

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) as a Predictor of Domestic Abuse Offending**

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**Abstract**

This article explores whether children witnessing domestic abuse (DA) incidents suffer higher levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that may lead to future offending behaviour as adults. The article focuses on using a secondary evidence-based approach and draws on systematic searches of peer-reviewed research of official sources, applying clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and critically analysing the relevant literature. The evidence shows that exposure to domestic abuse is itself an ACE and frequently occurs alongside other forms of adversity. This clustering of harms is associated with a 'clear dose' response effect, whereby higher ACE exposure increases the likelihood of negative behavioural demonstration in future. Analysis of published data indicates that elevated ACE exposures are associated with earlier contact with the police, higher risks of serious violence and adult perpetration of domestic abuse. Externalising behaviours and substance misuse emerge as plausible pathways linking childhood adversity to later offending. The article concludes that children present at DA incidents should be regarded as having experienced at least one ACE and, in many cases, multiple adversities. The article, therefore, recommends accurate and formal recording of the presence of children at domestic abuse incidents through warning markers to ensure officers have full situational awareness. Additionally, frontline training on effective engagement with children to capture accurate first accounts and recognise ACEs, alongside the introduction of a structured, child-appropriate risk assessment that integrates professional observations with an ACE-informed matrix.

**Keywords:** *Adverse Childhood Experiences; Domestic Abuse; Children and Young People; Police.*

### **Contextual background:**

Domestic abuse remains a significant and persistent concern affecting the UK public and policing. In England and Wales, an estimated 4.8% of people aged 16 and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2024, equating to around 2.3 million people (Office for National Statistics, 2024). His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Service highlights both the prevalence and repeat nature of domestic abuse, with children frequently present at incidents, raising serious safeguarding and long-term risk concerns (HMICFRS, 2024). Adverse Childhood Experiences are strongly associated with negative outcomes in a graded dose response pattern (Felitti et al., 1998). These include substance misuse, poor mental health, self-harm, sexual risk behaviours, chronic illness and overall, reduced quality of life (Chapman et al., 2004; Corso et al., 2008; Dong et al., 2004; Dube et al., 2003; Fuller Thomson et al., 2016; Hillis et al., 2001; Ports et al., 2019; Strine et al., 2012). ACEs are widespread, with two-thirds of adults reporting at least one, and one in five reporting three or more (Felitti et al., 1998). Youth studies show only 29% report no adversity, with maltreatment affecting one in seven children (Finkelhor et al., 2005).

ACEs provide a framework for understanding how early trauma, including domestic abuse exposure, shapes future patterns of behaviour (Felitti et al., 1998). Recognised ACE categories include abuse, neglect, household substance misuse, mental illness, incarceration, domestic violence exposure and parental loss (Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, 2021). Higher ACE scores are increasingly linked to increased police contacts, serious violence, and intimate partner violence perpetration (Jackson et al., 2022; Teyhan et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024). ACEs theory sits alongside broader trauma and intergenerational models, recognising the role of wider social factors such as poverty and neighbourhood disadvantage in shaping childhood adversity (O'Neill et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2022).

## **Depth of the problem:**

Domestic abuse accounts for a substantial burden of safeguarding, investigative and sentencing responsibilities for criminal justice practitioners, police, and partner agencies. Nationally, domestic abuse remains a significant policing and public health concern, with 851,062 police recorded domestic abuse-related crimes in the year ending March 2024, accounting for 15.8% of all recorded offences (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Inspection evidence consistently highlights high volumes of domestic abuse, repeat victimisation, and the frequent presence of children at incidents, raising serious safeguarding and long-term issues (HMICFRS, 2024). Freedom of Information requests show that domestic abuse crimes with a child present totalled 26,056 in 2022, 23,806 in 2023, and 21,018 in 2024, across three age groups: five and under, six to eleven, and twelve and over. These figures demonstrate both the prevalence of exposure and the seriousness of incidents to which children may be closely exposed, including violence with injury. In 2024 alone, violence with injury accounted for approximately one in five domestic abuse crimes where a child was present (Office for National Statistics, 2024).

HMICFRS inspection findings underline the importance of child presence for safeguarding and force performance. The PEEL assessment for 2023 to 2025 notes high demand, repeat victimisation, and the need for consistently strong safeguarding responses where children are present at domestic abuse incidents (HMICFRS, 2024). In response, the Police stated that it has adopted the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 statutory guidance and emphasises officers' responsibilities to identify, record, and consider the welfare of children linked to domestic abuse incidents (HMICFRS, 2024).

UK and European research estimates that a substantial proportion of harmful outcomes, including violent perpetration, can be attributed to ACE exposure (Bellis et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2017). Recent studies show that cumulative ACEs are positively associated with both intimate partner violence perpetration and victimisation in adulthood, supporting the plausibility of intergenerational cycles of abuse (Zhu et al., 2023). Longitudinal UK evidence further strengthens relevance for policing, demonstrating that ACE exposure predicts adolescent police contact and police recorded serious violence in young adulthood, with risk shaped by the type, timing, and duration of adversity (Jackson et al., 2022; Teyhan et al., 2023).

Despite this evidence base, a gap remains in publicly accessible research linking child presence at domestic abuse incidents to future offending, particularly domestic abuse perpetration. Current police data capture prevalence and severity, but do not track longer-term outcomes for children exposed to domestic abuse. Understanding the co-occurrence of domestic abuse with other ACEs, such as parental substance misuse or mental illness and their combined impact on later offending, remains underdeveloped. This limits effective prevention planning, early intervention, and evaluation of trauma-informed practice across policing, health, and children's services.

There are also well-recognised methodological challenges. Domestic abuse is under-reported, meaning police data provide only a partial picture of true prevalence (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Child present markers indicate proximity rather than direct witnessing, severity or chronicity, although research shows even indirect exposure can be harmful. Many ACE studies rely on retrospective or cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference, while confounding factors such as poverty, neighbourhood deprivation and household instability must be carefully considered (Lewer et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2022; Teyhan et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the weight of evidence supports a preventative policing focus on children exposed to domestic abuse as a priority risk group. The scale of exposure with national policy momentum under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 provides both need and opportunity for earlier intervention (HMICFRS, 2024). This article, therefore, seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Is witnessing domestic abuse associated with elevated ACE exposure?
- Whether ACE exposure predicts future risks of offending?

The article aims to inform ethically sound, evidence-based and trauma-informed policing. By translating robust ACEs research into a specific prevention agenda, it supports national professional guidance on safeguarding and early intervention while addressing inspection-identified priorities (College of Policing, 2015; HMICFRS, 2024).

## **Methodology**

This article is based on secondary evidence synthesis to examine the two interlinked research questions: the relationship between domestic abuse exposure and Adverse Childhood Experiences, and the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences and future offending. A critical analysis based on secondary sources of information was selected for ethical, practical, and analytical reasons. Research involving children and families affected by domestic abuse raises significant safeguarding and consent challenges, while a substantial body of robust secondary evidence already exists to address the research questions ethically and proportionately.

Qualitative data were drawn from peer-reviewed research and official sources, and quantitative data analysis is based on data available in the public domain, including the Office for National Statistics, Home Office, HMICFRS, and Freedom of Information releases. Searches covered the period of January 2010 to September 2025 and were conducted using Leeds Trinity University Library databases, Google Scholar, and targeted hand searches of key journals. Search terms focused on domestic abuse, child presence, ACEs, and links to offending, with emphasis on UK evidence.

Eligible studies included quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research, alongside high-quality systematic reviews. Priority was given to UK-based studies measuring child exposure to domestic abuse and standard ACE indices. Opinion pieces, studies without behavioural outcomes, non-transferable international research, and studies with insufficient methodological detail were excluded. Overall, the critical analysis combined narrative (Popay et al., 2006) and thematic synthesis for qualitative findings (Thomas and Harden, 2008) and descriptive tabulation of quantitative analysis. Limitations include reliance on secondary data, under-reporting of domestic abuse, ambiguity in child present markers and constraints on causal inference.

## **Theoretical frameworks and thematic analysis**

The review prioritises high-quality UK evidence, supplemented by international studies where methods and contexts are transferable to policing in the UK. Analysis has been conducted around the research questions and interpreted through

developmental criminology, social learning and trauma-informed frameworks to explain how exposure, accumulation of trauma and timing of adversity may shape later adulthood offending persona.

### **Relationship between domestic abuse and adverse childhood experiences**

UK policy and research strongly support the argument that children present at domestic abuse incidents are directly exposed to Adverse Childhood Experience. Section 3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines children who see, hear, or experience the effects of domestic abuse as victims (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). This aligns directly with the existing ACE framework, which identifies exposure to household violence as a core domain of childhood adversity alongside abuse, neglect and household dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). Subsequent refinements of the ACE model further specify adversities including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, parental substance misuse, mental illness, incarceration, and parental loss, all of which frequently co-occur in households affected by domestic abuse (Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, 2021).

While this definitional overlap establishes a clear conceptual link between domestic abuse and ACEs, the more operationally relevant issue for the police is whether children recorded as present at domestic abuse incidents are likely to experience cumulative adversity. The evidence consistently shows that domestic abuse rarely occurs in isolation. UK-wide studies demonstrate strong clustering of adversities within households, with risk escalating as the number of ACEs increases (Bellis et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2017). This suggests that a “child present” marker should be interpreted as an indicator of stacked risk rather than a single adverse exposure. Population-level analysis further underlines the significance of cumulative adversity. Bellis et al. (2014) estimate that substantial proportions of violence perpetration, substance misuse, and poor mental health outcomes can be statistically attributed to ACE exposure, highlighting the public health and preventative potential of early intervention. Hughes et al. (2017) similarly show that individuals with four or more ACEs face markedly higher risks across multiple outcomes compared with those with none, reinforcing that accumulation rather than any single adversity most strongly predicts harm.

Measurement issues are critical for policing practice and interventions. A domestic abuse incident flagged as “child present” indicates proximity at the time of police attendance, but does not fully capture whether the child directly witnessed the abuse, the severity of the incident or the extent of repeat exposure. However, as discussed previously, statutory and professional guidance makes clear that children who hear or experience the effects of domestic abuse should be treated as victims as well, even in the absence of visual witnessing (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021; College of Policing, 2015). Research around this issue also shows that the timing and chronicity of adversity matter, with early and prolonged exposure associated with more pronounced behavioural and health consequences that can extend into adolescence and adulthood (Teyhan et al., 2023).

The use of Police Protection Notices aims to capture concerns about a child’s welfare and assess cumulative risks across the household, with referrals made to Children’s Social Care for further assessment and support. Strategy Meetings and police protection powers under the Children Act 1989 provide mechanisms for safeguarding where significant harm is suspected. These measures, when applied consistently and supported by detailed reporting, offer opportunities to reduce further exposure and mitigate the longer-term impacts associated with ACE accumulation.

The literature also cautions against deterministic interpretations. Not all children exposed to domestic abuse or multiple ACEs go on to perpetrate violence. Emerging evidence highlights the protective role of Positive Childhood Experiences, such as supportive relationships with family, peers and schools. Youth Endowment Fund research shows that high levels of Positive Childhood Experiences can buffer the association between ACEs and later violence, with a reported 22 per cent reduction in assault perpetration among those with both high ACEs and high protective factors (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). This shifts the emphasis from risk labelling towards resilience building and supports policing approaches that combine safeguarding with referrals that strengthen a protective atmosphere.

Policing practice plays a critical role at the point of first contact. Research has long argued that police responses to domestic abuse incidents must attend to the needs of children, not solely adult victims or perpetrators (Burton, 2008; Shields, 2008). Richardson Foster et al. (2012) provide a detailed examination of police and

children's perspectives, revealing a persistent gap between procedural expectations and children's lived experiences. The study found that children often felt excluded, unheard or judged during police responses, despite recognising the protective authority of the police. Officers were frequently perceived as focusing on adults, reinforcing children's sense of invisibility at moments of crisis (Richardson Foster et al., 2012).

These findings highlight a blind spot in mainstream research and policy frameworks, where children are positioned as peripheral rather than at the centre of victimisation. Although policy has evolved, with officers required to speak with children present at domestic abuse incidents and capture their demeanour using body-worn video and structured risk assessments such as DASHH and Police Protection Notices, practice remains variable. Inconsistent training, confidence and communication skills can undermine the quality of information gathered and weaken safeguarding responses, particularly for younger children and adolescents (Richardson Foster et al., 2012). Finally, the in-depth literature review also identifies a clear local evidence and data gap at the local level, as inspection reports confirm high volumes of domestic abuse incidents involving children; there is no publicly available analysis quantifying cumulative ACE exposure among these children or tracking longer-term outcomes. The absence of granular, locally focused research limits understanding of how domestic abuse exposure interacts with other adversities and constrains the development of targeted, preventative interventions. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening trauma-informed policing and reducing the risk of intergenerational harm.

### **Adverse childhood experiences and future offending**

Criminological theories which argue that early adverse environments can normalise violence and shape long-term behavioural trajectories through social learning, strain, and developmental processes (Duke et al., 2010), with particular attention to intimate partner violence perpetration alongside broader antisocial behaviour. Drawing on Moffitt's developmental taxonomy, demonstrating that children with high ACE exposure are more likely to follow a Life Course Persistent trajectory, characterised by early initiation into offending, frequent criminal behaviour and sustained justice system involvement (Baglivio et al., 2015). Empirical studies show

that higher ACE scores predict increased likelihood of reoffending, particularly among violent and chronic offenders, even after controlling for known risk factors such as poverty, antisocial peers, and impulsivity (Fox et al., 2015; Weber and Lynch, 2021). These findings align with Strain Theory and Social Learning Theory, which emphasise how sustained adversity and exposure to deviant norms increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour (Fox et al., 2015).

Offender populations show markedly higher levels of ACE exposure than the general population. Studies across juvenile and adult justice settings consistently report high levels of cumulative adversity. In secure adult prison samples, only a small minority report no ACE exposure and higher ACE scores are associated with an earlier age of first arrest (Stinson et al., 2021). Within juvenile offending populations, experiencing one ACE substantially increases the likelihood of multiple adversities, with up to 90% reporting multiple ACEs and over two-thirds reporting four or more (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Baglivio and Epps, 2016). Experiencing four or more ACEs increases the likelihood of being classified as a high-risk offender by approximately 140%, an effect that remains significant even when socioeconomic status and peer influences are controlled for (Fox et al., 2015). Higher ACE scores are also associated with increased risk of reoffending. Comparative study between group differences also shows significantly higher scores among high-risk offenders compared to lower risk groups (Baglivio et al., 2014; Weber and Lynch, 2021).

Beyond general antisociality, evidence increasingly supports a specific association between ACEs and domestic abuse perpetration. Zhu et al. (2023) synthesise international research and identify a consistent positive relationship between cumulative ACE exposure and intimate partner violence perpetration. This suggests that ACE exposure is relevant not only for reducing general violence risk but also for preventing relationship-centred harm later in life. UK longitudinal research strengthens the relevance of these findings for policing. Jackson et al. (2022) demonstrate that ACEs measured in early childhood predict police contact by age fourteen, with externalising behaviours partially mediating this pathway. Early police contact can compound disadvantage across the life course, with higher ACE scores associated with increased risks of unemployment, poverty, residential instability, low parental supervision and intergenerational maltreatment (Duke et al., 2010; Jaffee et al., 2004; Merrick et al., 2013; Metzler et al., 2017). Neighbourhood context further

amplifies risk, with childhood adversity more prevalent in areas characterised by poverty and violence (Drake and Pandley, 1996; Mersky and Reynolds, 2007).

ACEs are also linked to internalising and externalising outcomes that increase vulnerability to offending. Each additional ACE increases the likelihood of violent perpetration and self-directed harm (Duke et al., 2010), alongside clinically significant depression, suicidality, and low self-esteem (Lynch and Cicchetti, 1998; Yexley et al., 2002). Antisocial behaviours associated with later offending can emerge early, with evidence of effects in children as young as seven (Jaffee et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2007). Emerging research further suggests that ACE exposure influences personality traits such as impulsivity and aggression, potentially through neuropsychological pathways affecting brain development (Perez et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2020). Associations have also been identified between ACEs, psychopathic traits, and serious offending, although these relationships remain contested and should not be interpreted deterministically (Baglivio et al., 2020; Delisi et al., 2021; Moriena et al., 2021).

Craig et al. (2023) provide a UK-grounded template for West Yorkshire of treating ACEs as a red flag for general offending probability, refining predictions with poverty, family structure, temperament within adolescents and targeting this support accordingly. As shown in Table 1 below, high ACE scores are associated with elevated prevalence of violent, property, and other offences, alongside significantly higher exposure to low income and risk-taking traits (Craig et al., 2023). Intergenerationally, parental ACEs did not independently predict offspring convictions once children's own ACEs and contemporaneous risks were included, indicating that ACEs operate within a broader ecology of risk rather than as a standalone driver of violence or domestic abuse offending.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Offense Types and Risk Factors by Generational High ACE Scores.

	% G2 low ACEs & at risk	% G2 high ACEs & at risk	OR	% G3 low ACEs & at risk	% G3 high ACEs & at risk	OR
Property offenses—G2	31.31	54.84	2.66*	26.24	72.09	7.26*
Violent offenses—G2	12.62	45.16	5.70*	11.88	39.53	4.85*
Other offenses—G2	12.62	22.58	2.02	9.41	34.88	5.16*
Property offenses- G3	13.08	19.35	1.59	10.40	30.23	3.73*
Violent offenses—G3	15.89	29.03	2.17*	14.36	32.56	2.88*
Other offenses—G3	16.36	22.58	1.49	14.36	30.23	2.58*
<b>G2 risk factors</b>						
Daring	28.04	64.52	4.67*	27.72	55.81	3.29*
Low family income	17.76	58.06	6.41*	17.82	46.51	4.01*
Poor supervision	12.62	51.61	7.39*	14.85	30.23	2.48*
<b>G3 risk factors</b>						
Large family size	25.70	32.26	1.38	22.28	46.51	3.03*
Low family income	26.64	41.94	1.99	25.25	44.19	2.34*
Young mother	16.36	29.03	2.09	15.35	30.23	2.39*

Note. G2  $n = 160$ ; G3  $n = 245$ ; G2 property offenders  $n = 58$ , violent offenders  $n = 28$ , other offenders  $n = 26$ ; G3 property offenders  $n = 34$ , violent offenders  $n = 43$ , other offenders  $n = 42$ .

\* $p < .05$  (one-tailed).

Overall, the evidence indicates a clear link between ACE exposure and future offending, including domestic abuse perpetration, while emphasising that ACEs interact with socioeconomic, familial, and behavioural factors. This supports the use of ACEs as an early warning indicator rather than a deterministic label. Integrating ACE-informed assessment with measures of poverty, family context, and behavioural risk offers a more accurate and ethical approach to prevention, with the potential to reduce future offending while avoiding over-attribution of criminal behaviour to childhood adversity alone (Craig et al., 2023).

## Conclusion and recommendations

The critical review and analysis reveal that children present at domestic abuse incidents meet the threshold of experiencing at least one ACE, aligning directly with the original ACE framework, which classifies household violence as a core adversity (Felitti et al., 1998). Importantly, the literature demonstrates that exposure to domestic abuse rarely occurs in isolation. It commonly co-occurs with parental substance misuse, mental ill health, family breakdown, and socioeconomic hardship, producing cumulative ACE exposure with well-established dose–response relationships to later

harm (Bellis et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2017). Within the UK, high volumes of domestic abuse incidents and repeat victimisation strongly imply a significant burden, both locally and nationally, of child ACE exposure. Yet qualitative research highlights a persistent gap between procedural policing priorities and children's lived experiences at domestic abuse incidents. Richardson-Foster et al. (2012) identify a pattern in which officers focus on adult victims and immediate risk management while children's emotional safety and testimony are often not prioritised. Officers frequently report feeling unconfident to engage directly with children, expressing concerns about causing distress or damaging parent & child relationships. This institutional stance can unintentionally silence children and reinforce their invisibility as victims, despite their statutory status and vulnerability to trauma (Morton et al., 2022).

With regards to examining whether ACE exposure predicts future offending, across UK and international longitudinal studies, the evidence is consistent: higher ACE exposure is associated with earlier police contact, increased frequency of offending, serious violence, and domestic abuse perpetration in adulthood (Jackson et al., 2022; Weber & Lynch, 2021; Zhu et al., 2024). Juvenile justice studies show that ACEs are highly prevalent among offenders, differentiate offending trajectories, and predict recidivism risk through mechanisms such as externalising behaviour, emotion dysregulation, and substance misuse (Baglivio & Epps, 2016).

The evidence, however, cautions against deterministic interpretations. Craig et al. (2023) provide a UK-based intergenerational analysis showing that while higher ACE exposure increases the odds of conviction, offence type specificity is modest, and effects attenuate when socioeconomic and personality factors are included. Fathers' ACEs did not independently predict sons' convictions once sons' own ACEs and contemporaneous risks were accounted for. This finding suggests that the persistence of offending is driven less by inherited trauma and more by enduring adverse environments. ACEs operate within a broader ecological framework rather than acting as standalone causes of criminal behaviour.

The absence of local longitudinal linkage studies limits precise estimation of risk. However, the convergence of national and international evidence provides a strong basis for preventative action. Taken together, the findings support three core conclusions. First, children present at domestic abuse incidents should be recognised

as victims experiencing at least one ACE, often within a wider cluster of adversities. Second, cumulative ACE exposure meaningfully elevates the risk of later offending, including domestic abuse perpetration, through potentially modifiable mechanisms. Third, policing responses that fail to identify, record, and respond to child exposure risk perpetuate cycles of harm and future demand on the criminal justice system. The evidence therefore justifies that an ACE and trauma-informed preventative policing approach should focus on early identification, high-quality recording, rapid referral, and proportionate safeguarding, while avoiding assumptions of inevitability. Addressing both the psychological impacts of adversity and the socioeconomic conditions that sustain risk offers the greatest potential to reduce future offending and protect children exposed to domestic abuse (Craig et al., 2023).

While this study relies primarily on secondary evidence, there is a clear and compelling rationale for undertaking primary research that incorporates cross-cultural and intersectional perspectives into ACE and offending. Existing UK and international studies have consistently demonstrated links between ACEs, domestic abuse exposure, and future offending (Jackson et al., 2022; Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Craig et al., 2023). However, much of this evidence is either nationally aggregated or derived from samples not appropriately representing all communities, which may not fully capture the nuances of social, cultural, and demographic variability that shape children's experiences of adversity. For instance, the population encompasses diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups, each of which may experience domestic abuse, family dysfunction and interaction with policing systems differently, where forced marriages and honour-based violence are a dominant part of domestic abuse (Teyhan et al., 2023; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). Without primary, locally grounded research, interventions risk assuming homogeneity in experiences and needs, potentially overlooking culturally specific risk or protective factors. Cross-cultural insights can illuminate how differing family norms, caregiving practices, multi-generational household dynamics, or community networks influence both the accumulation of ACEs and children's responses to trauma, thereby refining the understanding of vulnerability and resilience (Teyhan et al., 2023; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Intersectional research is equally crucial. ACEs do not occur in isolation; they intersect with other axes of identity and structural inequality, including gender,

socioeconomic status, and neighbourhood context (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007). Similarly, the interaction of ACE exposure with factors such as gendered socialisation or differential access to support services can influence the pathways to offending, including the likelihood of perpetrating or experiencing intimate partner violence (Zhu et al., 2023; Craig et al., 2023). Primary research that explicitly considers these intersecting dimensions can identify subpopulations of children who may be overlooked in aggregate analysis and support more equitable, targeted interventions.

The recommendations translate the evidence into precise, operational actions for the Police, aligned with existing safeguarding frameworks such as PPNs and DASHH.

1. Replace the “child present” flag with a structured child exposure profile

Police should move beyond the current binary “child present” marker and implement a structured exposure profile for children linked to domestic abuse incidents. This profile should capture three elements: modality (saw, heard, or experienced after-effects), severity (e.g. injury, weapons, threats), and chronicity (repeat incidents within a defined rolling period). This information should be visible to frontline officers before arrival.

To operationalise this within fast-paced emergency deployments, children should be attached to parents or guardians as warning markers on police systems, in the same way as markers for violence, weapons or mental health risk. These markers should include the child’s name, age, and date of last known domestic abuse exposure. District Control Rooms should relay this information during dispatch briefings, ensuring officers are aware of potential child exposure even where parents do not disclose children’s presence. This approach enhances officer situational awareness and supports child safeguarding without delaying response times.

2. Embed child-focused communication training for frontline officers

Despite statutory recognition of children as victims, frontline officers often lack confidence and training to engage appropriately with children at domestic abuse incidents (Richardson-Foster et al., 2012). Police should introduce mandatory training

for all frontline officers focused on child communication, trauma-informed engagement, and evidence capture.

This training should be delivered during existing force training days and led by qualified personnel experienced in child safeguarding, such as officers from Child Safeguarding Units trained in video-recorded interviews. The emphasis should be practical and include how to speak with children in age-appropriate ways, how to avoid leading or distressing questions, and how to record children's accounts accurately. The objective is not to turn response officers into specialist interviewers, but to improve first-contact engagement, evidence quality, and safeguarding referrals.

### 3. Introduce a child-friendly ACE screening and recording tool

A standardised, child-appropriate question set should be introduced for use at domestic abuse incidents where children are present. Drawing on recognised ACE categories (Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, 2021), the tool should use non-leading, developmentally appropriate questions suitable for children aged 4–17. Officers should record children's responses verbatim and include structured observations of the child and home environment. The tool should automatically generate an ACE profile and timeline, supporting cumulative risk assessment over time. An associated ACE matrix should guide proportionate responses, ranging from information sharing and early help referrals at lower scores, to urgent safeguarding action at higher scores. The form should integrate with existing PPN processes and be automatically shared with Children's Social Care to support timely multi-agency intervention.

### 4. Safeguard ethical use and avoid determinism

All recommendations must be underpinned by ethical safeguards. ACE profiles should be used as indicators of vulnerability, not predictors of criminality. Clear guidance must emphasise that ACE exposure increases risk but does not determine outcomes. Data use should comply with information governance standards, and children's voices should be respected without subjecting them to unnecessary intrusion.

### 5. Support future evaluation and research

Police should work with academic partners to develop a local, pseudonymised linkage study tracking DA-exposed children's medium-term and long-term outcomes across education, health, and justice systems. This would provide locally grounded evidence to refine interventions, improve targeting, and evaluate impact on future offending and service demand. Additionally, research grounded in cross-cultural and intersectional perspectives is indispensable for tailoring prevention and safeguarding efforts to the specificities of West Yorkshire, ensuring interventions are both inclusive and effective.

Together, these recommendations offer a feasible, proportionate, and evidence-based approach to recognising and responding to child ACE exposure in domestic abuse contexts, with the potential to reduce long-term harm and future offending while strengthening ethical policing practice. By producing an empirical study using primary data that can be evaluated with other studies, such as those used within this project, to see how policing can be adapted to best protect children, avoid future offending, which will overall cut down demand for front-line officers. The ethical lessons, appropriate training and guidance will help the frontline officers to avoid stigmas and determinism whilst treating every child as a person, a victim or potential victim and not just as a risk score.

To conclude, taking both questions together, the article finds that children present at DA incidents are experiencing at least one ACE, and that such exposure often co-occurs with other adversities, with cumulative ACEs showing dose-response associations with later harm (Felitti et al, 1998; Bellis et al, 2014; Hughes et al., 2017). In turn, higher ACE exposure predicts earlier police contact, serious violence, and domestic abuse perpetration, with externalising symptoms, emotion dysregulation and substance use functioning as mechanisms amenable to early intervention (Jackson et al., 2022; Teyhen et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024; Weber & Lynch 2021; Baglivio & Epps; 2016). With regards to the gap for West Yorkshire, it is significant from research that it can be justified to implement a preventative policing strategy that identifies and records child exposure comprehensively through more robust officer training of dealing with such adversities on the front line.

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