



# CODA - Children Overcoming Domestic Abuse

Overview document



# Welcome!

AVA is an expert, groundbreaking and independent charity working across the UK.

Our vision – A world without gender based violence and abuse.

Our mission – Working with survivors to end gender-based violence by championing evidence-based change.

Our guiding principles

- Survivors are at the heart of everything we do.
- As a feminist organisation, we understand that ending violence and abuse means challenging societal attitudes in order to change the behaviour of individual perpetrators.
- AVA is a fiercely independent organisation. We are informed by the lived experience of survivors, robust evidence and a passion for equality.
- We can make more of a difference in partnership than alone. We all have a responsibility to work together to end violence against women and girls.
- We strive to take an intersectional approach to all that we do.

How we make a difference

AVA's work is focused around those areas where we can make the best contribution to ending violence and abuse. We do this by:

- Making sure that survivors get the help and support they need in the here and now, through
  - providing innovative training that has a proven direct impact on the professional practice of people supporting survivors of violence and abuse
  - developing a range of toolkits, e-learning and other material that supports professionals to provide effective and appropriate support to survivors of violence and abuse
  - using our influence and networks to ensure survivors voices are heard.
- Working towards a future where the lives of women and girls are not blighted by gender based violence and abuse by
  - working with children and young people to play our part in raising a generation against violence and abuse
  - innovative and award winning work on prevention – because violence against women and girls, although widespread, is not inevitable
  - enhancing society's ability to end violence and abuse by carrying out innovative and practical research that fills the gaps in our understanding.

# Background Information

Until recently, recognition of the needs of children living with domestic violence in the UK has been largely confined to refuge services. Research in the UK suggests that the majority of children who have lived with domestic violence would prefer to talk to other children with similar experiences. For most children outside of the refuge system this is sadly not an option due to the severe lack of community-based programmes for children who have witnessed domestic violence. Many children exhibiting behavioural and emotional distress due to the traumatising effects of violence that they have witnessed, are rarely, if at all, referred to any service when domestic violence had been highlighted as the main adversity in their life.

For children, their emotional and behavioural distress can have both short and long term consequences. There is a high risk that many children will be directly abused but for many children it will be the effect upon their perceptions and beliefs that will leave long-term emotional scars.

In 2006, AVA mapped service provision for children across London and it was clear that there was a postcode lottery of access to specialist services for women and children who had experienced domestic violence. We looked at a range of possible options and it was decided that the Canadian parallel group work model was the best model of support available. The model has been running successfully for over 20 years in Ontario, Canada where it was developed. We contacted the original authors of the manual who were happy to work with us to develop a UK specific version of the model.

# How the model works

A 12 week concurrent psycho-educational, trauma informed programme to help women and children recover and heal from abuse and strengthen their relationship. It is a child focused programme so very different to freedom programmes for women.

## Guiding Principles

- To promote a child centred model
- To support women in recognizing their right to live without violence
- To provide opportunities to feel less isolated as mothers
- To provide info about safety planning
- To make personal connections and form a support network
- To validate importance of self-care and self-esteem.

## Core issues addressed are:

- validation of the children's experiences;
- understanding abuse;
- reducing self blame;
- safety planning;
- managing appropriate and inappropriate expressions of emotion.

A key component is teaching children how to safety plan as this strategy actively assists in the safeguarding of children as they learn to make safe choices for personal protection. This is achieved through role-play and artwork. The programme helps children learn to recognise their feelings and understand that their feelings are very important. Children are given opportunities to deal with their feelings constructively.

Discussions around power and control in relationships and responsibility help children to understand who is responsible for violence and positive conflict resolution through role modelling and play helps children learn new ways of solving problems. Group guidelines help to create a safe predictable environment for children to disclose. Finally, strategies to enhance self-esteem are ongoing throughout the programme.

Young people aged 13 – 21 also have the opportunity to discuss abuse that may occur in their own dating relationships. We are also developing group specifically for teenage mothers and their younger children (aged 0-4).

The programme offers a concurrent component for mothers to attend group - groups have been most successful when both mothers and children attend. Mothers are supported to understand how the violence has impacted on the child and how best to help them through the healing process. Collaboration and commitment across partner agencies has been the absolute key to success in operating and sustaining the community group programme.

# Eligibility Criteria

- Separation has occurred (but child can be having contact with the perpetrator)
- Child has experienced domestic abuse
- Child is impacted by the abuse and can remember it
- Risk assessment - ensure it is safe to attend
- Child assessed as appropriate and willing to attend
- Families need to be safe, secure and settled physically before they can engage in a group
- Attendance must be voluntary and should never be a requirement of a child protection plan.

Children's groups are divided by age:

- 4-6 years
- 7-8 years
- 9-11 years
- 12-13 years
- 14-16 years

Siblings must also not attend the same group.

We recommended 6-8 children per group and always at least 2 facilitators.

# Multi-agency Working

Clearly all our objectives are achieved by working as a team with a shared vision. A wide and varied number of professionals (statutory and non-statutory) have committed fully to the programme.

These include:

- Women's safety workers, London Probation Service
- Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Education Welfare
- Health Visitors
- School Nurses
- Social Services
- Teachers
- Police Officers
- Refuge staff
- Domestic violence coordinators

The benefits of such a range of participants are immense, as not only do staff increase their knowledge and skills in this area of work, so too do they make it transferable to other work settings. In addition, staff taking part from specific agencies, bring the expertise from their primary work environment and utilise that in group to assist children who are encountering difficulties in other aspects of their lives. We know from Climbe and other child protection cases the dangers of failure to work together in practice and this is particularly true in relation to children living with domestic violence. Providing a coordinated community programme reliant upon multi agency collaboration has the potential to improve services to children and women experiencing domestic violence and to maximise their continual safety and well-being.

# Impact of The Groups

- Children improved in their ability to identify abusive actions
- At post group, far fewer indicated they would try to intervene in abuse episodes, themselves a cause of great risk to children
- Fewer children condone any kind of violence in relationships at post-test
- Fewer children felt that children were the cause of abuse or parental fights
- Children improved in their strategies in interpersonal conflicts
- More children indicated they would use non-violent conflict resolution tactics
- Children were able to identify abusive behaviours, knew how to keep safe and avoid physical harm and were able to identify a safe person to confide in.

Attending the programme enables children to identify, understand and acknowledge their feelings. This has a positive impact on both their social and intimate relationships and emotional development. This is key for children of all ages but particularly those about to embark upon dating relationships. The programme provides information to mothers and children about the long lasting effects of violence. This can go a long way in helping mothers make safe choices about video and film material for children and encouraging children to recognise positive role models, particularly those involved in sport. All of this acts as a secondary prevention and gives the unequivocal message that all violence and abuse is unacceptable. In particular safety-planning skills are retained life long and more importantly are transferable across life stages and changes.

Many children experience social exclusion when their externalising behaviours result in them being excluded either from the education system or social activities and clubs. The agencies that came together to share in the implementation of this programme had to develop a shared vision. This included the belief that women and children should be able to live their lives free of violence and abuse and that until this was achieved women and children would continue to experience social exclusion in a range of ways.

Many women who live with violence are extremely isolated in their experiences. By offering a group programme to mothers it is an opportunity for them to take the first step towards decreasing their sense of isolation by coming together and identifying the value of women making connections with one another in the group setting. Invariably mothers will not have talked of their experiences or the specific challenges they face in parenting traumatised children. At group, for the first time they are no longer alone in their parenting experience. The confidence gained in group may enable mothers to consider further education and employment as they recover from the belief of their lack of worth.

To minimise social exclusion groups have to be available to children and mothers from diverse cultural communities, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities and those with a disability. Children and mothers feel included, as the service is nurturing, non-judgemental and well informed. Additional support systems are used to facilitate social inclusion at all times.

*We feel that this group work method is an excellent example of therapeutic work to support women and children and to prevent further violence and abuse in the future. Safety planning and risk assessment are crucial components of the model. It is also imperative to frame the abuse they have suffered within a gendered context as a form of violence against women and a violation of their human rights.*



# Thank you!

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## Margins

