

# “What did she do?”

*Shifting from a 'failure to protect' narrative towards a more domestic abuse informed practice with mothers living through domestic abuse*

# Introduction

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# Domestic Violence Informed Practice

- Decades of research
- Contemporary research on Coercive Control (Dr Emma Katz)
- Specific Domestic Violence Informed Models (Safe&Together)
- The Voices of Women and Child Survivors (Barnardos Empower Kids)
- Learning from serious case reviews, domestic homicides etc.

**.....translating the knowledge into what we say, do and record.**



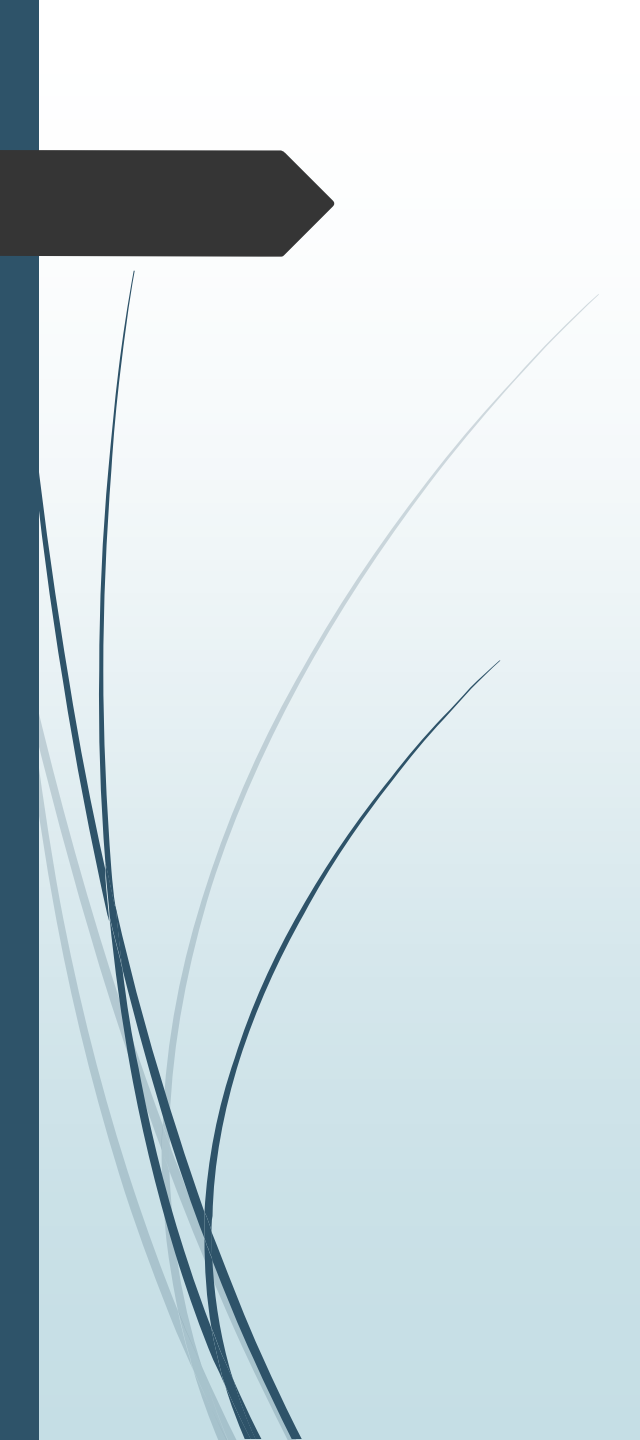
# Domestic Violence Informed Practice

## **Taking a position**

Responsibility for the harm to children lies with the abusive and controlling father / partner's parenting choices

The requirement for increasing safety through behavioural changes lies with the harm causing adult

When there are worries about the mother's behaviour and parenting we will locate our analysis of that in the context of her experiences of domestic abuse and control



**Women who are mothering through domestic abuse and coercive control are always making efforts to protect and nurture their children.**



# The 'Failure to Protect' Narrative

- Dominates in loud and subtle ways
- Makes things more dangerous
- Mirroring of oppression and control
- Manifests in our use language



# A starting point for change?

Rethinking our language



# Examples of common phrases used and recorded

- There was a domestic incident
- Parents were fighting / there was an argument
- Failure to protect the children
- Her drinking is worse than the domestic violence
- ...but he is a good father
- he has a right to access
- They have a volatile relationship
- She refused to go to the police
- She allowed the order to lapse
- She didn't follow through
- She has a history of domestic violence



## WE TEND TO SAY THINGS LIKE;

**She has a history of being in abusive relationships**

**She is prioritising him over the children / She refused to go to the refuge / She has left a number of times but returned**

**She didn't follow through on the barring order application / she won't engage with services / she is not following professional recommendations**

**She said herself that there's two of them in it / The relationship is violent / there was a fight on Friday night and Mum got injured / There is domestic violence between Mum and Dad**

## WHAT DOES IT COMMUNICATE WHEN WE SAY;

It seems like men over the years have seen Jane's trauma and used this against her to gain power and control in the relationship further effecting her self worth.

There is something about staying close to John that feels for Jane like the safest thing for her children right now even though all the professionals are pressuring her to leave. It must be such an awful bind for her that she has to choose who she is more afraid of – her husband or child protection services.

The power and control that John has over Jane is so gripping that it doesn't feel safe for her at the moment to work with professionals in the way that they are asking her to. Perhaps our involvement is making things more dangerous for her and the safest thing is to make her resistance to us visible to John. A conversation is needed with Jane about what safe support and help looks like for she and her children.

Who did what to whom? When we map out the patterns of abusive and controlling behaviours with whom does power and control lie. What about "there are some times when Jane has felt able to resist and physically defend herself hitting John and shoving him into the all once. Even though she says this made things worse in the moment she also says it's important for her that her children see that she doesn't find his treatment of her acceptable

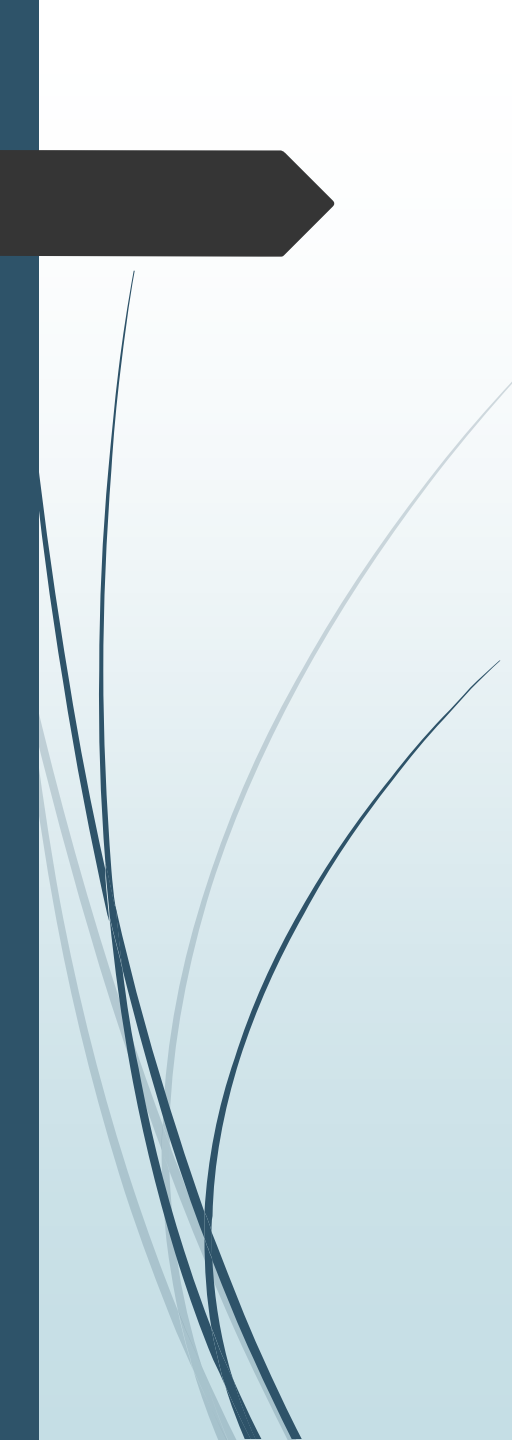


# Changing the story – case examples

“...If nothing changes and Sandra allows the order to lapse or Jim simply ignores the order and goes to the home, Tusla worry that Bailey and Brandon could be there during another big fight and could see their Mam being hurt. Based on what we have heard about the violence escalating we are also worried that Dad could lose control and kill Sandra and we know from research that things can be especially dangerous when the victim of domestic violence does finally decide to leave the relationship”



Instead, we might provide an alternative analysis that is more domestic abuse informed....



Tusla are worried that if nothing changes Dad Jim will keep trying to come to the house even though the Gardaí, Social Workers and the Judge have told him not to. Even if he doesn't come to the house, Social Worker James is worried that Dad Jim will find other ways to keep scaring, hurting and controlling Sandra, Brandon and Bailey like when he chooses to keep changing his phone number, keeps contacting Granny Maeve to ask questions about Sandra, turning up at the school when it isn't his day to see the children.

Tusla are worried that Jim is behaving in these ways to make sure that Mum Sandra and the boys keep him in their mind at all times so that they will live their life in ways he approves of. Because Dad Jim has started doing these things more often in the past few weeks and he recently told Sandra she will regret getting rid of him after she ended the relationship Tusla are worried that Jim might feel like he is losing control of his family, he might even try to kill Sandra.

Her family are worried about this too. Tusla are worried about how stressful and worrying this is for Sandra, having to watch out for her own safety and that of her boys while doing everything she does to take good care of them day to day.



# A starting point for change?

Asking better questions



Can we pivot from asking


“She did what?!”

about behaviour that worries us to asking


“She did what?”

about her behaviours that try to keep herself and her  
children safe?

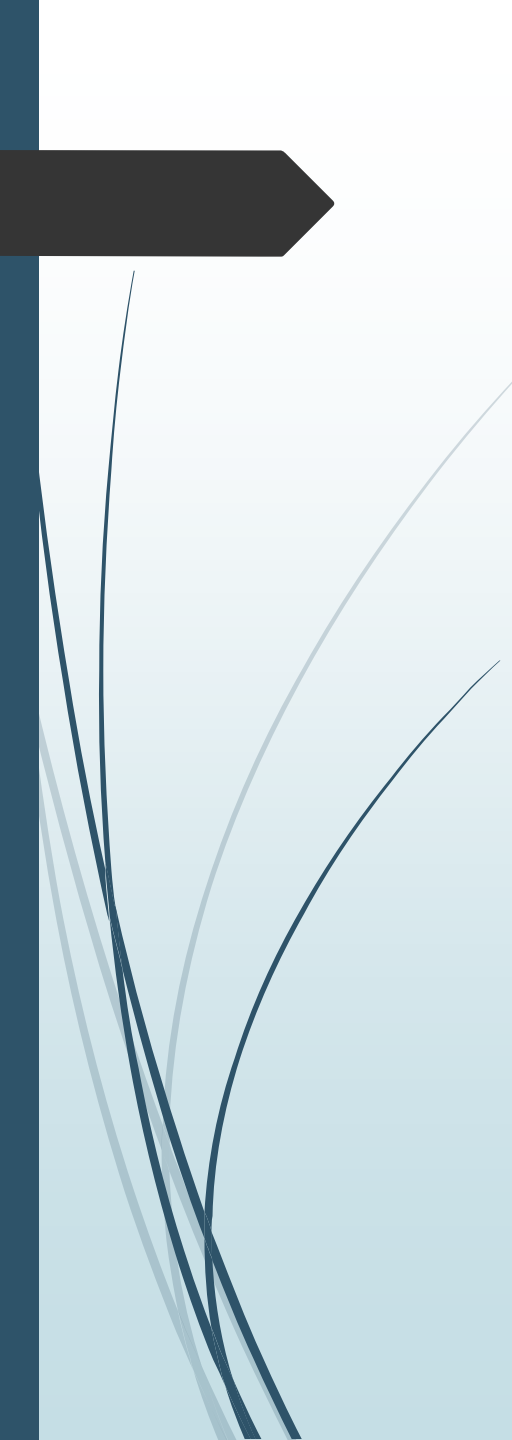




Research tells us that mothers living with domestic abuse and coercive control are doing the very best they can to protect their children within the (often very little) space for action that they have.

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- What questions can we ask? Of mother, children, father and others.
  - What might we find out and how might that help with risk assessment?
  - Insert examples from guide



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- What are all the ways in which this mother provides good care for her children when she is living with such stress, anxiety, fear as a result of Dad's behaviour?
  - Who comforts the children and checks on them in the aftermath of Dad's violence or at times when things feel bad?
  - How come things have not been worse for the children, what are the small or big things you are doing to protect them?
  - What are the ways in which Mum tries to protect her children when she notices that something is going to happen? What does she notice in Dad that lets her know things are getting dangerous? What are the ways she organises the day, the children, the space, how she speaks, what she does because her children are there?
  - You went to the refuge three times in the past, what gave her the courage to do that each time? How were you able to recognise that things were so dangerous she needed to do that?
  - You haven't called the police when things have felt dangerous. Professionals keep telling you to call them, what is it that we don't understand about him that makes it more worse for you to call the police?
  - What felt safest about that for you?



# Concluding reflection