

# CAFADA

# Children and Families Affected by Domestic Abuse

Recovery Group Work

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## About CAFADA

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CAFADA (Developing the Evidence Base for Innovation in Social Care for Children and Families Impacted by Domestic Abuse) is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. CAFADA examines social care responses to families affected by domestic abuse in Scotland and England. It explores how innovative services have developed, been implemented and their effectiveness in responding to domestic abuse.

This briefing focuses on Cedar, a therapeutic group work programme for children and mothers. It draws on Judith Herman's (2015) work about trauma recovery, to explore how children recover from domestic abuse, identifying factors that contribute to and detract from it. The briefing summarises more detailed findings by Morrison (in press).

## Key messages

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- **Stages of Recovery:** Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework provides a useful model to understand how interventions like Cedar support children's recovery from domestic abuse. The framework has three stages for recovery: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and reconnecting with the community.
- **Non-linear Progress:** Children's recovery from domestic abuse is often non-linear, influenced by factors like on-going domestic abuse, criminal and civil court proceedings, housing and wider family relationships.
- **Importance of Safety:** A central argument of CAFADA is that children's sense of safety is fundamental to their recovery. Cedar helps to strengthen mother-child relationships and expand children's social worlds to bolster their sense of safety. However, for a minority of children, their sense of safety had not been restored before or following their participation in Cedar, hindering their ability to recover.
- **Articulating Experiences:** Cedar helps children develop a language to express their experiences and feelings about domestic abuse and to talk about it. This can reduce shame and stigma, helping to make children's experiences more manageable. However, some children continued to find it difficult to talk to their mothers about domestic abuse and especially about their fathers.
- **Supportive Groupwork:** Group settings like Cedar offer a powerful space for shared healing, where children and mothers can process traumatic memories, supported by nurturing and caring group leaders.

## About Cedar

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Cedar is an established therapeutic groupwork programme that has been delivered in parts of Scotland for over 10 years. It is based on the Community Group Treatment Programme (CGTP), that was originally pioneered in London, Ontario in the 1980s. Cedar uses a 12-week groupwork model for children and mothers affected by domestic abuse. Groups for children and mothers run separately but concurrently, focusing on children's experiences with domestic abuse and helping mothers to support children's recovery. The CGTP, was originally developed in the mid-1980s but there is a limited research base on it. Previous evaluations of the programme highlight benefits like increased understanding of abuse, better emotional coping, and stronger mother-child relationships, while also suggesting areas for improvement, such as enhanced post-programme support.

## How did we research Cedar?

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This research involved interviewing 14 children aged 7-15 and their 14 mothers who completed Cedar. The interviews focused on their well-being and safety over time, rather than using the term "recovery." Creative methods were used with children, like mapping their experiences, ranking how the program helped, and offering advice to others. The researchers also collected data on safety and well-being outcomes from a larger group, which will be reported separately.

The study included participants from 4 women's groups and 4 children's groups, coordinated by 3 different facilitators. Eight of the child participants were girls, and six were boys. Interviews were conducted within two months of completing the program, mostly face-to-face, either at the participants' homes or another location, with a few done by phone for mothers' convenience. Most interviews were recorded, but one child preferred not to be recorded, so the researcher took notes instead.

The interviews explored the participants' experiences before, during, and after the program. The research aimed to understand what helps children in situations of domestic abuse. Data was analysed using a method called reflective thematic analysis. Since the author conducted most of the interviews, she was familiar with the content, which helped in identifying key themes. These themes were then reviewed with the research team and refined.

To make the research more inclusive and robust, participants were involved in the analysis. An artist helped create visual maps of the families' experiences based on the findings. The families who were originally interviewed were invited to workshops to review and provide feedback on these maps. Six children and six mothers participated, while others did not due to various reasons like other commitments or concerns about children's distress.

The feedback from these workshops was used to improve the analysis, resulting in revised maps for children and mothers. These discussions highlighted themes of recovery and healing, leading to further analysis using Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework, which is the focus of the briefing.

## What did we find?

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### Understanding Children's Recovery from Domestic Abuse

While the impact of domestic abuse is well-documented, less is known about how children recover. Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework (1992, 2015) offers a way to consider recovery processes. Recovery for children involves navigating both an optimism for recovery and the ongoing challenges of trauma and for many the ongoing aftermath of domestic abuse. Progress towards recovery is often non-linear, with both forward and backward steps are influenced by factors like the presence and absence of relationships with fathers, on-going criminal and civil legal proceedings, and financial (in)stability. Improvements in mother-child relationships helped drive forward children's recovery.

### Setting the Tone for Recovery

Cedar's approach to families before they participated in groupwork set the tone for recovery. Early engagement strategies that supported children and mothers' sense of empowerment and control over their participation helped to set an optimistic tone for recovery and encourage participation in recovery work.

### Children's Sense of Safety

Children's sense of safety was central to recovery. Strengthening relationships with mothers, siblings, and extended family helped bolster this, but not all children felt safe after Cedar. Finding ways to help restore children's sense of safety is essential to supporting children to be able to recover from domestic abuse.

### Making Domestic Abuse Speakable

Cedar helped children articulate their experiences and emotions about domestic abuse which supported children's recovery. Developing a language for these experiences allowed children to address feelings of shame and fear and made traumatic experiences more manageable.

## The Role of Relationships in Recovery

Recovery occurs within relationships, especially between the mother and child. While this relationship can be a source of strength for children's recovery, it can also be a vulnerability. Interventions like Cedar help to support and repair the damage done to the mother-child relationship by domestic abuse. Interventions should continue to consider how and what more they can do to help strengthen these relationships.

## Remembrance and Mourning

Cedar helps children mourn the many losses they experience because of domestic abuse. It supports children's communication about these losses and the untangling of complicated feelings and emotions. Findings underscored the complexity of emotions and relationships involved in children's recovery, and the significance and dynamics of both the mother-child and child-father relationship for children's recovery.

## The Power of Groupwork

Groupwork programmes like Cedar offer a space for shared healing. In these settings, children and mothers process and reframe their traumatic memories, finding strength by sharing their experiences and supporting other children and mothers.

## Nurture and Care

The group leader's role in fostering an environment of nurture and care is vital. They ensure that participants feel valued and supported throughout the group process. This helps children and mothers to be able to participate in groupwork, to process and make sense of their experiences and to ultimately recover from domestic abuse.

## Summary

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Understanding how children recover from domestic abuse is complex, and while the effects of domestic abuse are well known, children's recovery process is less understood. Judith Herman's trauma recovery framework helps to shed light on how interventions like Cedar support recovery, emphasizing three key stages: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and reconnecting with the community. Children and mothers further identified key priorities for recovery that can be integrated into Herman's recovery framework: progress towards recovery, setting the tone for recovery, safety, making the unspeakable speakable, a place to remember and mourn, the power of the group, and the role of the group leader in nurturing and care. The research shows how established theoretical frameworks about trauma can be applied to recovery work with children in the context of domestic abuse and help to understand how recovery happens.



## References

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Herman, J.L. (2015). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence--from domestic abuse to political terror*. Hachette UK.

Morrison, F. (2024). Trying to find safety, make it speakable, and mourn the Losses – children’s recovery from domestic abuse. *Journal of Family Violence*. DOI: 10.1007/s10896-024-00745-5

## How can you find out more?

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CAFADA has produced several briefings, as well as published research. These can be found here: <https://cafada.stir.ac.uk>

## Suggested citation

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