

EMBARGO: 0030 hours
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Domestic violence - silence isn't always golden

Sexist language and playground banter can legitimize violence against women and should not be tolerated by schools, says the NUT in a new pamphlet being distributed throughout England and Wales.

The pamphlet*, launched on International Women's Day, warns of the impact on children's behaviour and on their ability to achieve at school and on teachers' performance as employees if they are subjected to domestic violence.

Schools can work both to combat the development of the attitudes which can lead to domestic violence in later life and help the child who is currently living with domestic violence. They can also provide help and support to teachers and other employees who are themselves subjected to violence in the home.

Domestic violence includes bullying, beating, rape, sexual assault and harassment. The Union's advice also covers other forms of violence against women including female circumcision, 'honour crimes', and forced marriages (as opposed to arranged marriages).

Steve Sinnott, NUT General Secretary, said: "Domestic violence is an invisible crime but it has devastating and long term affects on the physical and mental health of those subjected to it. It may occur behind closed doors but everyone has a part to play in its eradication.

"This pamphlet is the first ever guidance for schools on domestic violence and suggests ways that teachers can address the issue across the curriculum and demonstrate to young people that violence will not be tolerated.

"Whilst there are no set symptoms displayed by children who witness domestic violence, the impact on their behaviour can be dramatic. Absenteeism, bullying, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol misuse, and self harm can all result.

"Teachers too can be the subject of domestic violence and it is important that they know where they can turn for help and the sort of support they should be able to expect from their employers.

"I welcome our joint work with the Home Office and the support it has given to our guidance."

Baroness Scotland, Minister of State for the Criminal Justice System and Law Reform said: "Domestic violence is an horrific crime that has devastating effects on both victims and their children who witness it. Domestic violence is gender blind but women suffer most. One in four women will suffer domestic violence in their lifetime, and victims tend

to suffer repeated attacks - on average 35 assaults - before they seek any help. It can have a very damaging effect on a child's health, educational attainment and emotional well-being and development. Teachers and schools have an important role in helping address domestic violence, raise the importance of the issue, and support children to help them regain their confidence and keep them safe.

"It's a shocking statistic that 80 per cent of children live in households where there is domestic violence are in the same or next room. The NUT's guidance *Silence is Not Always Golden*, published today, gives important advice for teachers on tackling domestic violence through the curriculum. Today, I am also launching the domestic violence and children toolkit which will be used by anti-bullying teams in schools throughout the country. Domestic violence and bullying are closely linked, with both issues being about the exploitation of power differentials. This toolkit will help anti-bullying teams take into account domestic violence when developing anti-bullying initiatives. Perpetrators of bullying often become domestic abusers in adult life. Tackling this behaviour can act as a powerful deterrent to its continued use. It's also important for children to feel that they can tell teachers and gain support if someone in their home is suffering domestic violence."

The guidance points out that attitudes towards women and girls that regard them as inferior to men and boys lie at the heart of most domestic violence. Within a broader context of schools' work on respect and conflict resolution, work needs to focus on gender stereotypes, on mutual respect in intimate relationships, and on challenging the condoning of domestic violence. Work on school culture and the prevention of bullying can usefully incorporate work on homophobic and racist abuse, as well as sexist bullying. It should always retain a focus on the causes of domestic violence as an essential element.

Learning can spread far beyond personal social and health education into specific subject areas such as drama and English and potentially to every area of the curriculum. It is highly relevant to citizenship education, for example in relation to valuing people equally, respecting the law, and being a good citizen. There are also obvious links with equal opportunities policies in individual schools.

All teachers with responsibility for child protection should receive training which should be regularly updated to fulfill their responsibilities.

Teachers with concerns about the welfare of children should:

- * listen positively and reassure the child or young person, but without guaranteeing complete confidentiality; and
- * speak to the designated person for child protection within the school.

Designated persons will contact relevant specialist agencies where appropriate about the particular needs of children experiencing domestic violence.

Women often seek help from relatives or from local voluntary organisations because their

greatest fear is that their children will be taken into care. Abused women, therefore, tend to avoid social services and seek help from friends and relatives, independent advice services and the other domestic violence organizations.

Supporting the non-abusing parent is the most effective way of reducing risks to the child. Only the abuser is responsible for the violence. Although abused women often give their partners another chance “for the sake of the children”, it is the effects of domestic violence on the children which frequently spurs women into terminating the relationship.

But attitudes and responses are changing.

The changes in the law and the measures brought in by the Domestic, Violence, Crime and Victims Act, send out a very clear message to perpetrators of domestic violence that their behaviour will no longer be tolerated and if it continues, they will feel the full weight of the law.

For victims, the new Act removes the burden on them to press charges or decide whether there should be charges brought when the police are called.

It is important to encourage victims to use the law to protect themselves and their children without fear of the consequences. Schools can be powerful allies in tackling domestic abuse especially if they are able to create constructive links with local authorities and the local police.

Proper training and support should be provided for all relevant staff to ensure that the questioning of children or discussions about these issues with women is done in a way that supports the non-abusing parent. Questioning should not result in children and their mothers being re-victimised, for example, by inappropriately removing children into care.

In many schools there will be staff who suffer domestic violence making it a trade union issue as well.

Domestic violence causes many kinds of mental disorder and reduces a victim's capacities and capabilities including the ability to work. This may include:

- * lost days of employment as a result of injuries, fear and anxiety;
- * time spent seeking help and seeing doctors and lawyers;
- * lost promotion as a result of working beneath potential as a result of injuries, fear and anxiety; and
- * jobs lost as a result of poor work performance and the need to move in order to escape a violent partner.

Many people who experience violence can take a long time to break free of an abusive relationship. For complex reasons people remain with, or return to, violent partners. It is important that there be no critical judgements made about such decisions. Many women face difficulties in reporting abuse because they fear disbelief.

Flexible arrangements can be introduced that are supportive of staff suffering domestic violence. A workplace policy can include the provisions below:

- * victims of domestic violence should not be penalised for coming in late, going absent at short notice or taking sick leave;
- * periods of special paid or unpaid leave should be arranged;
- * information should be available about local help or support, including culturally appropriate services where appropriate;
- * contacts should be identified for advice where one parent seeks to remove a pupil without consent of the other parent;
- * employees' confidentiality should be protected; and
- * steps should be taken to raise awareness of the issue in the workplace.

The NUT seeks to:

- * support and empower individuals to gain control and choice over their own lives and to approach the NUT if they need support at work;
- * help schools better meet the needs of children living with or fleeing domestic violence through awareness raising, training and a 'whole school approach' on bullying, citizenship and personal and social relationships;
- * create an environment, attitude and culture within schools as workplaces where individuals suffering from domestic violence are confident that they will be treated in a supportive and sympathetic way; and
- * reduce social tolerance and 'normalisation' of domestic violence and violence against women more generally so that it is no longer excused, minimised or ignored.

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*A pdf file of the full pamphlet will be sent as a following email.

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