

Children in Refuges

Changing the Future for
Children Affected by
Domestic Violence



"Children of all ages remembered the warmth of a refuge worker's smile or the small things they had said or done that made them feel welcomed and safe."

Every child should feel safe and secure in their own home. However, for too many children, home is a place of fear. For the women and children who seek help in refuges from domestic violence, finding a **safe haven** is the first step in the journey away from the long-lasting effects of living with violence. The experience that children have in a refuge can have a profound effect on that journey:¹

Children need specialist services to address their needs. Aoibhneas Women and Children's Refuge is working to ensure that children in Ireland, who experience the trauma of domestic violence, are given the support they need to deal with their experiences and to move on to the happy future that all children deserve.

Our Vision

Aoibhneas wishes to pave the way in changing how refuges work for children in Ireland. Refuges must become more than temporary safe houses and become places that truly support children through the traumas of domestic violence. We want to create an environment whereby children can reclaim their trust and feelings of safety. Our plans is to create a facility which will include age appropriate play areas, homework club, art and therapy rooms, as well as space for children to

1 Hogan and O'Reilly (2007) Investigating the impact on children of witnessing domestic violence – Nature and adequacy of child-centred services. National Children's Office, Dublin.

spend time alone and with their families. Specialist staff will work with children while they are in the refuge and will continue to provide the vital support they need once they have left the refuge. We will also provide outreach services to children affected by domestic violence in the local community.

Why Aoibhneas is developing in this way

Aoibhneas' experience to date of supporting children

Aoibhneas Women's and Children's Refuge has been working with children for many years. Since 2000, Aoibhneas has worked with over 2,000 women and nearly 4,600 children. Over these years we have learned that if we really want to **support children** we need to understand what such children are going through:

- Leaving domestic violence situations means children leaving their home, their personal belongings and often everything that is familiar to them
- Leaving a bad situation does not mean that children do not miss their fathers and can feel guilty and disloyal about leaving them
- While a refuge is a **safe haven**, it is a completely new place where children have to cope with different cultures and a lack of privacy as their family has to live together in one room. There is also the challenge of meeting new friends

- Once in the refuge children need **support in dealing with the outside world**, perhaps moving school, and getting help from outside agencies
- While in the refuge, children have the opportunity to address in a **safe and supportive environment** the effects of domestic violence on them and on their relationships with both parents
- When children leave refuges they **continue to need support** to work through the impacts of domestic violence on their lives

International Research Findings

Aoibhneas has carried out research to ensure that our plans for children are appropriate and based on best international practice. Our report 'Developing World Class Services for Children Affected by Domestic Violence Living in Refuges'² reviewed international research findings on children affected by domestic violence. This illustrates the serious and long-term effects domestic violence can have on children and identified the type of supports that children need. For example, the report highlights, among other things, how:

- living with domestic violence can affect children in many ways not only now, but also into their future: emotionally, academically, in their relationships and in family life



- children that have lived with extreme domestic violence can even show symptoms similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- inter-spousal violence is among the most catastrophic traumas for children;
- the impacts of domestic violence on children are age-specific
- specialist services and facilities can assist mothers and their children to rebuild their relationships in the aftermath of domestic violence

² CMAAdvice Ltd (2008) 'Developing World Class Services for Children Affected by Domestic Violence Living in Refuges' Dublin



So, what is needed to change the future for children who have lived with domestic violence?

Refuges need to provide children with two key things:

Specialist staff in refuges whose main priority is the child and who are trained and accredited

Before – Each child is different and has had a different experience and so child workers need to be able to assess each child as they come to the refuge to identify their particular needs.

During – To work with the child through therapy and play that is designed to meet the needs of children of different ages, to support the relationship between mother and child, and to advocate for the child in their relationship with the outside world and in the unfamiliar world of the refuge.

After – Children need support when they leave refuges, especially if they are returning to homes where they have experienced domestic violence in the past. Child workers are needed to coordinate with other agencies to make sure children get all of the support that they need.

Specialist facilities in refuges

Without play facilities, therapy rooms, areas for children to spend time alone and with their families as well as areas to do homework, even the best child worker cannot give children the support that they need; Teenagers also need more space, including separate sleeping accommodation.

Funding to make this happen!

Working with a combination of public and private funding, Aoibhneas will create a world-class service for children who have experienced domestic violence by designing and building a specialist centre staffed by experts that can provide the kind of support that such children need and deserve.

Aoibhneas' plans for the future are a dream. Please help us to turn our dream of a better future for these children into a reality. You can do this by supporting our appeal for funding to design and build a world class children's centre in Coolock.

For further information on the proposed centre and how you can help, please contact the refuge at fundraising@aoibhneas.org or visit the website www.aoibhneas.ie.