



# Children and Coercive Control

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Control in Children's and  
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# Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives

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OXFORD

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

The first academic 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.

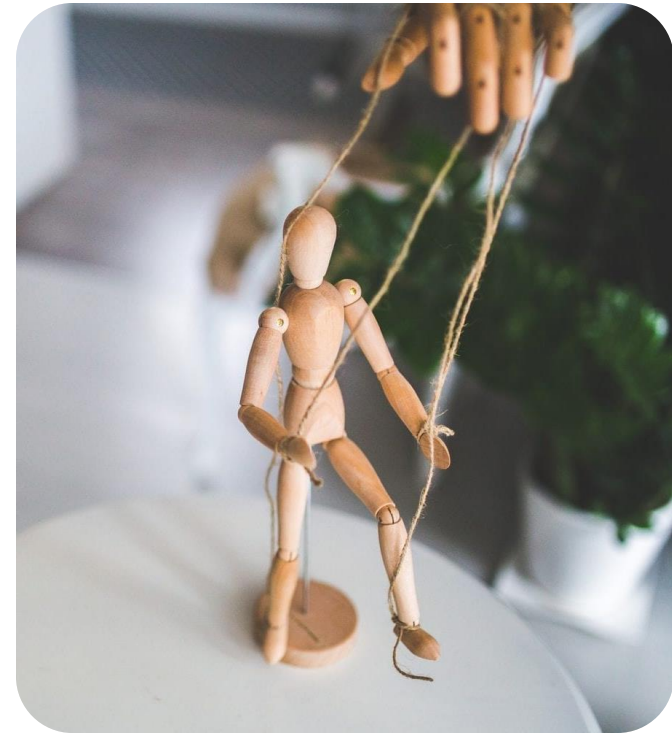
# Lives and freedoms are seriously limited

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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-survivor dreads, such as cruel verbal putdowns, hurting loved ones, coercing the victim-survivor into unwanted forms of sexual activity, or economically abusing the victim-survivor.

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







# Lives and freedoms 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** (e.g. as a sportsman, a pious man, active in charity work, prominent in their community etc.) that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will ever believe or rally around the victims-survivors, should the victims-survivors 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-survivors to **fight back**, resist, speak the truth about what is happening, and protect themselves as well as protecting the other victims in the family from further harm (Dutton and Goodman, 2005).



# Coercive control as a sub-type of violence and abuse

Not all incidents of violence or abusive behaviour in families or relationships involve coercive control.

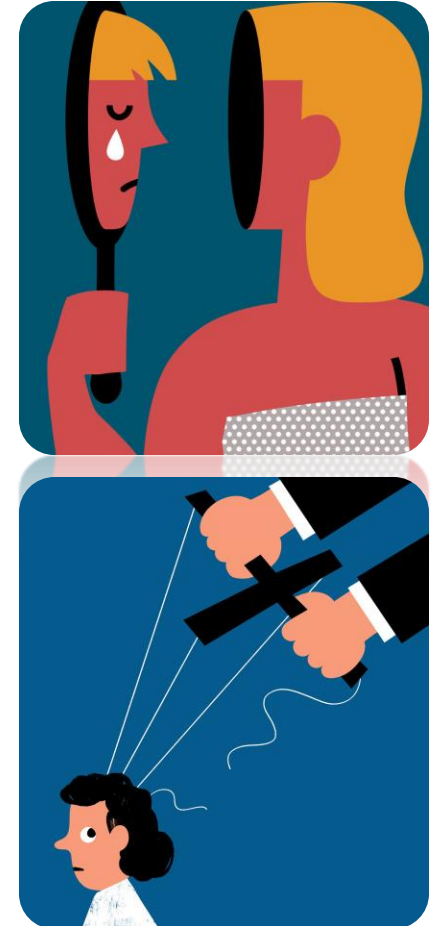
**Coercive control is particularly severe and serious sub-type.** It causes high levels of harm and is a key risk factor for intimate partner femicide (Monckton Smith, 2020; Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007).

**CC can take place both pre- and post-separation** (Katz, 2022; Spearman et al, 2022; Kelly et al, 2014).

**CC motivation** – Maintain control and dominance over a partner's, ex-partner's or family member's life, punish non-compliance.

**CC context** – There is a major power imbalance between the perpetrator and their current or ex partner/the rest of the family. The perpetrator wants to dominate the relationship/family. They expect their partner/family to submit. They enjoy punishing their partner/family for any perceived disobedience. The perpetrator's abuse has been going on for a long period of time and they plan to carry on in future. Remaining in control is of paramount importance to the perpetrator. The perpetrator does not recognise the human rights or independent identities of their partner/anyone in the family.

**CC impact** – The adult & child victims-survivors know that if they don't do what the perpetrator wants, he will punish them. They have to make harmful changes to their lives and behaviours to try to avoid the perpetrator's punishments. These harmful changes cause suffering and disadvantage at multiple levels. The victims-survivors also suffer when the perpetrator punishes them for any attempts they make to assert their human rights.



# Gender-based violence

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Research by Johnson and colleagues (2014) in the US found **22% of women** had experienced coercive control from ex-husbands, and **5.4% of men** experienced coercive control from ex-wives.

Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales by Myhill (2015) found that, out of a group of women and men who reported experiencing some kind of domestic abuse, **30% of women** and **6% of men** had experiences severe enough to be called 'coercive control'. (Their partners had (1) repeatedly belittled them to the point of making them feel worthless and (2) made them feel frightened by threatening to hurt them.)

Research by Hester and colleagues in the UK found that 1 in 40 men (**2.3%**) attending their doctor's office were victims of coercive control.

Analysis of Finnish district court cases for crimes of ex-partner stalking where the former couple shared one or more children found that **94.2%** of such stalkers were males (Nikupeteri et al, 2021).

**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).



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

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- control of **time** and **movement**, and the **micro-management** of the victim-survivor's everyday life & self-expression
- **emotional** and **psychological** abuse against the victim-survivor and their loved ones (including pets)
- **manipulation**, including through periods of strategic '**niceness**'
- **sexual coerciveness** and **rape**, **paranoia** about infidelity, intimate **image/video abuse** and **reproductive coercion**
- **economic abuse**, including interfering with the victim-survivor's employment, preventing them from having money/assets, refusing to contribute to bills, creating debt for which victims-survivors are liable, and taking them to court vexatiously so their money is 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-survivor
- using and manipulating **legal processes** and **institutions/systems** to threaten, harm, impoverish or discredit the victim-survivor
- **physical violence, physical abuse, intimidation**, destruction of **property**, and **threats** of violence against the victim-survivor, their loved ones (including **pets**)



(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; Pitman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Miller et al, 2010; Williamson, 2010; Stark, 2009; Stark, 2007.)



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

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**.

Victims-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 the coercive controller is using to carry out their abuse.







**Some coercive control perpetrators use no violence at all.**

Nevala's (2017) EU wide data (from the European Union's FRA Violence Against Women Survey) found that **45%** of women who reported experiencing high levels of control from their current partner were not being subjected to any violence from this partner.

Day and Bowen (2015) suggest that these perpetrators are actually the most **clever and skilful** abusers, because they have mastered more covert and hard-to-identify ways of abusing.

# Loss of choices and freedom



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Westmarland and Kelly (2013) and Kelly et al (2014) highlight that coercive and controlling behaviour limits victims-survivors' 'space for action' – that is their freedom to say and do things and to meet their own needs without worry or fear.

As perpetrators microregulate their everyday lives, victims-survivors' options, choices and ability to decide for themselves shrink down more and more (Stark, 2007).

'[Now I'm out of the relationship] I'm my own person; I can do what I want. I can answer my phone when I want, I can go where I want, I can eat what I want. I can wear what I want. I don't have to get dressed if I don't want to. I can watch a programme if I want. I can have a bath whenever I want... I can do whatever I want to do' (Survivor quoted in Kelly et al., 2014, p. 124).

It is precisely these kinds of *vital* everyday freedoms that perpetrators of coercive control take away from victims-survivors.

# Myths & realities about victims-survivors

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**Myths** – If a victim-survivor fights back or has less than perfect behaviour herself, or is intelligent, seems confident, or is from an affluent background, or has a high-status job, then she can't be a real victim-survivor.

**Reality** – victims-survivors come from all walks of life and are affected in different ways.

Some victims-survivors fight back and some don't, depending on the context.

Some maintain employment and outwardly seem confident and successful.

Some turn to alcohol, medication or drugs to try to cope with the perpetrator's abuse.

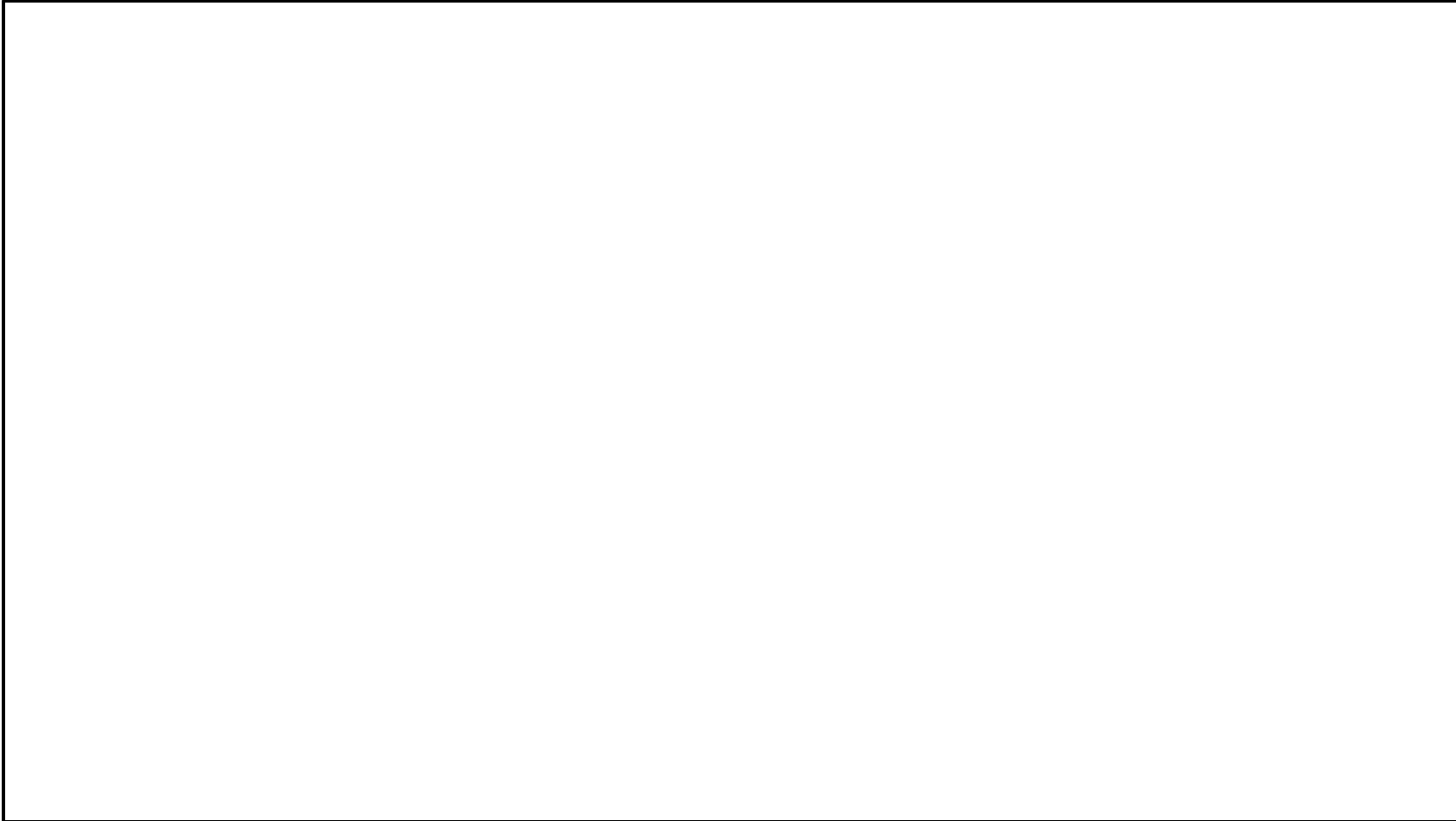
Many become psychologically distressed *because of* the perpetrator's abuse. Their mental health is a *symptom* of the abuse (Humpheys and Thiara, 2003; Moulding, 2021).

Some are manipulated by the perpetrator into thinking it's their fault, so will tell friends, family and professionals that they are to blame, or that the relationship problems are mutual.

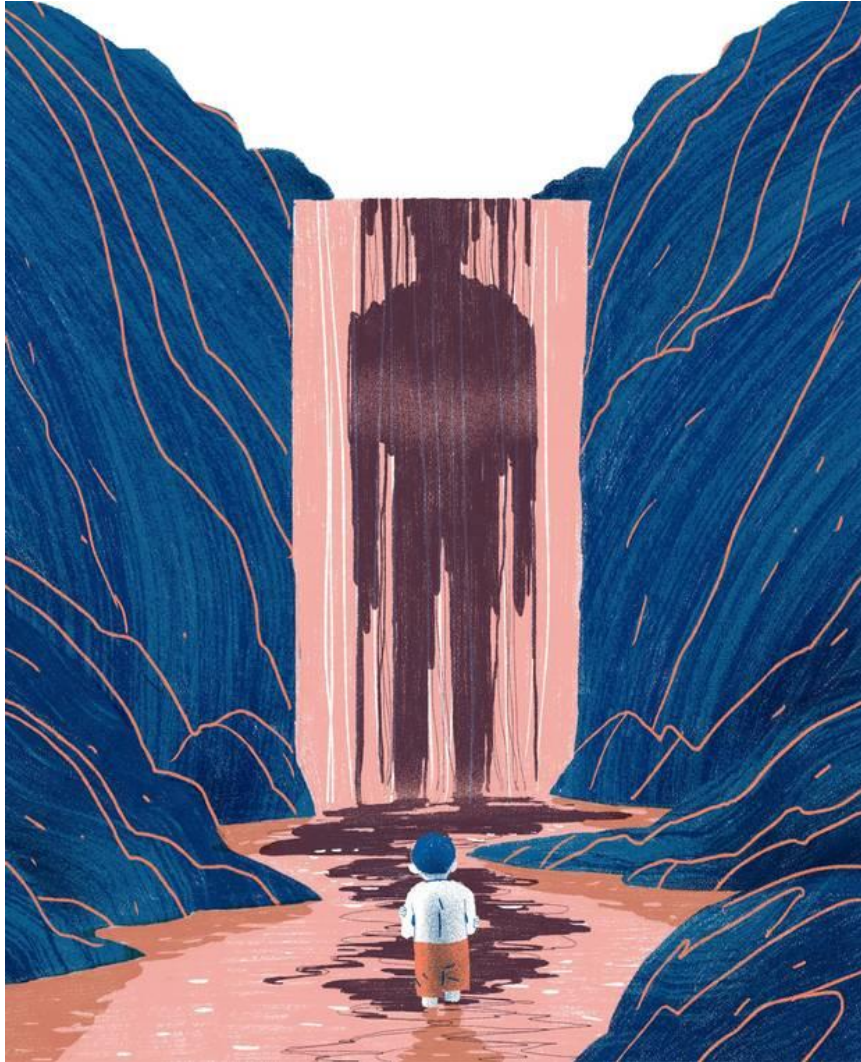
*Anyone experiencing coercive control **is** a real victim-survivor.*



Click the box below to watch video







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## IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

# Children and young people are targeted too

Perpetrators may target children and young people as well as adults.

The child of a perpetrator may experience the perpetrator rigidly and malevolently controlling their daily activities, excessively controlling and limiting their contact with friends, hurting their beloved pets, depriving them of access to amounts of money and resources that are normal for their age, exhibiting paranoia about their sexual activity, and sabotaging their educational efforts.

Some perpetrators control in a more insidious way by being overly permissive with the children, lavishing them with expensive treats and allowing them to do unhealthy things every day. This is part of the perpetrator parent's strategy to gain manipulative influence over the children, while casting the victim-survivor parent as stingy, poor, un-fun, and a killjoy, thus further marginalising and disempowering them within the family.

See e.g. Callaghan et al., 2018; Fellin et al., 2018; Haselschwerdt et al., 2019; Katz, 2016, 2019; Øverlien, 2013; Bancroft et al, 2012.



# 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).

‘[The kids] couldn’t have any friends round [to their house] 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 [and the clubs finished after that time]. Me and the kids weren’t allowed to go round to see their grandparents.’ (Isobel, mother).

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

‘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)

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

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‘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 [he said], things like that, so he’s really still hurting them emotionally. ... When they come back [from contact visits], they’re awful. Their behaviour’s really bad, and normally I’m getting verbally attacked by my son who’s having a go at me.’ (Marie, mother)

(Katz, 2022)



# Perpetrators undermining mother-child relationships



<https://www.aware.org.sg/2022/11/understanding-coercive-control-comic-series-by-charis-loke>



Perpetrators  
harming  
children's and ex-  
partner's lives  
through  
post-separation  
stalking

[https://www.ulapland.fi/EN/Webpages/CAPS-project-\(2017-2022\)](https://www.ulapland.fi/EN/Webpages/CAPS-project-(2017-2022))



# Co-victims and co-survivors

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Because of the similarity of children's and mothers' experiences of coercive control, Katz (2022) suggests using the term '**co-victims and co-survivors**'.

This term conveys that both mother and child were victims and survivors of the same thing: the perpetrator's regime of coercive control.





# Positive impacts of mothers' parenting

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It is important to note that most mothers being targeted by coercive controllers tend to do what they can to keep their children as safe, well, and happy as possible (Wendt et al, 2015), albeit their ability to do this can be limited by the perpetrator's/father's determination to abuse in ways that harm the children (Buchanan, 2018).

Even though mothers cannot stop the father's choices to use harmful behaviour, positive parenting from mothers is still a major factor in helping children to cope with fathers' domestic abuse (Letourneau et al, 2007).

'Mothers are cited more frequently by children who have lived with domestic abuse as their most important source of help than anyone else in their lives... Their relationship with their mother is most children's major support in coping.' (Mullender et al, 2002, pp. 210–11).



# Responding to coercive control

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1. Identify the perpetrator: they are the one who has been showing behavioural patterns of coercion and control for months/years. Be careful not to accidentally identify a victim-survivor who is trying to defend themselves or resist the perpetrator's oppression as the perpetrator. Most of the time (though not always), the perpetrator will be male.
2. Ask questions about what the victims-survivors feel they have to do, or can't do, because of how the perpetrator will react.
3. Partner with the victims-survivors: treat them with care and respect. Help them on their paths to gaining free, peaceful, abuse-free lives.
4. Update your language to incorporate the full scope and severity of coercive control. Use opportunities when you write or speak about the family to highlight the full scope and severity of the perpetrator's coercive control. Emphasise the perpetrator's responsibility for the coercive control: the perpetrator is the one actively causing the coercive control.
5. Recognise that the perpetrator is **entrapping** the victims-survivors & severely restricting their options and choices: the victims-survivors are trying to survive as best as they can in the circumstances, and there will be reasons behind their actions/inactions. Victims-survivors are normal people who have become entrapped in devastatingly harmful circumstances due to the malicious actions of the perpetrator.
6. Victims-survivors need systems and professionals to take effective action to get their perpetrators to **stop abusing** them. (Separation is unlikely to be enough to stop an abuser who is highly controlling and determined to keep abusing.)

# Responding to coercive control

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7. Recognise the children as co-victims and co-survivors. Recognise the coercive control as a **parenting choice** the perpetrator is making: the perpetrator is choosing to have their children grow up under a regime of coercive control, with all the distortions and harms to their childhood that this entails. They may be actively using and abusing the child as part of their drive to maintain dominance and control.
8. Investigate how the perpetrator's coercive control is impacting the child's daily life emotionally, relationally, physically, cognitively, developmentally, financially, socially and educationally.
9. Recognise and praise any **protective efforts** that the victim-survivor parent is making and how brave they had to be to make these efforts: ask questions to explore how they tried to make the child's daily life as safe and happy as they could in the circumstances. Be open minded here: the protective efforts might not take the form you are expecting, but they are protective efforts nonetheless.
10. Try to avoid a situation where the child remains entrapped spending time with or living with a perpetrating parent who is carrying out post-separation abuse: this is keeping the child very much in harm's way.



# Hope

‘[My son] John was painting the bathroom, he never would have done that before – he [the perpetrator/father] wouldn’t have allowed it. And he dropped the paint, he thought I was going to go mad. So I come along and he said “you’re probably not going to ask me to paint anymore” and I said “don’t worry John, I will”. He said to me the other day “Mum will you teach me how to make pastry?” because he wants to learn.’ (Eloise, mother)

‘Now [the kids and I] just have a laugh... Now we can just sit together and spend time together... I’d say we’re considerate of each other, we’re sensitive to each other’s feelings and emotions and I’d say we have fun.’ (Isobel, mother)

‘I stopped seeing him [perpetrator/father] a couple of years ago... I’ve spoken to two counsellors. One gave me these exercises to help me see what Dad was doing, 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)

‘We just love life at the moment. It’s brought us all closer and we’re all much happier that we were then, 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)

(Katz, 2022)



# 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.

There is much we can do to improve our responses to coercive control.

As we work on responding more effectively and robustly to coercive control, we should hold in mind two things:

- (1) Tackling the problem means tackling the perpetrators, holding them accountable, and curbing their desire and ability to continue abusing.
- (2) Adult and child victims-survivors should be supported get to a point in their lives where they are safe and free from abuse, including post-separation abuse. Adults and children don't just need to be safe 'on paper' or safe 'in theory', they need to be really, genuinely safe and free in their own lives.





# Training opportunities

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I'm available to provide bespoke presentations & training on family violence/coercive control

Email at **[dremmakatz@gmail.com](mailto:dremmakatz@gmail.com)**

# Thank you



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