Managing violent behaviours in primary schools – A multi-agency risk assessment model

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Awareness of childhood violence is growing globally. It is estimated that almost a quarter of teachers are assaulted by their pupils each week in the UK, with many of these children identified as having social, emotional, and mental health needs. These pupils are increasingly likely to be excluded from school. When compared with violence and aggression from adults, there is a poor level of awareness and multi-agency co-ordination when risk-assessing violence and aggression from children. In this article, I posit that risk models applied to adult violence and aggression, particularly multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC), should be applied to childhood presentations of violence and aggression, thus expanding knowledge and providing additional resources for early identification and support. Through a child-centred MARAC, there is opportunity for schools to remove responsibility from the teachers, placing it with multi-agency units. Units which can collate information on families, and provision, directed services to holistically support families, and consequently schools.

Keywords: safeguarding; violence; exclusion; behaviour

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Introduction

Inappropriate, challenging, and difficult behaviours are common in children. The terrible twos, and teenage defiance are culturally accepted as periods where conflict can occur between adults and children, but there are limits to their acceptability. Some behaviours are not just difficult to support but also problematic. Problematic behaviours have been classified as behaviours which can negatively impact upon the development of a child or young person, and violent behaviours can be included under this classification (Hackett, 2014). Violent behaviours do not just impact the development of the child or young person using them, but also the children who witness, and therefore experience this violence, and this can be particularly complex in the classroom, where multiple children are impacted.

It should be noted that children who are considered violent or problematic are themselves particularly vulnerable and in need of support. There were at least 48,000 pupils excluded from UK mainstream and special schools during the year 2017 (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018). There are three main causes for exclusions within school: Persistent disruptive behaviour; verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult; or other physical assault against a pupil or adult within the school (Gill et al., 2017; Martin-Denham & Donaghue, 2020). These behaviours are not only difficult for teachers to manage, but also for other children within the school, and the child themselves.

Children and young people excluded from school are said to be increasingly likely to have mental health needs and special education needs, to be living in poverty and/or have experienced domestic violence themselves (Education and Health and Social Care Committees, 2018; Graham et al., 2019; Ofsted et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2018). However, I would recommend caution in interpreting this data as evidence that these social issues are increasing in the population of pupils who have been excluded. Excluded pupils have always been disproportionately impacted by these adversities. Recently, however, there have been improvements in not only how we recognize childhood adversities (Felitti et al., 1998), but also how they impact behavioural and emotional expressions.

Impact of violence in schools

Munn et al. (2007) argued that violence in school is a subjective experience, and different teachers and headteachers will have different interpretations of acceptability and thus it is difficult to measure frequency, levels, and impacts of *violence* when this violence is being measured and interpreted so differently. Nevertheless, when children are violent within the classroom, we are becoming more aware that they are also using these problematic behaviours in other environments. These other forms of violence can include sibling abuse, self-harming behaviours, child to parent violence and abuse, property theft, property damage and destructive behaviours, and peer abuse (Kennedy et al., 2010; McCloud, 2017; Sanders, 2020). As such, exploring and understanding violent behaviours in schools can be key in understanding the violence enacted by children and young people elsewhere (Eisenbraun, 2007).

When children are using several different forms of violence it poses challenges across the board. Headteachers have a responsibility to keep their staff and their other people safe from violence. In some circumstances school is the only respite a parent may get from their own child's violence. This can mean that when a child is excluded from school for using violent behaviours strategies, they transfer those behaviours to the home which have been compounded because the child has experienced a significant loss and rejection through the school exclusion. Schools are well-placed to identify and target children who are presenting with violent behaviours or experiencing them at home because they have more contact with children than any other service (Lloyd, 2018). By being able to identify that a child is beginning to use violent strategies earlier, we may be able to put in earlier interventions, and thus reduce the risk to parents, family members, educators, and the community.

Identifying when multi-agency working is appropriate

Schools and their staff are part of the wider network to safeguard children and young people and are required to follow statutory guidance of 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (Gov UK, 2020); and 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (Gov UK, 2018). These documents provide all school staff with recommendations and procedures to follow where there are safeguarding concerns about a child, and these concerns should include when a child appears to be violent.

Working together to safeguard children

This guidance specifically focuses upon the risks to children and young people, and where they may be vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, or abuse. This broad definition encompasses where children could be experiencing abuse or exploitation from their peers, and this can happen within schools. Furthermore, even if children and young people are not directly targeted by violence by other children, they are still vulnerable to experiencing violence when it takes place within the classroom or school environment and school staff have a responsibility to identify these risks. This issue can become difficult to navigate when the child or young person presenting as violent themselves has a special educational need or disability (SEND). If the needs of the young person are not being met, they are more likely to become distressed and become violent within the school environment, and the Equality Act 2010 places the responsibility on the school to assess the risks to all children and young people, and reduce the demands or challenges being placed on the young person with SEND whilst also balancing the needs and safety of others.

Keeping children safe in education

One of the key points in this guidance is that all school staff have a responsibility to provide children and young people with an environment which is safe and conducive to learning. This point can incite staff to wish to remove children and young people who make the environment *feel* unsafe. Nevertheless, harmful behaviour initiated by children and young people can impact their own mental and physical development, and it is the responsibility of all school staff to prevent this.

In both these pieces of guidance, there is a clear pathway to formal safeguarding procedures, however it can become complicated when it appears that it is the child or young person who is the risk to others. Both pieces of guidance recognise that changes in behaviour, or complex violent behaviours can be signs that a young person is in distress, potentially from neglect, abuse, or exploitation themselves, but this is not always the case (Holt & Lewis, 2020). At present, the safeguarding pathway tends to involve working with external agencies and referring directly to Early Help services, but there are existing frameworks within some schools through the Operation Encompass model.

Operation Encompass (OE) (Operation Encompass, 2019) is a collaboration between some polices forces and schools. Those areas who adopt this model develop a school-policing

relationship in which Operation Encompass improves information sharing when there has been a report of domestic abuse. Through the above guidance, when police attend a property after a report of domestic abuse, whether further action is taken or not, if a child is present then a referral is sent to child safeguarding services to determine whether social care or early help involvement is required. If social care determines no further action, then a school may never know of the incident. Through OE, police will also contact schools via their 'key adult' who has taken additional training through the OE pathway. This key adult is usually the school Designated or Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead and will then take steps to share information with the relevant staff members (form tutors, teachers, support staff), so that the relevant staff can take steps to support the child or young person (Operation Encompass, 2019).

When it may not be clear whether there are safeguarding concerns relating to violence which require multi-agency intervention there are 'Ask and act' procedures which can be enabled. Ask and act refers to two different, but related pieces of training recommended by the Welsh government and domestic abuse charity Respect.

Ask and act, Wales

This training is available for professionals who may come into contact with women who may be experiencing domestic abuse or be surviving the effects of such experiences through their work. The ask and act training focuses on recognising the gender-based nature of such offences, how to sensitively approach the questions, recognise the signs, and direct women to appropriate services and support (Gov Wales, 2019).

Ask and act, Respect

This training is available for professionals working with families, to help them identify where children are being violent within the home. It is not specifically for those children who have been identified as initiating violence within the home, but to help professionals see the signs, such as violence within schools, and support families in the early stages of these behaviours. The training provides resources and tools for professionals to use in their support of families (Respect, 2020).

Both pieces of training provide opportunity to identify and approach families in conversations about violence, abuse, and how to access and receive support to prevent these issues from exacerbating. Nevertheless, for some schools experiencing intense violence from pupils,

particularly those schools with multiple children with social emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), there may be a need for more intensive support, and it is difficult for schools to manage or complete full risk assessments for children and young people without the support of external services through multi-agency working.

A framework to reduce risks

As mentioned, safeguarding children often focuses upon preventing or reducing the impact of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children; this is complex when it appears that it is the child themselves who is a risk to the adults meant to support and protect them. There are several ways local authorities and services have attempted to implement risk assessments for young people co-ordinated by local child safeguarding boards (LCSBs). These are often area-specific based on local availability, commissioning, and expertise. One of the most commonly adopted risk assessment conference relating to violent behaviours is the 'Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conference' (MARAC) which is a co-ordinated assessment of high-risk domestic abuse cases, and how services can reduce the risk to victims. One of the key components of a MARAC is that families do not attend, and services share information to other agencies:

> *At the heart of a MARAC is a working assumption that no single agency or individual can see the complete picture of the life of a victim, but all may have insights that are crucial to their safety. This is because domestic abuse takes place behind closed doors and presents itself to the outside world in many ways: through calls to the police, through visits to A&E, through calls to domestic violence helplines, through poor child attendance at school, and through friends.* (SafeLives, 2010, p. 4)

The purpose of the MARAC is to share information to increase the safety, health, and well-being of the victims, who could be adults, and their children. One of the questions asked at a MARAC is does the perpetrator pose a significant risk to a particular individual or the general community? Are there any outstanding referrals which could impact risk level? The aim of the MARAC is to reduce repeat victimisation, improve agency accountability, and improve support for staff involved in high-risk domestic abuse cases. The goal is collaboration to pull together a risk management plan that provides professional support all those at risk and reduces the risk of harm overall. Whilst I would like to repeat that the children who use violent strategies are a risk to others, they can also be a risk to themselves. They require support and

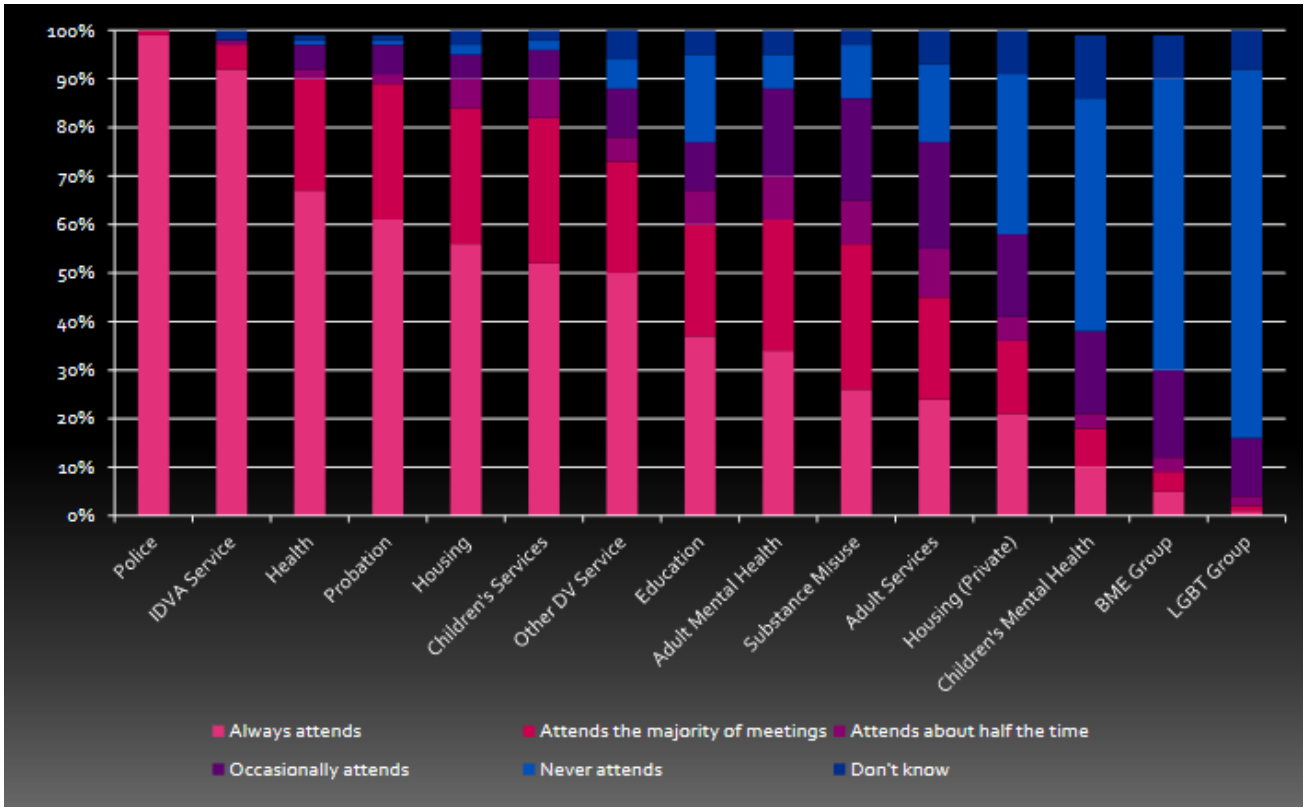
protection, not rejection, but it should not be the responsibility of individuals such as teachers to reduce the risk children pose to themselves and others alone. Reducing the risk of harm to everyone is a key goal of the MARAC and takes away the responsibility from individuals (SafeLives, 2010).

Could a model like MARAC work for children?

Many attendees of a MARAC meeting are typically invited to child protection conferences, youth offending team meetings, child sexual exploitation conferences, or county lines conferences. These meetings typically do not require families to attend as they often discuss confidential histories and information regarding other parties who may be vulnerable to the offences discussed. Similarly, any of these meetings and conferences could be identified as providing a good information-sharing opportunity regarding childhood violence however, I am recommending the MARAC due to the considerable number of professionals who are able to be involved, recognising the wider-reaching consequences of violent behaviours.

If a MARAC-type conference were to be utilised in child violence cases, all these attendees would not be needed. The MARAC model allows for invitations to be provided to those services who have been identified as potentially having information about the family, or information that may be helpful for the risk assessment. Robinson (2013) analysed Home Office data (Home Office, 2010) and adapted a graph to demonstrate which services attended MARAC meetings and how frequently (Figure 1):

Figure 1: National survey response to the question 'how regularly does a representative attend MARAC? (% of respondents)



(From Robinson, 2013)

If this child-centred MARAC model (child-MARAC) provided an opportunity for identified services to come together and discuss the potential risks to the child, their peers, their family, school staff and the community, it would facilitate the opportunity for services to speak to one another and thus provide opportunity for a comprehensive risk assessment, safety plan, and intervention. This would take the responsibility away from the child, the parents, and the individual teachers experiencing violence and instead would focus on the whole community response to supporting everyone involved. Safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility (Gov UK, 2018), and so every service has a place in reducing the risk a child may place towards themselves.

Violence reduction units (VRUs) are a recent programme developed to prevent and reduce serious violence, funded by the Home Office. The 2020 evaluation of VRUs found that they successfully "build on, complements and enhances existing arrangements" (Home Office, 2020, p. 32), and therefore they may be ideally suited to initiating child-MARAC processes, particularly as it is recommended that VRUs are positioned in a co-located space for police and the local authority.

Another benefit to the MARAC is it can improve access to services. An example of this is an adult being on a waiting list for drug and alcohol services can have their appointment expedited once it is identified as a key need by the MARAC. Similarly, a child or young person who has been waiting for drug and alcohol services, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), or an occupational therapy appointment, could have this expedited to ensure quicker access to needed therapeutic interventions or support.

It would not be appropriate to refer all children who present as violent in school to a child-MARAC due to the time and costs involved, as for some children it would be unnecessary. Instead, the referral process could be adapted based on the existing setup of the local authority. If concerns about child's behaviour or emotions are raised by school all parents, three checks could be made:

1. If the violence and/or aggression is only seen within school, and not seen at home or in the community, then there should be a referral or within-school assessment to explore whether or not the child or young person has an unidentified SEND.
2. If a SEND has been identified and the behaviour is on-going then a re-assessment of these needs should be completed in line with the Equality Act 2010.
3. If the violent or aggressive behaviours are consistent across environments and the behaviours are escalating or there are other children placed at risk due to the behaviours, then these cases could be referred to the child-MARAC for a full assessment of the needs and risks of the child.

Once a child-MARAC assessment has taken place, several outcomes should be expected, the below five aspects should be considered, but this is not an exhaustive list, and as with all child safeguarding practices, context matters:

1. An advocate should be allocated who can keep the family informed of outcomes.
2. A full community risk assessment should be completed.
3. Relevant interventions available within the local authority to be identified, including existing interventions such as positive relationships, or child-parent violence interventions.
4. Strategies that can be implemented by the school.
5. Costs of the required support and intervention and who will be paying for these services.

Cost concerns

There are considerable costs associated with the MARAC model and the investment required to run a conference requiring so much professional involvement, as well as costs associated with interventions and support that come out of the risk plans. Nevertheless, the MARAC model has been adopted by so many local authorities due to the long-term savings that accumulate, whereby an investment of £1 in the MARAC, provides a long-term saving of £6 (Caada, 2010, in Robinson, 2013). Furthermore, as so many services have adapted to remote working and virtual conferencing, the costs of running such multi-agency conferencing could be marginally reduced.

When considering the costs which may accumulate with a child-MARAC, there may be additional costs due to the educational aspect of risk assessment, intervention, and support. Nevertheless, the costs associated with permanently excluding children and young people from school, youth offending services, and health services is significant and any model that can be adapted to reduce such social, financial, and practical costs should be seriously considered:

> *"Every cohort of permanently excluded pupils will go on to cost the state an extra £2.1 billion in education, health, benefits and criminal justice costs"* (Gill et al., 2017, p. 7).

Conclusion

Most children excluded from school are excluded due to disruptive, aggressive, or violent behaviours and these behaviours may be due to unidentified or unsupported SEND, and may be behaviours being used in other areas, such as home or the community. The earlier these behaviours are identified and targeted, the better the opportunity to support children and young people presenting in this way, their families, and other children within the classroom. Whilst there are several ways services could work together to reduce childhood violence within schools, within the home, and within the community; the MARAC is an excellent, cost-saving model which removes the expectation on teachers to reduce the impact of violence within schools and instead positions schools and school staff as key people to identify where children are at risk, and levels the responsibility for risk assessing and reducing risks through multi-agency teams. Everyone who encounters children has a responsibility to safeguard them (Gov

UK, 2020), and yet how to safeguard children when they appear to be a risk to themselves is a challenge.

The MARAC is considered at present to have a 600% saving when allocated to cases of high-risk domestic abuse, and this costing may increase with a child-centred version, in which the savings could include the costs of exclusion. Whilst this model theoretically has the potential to work well when associated with childhood violence, it would need to be adapted considerably based on the commissioned services available within each local authority, and this may be difficult based on how safeguarding guidance recognises childhood violence. At present, guidance is available for children and young people in relation to when they are responsible for sexual abuse and sexually harmful behaviours. However, there is little guidance for physical or emotional abuse initiated by children and young people, and so Home Office guidance will need to be adapted to provide recommendations for LCSBs to provide guidance for schools in how they approach childhood violence, and work with families and other agencies to prevent and/or reduce it.

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