



DVACT-PAI
Assessments & Interventions

Standards for Specialist Domestic Abuse Assessment



Guidelines for Child
Focused Family Safety
Assessments

Summary document

Standards for Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment

Standards for Child Focused Assessments of the Risk Posed by Domestic Abuse

Working document

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Domestic Abuse Experts

The purpose of domestic abuse risk assessments is to establish and quantify the risks to the children of exposure to domestic abuse and conflict. The definition of expert as used by the family courts can lead to significant discrepancies in what is meant by expertise, resulting in difficulties for commissioners. Within the large field of professionals there are multiple and varied titles and qualifications signalling areas of expertise. Formal recognised qualifications and membership of professional bodies form the criteria by which many courts decide who to appoint to assist them in the role of expert.

One drawback of this approach is that many qualifications which are thought to be relevant do not ensure that a professional has the requisite expertise to address numerous common child protection issues that arise in the family court. Some major areas of risk to children, such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and criminality, fall outside the parameters defined by the professional labels of court approved experts. In particular, legal practitioners will often default to a psychological or psychiatric assessment when confronted with entrenched or problematic behaviour even if the context strongly suggests that domestic abuse is the underlying cause of difficulties and the principal source of danger. However, domestic abuse is a specialised area to which models and theories from other disciplines, including psychology, do not readily apply.

In 2011 we undertook a comprehensive analysis of serious case reviews where domestic abuse was identified as a key factor in the death or serious harm of a child. Consistent themes emerged showing that professionals involved in child care tended to have a poor understanding of risk and that as a result assessments were inadequate. In 2025 DVACT-PAI repeated the exercise, taking account of recent serious case reviews from between 2020 and 2024. The findings showed that poor risk assessments continued to be a significant factor in 32% of cases and that an alarming 59% of cases showed professionals had insufficient understanding or a lack of confidence about domestic abuse and its nuances. This suggests that more work needs to be done towards improving expertise and risk assessment in cases where children are at risk of serious harm due to domestic abuse.

Reliable risk assessment (and effective intervention) requires specialist knowledge not covered by medical and psychology training. The British Psychological Society (BPS) released guidelines in September 2023 in which the qualifications and specialisms which must be demonstrated to earn the right to adopt one of nine protected professional labels are listed. There is no reference within any of these criteria to domestic abuse or risk assessment. In practice, this means that expert evidence is often produced which fails to address some of the most basic questions in family court enquiries where domestic violence is a key factor. It can also lead professionals towards a pathology led approach when there may well be a more appropriate formulation based on the family's history of domestic abuse.

About DVACT-PAI

DVACT-PAI is an independent organisation providing expert assessments relating to domestic abuse and sexual abuse as well as assessments of psychological functioning for children's services and the family courts. Since 2005 we have worked closely with courts, parents and local authorities to design assessments that offer a level of clarity and insight into the dynamics of abuse and ongoing risks within families. The assessments provided by DVACT-PAI are consistently commended by judges and court professionals for the helpfulness and clarity of reports and the comprehensive risk management plans.

As a provider of both psychological and family safety assessments, DVACT-PAI is uniquely placed to observe the differences in these disciplines and the consequences to vulnerable children of commissioning the wrong expert. These include, at best, delays in already lengthy timescales and, at worst, inadequate risk management where care arrangements are based on less reliable indicators. For this reason, DVACT-PAI has sought to bring clarity to this issue and set out core competencies and qualifications for domestic abuse experts in order to protect the integrity of domestic abuse risk assessment and ensure that children are adequately safeguarded by them. A register of experts that meet the standards to complete family safety assessments can be found on the DVACT-PAI website at dvact.org/

DVACT-PAI has also devised specific intervention programmes as a response to the gap in provision for many parents with complex needs. As specialists in complex and difficult cases the goal is to move a case forward and find realistic solutions for safeguarding children in difficult circumstances.

DVACT-PAI Minimum Standards

1 Focused & Informed	1.1 Understanding the impact on children	Assessments should examine the specific risks to children of exposure to domestic abuse and consider which factors may suggest greater resilience or vulnerability for the children.
	1.2 Specialist knowledge of methodology	Expert assessors must have extensive and up to date knowledge of risk assessment methodology and the capacity to apply research to the specifics of individual cases.
	1.3 Advanced knowledge of risk factors	Assessors must evidence advanced knowledge of static risk indicators, their application within a predictive risk analysis and the ability to use a principled method for determining risk ratings based on these factors.
2 Credible & Responsive	2.1 Evidence-based assessment	Assessments must be evidence-based, drawing on multiple sources of information about the family to identify risk indicators that have a demonstrated relationship to violent behaviour or vulnerability.
	2.2 Realistic risk management	Assessments should identify achievable strategies for risk management using dynamic indicators which reflect the reality of the family's experience, and make recommendations offering viable interventions, taking into account local resources and being matched to risk levels.
	2.3 Knowledge of interventions	Assessors should be aware of the likely impact of interventions and provide timeframes and prognoses for meaningful change.
3 Expert & Accountable	3.1 Relevant qualifications	Assessors require post graduate level education in a relevant field and the ability to research, assimilate information and write to a high standard.
	3.2 Experience in the field	Assessors should have extensive professional experience in the field of domestic abuse.
	3.3 Access to supervision	Assessors must show they have access to high-quality clinical supervision.
	3.4 Peer reviewed reports	All reports should be peer reviewed and quality assured to the highest professional standard.
	3.5 Availability for cross-examination	Assessors must be willing to be cross examined in court and be able to support their conclusions.
	3.6 Independent	Assessments have an overriding duty to the court that takes precedence over any obligation to other parties. Assessments must be focused on the risks to the children and should be free from any bias on behalf of the expert or others.
4 Useful & Reliable	4.1 Providing assistance	Assessment reports must be helpful and assist in the decision making process. The evidence base for the analysis should be clearly set out and any gaps in evidence identified.
	4.2 Professional reports	Assessments should be clear, well-written, respectful to all parties and completed by the agreed timescale.
	4.3 Transparent processes	Administrative processes must be transparent and information supplied in advance of instruction to clearly state exactly what the expert assessment is expected to provide.
	4.5 Accurate record keeping	Assessors must be aware of data protection regulations in keeping secure, accurate records of contacts with clients or professionals.
5 Cultural Competence	5.1 Knowledge of cultural contexts	Assessments must take account of the cultural contexts and imperatives relating to families.
	5.2 Respecting differences	Practitioners should understand and respect differences in values, attitudes and beliefs.
	5.3 Culturally appropriate assessments	Assessors should recognise their own biases and ensure that assessments and recommendations are inclusive and culturally appropriate.