Children's Experiences of Domestic Abuse: Reports of feelings in online peer-to-peer self-disclosures

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1. Introduction

Few scholars would dispute the central role of children's voices in research exploring their experiences of living in homes with domestic abuse[1], both to gain their insight into how they understand their problems (Överlien, 2010) and to recognise the importance of their individual experiences (Swanston et al., 2014). As Callaghan et al. (2017a) argue, children must not be seen as passive witnesses. However, gaining access to those crucial voices is fraught with problems. Firstly, on a methodological level, simply gaining access to children for participation in research can be very difficult (Överlien, 2010). Secondly, children can be distrusting of adults and their responses to disclosures, which constitutes a significant barrier to disclosing being a witness to, or victim of, domestic abuse (Callaghan et al., 2017b). As such, it is unsurprising that children more commonly disclose to a same-aged peer: they are more likely to disclose to a friend rather than a close or familiar adult (Howell et al., 2014).

Due to the challenges of working with children described above, we have insufficient understanding of domestic violence from the child's perspective, particularly as told in an authentic context free from power dyads or fear of action being taken. Indeed, the knowledge that has been accrued has largely been derived from retrospective semi-structured interviews with adults who were victims as children (e.g. Callaghan et al., 2015; Naughton et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2012). Whilst such an approach provides a safe space for researcher and participant to collaboratively explore their ideas, they are situated within a context that may influence participant responses, and are reliant on the adults having accurate recollection of the events and their experiences. The current state of knowledge largely reflects adults' memories of experiences of domestic abuse, rather than their experiences in the moment.

Further, many children are recruited to participate in such interviews through treatment and intervention programmes, or through their residence at refugee homes (e.g. Izaguirre & Cater, 2018; Ornduff & Monaham, 1999; Peled, 1998) meaning that the children who constitute such samples do not represent participants at the most vulnerable point of disclosure: they will have been well informed about the wrongful actions of the aggressor, which may have affected their willingness to talk. The content and structure of their narratives are unlikely to be in their rawest, most authentic form and the children's thoughts and feelings about domestic abuse will, in many cases, have been shaped and re-framed to some extent. Moreover, studies of participants which focus predominantly on children of refugee backgrounds, whilst providing valuable and necessary insight into their particular experiences, perhaps do not represent broader experiences of other children in the community (Swanston et al., 2014). Naughton et

[1] The term *domestic abuse* will be used throughout as a coverall term for all types of interpersonal violence and conflict (both verbal and non-verbal) that occurs within the home, unless describing salient research where an alternative term is used (notably, *domestic violence*). The methods which drive our data-collection do not allow us to use more nuanced terminology when describing our own data.

al. (2019) offer a notable exception with none of their 14 participants having undergone specific treatment for exposure to domestic violence; that said, 12 of the 14 participants did disclose that they had received treatment for mental health conditions (although no link between the mental health treatment and domestic violence is stated or implied by Naughton et al.).

In an attempt to overcome some of the limitations of previous research and to more accurately capture the experiences of children who live in homes where domestic abuse has occurred, the present research attempts to capture the voices of children at the point of informal disclosure to unknown peers: specifically, through their posts to an asynchronous online support forum. For this purpose, our data will come from Childline[2] message boards. By working directly with the words that children use in a naturalistic, non-experimental context that is in the moment rather than relying on self-reports, their voices may more authentically be represented. This chapter begins by exploring how data was captured and the way in which ethics were considered before reporting the findings from an initial exploratory analysis focussing specifically on how children talk about their feelings. We conclude by highlighting the significance of our findings for practitioners involved in supporting children who have witnessed or been subjected to domestic abuse.

2. Data: A methodological challenge

Data were collected in late 2019 from Childline's online message boards.[3] Posts made to these message boards are organised around a set of broad **categories** that group together specific **topics** of discussion. For example, the message board **category** 'bullying, abuse and keeping safe' subsumes the following **topics**:

- bullying and discrimination
- emotional abuse
- neglect
- online safety and cyber bullying
- physical abuse
- racism
- sexual abuse

The Childline message board provides a search function which enables users to search for and identify topics of interest through the selection of broad **categories** and subsidiary **topics** as well as through searching the message boards using specific **search terms**.

Regarding the present research, *domestic abuse* does not exist as either a **category** or **topic** on the message board but reports of domestic abuse (henceforth, DA) are present in the Childline online message boards. Although many of the reports are framed as abuse, only a small minority directly refer to 'domestic abuse' when reporting incidents of behaviour that characterise DA. Most reports do not, for example:

[2] Childline is a free, confidential counselling and support service for young people in the UK aged up to 19 years old.
[3] https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/message-boards/

> I'm [Age] and I go to high school. My mum and I have been living with her abusive boyfriend for [X] years by now and honestly, it was terrible. Here is why:
> […]
> -He took of my mums clothes and even called me to come into the room. He also pressues[4] her for sex.

That many reports do not contain the term 'domestic abuse' presents both methodological and analytical challenges in terms of how to firstly identify and secondly interpret language related to DA in posts on the Childline message boards. Relatedly, and more problematically, that Childline lacks a board dedicated to the discussion of DA presents a potential barrier to accessing community advice on DA as a generalised **topic**. Simply searching 'domestic abuse' in the hope that all posts referring to DA are returned is insufficient to discover the variety of ways in which DA is codified, reported and discussed in the message boards. This methodological challenge is identified by Callaghan et al. (2017b). Based on semi-structured interviews with 107 children aged 8—18 from across UK, Greece, Italy and Spain, Callaghan et al. (2017b) found that their participants "expressed caution, suspicion and distrust about disclosure" (p. 3375) and that they commonly used euphemisms and understatements to describe their experiences, rather than directly labelling what they experienced as *violence* (p. 3375). They conclude that for "fraught and difficult experiences like domestic violence, the available language for children to articulate their experiences can be very limited" (p. 3382).

In response, we took an approach to sampling that would enable us to capture as many possible reports of DA whilst also attempting to mitigate researcher bias. Although researchers may have intuitions about the contents of reports, it is important that these intuitions do not bias the 'shape' of the data or analysis. Therefore, rather than attempting to generate an exhaustive list of search terms that we think reports of DA might contain, or collecting posts in boards **categories/topics** that we might suspect would refer to DA, we adopted a form of purposive sampling that aimed to identify as many posts referring to DA as possible by detecting which boards and topics *tend to* attract discussion of DA (which may be characterised by DA, abuse or violence in the home, or 'family violence'). Our sampling method thus began by identifying posts that matched searches containing combinations of (domestic OR home OR family) AND (abuse OR violence). Specifically:

- domestic AND abuse
- domestic AND violence
- home AND abuse
- home AND violence
- family AND abuse
- family AND violence

Search results enabled us to tabulate how resulting posts were distributed across different **categories** (Figure 1) and **topics** (**Error! Reference source not found.**) and found

[4] All extracts are reported faithfully including typographical errors as in the original. Where appropriate, we have redacted any potentially identificatory material such as the age of the child.

that posts matching the above searches occurred most frequently in the message board **categories** *bullying, abuse and keeping safe* and *home and school* (Table 1; Figure 1) and, more specifically, within the **topics** *emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse,* and *home and family* (Table 1; Figure 2).

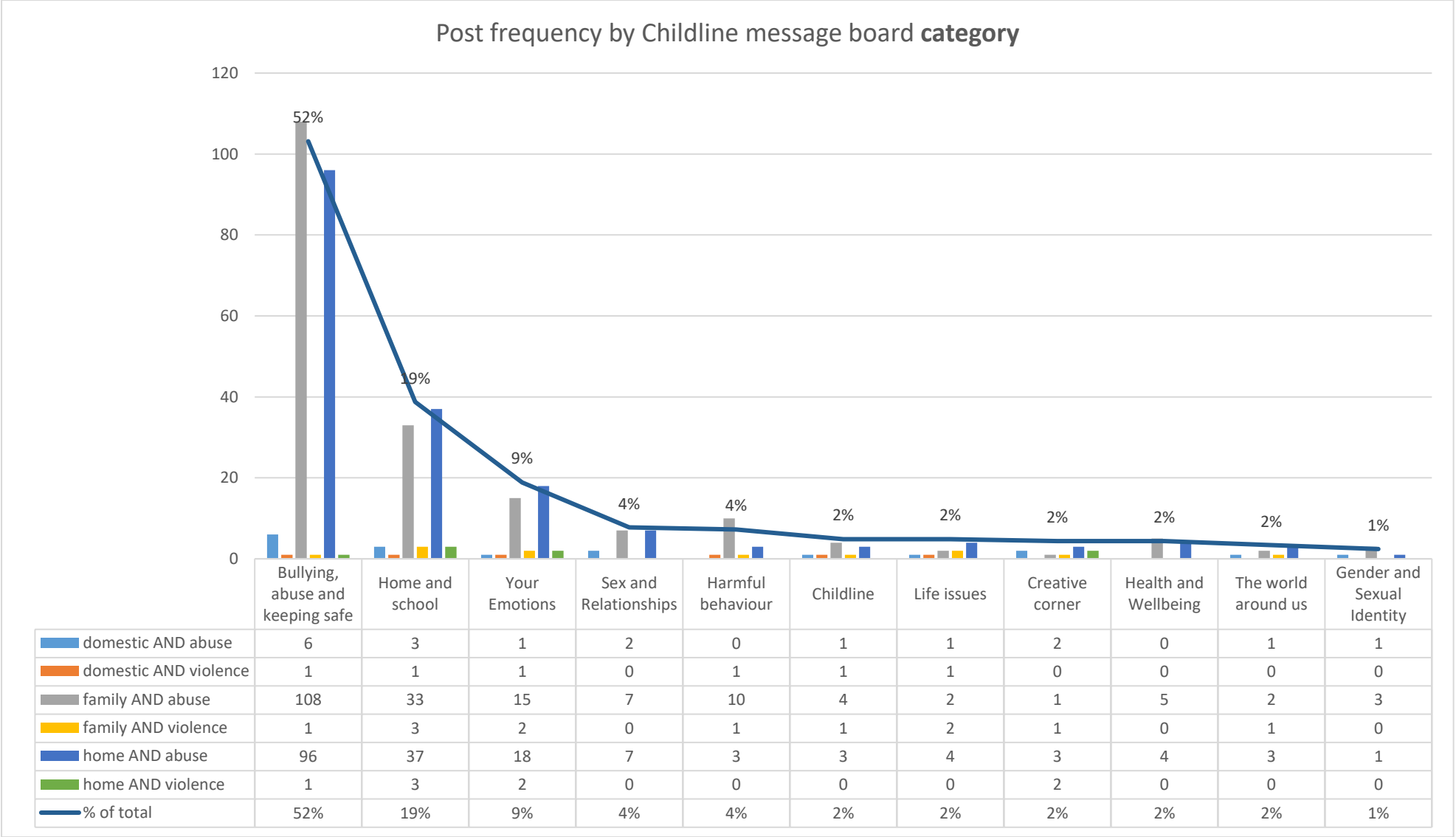
Table 1: Distribution of posts matching search terms across different message board topics. Most frequent shown

Category	**Topic**	**Number of posts**	**% of total number of posts**
Bullying, abuse and keeping safe	Emotional abuse	98	24%
	Sexual abuse	59	14%
	Physical abuse	58	14%
Home and school	Home and Family	50	12%
Totals		**265**	**64%**

Using this information about the distribution of posts that may contain reference to DA, we are able to make an educated guess that these topics tend to attract posts containing reference to DA but also acknowledge that the terminology of our search terms might not accurately capture all discussions of DA within these topics. As such, to analyse the potential variety of discussions of DA within these topics, we collected **all** posts made to the message board **topics** given in Table 1, resulting in a corpus containing data from **3,242** posts, which contain a total of **521,395** words (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of posts according to category and topic

Category	**Topic**	**Size of subcorpus (posts)**	**Size of subcorpus (words)**
Bullying, abuse and keeping safe	Emotional abuse	426	78,078
	Sexual abuse	725	128,048
	Physical abuse	256	36,485
Home and school	Home and Family	1,835	278,784
Totals		**3,242**	**521,395**



	Bullying, abuse and keeping safe	Home and school	Your Emotions	Sex and Relationships	Harmful behaviour	Childline	Life issues	Creative corner	Health and Wellbeing	The world around us	Gender and Sexual Identity
domestic AND abuse	6	3	1	2	0	1	1	2	0	1	1
domestic AND violence	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
family AND abuse	108	33	15	7	10	4	2	1	5	2	3
family AND violence	1	3	2	0	1	1	2	1	0	1	0
home AND abuse	96	37	18	7	3	3	4	3	4	3	1
home AND violence	1	3	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
% of total	52%	19%	9%	4%	4%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%

Figure 1: Post frequency by Childline message board category

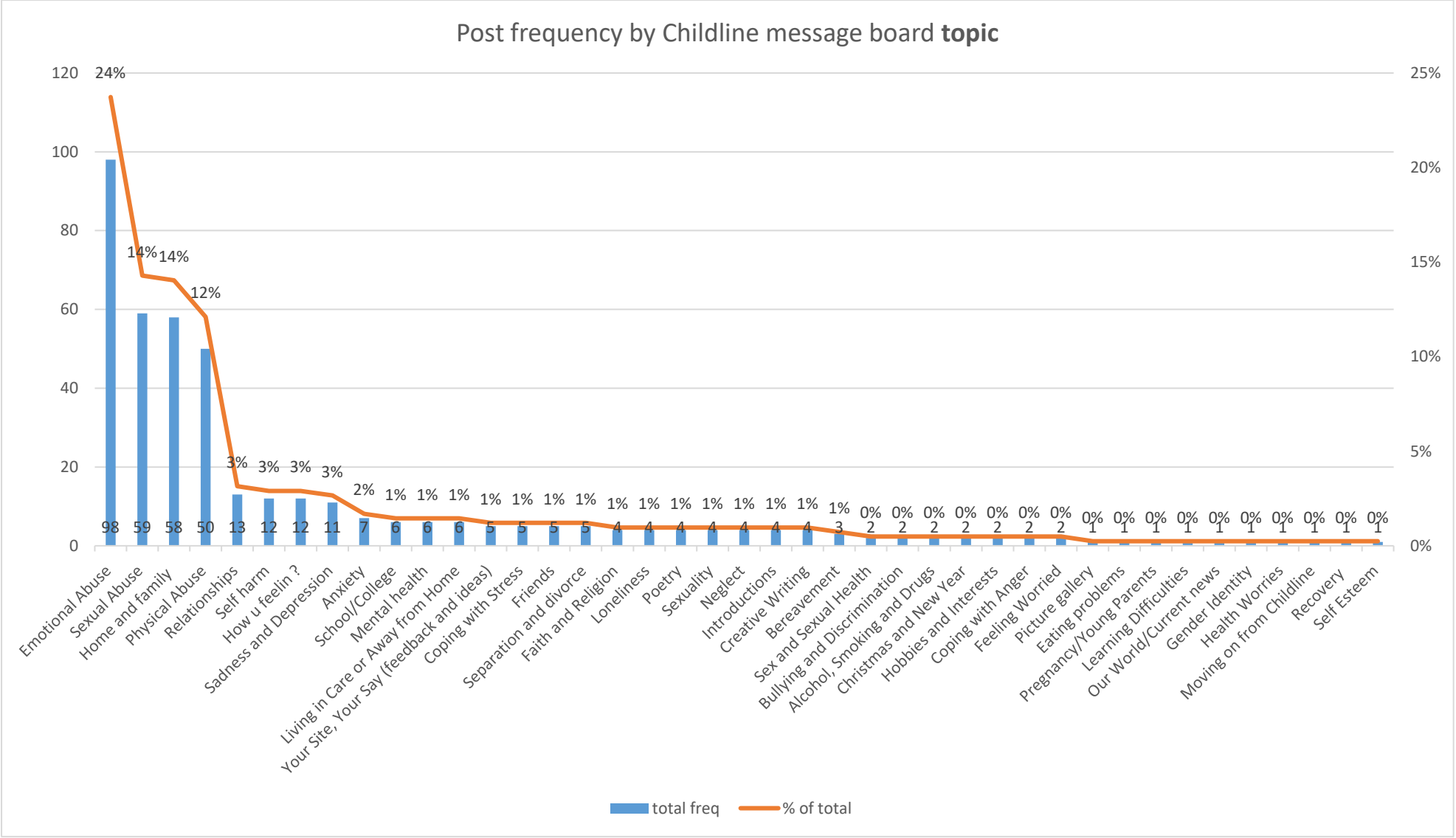


Figure 2: Post frequency by Childline message board topic

3. Ethical Considerations

The message boards exist freely in the public domain and no barriers exist to prevent the data from being downloaded. All children posting to the Childline message boards do so anonymously. Indeed, Childline moderators review each individual post prior to publication to ensure that it does not contain personal information. This means that no identifying names, addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, place names, or any other details which could potentially identify the children are posted. Furthermore, this chapter does not include any extensive direct quotation from the posts in which participants could potentially be identified. Where we do rely on direct quotation to illustrate a point, the smallest stretch of discourse is used, of course avoiding anything that might provide contextual details particular to an individual (noting again that Childline moderate all content for this type of material specifically so it is highly unlikely that there will be any identificatory material in the posts). The protocol of downloading social media data—provided that anonymity and respect is afforded to the participants—is widely documented in the corpus linguistics literature (e.g. Coles & West, 2016; Hardaker, 2013; Herring et al., 2002). This research is therefore fully compliant with the ethical standards and expectations of corpus linguistics research and full ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Manchester Metropolitan University).

4. Findings

As discussed above, challenges exist for the identification and interpretation of reports of DA in the message boards. That explicit, direct reference to DA in posts is rare presents a challenge for analysis. When searching for direct reference to "domestic abuse" in the corpus described in Table 2, just nine posts were identified (0.28% of the corpus) of which eight referred directly to a form of DA as shown in Table 3. Following corpus linguistics conventions, the middle column shows the keyword in context (KWIC) i.e. the lemma *domestic**. The left column shows the words that immediately precede the KWIC and the righthand column shows the words that immediately follow the KWIC.

Table 3: Posts which directly reference "domestic abuse"

Left of Keyword	KWIC	Right of Keyword
and alone at the moment my child's dad has been	domestically	abusive to me and tried breaking into my parents garden
let me give you the run down my parents were	domestically	abusive and got divorced when i was 6 my dad
to what happened my primary school headteacher would put out	domestic	abuse helplines hoping my mum would call them i only
woman being hit by a man your first thought is	domestic	abuse but if you see a man being hit by
hitting yelling cops were called and i was nearly arrested	domestic	violence assault 4th degree my mom wouldn't speak to me
bit up and down she has been through a lot	domestic	abuse multiple times from different partners drug and alcohol abuse
part in a family where there is a history of	domestic	abuse but some people just don't listen learn or care

i had a bad childhood anyway i was sexually assualted	domestically	and emotionally abused and with being the older sister i've

These reports include DA involving the respondent, reports of DA between parents, reports of child abuse, and a single question about DA as a gendered phenomenon. To potentially capture reports of DA that do not include explicit reference, our analysis here first explores some quantitative linguistic findings on the corpus (see Table 2) before discussing the contents of the posts in more qualitative detail.

4.1. Quantitative Linguistic Analysis

Quantitative analysis begins here with an exploration of some frequent features of the texts. Table 4 gives four lists showing the top 30 most frequent words, lemma (dictionary headwords; the canonical form of a group of words), and variants of these lists which have had grammatically closed-class words—words that have restricted grammatical functions and limited semantic content; also referred to as *stopwords*—removed.[5] These lists are ranked by the frequency of the items in the *Feature* column and *DocFreq*, which shows how many texts a feature is distributed across.

Table 4: Top 30 most frequent words

	Words			Words (stopwords removed)			Lemma			Lemma (stopwords removed)		
Rank	Feature	Freq.	DocFreq.	Feature	Freq.	DocFreq.	Feature	Freq.	DocFreq.	Feature	Freq.	DocFreq.
1	i	28605	3131	just	3210	1657	i	28607	3131	mum	3231	1535
2	and	21805	3091	like	3006	1613	and	21805	3091	just	3211	1658
3	to	17222	3030	mum	2998	1483	to	17222	3030	get	3130	1736
4	my	16254	3020	know	2698	1696	my	16254	3020	like	3115	1641
5	me	12354	2779	really	2392	1404	me	12354	2779	know	2923	1763
6	the	8907	2547	feel	2364	1349	it	9056	2578	feel	2906	1531
7	a	7984	2557	dad	2235	1185	the	8907	2547	want	2656	1516
8	it	7091	2354	get	2181	1403	a	7986	2557	dad	2416	1231
9	but	6294	2473	im	2102	966	he	6561	1445	realli	2393	1405
10	he	6116	1402	want	2034	1283	but	6297	2474	go	2227	1319
11	was	5486	1731	dont	1493	821	was	5486	1731	im	2102	966
12	of	5093	2081	now	1451	1057	she	5481	1380	say	1909	1183
13	she	5079	1351	time	1419	1008	that	5148	2010	time	1820	1197
14	that	4829	1956	parents	1405	886	of	5093	2081	thing	1703	1101
15	in	4468	2043	can	1365	986	have	4546	2051	year	1692	1132
16	is	4391	2016	always	1347	885	in	4468	2043	make	1618	1072
17	so	4270	1991	go	1297	896	is	4391	2016	tell	1581	1051
18	have	4118	1956	told	1273	849	so	4270	1991	friend	1546	896
19	with	4010	1962	things	1258	869	with	4011	1962	parent	1534	943
20	for	3601	1843	said	1244	739	do	3990	2049	dont	1493	821
21	do	3508	1939	help	1241	941	for	3602	1843	now	1452	1057
22	this	3405	1763	even	1220	877	this	3405	1763	help	1395	1026
23	at	3365	1765	school	1215	770	at	3365	1765	think	1368	942
24	just	3210	1657	one	1173	856	mum	3231	1535	can	1367	988
25	her	3112	1124	tell	1100	812	just	3211	1658	alway	1350	887
26	like	3006	1613	got	1095	793	get	3130	1736	tri	1286	876
27	mum	2998	1483	never	1079	778	her	3122	1125	told	1273	849
28	on	2943	1673	think	1014	737	be	3117	1665	even	1254	894

[5] The reason for removing stopwords is to focus more directly on those less semantically restricted words in a corpus.

29	when	2897	1623	friends	1008	689	like	3115	1641	school	1251	781
30	him	2863	1097	going	930	694	on	2943	1673	said	1244	739

The most frequent items in the words and lemma lists show a frequent use of personal pronouns (*I, my, me, he, she, her, him*), conjunctions (*and, but*), and articles (*a, the*), which are extremely common and well distributed across the corpus but do not reveal much (at the lexical level) about the topic of the posts being analysed. Other, more open-class words—some of which are just as common and well distributed as pronouns, conjunctions, and articles—also appear to reveal some common topics of the posts in the corpus. Specifically, topics relating to relationships, including parents (*parents, mum, dad*) and *friends*, and concerns relating to *school* are some of the most common themes. Given the focus of this chapter on DA, we are unable to explore all of these topics but posts that focus on relations with and between *parents* may correlate broadly with discussions of DA in the posts from these message boards. As such, we focussed our discussion on only those posts that contained at least one reference to the lemma of both *mum* and *dad* in order to examine how children discuss relationships with and between these parents.

The more concentrated focus on posts referring explicitly to parents returned a smaller sample of 866 posts to work with (26.71% of the corpus). These 866 posts were manually read and all instances in which children expressed concern about some form of abuse or conflict between parents were selected, which resulted in a smaller set of 162 texts (henceforth, the DA corpus). Table 5 shows the top 100 frequently occurring words in the DA corpus, ranked by the frequency of the items in the *Word* column. The column labelled *Texts* indicates how many texts contain at least one instance of the *word* and the column labelled *Freq.* indicates how many instances of the word there is across the entire DA corpus.

Table 5: 100 most frequent words in DA corpus

N	Word	Texts	Freq.	N	Word	Texts	Freq.	N	Word	Texts	Freq.
1	I	156	1429	34	ABOUT	93	165	67	HOW	53	83
2	AND	160	1404	35	HAS	84	163	68	ARE	57	81
3	MY	160	1244	36	REALLY	90	161	69	NEVER	55	77
4	TO	156	1022	37	WHAT	100	157	70	THINGS	58	76
5	ME	138	586	38	BE	87	154	71	HELP	46	75
6	THE	136	568	39	NOT	85	150	72	GO	44	71
7	HE	101	479	40	DON'T	67	148	73	ONE	51	71
8	A	141	477	41	KNOW	83	147	74	YEARS	52	70
9	MUM	162	430	42	IF	74	143	75	THERE	50	68
10	BUT	136	394	43	LIKE	84	140	76	EVEN	50	66
11	IT	130	375	44	OR	79	134	77	GOT	48	66
12	DAD	161	366	45	WE	67	130	78	HOUSE	41	66
13	SHE	92	364	46	AS	65	128	79	OTHER	50	66
14	OF	120	318	47	GET	81	127	80	US	41	66
15	IS	116	310	48	ALL	80	124	81	BROTHER	37	65
16	THAT	114	282	49	UP	80	123	82	AM	43	62
17	WAS	92	269	50	I'M	68	122	83	ALSO	44	60
18	IN	116	265	51	FEEL	67	119	84	FROM	49	60
19	HER	97	256	52	OUT	75	113	85	GOING	39	60
20	HAVE	115	251	53	BEEN	70	111	86	BEING	40	59
21	WITH	106	239	54	WANT	68	109	87	THEM	42	59
22	FOR	103	229	55	ALWAYS	70	108	88	STARTED	39	58
23	HIM	86	221	56	NOW	69	104	89	TOLD	37	58
24	SO	98	220	57	HAD	58	99	90	AN	44	57
25	DO	117	217	58	PARENTS	62	96	91	ANYTHING	47	57

26	AT	106	212	59	IM	45	95	92	BACK	41	57
27	THIS	104	208	60	WOULD	51	94	93	IT'S	35	57
28	#	87	203	61	DONT	46	90	94	ITS	38	56
29	JUST	95	190	62	HIS	43	90	95	MUCH	45	56
30	BECAUSE	86	185	63	TIME	72	87	96	THINK	40	56
31	WHEN	92	180	64	THEN	56	86	97	ANYONE	46	55
32	ON	99	171	65	YOU	34	84	98	DAY	39	54
33	THEY	71	171	66	CAN	62	83	99	OVER	37	54
								100	NO	38	53

There are many interesting aspects to the words that have been identified as occurring most frequently in the small DA corpus, as exemplified in Table 5. For instance, the first person pronoun (*I*) indicates the personal nature of these disclosures and the references to *mum* (rank 9), *dad* (rank 12) and *parents* (rank 58) are to be expected since these posts were selected specifically for the reference to parents. Other words offer further opportunity for investigation such as *things* (rank 70) in terms of understanding what sorts of issues children are ambiguous or vague about (e.g. referring to specific events as *things*). Equally, *think* and *know* are interesting in terms of understanding what claims to knowledge children make about domestic abuse and their opinions, and *want* may provide insight into children's needs. However, one word that stands out as being particularly insightful, and which has support from the salient literature, is *feel* (which ranks at 51 and occurs 119 times across 67 texts). Naughton et al. (2019) carried out semi-structured interviews with 13 university students to understand how young people construct domestic violence and abuse in their families, and how those constructions may affect the way they report their experiences. They found that participants constructed domestic violence and abuse as physical violence only, and in so doing, struggled to articulate the psychological aspects as a form of domestic violence and abuse in its own right. Furthermore, their analysis revealed that their participants normalised incidents and the behaviours that they had witnessed, meaning that it is harder for children to recognise that intervention is warranted. It seems then, that during research interviews at least, these young people struggled to articulate their feelings. Furthermore, Callaghan et al. (2017a) carried out an analysis of two case studies of interviews which explored the ways that siblings care for their brothers and sisters in families where domestic violence occurs. In one of the case studies, Callaghan et al. highlight that the 11-year-old child talked to her teddies about her feelings because there was not space within the family to talk about the domestic violence and abuse she was experiencing. They note that this is a "far from optimum way to express herself" (p. 20). Through an exploration of the word *feel*, it may be possible to better understand what children feel about their experiences of domestic violence. From the outset, however, we anticipate that the volume of examples will be few, so due caution will be exercised in interpreting and understanding our findings. We return to this matter in the conclusion.

5. What do children feel about domestic abuse?

For the purposes of this analysis, concordances[6] were extracted for the lemma *feel** (i.e. *feel, feeling, feelings*). Whilst *feel* occurred 119 times across 67 texts, the cumulation of *feel, feeling*

[6] Citations of *feel* in the context in which they occur.

and *feelings* generated 149 entries across 80 texts . Table 6 provides a list of the 100 most frequent words which collocate (co-occur) with *feel** in the DA corpus.

Table 6: 100 most frequent collocates of *feel** (emotions highlighted in red)

N	Word	Texts	Freq.	N	Word	Texts	Freq.	N	Word	Texts	Freq.
1	FEEL	67	119	35	DON'T	6	7	69	SOMETIMES	4	4
2	I	56	118	36	SHE	7	7	70	AT	4	4
3	AND	36	48	37	NOW	7	7	71	THOUGH	4	4
4	LIKE	26	35	38	MAKE	6	7	72	DEPRESSED	3	4
5	TO	22	33	39	JUST	7	7	73	DO	4	4
6	ME	21	27	40	I'M	4	7	74	BETTER	4	4
7	MY	17	19	41	IM	5	7	75	EVEN	4	4
8	#	9	16	42	BE	7	7	76	YOU	3	4
9	FEELS	14	14	43	ALONE	6	6	77	PEOPLE	4	4
10	BUT	13	14	44	AND	5	6	78	OTHER	4	4
11	FEELING	11	14	45	HAVE	6	6	79	ALL	4	4
12	THE	12	13	46	TO	5	6	80	FEELINGS	4	4
13	FOR	8	12	47	HE	5	6	81	TELL	3	3
14	THAT	9	11	48	REALLY	6	6	82	WHICH	2	3
15	SO	8	11	49	THEM	4	6	83	TO	2	3
16	IN	10	11	50	TALK	6	6	84	SINCE	3	3
17	BAD	9	11	51	GUILTY	4	5	85	SO	3	3
18	ABOUT	9	10	52	ONE	4	5	86	SHE	3	3
19	HE	9	10	53	DAD	4	5	87	SHOUTS	3	3
20	HER	7	9	54	MUM	5	5	88	MY	2	3
21	WHEN	7	9	55	THEY	4	5	89	TALKING	2	3
22	MAKES	9	9	56	ME	4	5	90	NO	3	3
23	IT	8	9	57	BEING	5	5	91	STILL	3	3
24	IT	7	8	58	IS	5	5	92	IT'S	3	3
25	THIS	7	8	59	IF	5	5	93	ALWAYS	3	3
26	HOW	7	8	60	NOT	5	5	94	CANT	3	3
27	OF	7	8	61	WAY	4	5	95	ANYONE	3	3
28	AS	7	8	62	AND	5	5	96	I	3	3
29	A	8	8	63	LONELY	3	4	97	BUT	3	3
30	WITH	6	8	64	LIKE	4	4	98	HAPPY	3	3
31	ALWAYS	7	8	65	NEVER	4	4	99	LIKE	2	3
32	BECAUSE	7	8	66	I	3	4	100	AROUND	2	3
33	HIM	6	8	67	ME	4	4				
34	CAN	7	7	68	SORRY	3	4				

The same pattern as identified for Table 4 is evident for Table 6; that is, the prevalence of personal pronouns, conjunctions and articles. However, in terms of emotion terms, it is apparent that the emotions most frequently 'felt' are negative, with *bad* being the most frequently expressed feeling (11 times across 9 texts) and words relating to loneliness (*alone, lonely*) being expressed 10 times across 9 texts. It is notable, however, that two positive terms

are used in relation to feelings: *better* and *happy*. The following qualitative analysis explores how feelings are reported across the DA corpus.

There are 11 instances of children reporting feeling *bad* and these can be grouped into three types:

- Other people exploiting the young person's feelings (n=4)
    - E.g. *she has a go at me and tries to make me feel bad*
- The young person concerned with helping/protecting others (n=5)
    - E.g. *my family aren't the most well off so now I feel really bad*
- The young person not getting support (n=2)
    - E.g. *It makes me feel bad because I cant talk to anyone anymore*

Perhaps surprisingly, it is not necessarily the case that the domestic abuse itself directly makes children feel bad in this corpus; rather, their feelings are actively exploited by others (a sign of other forms of abuse, potentially) and that children feel bad because they cannot help and protect others, signalling their level of care and concern beyond how the situation affects them personally. Some examples reveal some concern for the abusive parent as illustrated in the following example where a father is abusive towards the mother: *most of us feel awkward talking to him (which I feel really bad about).*

In terms of feeling *alone* and *lonely*, eight of the ten[7] examples state categorically that the children feel alone. They mention isolation and feeling that they have insufficient support: *He scares me sometimes. I feel alone, why won't my mum help me?* and *we have social workers and stuff but I feel like im alone in this world*. They report not being able to talk to anyone: *I have no one to talk to and feel completely alone* and grieving relationships they once had: *I feel so fucking lonely because I feel like Ive lost her already and my dads never around*. In contrast to feeling *bad*, only one example expresses concern for other people's loneliness, offering to share her story so that other people *don't feel alone*.

Of the five instances of *guilt* and two instances of *guilty* identified in the corpus, two relate to feeling guilty about the abusive situation itself and specifically the young person's (perceived) role in the abuse: *I remember so much and I feel so guilty* and *I feel so guilty out what happened so i cannot tell her*. The remaining five instances express feeling guilt for other people's circumstances and concerns: *i feel guilty for being uncomfortable alone around him* (i.e. a concern for the abusive parent's feelings) and *I feel especially guilty as all of her money is being spent on my school fees* (i.e. guilt because of how a parent allocated limited financial resources).

From five instances of feeling *sorry*, one young person reports not wanting pity (*I have no one I can talk to without them feeling sorry for me*), two instances of feeling sorry for another person (e.g. *I do feel sorry for my mum*) and two instances of others feeling sorry for how the young person feels (e.g. in explaining why it's difficult to talk to others about their situation,

[7] One example uses *alone* in the literal sense of not wanting to be *alone around* the abusive parent so has been excluded.

the young person complains that the abusive parents' reactions are always *Im sorry that you feel this way about me* rather than *im sorry I make you feel this way*).

There are four instances of *depressed*: Two children report feeling depressed because of other people's actions (*he is makeong me feel "low", "unwanted" and "depressed"* and *my mum has been really making me feel depressed and angry with myself*) and one occasion where it is the experience of domestic abuse itself causing the depression (*i always feel depressed, sad and anxious*). A further example reports a counsellor providing suggestions for how to feel less depressed.

Two words, *happy* and *better* may suggest a more positive outlook and therefore need to be considered. There are three instances of feeling *happy*. However, in each of the examples of *happy*, that feeling is negated (*I just feel I can never be happy*, *i feel like shes never happy with me*, and *I dont feel happy anymore*). We can therefore state with some certainty (unsurprisingly) that children are not happy living in homes with domestic abuse. What about the situation getting *better*? There are just four examples: one is an instance of a mother using the term sarcastically to indicate it would be better for the child to move out if she's so unhappy, one young person asks for advice about how to make her parents feel better (*is there anything you can do to try to make them feel a bit better?*), one example is negated as with *happy* (*I just feel like nothing will get better*) and the final instance is more positive, in that the young person reflects on her father's behaviour: *He has been better lately and i feel relaxed more*). In other words, with the exception of the last example, the use of *better* does not typically suggest that the young person is in a positive place.

These insights into feelings of *bad*, *alone/lonely*, *guilt*, *sorry* and *depression* highlight, unsurprisingly, the prevalence of negative feelings amongst children disclosing their experiences of living in a home with DA, but further reveal that many of the negative feelings are not the direct result of the domestic abuse, but rather a consequence of other people's actions, or for a concern over other people. Furthermore, when positive feelings are described, they are typically negated, adding to the overwhelming tone of negativity in describing feelings. Bearing in mind the small size of the corpus, the fact that children who are directly experiencing domestic abuse express stronger consideration for others over themselves appears to be prevalent, which is testament to the altruism of these children. However, it may also raise concerns about whether these children are being supported sufficiently—at this early point of disclosure—with processing how the abuse affects them directly and how much of the emotional burden they assume. The children also use descriptions of feelings about DA to signal that other forms of abuse may be present. In relation to describing feeling *sorry* and *depressed*, some of the children were actually disclosing mental and emotional abuse directly perpetrated against them, within the wider context of DA.

Conclusions: Implications for Practitioners

As we have stated throughout, the limitation of this study is the small corpus which has been used for analysis, and this was attributable to the difficulty with identifying message board posts related to DA, requiring us to develop a methodological approach for identifying reports of DA. We are confident that in identifying posts relating to *mum*, *dad* and *parent*, we have

achieved this, but this does of course further delimit the scope of our investigation to only those reports by children of parental DA. Similarly, the analysis has been based on very small frequencies, so a good degree of caution must be expressed over the interpretation of our results. Nonetheless, this research has captured the voice of children at the height of their distress, making a confidential disclosure of domestic abuse anonymously to their peers. This provides the benefit of exploring what they feel at the precise moment of disclosure, rather than relying on what they say they felt at a later point, when perhaps they have been more reflective or influenced by other events.

Our main finding is that children experiencing DA feel *bad, lonely, guilty, sorry* and *depressed*. We humbly suggest that this will be unsurprising to practitioners. However, the insight gained from this analysis is in the words used by children to label these feelings. The somewhat generic but most frequently used term *bad* provides a platform on which practitioners may initiate deeper conversations to explore the root of this feeling in an attempt to help children demarcate what exactly they feel bad about, so that more meaningful support can be provided. The fact that some of the children in this sample are concerned with other people's feelings and circumstances, including the perpetrator's, often at the expense of their own feelings, legitimates practitioners' assumptions that children are very likely blaming themselves, even if children do not articulate this for themselves.

Notwithstanding the many possible barriers to children making disclosures of any form of abuse, the range of behaviours (and ways of talking about those behaviours) associated with DA discussed in the posts under study highlights the value of platforms such as the message boards provided by Childline as an important site for children to make disclosures of—and to seek advice on—experiences and behaviours witnessed in the home that they may not fully understand. However, the difficulty in finding a clear source of message board posts indicates that no clear outlet for discussing domestic abuse exists. Given that some of the children in this research have expressed the desire to talk to someone—or more specifically that their feelings of loneliness were attributable to not having someone to talk to—a dedicated message board on the Childline website, to sit along the other categories and/or topics, may better facilitate requests for advice and the sharing of stories.

This of course speaks to the bigger issue that for all the children who use Childline message boards to discuss their experiences, there will be many more who do not. For such children, the feeling of loneliness and isolation will likely be higher if they have no other outlet for exploring their experiences and emotions. A more proactive approach to engaging at-risk children in difficult conversations may be beneficial since it shifts the burden away from the child having to initiate a conversation. However, such an approach may require reconsideration of how practitioners engage with children over safeguarding concerns. Of significance here is the fact that children's posts to a Childline message board do not (typically) constitute evidence in the way that a social worker or teacher talking to a child about safeguarding concerns likely will (Department for Education, 2020). This limits the extent to which some practitioners can actually have an informal conversation with a child about domestic abuse before their professional duty to make a formal referral is activated. Exploring further spaces and opportunities for children to talk informally about their experiences of domestic abuse may

therefore be beneficial in helping them to understand their emotions. And of course, the fact that the children writing these posts were primarily disclosing to their peers is also significant: further research is needed into the changing dynamics between peer-to-peer disclosures and child-to-adult disclosures.

Whatever motivates children to disclose DA-related experiences, the findings in this chapter confirm previous findings (e.g. Callaghan 2017a) that parental conflict—and, indeed, abuse—is oftentimes not talked about using the language of "domestic abuse". These findings might suggest that these experiences are not talked about by children as being forms of DA but may also suggest that children do not possess the language to fully articulate their experiences of DA. The findings from the work done here suggests that there may be need for a specific space for children to report experiences of and seek help about DA, whether happening to them or others, as well as child-directed guidance on what may or may not constitute an instance of DA. Given that accounts of DA are often not described as DA and are reported alongside a variety of other issues being experienced by the child, implications may exist for practitioners in their being able to address and respond to reports of what a child might perceive to be DA but is not describing as such.

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