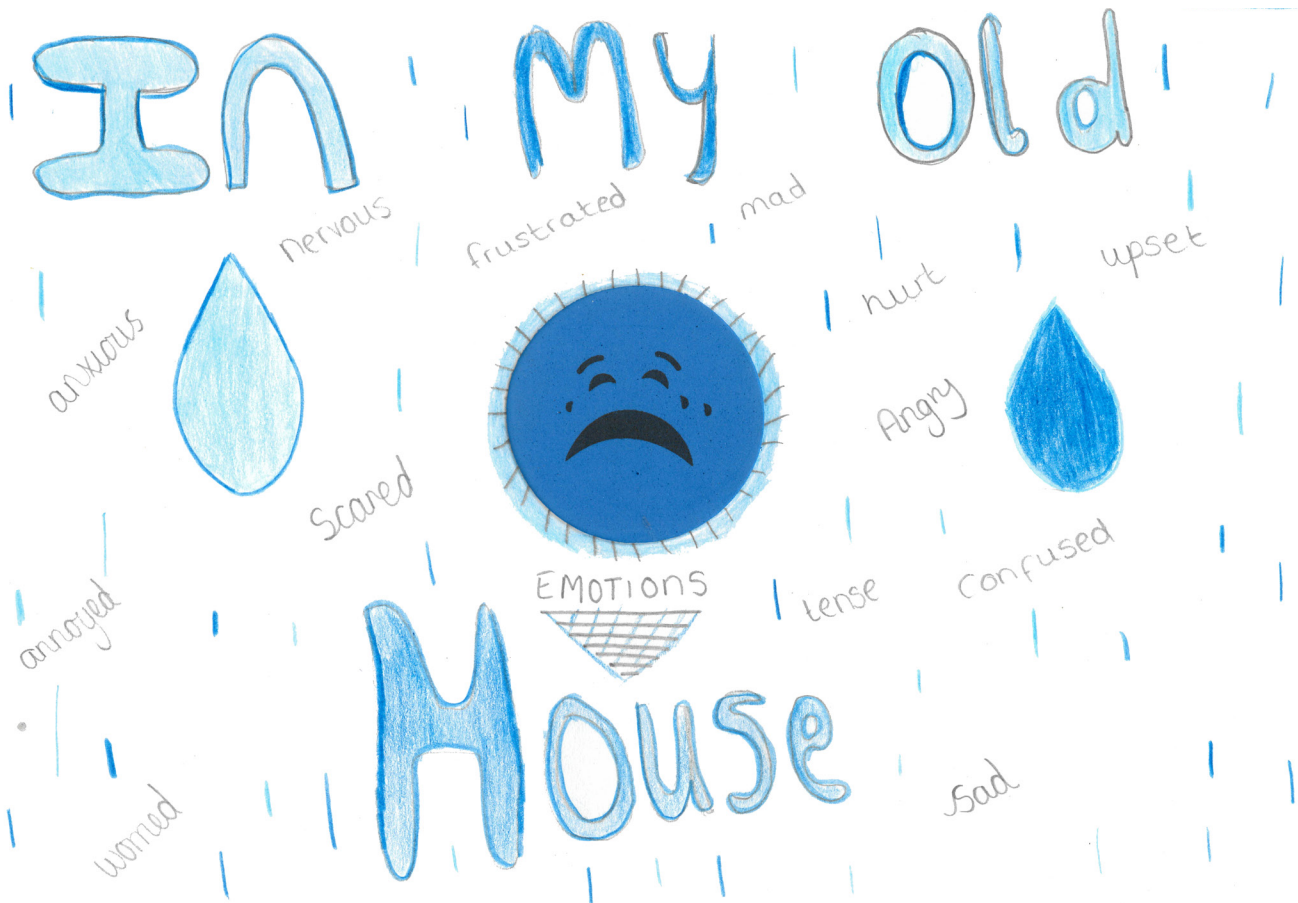


### “A million feelings”

#### Impact on emotional wellbeing

It is important to remember that the vast majority of children and young people, as well as their mothers, have experienced trauma before fleeing the perpetrator. Thus, children and young people are making the difficult journeys away from domestic abuse at a time in their lives when they are often already struggling emotionally. Jade drew the picture of rain and tears on the **next page** to express how she felt when living with abuse.

Jade also drew a picture of a house (**left**), using symbols of lightning to convey her

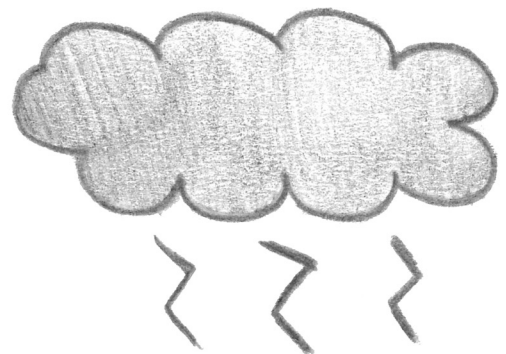


frightening experiences of living with domestic abuse.

Several participants told us that they had been “scared” in the family home. Shannon, for example, told us that since her mother’s ex-partner had thrown a heavy object through a window, she now feels scared every time she sees a window, because it reminds her of the incident. For Shannon, the dark cloud on the **bottom right** illustrated her fear.

Children and young people’s journeys into refuge created an additional host of emotions for them. Leah, for example, told us:

**“Well all those different feelings, like there could be a million feelings that I feel in just a few minutes.”**



this is my messed up feeling before the refuge



Leah created the image **above** to convey her feelings.

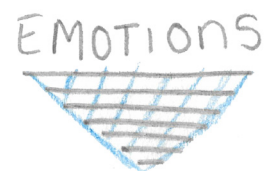
Many young people spoke about having to negotiate their confusion and anger about what was happening, their desire to protect their mother, their complicated feelings towards the perpetrator, and feeling relieved once they had found a place of safety (also see the images **right** and **below**, which are taken from the artwork of several of the participants).

**ANNOYED**



**UPSET**

**Confusion**



“I didn’t know where I was going and what’s going to happen”

## Sensing a lack of control

Many of the young people spoke about the lack of control that they sensed during their journeys. Leah, for instance, told us:

**“I didn’t know where we’re going and what’s going to happen.”**

In many cases, children and young people’s mothers themselves did not know where they were going or what was going to happen. Leah’s mother, for example, did not know that

they were going to stay in a hotel the night that they fled, or when they would finally be able to find a refuge space. Leah drew the image of herself **below** to communicate her sense of confusion.

The sense of not being in control is also captured well in Josh’s account of his journey:

**“My mum rang and we had to stay with my dad ... Granddad dropped us off ... He said for six weeks ... It was just a bit**



When Im Confused of whats going to happen

**like upsetting and just like annoying. I didn't know what was going on ... It's not normal ... Mum's not here and it didn't feel right ... No one knew what was going on and I didn't either ... I didn't know. I didn't know all that was going to happen ... After a while I heard that [my mum] was in the refuge but she never told me that I was coming ... I was stressed. I didn't know what was going on."**

Mothers fleeing domestic abuse who plan their departure in advance face the difficult task of deciding how much information to share with their children at a time when it is essential to keep her family safe from the perpetrator, and when opportunities to stay in a safe place may change rapidly. Our data highlighted this dilemma. Some young people who were not told in advance that they were leaving told us that they were able to live a usual life in the days before they eventually left. Shannon for example told us the following about the day before she left:

**"I didn't know we were moving so it was just a normal day."**

However, some young people who we spoke to wished that they had had access to more information. For some young people the lack of knowledge about their forthcoming journeys made them feel out of control. Sebastian only found out a day before fleeing that he was leaving. He struggled with this lack of advance knowledge:

**"I never knew I was going to move out. I never knew I was going to come here ... [My mother] told me like a day before I think ... I was shocked ... After she told me I didn't know. I just didn't**

**say anything because I was annoyed and I knew if I said something I would be angry or rude."**

Sebastian felt out of control about "everything", both in relation to the abuse from his stepfather and in relation to the decision of leaving. While Sebastian knew that staying with the perpetrator was not an option, he felt like his choices were taken from him. For him both staying and leaving felt like difficult options. This made him feel stuck:

**"It felt like I was in a black hole. I couldn't get out of it ... I just felt like I was in a bad place and I couldn't get out."**

Sebastian drew a lion (**next page**) to signify his anger, as well as his strength. He drew the dark shading around it to illustrate the black hole that he felt he was in. Despite his negative feelings, he drew the lion in multiple colours to illustrate the subsequent happiness he found in the refuge which he moved to.

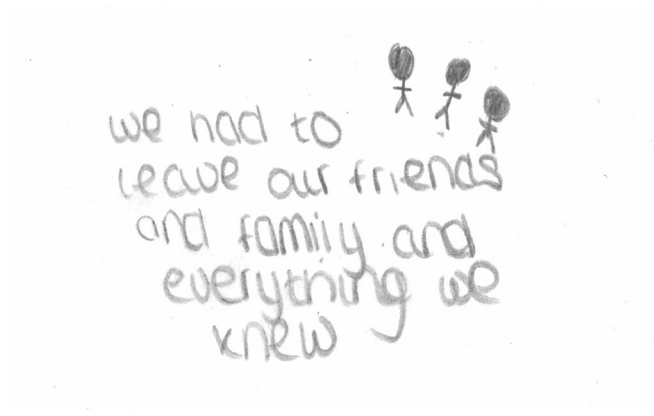
Our research showed that some children's relationship with their mothers was fraught by the need to flee, as it tended to be the mothers who broke this news to their children. Nonetheless young people drew an enormous amount of support from their mothers. The protective factors of the mother-child relationship in recovering from domestic abuse are documented in the research literature extensively.<sup>17</sup> Children and young people knew that their mothers always had their best interest at heart. Shannon, for example, told us that while she tried to change her mother's mind, once she was told that they had to leave, she knew it was "a good decision ... to keep us safe".

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Child-First-Nineteen-Child-Homicides-Report.pdf>



## Saying goodbye to “everything we knew”

### Leaving friends and family



For children and young people, fleeing domestic abuse often meant leaving their friends and extended family behind. Young people expressed how difficult it was to leave “everything [they] knew” (Shannon; see **images above**), especially the people they were close to. Shannon told us:

**“I was just sad because I had to leave my friends and family.”**

Similarly, Sebastian told us:

**“I was a little bit angry because I didn’t want to leave where like all my friends and that ... my nan, because my nan lives there as well.”**

As children and young people did not always know in advance that they were leaving, they were often unable to say goodbye in person. As Josh put it:

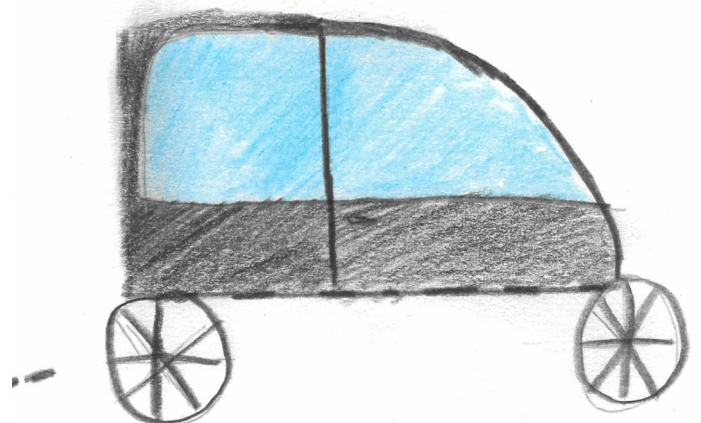
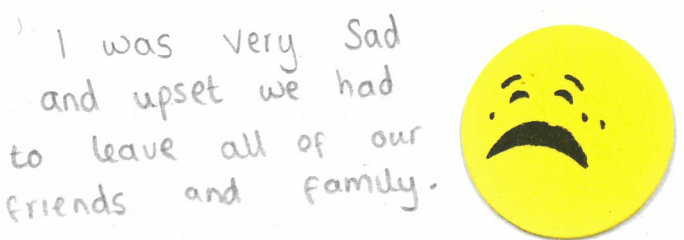
**“I never got to say goodbye to ... my granddad and my friends ... I would have cried when I was saying bye to my friends.”**



Some young people struggled to stay in touch with their friends after fleeing. Shannon, for example, described her relationship with her best friend in the following way:

**“We don’t talk that much though because we moved away from each other.”**

Sebastian told us that he had not spoken to his friends since he had left. Other young people were able to stay in touch with their friends regularly using technology such as FaceTime.

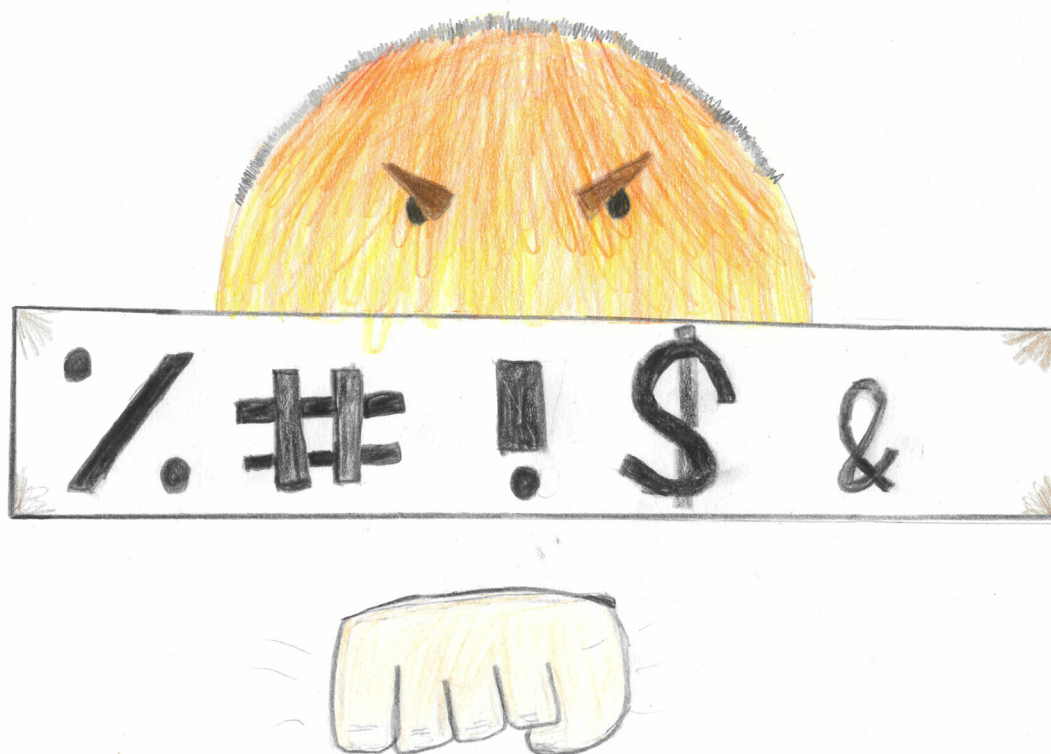


Jade and Josh told us that they talk to or message their friends “every day”. However, in order to stay safe, this required them keeping their location a secret, which, they said, could sometimes make it a little awkward and put barriers between them.

Children and young people experienced a range of feelings about not seeing their abusive fathers or stepfathers after they had left. Jade felt “happy” that she did not have to see her former stepfather anymore. Leah, on the other hand, had more complicated feelings. She told us that she was angry at her father and scared of him tracking her and her mother down. She drew the angry emoji **below** to express her feelings about this. Leah told us that she was glad that she did not have to see her father anymore “so he wouldn’t hurt us or anything”. While she stated that her life away from him

would be safer, given that she had spent most of her life with him, she nonetheless missed him on another level.

For Josh, his father was not the person he and his mother were fleeing from. His contact with him was nonetheless problematic because it was considered of utmost importance for the family’s safety that he would not be aware of the location of the refuge that Josh and his mother were moving to. This initially led to Josh staying with his father rather than moving to the refuge with his mother. Once Josh had moved to the refuge, there were concerns about him spending time with his father. Josh nonetheless kept up contact, but was required to keep his location a secret. This was not always easy for Josh. Families fleeing domestic abuse are forced to negotiate such difficult dilemmas with much at stake.





## “We had to leave our school”

### Disruption of education

Almost half (47.4%) of children and young people in refuges are of compulsory school age (5 to 15 years old)<sup>18</sup>, and children and young people who have to leave home because of domestic abuse often face significant disruption to their education. Josh, for example, told us that he came to a refuge “halfway through the third lesson”. Analysis of national On Track data shows that the most common months of referrals of families with children are July (10.8%) and September (10.5%), which fall at the end and the beginning of the school year, respectively. We know from our work that many women plan their journey into safety in such a way which ensures that their children’s education is disrupted as little as possible.

Leaving their school can be challenging for young people, especially if they are part of social networks at school. One participant, Jade, told us:

**“I was crying because I left my old school and I was sad that I had to start a new one because I wanted to stay in my old school.”**

The disruption of education can also impact on learning and a child’s or young person’s capacity to manage the curriculum at a level commensurate with their peers. The upheaval of their education, as well as their associated social lives, featured in many of our interviews with children and young people. Jade told us that in the week that her mother was trying to find a suitable refuge space, she had to sit her SAT exams:

**“I went to school Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday because it was my SATs week ... I had to do them ... and I didn’t even get the results.”**

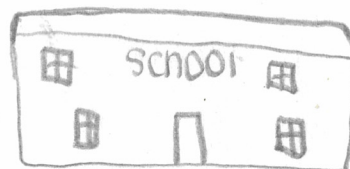


▲ Image by Jade

Jade managed to find an enormous amount of strength during this time, and while she never received her results, she was confident that she had done well.

Shannon, who was at the beginning of her final GCSE year when she fled, struggled to catch up on her school work once she had started in a new school as she had to change one of her subjects:

**“We had to leave our school which made it hard to join another one because in my old school we was learning different things ... I have two of the same courses now but then I had to choose another one ... And I’m far behind in the coursework.”**



▲ Image by Shannon

These findings suggest that children and young people who have to move because of domestic abuse should be offered additional support, as well as being given a fast track process into a new school.

<sup>18</sup> This is based on national On Track data.

## “Everything was in different places”

### Living transient lives

**Table 1** below shows where families with children who were supported by the NWTAs project this year stayed while searching for a refuge space.

As can be seen in Table 1, many families sofa-surfed, and some stayed in emergency accommodation and hotels. One teenage boy was forced to sleep rough with his mother. This is not an isolated case, and previous reports have documented further cases of children and pregnant women sleeping rough.<sup>19</sup> As fleeing an abuser often involved long, difficult and fragmented journeys for women and children, their experiences sometimes included frequent moves between unsafe and unsuitable types of accommodation.

Our interviews with children and young people offered further insight into these temporary solutions, and what staying in different places felt like to children and young people in reality. Josh stayed with his father (not the perpetrator) for three weeks, and with his grandfather for a few days, while his mother made arrangements

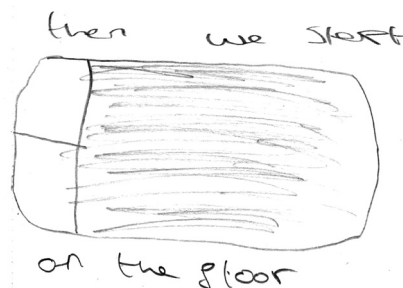


▲ Image by Kevin

for him to join her in a refuge. While Josh was happy to stay with his father for a while, the house was very crowded:

**“I have two brothers, three sisters ... I have my own room, but I have two brothers sharing. Me, my big brother ... and my little brother ... There’s a bed there. Mattress there and a bed there ... So I sleep on the floor with a mattress.”**

Another participant, Kevin, slept on the floor of his aunt’s house for several weeks before moving to a refuge. He drew the picture **below** of a mattress.



**Table 1:** Where did women fleeing with children stay while waiting for a refuge space\*

	Number of women	Percentage out of total number of women fleeing with children (out of 123)
Spent time sofa-surfing	49	39.8%
Spent time in emergency accommodation	14	11.4%
Paid to stay in a hostel/B&B/hotel	7	5.7%
Spent time sleeping rough (including using 24h spaces to sleep, or living in her car)	2 (only in one case with her child)	1.6%

\* We were not necessarily aware of where women were staying and not all women are represented here. Some women stayed in more than one type of temporary accommodation. We did not always collect information on whether children were staying with their mother at this time.

Josh spoke about how three weeks can seem like a long time when you are in limbo:

**“I was there for three weeks but it was like more weeks added on for waiting.”**

Another participant, Leah, spoke about her experiences of staying in hotels whilst waiting for a refuge space. As Leah’s mother was unable to claim the benefits necessary to pay for refuge, Leah and her mother were forced to stay in hotels for several weeks before finding a suitable refuge. Leah’s quote below captures her sense of transience well:

**“We were in three different Travel Lodges and one Holiday Inn or something ... We were in a hotel for a week, then we moved to another and we were in there for a bit over a week then we moved to the next one and we spent a bit more than three weeks I think.”**

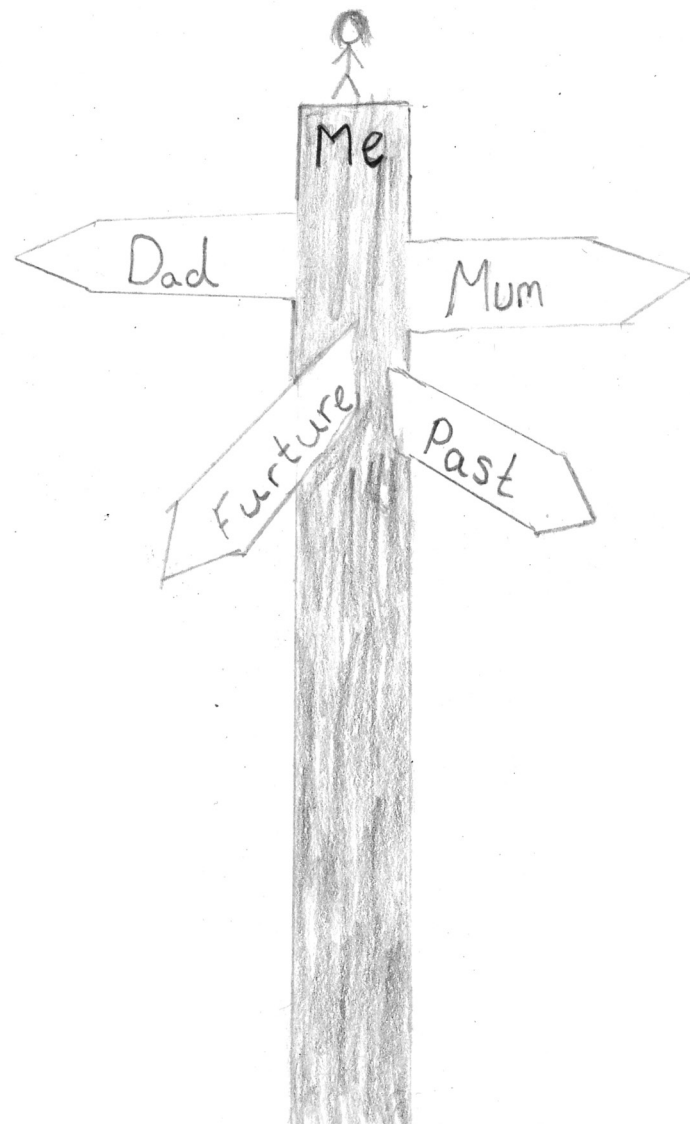
Leah spoke about how she felt that hotels were inadequate at catering to her needs at this difficult time in her life:

**“Some people were shouting at the hotel room that it was too noisy ... Because like we were in the hotel for ages and we didn’t really get ... like there was loads of people. There was people on top of us and stuff and they were being so noisy. I didn’t get much sleep. There was no kids or anything so no one I got along with.”**

Leah also found it difficult to live without any of her belongings for so long. She and her mother had had to leave their belongings behind because if they had taken anything then her “dad would just question more”. As expressed in the image on the **right**, Leah felt that “everything was in different places”: her belongings, but also her mum and her dad, and her past and future.

On top of struggling with the emotions that came with the experience of abuse and leaving her family home, Leah found the lack of things to do a real challenge:

**“We didn’t go out much. We used to stay in the hotel room because there wasn’t much we could do ... I stayed in bed and watched TV. My mum let me watch it all day if I wanted ... it felt like the nights were very short so I didn’t get much sleep, but it felt like the days were really long ... It was really boring.”**



We where in the hotel  
for a long time  
waiting for a refuge

July						
mon	Tue	wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	sun
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22 <small>birthday</small>	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

June					
mon	Tue	wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6
8	9	10	11	12	13
15	16	17	18	19	20
22	23	24	25	26	27

Leah's picture (**above**) of a calendar illustrates how the three weeks that she stayed in a hotel seemed like a very long time to her.

In addition, whilst staying in hotels, Leah and her mother were not able to cook, which made it very difficult to eat well, especially given that Leah and her mother only had £20 a week to spend on food (see section on financial struggles for further information):

**"We had a lot of sandwiches and stuff because there was a shop and they had 50p on like ham and stuff so we used to get a lot of that sort of stuff."**

“It was hard to live with £20 a week”

## Children and young people’s financial struggles

While our young participants told us that their mothers did all they could to protect them from hardship, the financial struggles that came with leaving a perpetrator did not go unnoticed to several of them<sup>20</sup>. The themes of financial difficulties and a lack of adequate food and clothing featured heavily in some of the children’s and young people’s accounts.

Data from *Nowhere to Turn 2020: Findings from the fourth year of the No Woman Turned Away project* showed that 18 out of 180 women (10.0%) who were supported by the project between 1st April 2019 (when we started recording this data) and 11th January 2020 struggled to pay for essentials while waiting for a refuge space. Additional analysis revealed that half of these women (nine women; 50.0%) had at least one child. Two of the women (11.1%) had five children. The NWTAs specialist practitioners offered support around finances in 11.9% of all cases.

We already heard in the section on ‘living transient lives’ how some young people

were forced to leave their homes with few possessions. Shannon told us the following about how they packed before fleeing her mother’s ex-partner:

**“Just clothes ... We left some things at my nan’s and our friend’s. We just brought the stuff we needed ... we had to do it really fast and we only had a day.”**

Leah was not able to take clothes with her when she fled and she was not able to buy any:

**“We didn’t get any clothes but [the social worker] got us some donated clothes.”**

The section on ‘living transient lives’ also pointed to how some young people lived in poverty whilst waiting for a refuge space. We heard how the £20 that Leah and her mother, who were unable to claim benefits, were given by their social worker (see picture **below**) was



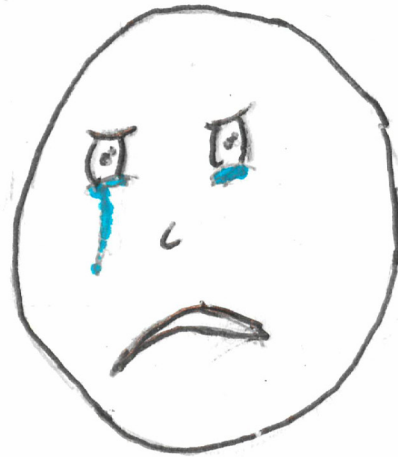
<sup>20</sup> See our recent report *The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Economics of Abuse* for further information.

never enough, especially given that they were unable to cook in the hotels in which they were staying. Leah told that the following:

**“Sometimes [the social worker] brought clothes and stuff, but most of the time she brought food and she used her own money which she wasn’t supposed to do, but she did it because she felt sorry for us ... We went to a shop like Asda or something and she’d let us choose stuff that we wanted and she’d pay with her money ... because we had hardly anything to eat so my mum used to go to the shop a lot and she had to try to get like 50p on canned stuff like that. Really cheap stuff.”**

Leah told us that early on in the week she was worried about not having enough to eat later in the week. She drew the crying face on the **top right** “because it was hard to live with £20 a week ... it might not sound hard but it is.”

Leah also drew the picture **below** to signify how on her birthday she did not receive any



presents because her mother was not able to afford any.

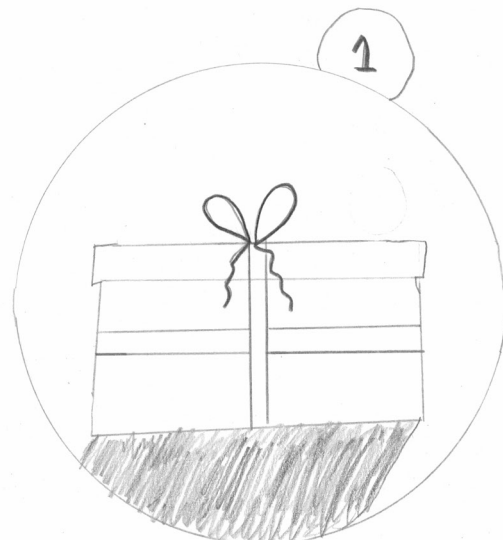
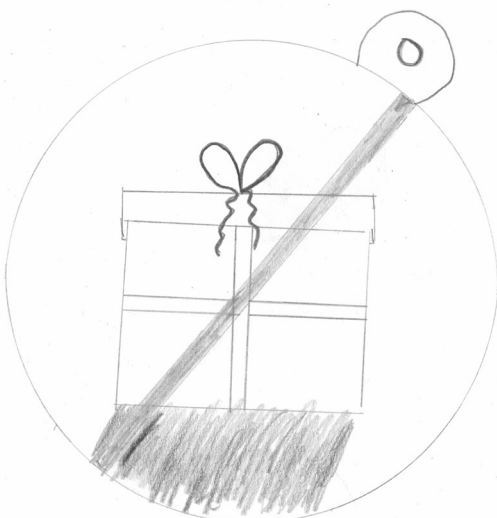
Leah was able to choose a gift the following day when her mother had received more money from the social worker. While her mother was not really able to afford it, she could not bear to see her daughter so sad and did not want her to go without at least a small gift. Leah told us the following:

on my birthday i was n4 given any gifts

my birthday

the day after my birthday

I was given a remote car by my mom but after an hour it stopped working. this was after my birthday



“[My mum] said on my birthday that she was going to get me something like later. She knew she was going to get me something so I knew I wasn’t going to get something on my birthday ... It was pretty sad because my birthday was in the hotel. We only had £20 a week to spend, but then my mum used £11 or £12 on a remote control car for me and she got that for me, but after an hour it stopped working ... We went to Argos and I got to choose the car because she said I could choose it, but all of them were over £10, so I chose that one and it was like £11 something ... it was one of the lowest prices.”



Another participant, Jade, told us that she, her mother and her sister also struggled to pay for food:

“Every time we got money we only had £40 to spend on food and clothes and we used to spend £100 a week and we could only spend £40 a week.”

She drew the picture of a banknote on the **top right** to communicate this experience. She also wrote the statement to the **right**.

Jade also told us that she was forced to wear clothes which were too small for her:

“My feet grew when we moved and my shoes were too small for me so we had to get new ones. My clothes got too small as well. They went up here on my arms. They were too small and I had to get new clothes.”

The hardest thing  
 The hardest thing  
 was to try and  
 get money for  
 things we needed  
 like food, clothes, shoes  
 but it was very  
 hard we only had  
 £40 for food we use to  
 spend £100

“I didn’t want to upset her”

## Worrying about mum

Children and young people sometimes also worried about their mother’s wellbeing and felt a responsibility to protect her. Josh, for instance, told us the following:

**“My mum ... was not herself so I was upset ... I just kept worrying about mum.”**

For Josh, this worry meant that he did not want to burden his mother further:

**“I didn’t want to like upset her or anything so I just acted like I was happy ... like make her worried about me. [I was worried about her knowing] that I was worrying about that she’s not safe. I didn’t want her to worry about if I’m safe ... I didn’t want to add things on to what has happened.”**

Josh’s experiences happened in the context of him being temporarily separated from his mother, who was able to access a refuge before him. Josh missed his mother terribly during this time, and his worries extended to whether they were going to be able to live together again. This worry continued once they were reunited:

**[I was without her for] about three or two weeks but it still hurt because it felt longer ... [I was worried] if mum was going to come back because she kept saying three weeks and it was past three weeks. It scared me that she wasn’t coming back ... [now] it’s when someone comes to speak to her, it just worries me [that she might leave again].”**

Shannon also wanted to protect her mother from her difficult feelings:

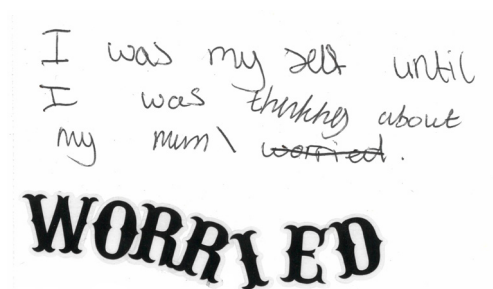


Image by Josh ▲

**“[My mum] didn’t really know that I was sad ... because she was sad so then I didn’t want her to be more sad.”**

Some children and young people told us that fleeing a perpetrator together made them feel closer as a family. Shannon, for example, felt that they “all got closer”. However, given that some children and young people did not want to worry their mother, some chose to seek additional comfort from other people. Jade, for example, sometimes slept in her sister’s bed. She also sought comfort in her teddy bear, which she slept with every night and “still [does] now”. Jade’s experiences highlight how siblings and attachment objects may be significant for young people fleeing domestic abuse.

However, the section on ‘sensing a lack of control’ already pointed to the protective factors of the mother-child relationship in recovering from domestic abuse,<sup>21</sup> and mothers almost always continued to be the single most important source of help and support reported by children and young people. This was the case even when their relationship had been negatively affected by the abuse from the perpetrator and the long journeys into safety. Many mothers and children drew enormous support from each other: they developed protective strategies together and children valued their mother’s ability to parent them even in the face of adversity.

Children and young people also valued the support of other adults who took them and their needs seriously. At a time of great turmoil for the whole family, it is important for

<sup>21</sup> See our report *Nineteen Child Homicides*; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Child-First-Nineteen-Child-Homicides-Report.pdf>



children and young people to have access to specialist children and young people's (CYP) workers<sup>22</sup> in refuges, who can support them with their emotional needs. Professionals working with families need to be aware of and sensitive towards the psychological and emotional needs of children and young people, as well as the potential impact on family

## Meeting professionals

Despite the potential value of other supportive adults in the lives of children and young people, professionals other than CYP refuge workers were often absent in the accounts and artwork of children and young people. When other professionals did feature, children and young people were not necessarily aware of their role.

One of our participants, Shannon, spoke about how she felt that her family had been let down by the police, as "it took them 25 minutes" to arrive when the perpetrator had thrown a hard object through their window. This understandably made her feel "annoyed", especially because their house was "flagged" and they had been promised that "they'd be there in five minutes". However, she highlighted that once they arrived the two men were "friendly" and that she trusted them to help her family. In the year 2019 to 2020, the 57 organisations with an accommodation-based service using On Track recorded 291 negative experiences by families with services, including the police, social services and housing departments.

Our research highlighted the difference it made to children and young people when they had positive interaction with professionals who listened to them in their own right. It was important to children and young people to be taken seriously, and participants valued the opportunity to speak to adults about

relations, during this taxing time in the lives of children and young people. While habits of protecting one another from painful knowledge may be hard patterns to break (Mullender et al. 2002), it is important to see the strengths in the relationship between mothers and children and to facilitate the work that may need to be done to assist their recovery together.

their concerns. Constructive interactions with professionals had the potential to have a positive effect on children's and young people's social lives, family relations, education, and mental wellbeing. Leah told us about the difference it made to her that her social worker spent time with her and listened to her concerns:

**"We were waiting for [the social worker] outside and ...she came late and I saw some leaves and stuff and I made a smiley face ... because I was like excited to see her because she's so nice ... like when we saw her sometimes she took me out of the room. Like my mum was in another room and I was in the room with [the social worker] and she said is everything ok at home and stuff? ... And she got some activities to do."**

In addition, we heard from our participants how they valued being supported by the CYP workers in the refuge in the creation of their artwork for this research (and in one case the safeguarding lead; see footnote 22 for a definition of CYP workers). Not only did the CYP workers support artwork production, they also facilitated open and honest conversations between children and their mothers, and contributed significantly to young people's healing process. Artwork production served as a powerful tool for this.

<sup>22</sup> Dedicated CYP workers create a separate space for children in refuge where they can begin to understand life in refuge and their experiences that led them to it. Skilled children's workers create age-appropriate group opportunities for children and young people in the refuge. Using art and play materials, children are given the language and skills to understand the difference between healthy relationships and experiences of abuse.

# Part 2: Available services and additional barriers

Part 1 of this report illustrates children and young people's experiences of fleeing domestic abuse, and points to their needs during this time. This part of the report documents the services and support systems

that are currently available to children and young people, the gaps in provision, and the additional barriers and structural inequalities which some families with children face in their search for a refuge.

## Refuge vacancies and services for children and young people

### *Refuge spaces for families with children*

While children and young people rarely feature in policy discourses about families' journeys into safe spaces or refuge life, national On Track data shows that children and young people make up more than half of those who live in a refuge. The Domestic Abuse Report 2020<sup>23</sup> shows that in the financial year 2018-2019, 13,787 children stayed at a refuge listed on On Track, compared to 11,489 adult women. This means that on average women who lived at a refuge had 1.2 children.

There is a shortage in refuge provision for families with children, which is occurring within a context of a more general shortage in bed spaces<sup>24</sup>. While our Domestic Abuse

Report series<sup>25</sup> shows that there is a yearly increase in the overall number of refuge spaces, the current number (as reported in *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*) still falls short by 1,684 (30.1%) of the number recommended by the Council of Europe<sup>26</sup>. Only some of the available spaces are suitable for families. As shown in **Table 2** (over page), of the 10,352 refuge vacancies posted on the Routes to Support database on the 1st May 2020, 59.5% were available for a woman with one child, 43.0% were suitable for a woman with two children, and less than 1 in 6 vacancies (15.1%) could accommodate a woman with three children. Only 4.6% of refuge vacancies are available to women with four or more children. In our report *Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017*<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Annual Audit*; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report/>

<sup>24</sup> One space refers to space for one family unit, no matter how many bed or cot spaces this entails.

<sup>25</sup> Our Domestic Abuse report series is available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report/>

<sup>26</sup> Council of Europe recommendations, available here: [https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF\(2007\)Study%20rev.en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg2/equality/domesticviolencecampaign/Source/EG-VAW-CONF(2007)Study%20rev.en.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> *Survival and Beyond: The Domestic Abuse Report 2017*; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/the-domestic-abuse-report/>

we reported that there is a move within refuges towards smaller room sizes, and our findings suggest a continuation of this phenomenon<sup>28</sup>. This means that it is becoming more and more difficult for large families to find suitable refuge accommodation.

11.5% of the women supported by the NWTa project this year were fleeing with four or more children. With the support of the NWTa specialist practitioners, 6 out of 26 (21.4%) of those with four or more children were accommodated in suitable refuge accommodation. For at least<sup>29</sup> 11 of the 26 families (42.3%), a solution was found which meant that all children could be accommodated with the woman.

### Refuge spaces for older male children

Apart from being limited by room size, to maximise the safety of residents (the majority of whom are survivors of male violence), many women-only refuges are unable to accommodate teenage males. This can make it more difficult for families with an older male child to find a safe space to live. This is particularly the case for communal refuges. Refuges which have self-contained units tend to be able to be more flexible. The imposed upper age limit for accompanying male children varies. As shown in **Table 3**, 92.4% of refuges are currently able to accommodate male children aged 12 or under. This reduces to 79.8% for male children aged 14 and under, and to 49.4% for male children aged 16 and under. Only 19.4% of refuges are able to accommodate male children aged 17 or over.

The chances of older sons being accommodated in a refuge may be further exacerbated when families have additional support needs. In *Nowhere To Turn 2020: Findings from the fourth year of the No Woman Turned Away project*, we reported that 16 (6.6%) of those women who were supported

**Table 2:** Refuge vacancies available by number of children

Number of children	% of vacancies posted
Woman with one child	59.5%
Woman with two children	43.0%
Woman with three children	15.1%
Woman with four or more children	4.6%

**Table 3:** Age limit for older male children imposed for refuges

Age limit for male children (years)	% of vacancies (n)
8	0.4% (1)
10	1.5% (4)
11	1.1% (3)
12	7.2% (19)
13	5.3% (14)
14	15.2% (40)
15	15.2% (40)
16	30.0% (79)
17	4.2% (11)
No age limit/18	15.2% (40)
No children	4.2% (11)
Unknown	0.4% (1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>

<sup>28</sup> In *Survival and Beyond* we reported that 17.9% of refuges are able to accommodate a woman with three children, and 5.8% a woman with four children.

<sup>29</sup> We are using the phrase 'at least' here to acknowledge that there may have been some missing data.

**Table 4:** Outcomes for mothers with a son aged 14+ (NWTa project)

Outcome	Number of women	% of women
Staying with friends and family	3	18.8%
Emergency accommodation	3	18.8%
Stayed put (not living with perpetrator at the time of referral)	3	18.8%
Accommodated in suitable refuge space	1	6.3%
Outcome unknown/lost contact	6	37.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	

by the NWTa project in the year 2019-2020 were fleeing the perpetrator with a male child aged 14 or over. Only one of these families (6.3%) was accommodated in a suitable refuge. The age limit on boys entering refuges presents mothers with the difficult choice of going into a refuge without her son if alternative safe accommodation cannot be found. **Table 4** shows the outcomes for families with an older male child who were supported by the NWTa project.

Capital investment is needed to ensure the national network of refuges can deliver a range of accommodation types, including self-contained and dispersed units, to meet families' needs. There is a need for greater national oversight of the government's statutory duty on refuges in this regard. In addition, creative partnerships between refuge service providers, housing associations and local authorities could lead to the combination of safe community-based housing and domestic violence outreach services, which together could meet children's and their mother's needs for safety, advice and emotional support.

### ***Dedicated services for children and young people***

Routes to Support snapshot data shows that 86.7% of refuges are running at least one dedicated children and young people (CYP) service. As can be seen in **Table 5** (next page), 63.9% of refuges employ a dedicated

CYP worker, whose primary role it is to engage young people, offer them emotional support, and assist families with essential tasks such as school admission. Dedicated children's workers create a separate space for children in refuge where they can begin to understand life there and their experiences that led them to it. Skilled children's workers create age-appropriate group opportunities for children and young people in the refuge. Using art and play materials, children are given the language and skills to understand the difference between healthy relationships and experiences of abuse.

Other CYP services offered include dedicated emotional support for children and young people (73.8%), outings/activities/play sessions (74.5%), individual support (64.6%), advocacy (20.2%), and play therapy (39.5%). 12.5% of refuges are able to offer specialist CYP counselling.

Part 1 of this report outlines the importance of listening to children and young people, and the significance of support tailored specifically to their needs. Given these findings, the fact that not all refuges are able to offer dedicated services for children and young people (often due to lack of funding) is concerning.

While refuges tend to do all they can to support children and young people, increased funding for CYP services may enable much-needed tailored support for a greater number of children and young people, and allow CYP

**Table 5:** Support for children and young people (CYP) in refuges\*

Service	Number of refuges	% of refuges
Outings/activities/play sessions	196	74.5%
Dedicated emotional support	194	73.8%
Dedicated service for CYP	178	67.7%
Individual support	170	64.6%
CYP worker	168	63.9%
Play therapy	104	39.5%
Support group	94	35.7%
Advocacy	53	20.2%
Mentoring	41	15.6%
CYP counselling	33	12.5%
Family support worker	6	2.3%
Art therapy	2	0.8%
<b>At least one of the above</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>86.7%</b>
<b>Total number of refuges</b>	<b>263</b>	

\*This table and associated text was amended on 24th June 2021 to reflect incorrect numbers and percentages included here on a previously published version of the report.

workers, support workers and counsellors to spend more time with each child or young person. Support for children and young people is an integral part of refuge services, yet it is not embedded in current funding mechanisms, and is too often an 'add on' or optional extra paid for through charity donations. Lack of funding affects CYP services in community-based services to an even greater extent, resulting in fewer specialist CYP services: Routes to Support snapshot data shows that 60.6% of community-based services are able to offer one or more dedicated service for children and young people.

### **Support from social services**

Part 1 of this report highlighted the potential significance of other professionals in children and young people's journeys into refuges. In particular, we saw how children's social

workers can play a positive role in children and young people's experiences. According to Section 17 of the 1989 Children's Act<sup>30</sup>, local authorities are obliged to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need, and so far as it is consistent with that duty, to place children with their family. However, while 45 (36.6%) of the women fleeing with children supported by the NWTa project last year had contacted social services, we found that 15 of these (33.3%) had had negative experiences with them, including eight cases of refusal to accommodate children and mothers. Austerity-induced cuts have deprived children and young people of essential support services. Further training and sustainable funding is required to ensure that social services are able to adhere to legal requirements and official guidance.

<sup>30</sup> Children's Act 1989, available here: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/17>

## Additional barriers and structural inequalities

Our previous Nowhere to Turn publications<sup>31</sup>, as well as Part 1 of this report, are a stark reminder that due to the shortage in adequate refuge provision, for many families fleeing domestic abuse searching for a refuge can be a difficult and long drawn-out experience. However, while the journeys into refuges are difficult for many children and young people, some families fleeing domestic abuse face additional barriers and structural inequalities when trying to access a safe space to live.<sup>32</sup>

### **Children and young people's ties to the local area: Contact arrangements, family support, and schools**

Women who are fleeing the perpetrator with their children face the challenging task of navigating their search around child care. This may mean contacting professionals during school hours or while children are busy in another way. Part 1 of this report shows that in some cases women face the difficult decision of leaving children with another caretaker while they make arrangements. It also highlights how taking children out of the area may be difficult due to the child's social lives and educational needs. An additional consideration which women need to negotiate when fleeing domestic abuse with their children is the child's relationship with other family members, especially the existence of any child-contact arrangements with another parent.

46 out of the 123 (37.4%) women with children supported by NWTAs in the year 2019 to 2020

had ties to their local area. In 15 of these cases (32.6% of those mothers with ties to their local area) this was due to support that the mother received from family or friends, in 12 cases (26.1% of those mothers with ties to their local area) the mother did not want to take the child out of school, and in 11 of these cases (23.9% of those mothers with ties to their local area) the reason for this was child contact arrangements.

There is a plethora of evidence showing that family courts prioritise preserving contact between children and abusive parents, even when this is not what the children themselves want<sup>33,34,35</sup>. In cases where child contact has been ordered by the courts, survivors may be put in a position when they have to choose between the safety of both themselves and their child, and breaking court orders.

It is difficult for those with ties to their local area to find refuge accommodation, as refuges have to balance the need to retain the family's local ties with being a safe distance from the perpetrator. One of our interviews with a young person highlighted how the risk of being found by the perpetrator is very real. Leah told us that when she and her mother had been staying in refuges previously, they had on several occasions been tracked down by her abusive father, who went to great lengths to find them:

**"I was in a lot of different refuges. I'm not sure how many but it was a lot"**

<sup>31</sup> *Nowhere to Turn, Nowhere to Turn 2018, Nowhere to Turn 2019, Nowhere to Turn 2020*

<sup>32</sup> Further information on barriers and structural inequalities to finding refuge provision can be found in our previous Nowhere to Turn reports, available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

<sup>33</sup> See our 'Nineteen Child Homicides' report; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Child-First-Nineteen-Child-Homicides-Report.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> See Dr Adrienne Barnett's guest blog post on our safe blog; available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/parental-alienation-and-the-family-courts/>

<sup>35</sup> See the Ministry of Justice report 'Assessing Risk of Harm to Children and Parents in Private Law Children Cases'; available here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/895173/assessing-risk-harm-children-parents-pl-childrens-cases-report\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/895173/assessing-risk-harm-children-parents-pl-childrens-cases-report_.pdf)

**because dad had a private detective and that one found us and said he knows where we are so we had to move. That kept on happening.”**

Only 5 out of 46 (10.9%) of those women who were fleeing with children, who had ties to their local area, and who were supported by the NWTa project, were able to find suitable refuge accommodation.

### **Families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF)**

Government policies make it even more difficult for some families to secure a refuge space, and families who have been denied recourse to public funds find it especially hard to find refuge accommodation. This means that their journeys into safety are frequently long, difficult and dangerous, if possible at all. Leah, whose mother was initially unable to claim the means-tested benefits she needed to pay for refuge, said:

**“We went to this office with our support worker and then she was making a few calls to the refuges to see if they’d let us stay there so we could get there because it was still daytime. We were there for a few hours and we didn’t get any replies and some said no, then she put us in a hotel ... and we were in that for a long time.”**

Only a very small proportion of refuges are able to accept families with NRPF, and even in these cases this is dependent on a number of factors. While 4% of vacancies listed on Routes to Support are open to those with NRPF, in practice acceptance may depend on the woman having funding in place from the destitute domestic violence (DDV) concession,

or agreed funding from another statutory service such as Child Services. As discussed earlier in this report, under Section 17 of the 1989 Children’s Act, local authorities are obliged to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need, and so far as it is consistent with that duty, to place children with their family. This includes families with NRPF. However, while 16 out of the 29 women who had NRPF and who were fleeing with children (55.2%) had contacted social services before or during their support from the NWTa project, we found that in at least four cases (25.0%) social services refused to accommodate the family. Of those women supported by NWTa this year who had at least one child and NRPF, only five out of 33 (15.2%) were accommodated in a suitable refuge.<sup>36</sup>

### **Structural racism**

In *Nowhere to Turn 2020: Findings from the fourth year of the No Woman Turned Away project* we reported that almost half of the women supported by the NWTa project were from Black and minoritised backgrounds (105 out of 243; 43.2%), reflecting the systemic racism that Black and minoritised women and children continue to face when trying to access places of safety.

Black and minoritised children and young people are a hugely diverse group which may include children from migrant families, families with NRPF, and children whose first language is not English. The previous section outlines how families with NRPF are disadvantaged by systemic barriers in their search for a refuge. In addition, as detailed in Imkaan’s work<sup>37</sup>, many families from Black and minoritised backgrounds prefer to be supported by specialist ‘by and for’ services for Black and minoritised women and children that understand the intersection between

<sup>36</sup> Specialist organisations ‘by and for’ migrant women have long been concerned about local authorities not upholding their responsibilities under Section 17. See Southall Black Sister’s campaign against NRPF, available here: <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/campaigns/immigration/abolish-no-recourse-to-public-funds-campaign/>

<sup>37</sup> See Imkaan (2018) for further information: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/2f475d\\_9cab044d7d25404d85da289b70978237.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/2f475d_9cab044d7d25404d85da289b70978237.pdf)

**A**na, Marta and Antonio were fleeing their abusive father with their mother. The children's mother had no recourse to public funds and was unable to claim benefits. With nowhere else to go, they stayed in the family's holiday caravan, where they had no running water or cooking facilities. The children and their mother were worried that the perpetrator would be able to track them down.

Their mother was able to find a refuge space and contacted social services. However, as she had a small amount of money in her bank account, social services refused to pay for the refuge or a hotel.

One day the children's mother briefly left the caravan, leaving the teenage Ana in charge. During this time, the perpetrator's family banged on the door, demanding access. Ana

refused to let them in, but the incident left all three children traumatised. The family left the caravan park and stayed with friends in another city.

Once the school term started again, Ana stayed with another family friend in her home town so she could continue with her studies. Marta and Antonio stayed with their mother.

With support from the NWTa project, the family was connected with a solicitor who could support them to apply for the DDV concession. The family was also put in touch with a local domestic abuse service, which assured the NWTa team that it would support the family to find a refuge where they could all stay together, and where Ana would be able to continue with her studies, albeit potentially at another school.

gender and racial inequality. Within 'by and for' services, Black and minoritised children and young people are able to get peer support from other Black and minoritised survivors of domestic abuse. Specialist 'by and for' support staff may be able not only to communicate with children and young people in their own language or dialect, but also, perhaps more importantly, navigate cultural nuances and share a lived understanding of their experiences of racism.<sup>38</sup> However, although national On Track data shows that 34.2% of all children

and young people in refuges are from Black and minoritised backgrounds, as reported in our report *The Domestic Abuse Report 2020*, outside of London there is very limited refuge provision for Black and minoritised families. 'By and for' providers for Black and minoritised women and children continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged by cuts, with funding approaches not sufficiently considering the need and value of 'by and for' provision for Black and minoritised women and children.<sup>39,40,41</sup>

**38** Interpreters are not always a preference for both survivors and service providers as it can impact on Black and minoritised women's and children's engagement with support when having to share difficult and traumatic experiences.

**39** Specialist 'by and for' refuge provision is especially underfunded for Black African and African Caribbean women. This is often driven by an assumption that women without the need for same-language support do not require or benefit from culturally literate support. Instead, it is assumed that their needs can be easily 'assimilated' or met by providers that are not 'by and for' services for Black and minoritised women and children.

**40** See Imkaan (2018) for further information: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/2f475d\\_9cab044d7d25404d85da289b70978237.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/2f475d_9cab044d7d25404d85da289b70978237.pdf)

**41** See also Imkaan's paper on violence against women and girls and Covid 19 on Black and minoritised women and girls, available here: [https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d\\_6d6dea40b8bd42c8a917ba58ceec5793.pdf](https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d_6d6dea40b8bd42c8a917ba58ceec5793.pdf)



### Other additional barriers

Children and young people may also be disadvantaged in other ways. For example, Routes to Support snapshot data shows that only 0.9% of refuge spaces are currently fully wheelchair accessible. Other children and young people who face additional discrimination and barriers to support include: children and young people whose mother has a disability; children and young people who have mental health support needs or whose mother has mental health support needs; children and young people whose mother has drug use support needs; children and young people whose mother has alcohol use support needs; children and young people whose

mother has been previously evicted from a refuge; children and young people whose mother has a history of violence, arson, or a criminal conviction; or children and young people from travelling communities.

Despite the great efforts of the NWTAs specialist practitioners, only 24 out of the 123 families with children (19.5%) who were supported by the NWTAs project between 2019 and 2020 were eventually accommodated in a suitable refuge. In our previous *Nowhere to Turn* reports, we describe how those who face multiple disadvantages and discriminations are even less likely to find suitable refuge accommodation.<sup>42</sup>

**A**lex, Ben, Jimmy and Marc, who were all under the age of 12, were fleeing their abusive father with their mother. Alex, the oldest of the brothers, suffered from severe anxiety and ADHD<sup>43</sup>. The family therefore required a self-contained refuge where Alex could feel safe and secure. The family also needed to stay in the region as the boys' mother relied on family support to take care of the children. As Alex struggled with change, temporary accommodation which could have been provided by the council was not suitable for them.

The boys' mother contacted a refuge, but the refuge was unable to accommodate Alex's needs. She then contacted the National Domestic Violence Helpline<sup>44</sup>, which referred her to the NWTAs project. The NWTAs specialist practitioner searched Routes to Support for suitable refuge spaces and passed on the relevant contact numbers. With support from the NWTAs project the family was able to find a self-contained refuge in the region, where the children were still able to see their extended family.

<sup>42</sup> Our Nowhere to Turn series is available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

<sup>43</sup> ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

<sup>44</sup> The National Domestic Violence Helpline is now called the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

## “Rise above the storm”

### The significance to children and young people of finding refuge accommodation

Our research shows that while there is systemic inequality in refuge provision, those young people who are accommodated in a suitable refuge benefit significantly from the safety and support that they receive there, especially when specialist CYP workers are available.

Most of the young people who took part in our research did not have a clear idea of what a refuge was before they got there, which for some created mixed feelings. Shannon, for instance, noted the following:

**“I thought it was a big house with like huge rooms, loads of different beds, and people sharing ... I was scared.”**

Similarly, Leah noted:

**“I knew we were going to a refuge, but I didn’t know how it was going to be exactly.”**

However, once they got to a refuge, children and young people usually felt safe and comfortable. Shannon noted that she was relieved when she arrived as the refuge offered her more privacy than she had expected. Similarly, Sebastian noted when he got to the refuge it was “actually quite nice”. Jade put it in the following way:

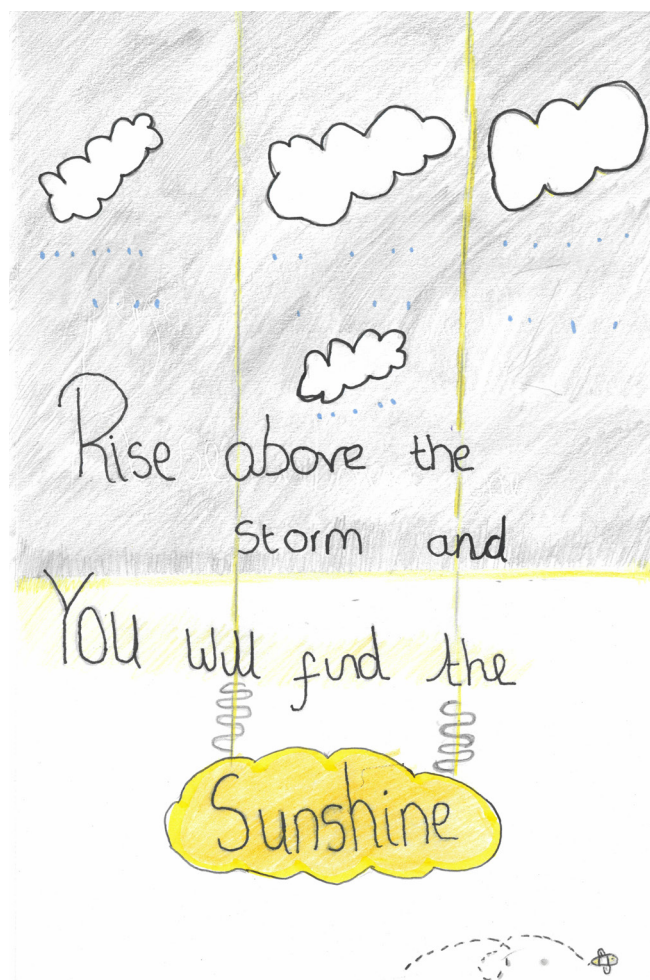
**“I felt happy because we got away from him [the perpetrator] and we could start our new life.”**

Some children and young people spoke about how being met by specialist CYP workers, and the distribution of games and cosmetics, made



their arrival somewhat easier. Leah provided the drawing **above** to highlight the optimism that refuge had given her.

The picture **below** was drawn by Jade to convey to other children and young people that there is hope for a life beyond “the storm” of domestic abuse.



# Conclusion

This report offers an in-depth analysis of the journeys of children and young people into refuge, their needs during this time, the support available to them, and the barriers and structural inequalities that they may face. We heard how during their journeys into safety children and young people often live transient lives; many are exposed to financial difficulties; and almost all are required to navigate a host of complicated emotions around the abuse, leaving their family and friends, and taking a step into the unknown. We saw the strength which many children and young people show in adjusting to new lives, new schools and new situations.

This report highlights the importance of listening to the needs of children and young people, and of tailoring professional responses around their lived experiences. However, listening to children's voices is not enough; rather there is a need to explore the ramifications of what children are telling us and how we use this knowledge (James 2007). Whilst there is currently insufficient specialist support available to children and young people on their journeys to safety, this report is testament to the insight that children and young people can offer when they are given a platform to do so.

Scared  
dissapointment  
overwhelmed  
anxious  
hurt  
not knowing what will happen next  
upset

# Recommendations

## 1. Recognise children and young people as survivors of domestic abuse in their own right and reflect the reality of their experiences

- ▶ The Children's Act (1989) must be amended to better reflect children's and young people's experiences of domestic abuse and our enhanced understanding of what domestic abuse is, making clear that coercive control constitutes 'harm to children'.
- ▶ Meaningfully consult children and young people when planning any changes in the sector which may affect them.
- ▶ Develop and publish specific statutory guidance on teenage relationship abuse.

## 2. Provide funding for child survivors of domestic abuse

- ▶ Ensure that support for children and young people is an integral part of funding of specialist domestic abuse services, including refuges and specialist services such as 'by and for' organisations for Black and minoritised women and children, and fully accessible services.
- ▶ Fully fund the statutory duty in the forthcoming domestic abuse bill to ensure demand for specialist CYP support in refuges is met (see Women's Aid's report *Funding specialist support for domestic abuse survivors* for estimated costs<sup>45</sup>).
- ▶ Deliver national oversight of the statutory duty to ensure the national network of refuges is able to support all children and young people. This includes capital investment in dispersed accommodation to ensure families with teenage sons can access refuge.

## 3. Provide support for young migrant survivors

- ▶ Through the domestic abuse bill widen eligibility of the destitute domestic violence (DDV) concession/domestic violence rule (DVR), and in this way ensure access to public funds for all survivors of domestic abuse.
- ▶ Introduce specific statutory guidance for local authorities in meeting duties relating to Section 17 of the Children's Act (1989) to migrant families escaping domestic abuse, including access for families to sufficient money for food and clothing whilst waiting for a refuge space.

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<sup>45</sup> Funding specialist support for domestic abuse survivors (2019), available here: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/research-and-publications/funding-specialist-support-for-domestic-abuse-survivors/>

## 4. Ensure support for children and young people from schools and professionals

- ▶ Ensure that professionals in statutory agencies, especially those working with children and young people, have sufficient knowledge on the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people and their needs when searching for a safe space to live. This must include listening carefully to children and young people to determine their needs.
- ▶ Services and other providers must work together to ensure teenage boys can be accommodated safely with their mothers, and in this way can continue to access support from their mothers and siblings.
- ▶ The Department of Education must ensure that children and young people in refuges have priority access to school places.
- ▶ The Department of Education must ensure that young survivors of domestic abuse receive additional support with their school work after being forced to move.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Methodology: On Track data (NWTa)

The quantitative No Woman Turned Away (NWTa) data shared in this report was recorded by the NWTa specialist practitioners on On Track, the Women's Aid case management and outcomes monitoring system. The specialist practitioners collected data on children's and young people's families' needs, outcomes, the barriers they have faced, what happened to them while they were waiting for a refuge space or other safe outcome, as well as their mother's demographics. They also completed questions on mothers' experiences with statutory services when they closed a case on On Track, as well as the time spent on each case and the types of support they gave to mothers (e.g. advocacy, looking for a refuge space). The NWTa On Track data shared in this report covers the time period from 12th January 2019 until 11th January 2020.

## Appendix 2: Methodology: National On Track data

The quantitative national On Track data shared in this report was recorded by specialist support workers in 57 domestic abuse organisations which run an accommodation-based service (refuge and/or resettlement) and which used Women's Aid's case management and outcomes monitoring system On Track between 1st April 2019 and 31st March 2020. Specialist support workers collected a range of data relating to the demographics of children and young people, their journeys and outcomes. The national On Track data shared in this report covers the time period from 1st April 2019 until 31st March 2020. Data was extracted from On Track on 21st July 2020.

## Appendix 3: Methodology: Routes to Support snapshot data

Routes to Support is the UK violence against women and girls directory of services and refuge vacancies, run in partnership by Scottish Women's Aid, Welsh Women's Aid, Women's Aid Federation of England and Women's Aid Federation of Northern Ireland. Snapshot data on the number and types of services registered on Routes to Support was extracted from the system on 1st May 2020.

## Appendix 4: Methodology: Interviews and arts-based methods

### *Rationale*

Given the scarcity of knowledge relating to children and young people's needs when fleeing domestic abuse, it is paramount to obtain a detailed understanding of their experiences and what types of support are of most significance to them. To achieve this aim, we worked closely with children and young people to document their journeys into refuge. Specifically, we used in-depth interviews, as well as artwork produced by participants (primarily drawings), to document the journeys of children and young people seeking refuge. Participants and their mothers were given the opportunity to review the report before publication.

The participatory methods offered us the opportunity to co-create the focus of the research and redistribute power (Maguire 1987). Due to their hands-on nature, arts-based methods lend themselves particularly well to



working in partnership with children and young people. They enable participants to produce their own output and allow them to express what they themselves feel about a particular experience. It is the participants who decide what it is that they want to communicate and how they want to express it. In addition, it facilitates them to communicate complex and even contradictory experiences which may be difficult to convey using language. As reported in the main body of the report, there may be some therapeutic benefits to this. Another benefit of using arts-based methods is that artistic output can provoke powerful emotional responses within those that view it (Leavy 2015).

### **Demographics**

In total, six participants (three girls, three boys) from two different member organisations took part in the arts-based methods, with five of these participants also taking part in in-depth interviews. The age range was 11 to 17 years. All participants were living in a refuge at the time of research recruitment. Four of the children and young people were White British (one of whom took part in the art production only, i.e. did not take part in the interview), one was from another White background (other European country), and one was from a mixed Black Caribbean and White background. All children identified as cis-gendered. None of them reported a disability. As pointed out in the main body of the report, our findings are therefore not representative of many minoritised groups, and further work is needed to offer a platform to a more diverse range of children and young people.

### **Procedure**

After an initial meeting, with the support of refuge staff (CYP worker or safeguarding lead), children and young people created artwork in their own time. All participants were offered emotional support by refuge staff throughout this process. In order to make children and young people feel comfortable to express

themselves using art, we asked them to choose which specific method they wanted to use, and emphasised that artwork will not be evaluated according to whether it looks or sounds aesthetically pleasing, but that it is the process and the story behind the arts-based output that is of most value to the project.

Accompanying loosely structured interviews were carried out in late 2019 and early 2020 and lasted between 14:07 minutes and 57:10 minutes. A member from the refuge (CYP worker or safeguarding lead) was present throughout the interviews to increase the sense of safety for children and young people. Participants and their families were given a £20 gift voucher to acknowledge the time that they had spent on the project.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews and transcripts were saved on password-protected computers. Hard copies of artwork were stored in lockable drawers in Women's Aid's office. Once the report had been written, children and young people, as well as their mothers, were given the opportunity to review the report and to offer input ahead of publication. We also offered to return artwork once the report was written, as long as this was safe.

I n

M y

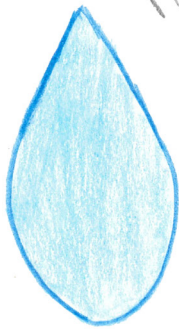
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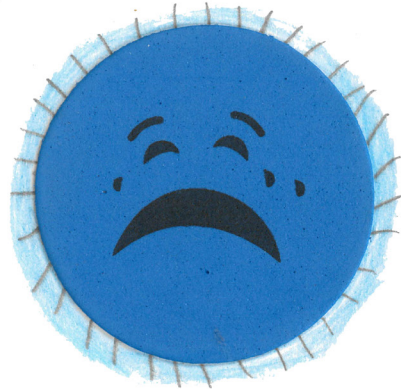
frustrated

mad

anxious



Scared



hurt

upset

Angry



annoyed

EMOTIONS

tense

Confused

worried

House

Sad

*Nowhere to Turn for Children and Young People:  
Documenting the Journeys of Children and Young People into Refuges*

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