

DA or PC Guide - Webinar Q&As

General questions

1. What is the main difference between parental conflict and domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse involves behaviour used to maintain power and control. It may include coercive control, threats, physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, stalking, harassment and online abuse. Parental conflict may be frequent or poorly resolved, but it does not involve one person controlling the other or creating fear. Look at patterns over time rather than isolated incidents.

2. Is the Guide an assessment tool?

No. It supports professional judgement and should be used alongside safeguarding procedures, the Kent and Medway Domestic Abuse Referral Pathway, DASH, agency policies and specialist advice.

3. Can parental conflict and domestic abuse coexist?

Arguments may occur in an abusive relationship, but the situation should not be treated as mutual conflict where power, control or fear is present. Conflict-focused or joint interventions could increase risk if one person cannot participate safely and freely.

4. What signs might indicate coercive control rather than conflict?

Indicators include one person:

- appearing frightened or changing their behaviour to avoid consequences;
- being isolated from friends, family or services;
- having their money, benefits or documents controlled;
- receiving repeated calls or messages;
- being monitored online or through their phone;
- being told what they may wear, where they may go or whom they may see;
- routinely accepting blame or appearing anxious about returning home.

No single sign proves abuse; assess the wider pattern and impact.

5. How should we respond to counter-allegations?

Avoid deciding based on who appears calm, confident or distressed. Establish who is doing what to whom, consider patterns and impact, and ask:

- Who holds power?
- Who is fearful?
- Who changes their behaviour to remain safe?
- Who benefits from the current account?
- Are allegations being used to distract from or minimise another pattern of behaviour?

Gather information across agencies and record the reasoning behind your decision.

6. Does separation mean the controlling behaviour has ended?

No. Abuse can continue or escalate after separation. Contact arrangements, finances, court proceedings, repeated communication, stalking, technology and the children may be used to maintain control. Historical behaviour therefore remains relevant.

7. How should children's experiences be considered?

Children who see, hear or experience the effects of domestic abuse are recognised as victims in their own right. Possible indicators include withdrawal, aggression, disturbed sleep, physical complaints, declining school performance or excessive compliance. Children should be heard safely without being asked to mediate, carry messages or choose between parents.

8. How should a practitioner ask about domestic abuse?

Create a safe, private space and explain confidentiality and its limits before asking. Allow time, listen actively and avoid victim-blaming language. Helpful questions include:

- "How safe do you feel?"
- "How are things at home?"
- "Are you ever frightened of your partner or former partner?"
- "I have noticed a change - how do you feel about it?"

Check whether the abusive person is nearby or could monitor subsequent communications.

9. What should happen following a disclosure?

Believe and validate the person, check for immediate danger and consider the safety of children and other dependants. Assess risk using DASH where appropriate, follow safeguarding procedures and discuss specialist support. Safety planning should be individualised because some actions may create additional danger if discovered by the abusive person.

10. When should DASH or MARAC be considered?

DASH supports practitioners in identifying domestic abuse risk. Anyone believed to be at high risk should be referred to MARAC. The website identifies four routes to the MARAC threshold:

- 14 or more "yes" answers on DASH;
- professional judgement, including significant indicators such as strangulation, weapons or extreme fear;
- escalating frequency or severity;
- significant suicide or self-harm risk connected with current domestic abuse.

Professional judgement should not be used to downgrade identified risk.

Case-example questions

11. “Both separated parents send hostile messages. How do we know whether this is conflict or abuse?”

Do not rely solely on the number or tone of messages. Explore the history, context, intent and impact. Consider whether one parent is monitoring, threatening or repeatedly contacting the other, restricting finances or contact, or using the children to maintain control. Ask whether either parent feels frightened or has changed their behaviour to stay safe.

12. “One parent is calm and persuasive, while the other is distressed and gives an inconsistent account. Who should we believe?”

Presentation is not a reliable indicator of responsibility. Trauma can affect memory, communication and emotional regulation, while a person causing harm may present confidently. Gather information from multiple sources, examine patterns and focus on power, fear, control and impact.

13. “A child’s behaviour and school performance have changed, but they have not disclosed abuse. What should the school do?”

Changes such as withdrawal, aggression, poor concentration, sleep difficulties, physical complaints or excessive compliance may indicate distress but are not proof of domestic abuse. Speak with the child through established safeguarding arrangements, record observations, consider the wider family context and consult the designated safeguarding lead. Do not ask the child to investigate events or intervene in arguments.

14. “Two parents strongly disagree about routines and discipline, but neither appears frightened. Is that domestic abuse?”

It may be parental conflict if both can express their views freely, neither controls the other and there is no pattern of fear, coercion or retaliation. The impact on the child still requires attention. Support may focus on communication, consistent routines and reducing the child’s exposure to destructive arguments, while remaining alert to information that could change the assessment.

15. “A service user admits checking their partner’s phone, controlling bank accounts and holding their passport. What should we do?”

These behaviours are abusive. Respond clearly without colluding or blaming the affected person. Address immediate safety, follow safeguarding and information-sharing procedures, document the behaviour and seek specialist advice about appropriate behaviour-change support. Avoid unsafe joint work or mediation.

Local support and signposting

- **Immediate danger:** call **999**.
- **Kent and Medway support:** **0808 168 9276**, Monday–Friday, 8am–8pm.
- **Outside these hours:** Victim Support on **0808 168 9111** or the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline on **0808 2000 247**.
- Local services are free and confidential and support people of all genders and backgrounds.

Additional Case Examples: Parental Conflict or Domestic Abuse?

These are deliberately ambiguous. Encourage participants not to “vote” too quickly, but to identify what further information is needed.

1. Hostile messages after separation

Scenario

Both parents send angry messages about child-contact arrangements. One parent sends more messages and sometimes swears. The other repeatedly changes collection times, withholds information about appointments and threatens to return to court. Both describe the other as controlling.

Steer the discussion

- What is the pattern over time, including before separation?
- Is either parent frightened of the consequences of disagreeing?
- Who controls information, arrangements or access to resources?
- Is communication necessary and proportionate, or persistent and intrusive?
- Is the child being used to monitor, pressure or punish the other parent?
- Who is adapting their behaviour to stay safe?

Suggested response

The volume or tone of messages alone does not determine whether this is parental conflict or domestic abuse. Explore context, intent and impact. Repeatedly manipulating arrangements or using legal proceedings and children to maintain control could indicate post-separation abuse.

2. “They are both as bad as each other”

Scenario

Police have attended after both parents shouted and threw objects. One parent says they acted after being blocked from leaving the room. The other says this proves the abuse is mutual. There are previous reports of jealousy and phone-checking, but no recorded physical assaults.

Steer the discussion

- Who initiated the incident, and what happened immediately beforehand?
- Was either person trying to escape, resist or protect themselves?
- Is there an established pattern of monitoring, restriction or intimidation?
- Who experiences fear?
- Who has freedom to make everyday choices?
- Could one person’s behaviour be resistance or a trauma response?

Suggested response

Do not assume mutual abuse because both people used harmful behaviour during one incident. Apply “who is doing what to whom, with what impact?” Identify the primary aggressor by examining patterns, power, fear and context - not just the most recent event.

3. Strict control of family finances**Scenario**

One parent manages all household money because the other has previously accumulated debt. They provide a weekly allowance and require receipts. They say this is responsible budgeting. The other parent says they have no access to accounts and must ask for money for food, travel and children’s activities.

Steer the discussion

- Was the arrangement genuinely agreed, and can it be renegotiated safely?
- Does each person have access to essentials and financial information?
- What happens if the person challenges the arrangement?
- Are money or benefits being used to restrict independence?
- Are documents, bank cards or passwords withheld?
- Is this one issue or part of a broader pattern of control?

Suggested response

Shared budgeting is not automatically abusive. However, restricting access to money, requiring justification for essentials or preventing financial independence may constitute economic abuse - particularly when accompanied by fear or other controlling behaviour.

4. A child refuses contact**Scenario**

Following separation, a child becomes distressed before contact with one parent. That parent says the other is turning the child against them. The resident parent says they are simply listening to the child. Professionals disagree over whether the case involves parental conflict, manipulation or domestic abuse.

Steer the discussion

- What is the child saying and showing, in their own words and behaviour?
- Is the child frightened, or mainly responding to adult disagreement?
- Has there been previous domestic abuse or controlling behaviour?
- Is either parent pressuring the child to take sides or carry messages?
- Have explanations been tested across agencies?
- Who benefits if the case is framed as “high conflict”?

Suggested response

Do not assume either alienation or abuse without careful assessment. Keep the child's lived experience central, review historical patterns and gather multi-agency information. Children should not be asked to mediate, choose between parents or prove an adult's account.

5. One parent appears calm; the other appears “difficult”**Scenario**

At meetings, one parent is calm, organised and persuasive. The other frequently becomes distressed, misses appointments and gives inconsistent accounts. Professionals begin to regard the calmer parent as more credible.

Steer the discussion

- Are confidence and distress being mistaken for credibility or responsibility?
- Could trauma affect memory, communication or engagement?
- Does one parent dominate meetings or speak on the other's behalf?
- What do historical records and other agencies show?
- Who appears to have power outside the meeting?
- Is either parent adapting their behaviour because of fear?

Suggested response

Don't rely on who presents most confidently or appears most distressed. Focus on patterns, corroborating information, power, control and impact. A polished presentation does not rule out abusive behaviour.

6. Location sharing “for safety”**Scenario**

Both parents have location sharing enabled on their phones. One says it provides reassurance when collecting the children. The other switches it off occasionally, leading to repeated calls and accusations of hiding something.

Steer the discussion

- Was location sharing freely agreed?
- Can either person withdraw consent without consequences?
- How frequently is the information checked?
- Is it being used for practical coordination or surveillance?
- Are there other forms of digital monitoring?
- Does one person feel frightened or compelled to remain visible?

Suggested response

Technology used by genuine mutual agreement is not necessarily abusive. It

becomes concerning when consent cannot be withdrawn, monitoring is excessive or the information is used to intimidate, isolate or control.

A consistent facilitation framework

For every example, bring participants back to these questions:

1. **What is the pattern over time?**
2. **Who holds the power?**
3. **Who is fearful?**
4. **Who changes their behaviour to remain safe?**
5. **Who is doing what to whom—and with what impact?**
6. **What information is missing, and which agencies may hold it?**
7. **What action is needed now to maintain safety?**

Emphasise that the Guide supports professional judgement; it does not replace DASH, safeguarding procedures, specialist consultation, referral pathways or professional escalation. If immediate danger is identified, call **999**.