

Domestic abuse or parental conflict?

Guide to tell the **difference** and what to do next





Domestic abuse and **parental conflict** are different issues and must not be confused. Getting this wrong can lead to unsafe decisions, the wrong support being offered, and increased risk for both children and adults.

This guide helps professionals think clearly about what they are seeing by encouraging clear language, a focus on solutions, and an understanding of people's actions and motivations.

It is not an assessment tool, but a guide to support professional judgement, with a key focus on identifying who holds the power in the relationship to help distinguish between conflict and abuse.

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading, or violent behaviour.

It can occur between partners, ex-partners or family members, and includes forms of abuse such as coercive control, physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, verbal and financial abuse. Harassment, stalking, online and digital control can also be forms of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse does not stop when a relationship stops.

Honour-based abuse can lead to additional risk factors for victims, as whole families and communities can be complicit in the abuse. Therefore, creating further challenges for victims and their children when accessing support.

Domestic abuse happens between people who are 16 or older. The Domestic Abuse Act also recognises that children and young people are victims of domestic abuse in their own right as they experience the abuse happening in their homes too.

Situational abuse

This is not classed as domestic abuse but is negative and unhealthy. There is no coercive control, both people hold equal power, and disagreements are expressed openly and mutually. These disagreements can sometimes involve a physical element but do not form part of a pattern of intimidation, control or ongoing abuse.

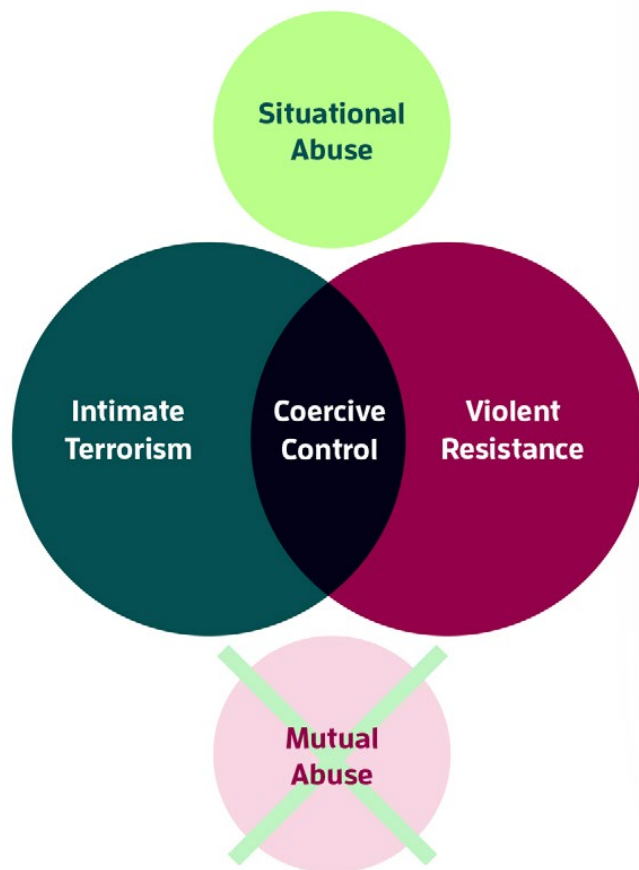
Typologies of domestic abuse

Intimate terrorism: Coercive control-based domestic abuse, one person will seek to dominate the situation, while the other is trying to survive, motivated by wanting the abuse to stop. The perpetrator seeks control and dominance, while the other changes their behaviour to comply and avoid punishment.

Violent resistance: When a victim of 'intimate terrorism' resists abuse using violence, often as self-defence or retaliation.

“ I didn't feel like there was a future, I could only cope with one day at a time because I never knew when they'd get angry again, we lived in constant fear. ”

“ We never argue because I never answer him back. It's not a fight, it's a one-sided attack. ”



Impact on children

- **Emotional and psychological**
(e.g. anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation)
- **Neurobiological**
(e.g. developmental delays)
- **Behavioural**
(e.g. risk-taking or aggression)
- **Attachment**
(e.g. struggles to form healthy relationships)
- **Physical harm, including injuries from being caught in violent incidents and stress related physical symptoms**
(such as headaches, stomach aches and sleep disturbances).



“ I didn't want to go to school, I was always so worried what (the perpetrator) would do, what I'd go home and find. ”

Asking about domestic abuse

It is best practice to routinely include safe enquiry about domestic abuse in your work. Wherever possible, speak to family members individually, in a private and safe setting. Do not ask about domestic abuse in front of friends, partners or extended family, even if they appear supportive.

When raising the topic, begin with broad, open questions such as "Is there anything at home that's making you feel stressed, anxious or afraid?" or "How are relationships at home?" If someone's response suggests abuse may be present, and it is safe to do so, questions can then become more direct.

If you identify that someone is experiencing abuse, complete a DASH Risk Assessment to understand the level of risk and help guide your next steps.

It is also important to look after your own wellbeing, and that of your team, as well as the people you support. Use self-care tools and seek support when needed.

See support for Practitioners.
DomesticAbuseServices.org.uk/practitioners

How to identify the victim and the perpetrator

When a victim/survivor starts to speak out about what is happening and starts to seek support, it is usual for perpetrators to respond with a **DARVO** (Deny, Attack and Reverse Victim and Offender) strategy:

Deny or minimise the abuse

Attack the credibility and character of the victim

Reverse the narrative about who is the

Victim and

Offender

This is used to disguise who the safe parent is and who the abusive parent is.

This tactic is often effective in confusing and manipulating professionals.

Respect has a toolkit to help identify who is causing harm. You should also consider any other people who could be at risk of harm. This may include children or adults with care and support needs.

Respect.org.uk

Person experiencing abuse

Minimises severity of incidents, although is likely to provide details and chronology.

Takes responsibility for or excuses the actions of the abusive person.

Empathises with the abusive person, including difficult circumstances or childhood experiences.

Feels remorse for fighting back or defending themselves.

Can identify a very specific reason for accessing support, often abuse.

Feels ashamed or unsure that this is abuse.

Is fearful.

May seem confused.

Has tried unsuccessfully to leave or repair relationship.

Feels a sense of obligation to abusive person.

Abusive person presenting as a victim

Minimises events and is vague and unable to provide details or provides excessive detail on specific aspects of their grievance.

Blames their partner/family member for the incidents.

Focuses on their experiences, little or no empathy for their partner/family member.

Feels aggrieved.

Less likely to identify specific incidents, instead focuses on general grievances.

Assertively claims victim status.

Does not appear to be in any immediate risk, not fearful.

Overly confident.

Claims not to be able to understand why previous relationships ended.

May emphasise their role as a provider or the victim's reliance on them.



What is parental conflict?

“They’re always arguing over everything, like nothing’s ever good enough”

Not all conflict is damaging, and all parents will argue at some point. However, sometimes conflict can increase to a level that is not healthy for the family. This might involve shouting and screaming at each other without resolution, periods of silence, or communicating in a way that lacks respect.

Conflict between parents can be damaging to children if it happens often or is extreme.

While some conflict is normal, parental conflict refers to:

Frequent: regular or repeated occurrence.

Intense: severe disagreements with high levels of hostility, anger and emotional reactivity.

Poorly resolved: lacks resolution, ends without apology or compromise, or results in silence and withdrawal.

Parents often describe:

- Feeling trapped in negative patterns of arguing.
- Guilt and sadness afterwards but feeling too overwhelmed or defensive to repair.
- Concern that children are starting to copy shouting, sulking or name-calling.

Normalising but not minimising these experiences can help parents feel understood and more motivated to change.

Causes of parental conflict

External stressors: financial pressure, unemployment, insecure work, debt, infidelity, housing problems, poverty, health problems, disability, caring responsibilities, immigration and discrimination.

Family transitions: pregnancy and the early years, step-families and blending households, separation and re-partnering, complex contact arrangements, adolescence and leaving home.

Differences in expectations and roles: parenting styles, routines, discipline, schooling, division of household labour and emotional load, beliefs about money, extended family, culture or religion.

Communication patterns and past experiences: growing up with high conflict or emotional neglect, learned patterns of shouting, avoiding or shutting down, unresolved hurts or breaches of trust (e.g. affairs, broken promises), mental-health difficulties or substance misuse.

“I worry about asking if friends can come over after school, just because I never know if they might start arguing again”

How parental conflict looks in practice compared to healthy conflict

Constructive (helpful)	Destructive (unhelpful)
Acknowledging each other's feelings.	Defensiveness and counter attacks – "I wouldn't have done A if you hadn't done B."
Staying on one topic and avoiding old grievances.	Constantly bringing up past mistakes.
Focusing on behaviours rather than character.	Character attacks and criticism rather than the issue in question ("You're lazy", "You're a terrible parent").
Listening without interrupting.	Not listening, interrupting, walking away mid-sentence.
Looking for shared solutions.	Trying to "win" or score points, rather than understand.
Apologising and repairing after disagreements.	Arguments that end in silence, withdrawal or collapse without repair.

“I've never told them, but when I'm in bed and they're shouting at each other, I pull the pillow over my head, just to block out the noise.”

Impact of parental conflict on children:

Children may feel:

- Caught in the 'middle' of disagreements.
- Anxious, unsettled or unsure about household tension.
- Burdened with passing messages or managing emotional fallout.
- Confused about what to expect or who is responsible for decisions.

These impacts are incidental, not intentional. Unlike domestic abuse, the child is not being used as a tool within a strategy of control.

High levels of conflict are linked with poorer parental mental health and with less warm, less consistent parenting.

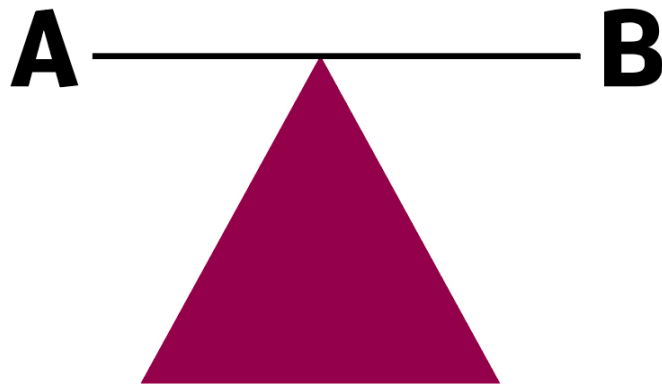
For support in reducing parental conflict, book a place on the Kent and Medway

Strengthening Family Relationships workshop.



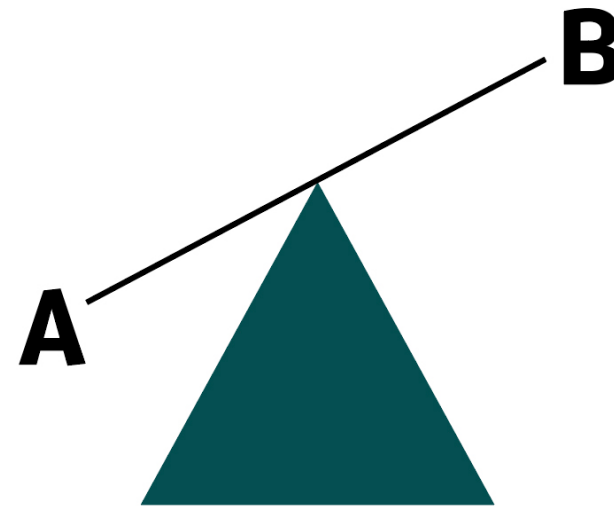
The Power Differential

A straightforward way to tell whether you're seeing abuse or conflict is to look at who holds the power.



Conflict

Both sides have equal power but conflict is poorly resolved



Domestic abuse

A pattern of power is used by one person to control the other

Parental conflict or domestic abuse?

PARENTAL CONFLICT

No imbalance of power between parents.

Neither parent seeks to control the other.

Neither parent is fearful of the other.

Issue-focused disagreements with a focus on winning.

There are repeated incidents of poorly resolved conflict.

Both parents can receive support.

Neither parent threatens harm that the other person believes.

Parents may have frequent and unresolved conflict over finances.

Children are caught in the conflict – this is incidental, unplanned or emotional rather than strategic.

Sexual abuse does not fit in the definition of parental conflict.

Stalking does not fit in the definition of parental conflict.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

The abusive person holds the power.

The abusive parent seeks to control the non-abusive parent.

One parent feels fearful or unsafe.

The abusive person uses a pattern of abusive tactics.

There may be incidents of physical violence, threats and/or intimidation.

The abusive person isolates or restricts the other from friends/family/work/support.

The abusive person uses threatening behaviour and language towards the other.

The abusive person removes ability of the other person to acquire, use or maintain economic resources.

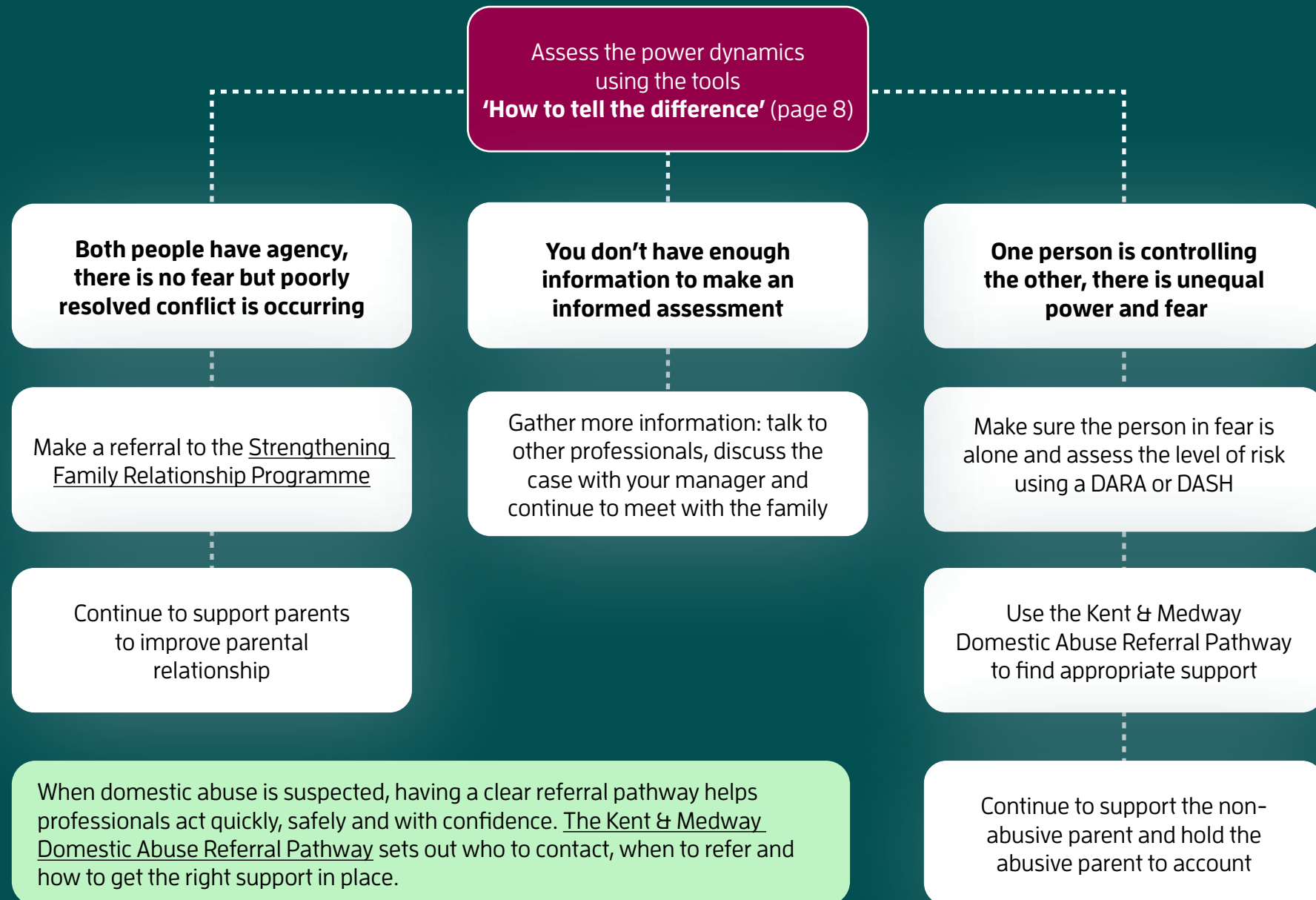
Children are used as tools and are actively involved by the perpetrator as part of the abuse tactic.

Domestic abuse may include sexual abuse as a tactic of control.

Stalking is repetitive, persistent and intrusive and can be used by a perpetrator to maintain control or instil fear.

“It goes on still now. He still has an element of control over my life via the children. The hardest part is now. He’s still very, very much in my life.”

The Kent & Medway Parental Conflict & Domestic Abuse Referral Pathway



Think someone has been incorrectly assessed?

If you think a family you are working with has been incorrectly assessed as experiencing either parental conflict or domestic abuse, you should use the toolkit to evidence your concerns. Your first step is to bring your evidence to your manager and seek support in addressing your concerns with the relevant agency.

If, after receiving managerial support and engaging in conversations with the agency, the desired outcome for the family is not achieved, you should follow either:

- [Kent Safeguarding Children Partnership – Kent Escalation and Professional Challenge Policy](#)
- [Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership – Resolving Professional Differences](#)
- [Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board – Escalation Policy: Resolving Practitioner Differences](#)





Understanding the terminology

Alienating behaviour:

Sometimes called parental alienation, this refers to one parent influencing a child to view the other parent negatively, leading the child to resist or avoid contact. Your role is to understand whether these behaviours arise as a protective response to abuse and fear, whether children are being used as tools within a pattern of power and control or are being involved in conflict rather than abuse.

Power and control:

A pattern of behaviours used by one person to dominate, intimidate and restrict the autonomy of another. It is intentional and repeated.

Coercive:

Tactics such as isolation, degradation, monitoring, threats, or emotional pressure to create fear, dependency and compliance.

Counter allegations:

Claims of abuse made by the person accused, often in response to the original disclosure, which may be genuine but are frequently used to deflect blame, undermine the victim, or obscure the pattern of harm.

Perpetrator:

An individual who carries out abusive, harmful or controlling behaviour towards someone they are personally connected to, for example a family member, past or current intimate partner.

Power differential:

A power differential refers to an imbalance in control, influence, or authority between individuals. In the context of domestic abuse, it describes the ways an abuser holds more power (emotionally, financially, socially or physically) than the victim, enabling them to dominate, manipulate and restrict the victim's choices and freedom.

Primary aggressor:

The person who holds power and control within the relationship and is responsible for the pattern of abusive behaviour. Identifying the primary aggressor means looking beyond a single incident to understand who is exerting ongoing coercion, intimidation or violence. This helps ensure that victims who may use protective or defensive actions are not wrongly labelled as perpetrators.

Victim/survivor:

A person who experiences harmful, controlling, coercive, threatening, or violent behaviour from a partner, ex-partner, or family member.

Mutual abuse:

A term sometimes used to suggest both partners are equally abusive, but this idea is discredited. In practice, domestic abuse involves an imbalance of power, with one person as the primary perpetrator and the other reacting or trying to cope under coercive control. If there is no power dynamic or coercive control, professionals should explore whether the family are experiencing parental conflict.

Mutualising language:

Language that incorrectly frames domestic abuse as mutual for example "an abusive relationship" or "abuse between parties". This minimises the perpetrator's responsibility, erases the power imbalance, and can wrongly imply both people are responsible for harm.

Domestic abuse support

For further information and resources around domestic abuse support services in Kent and Medway, visit the [Kent and Medway Domestic Abuse Partnership Website](https://DomesticAbuseServices.org.uk).



DomesticAbuseServices.org.uk

