

Giving voice to children in refuge from domestic violence

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Credit: Ivan Samkov from Pexels

A new [report](#) from Trinity College evaluating a child-centered and trauma informed project to support children in refuge from domestic violence at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS) was

launched today to coincide with World Children's Day.

The research examines [children](#)'s experiences of [domestic violence](#) (DV) and transition to [refuge](#) and highlights, among other findings, the importance of play as therapy and empowering children to use their own voice. The report specifically emphasizes the role of the Children's Support Worker in creating a safe space for children and women in refuge and supports them to make the transition into their new environment.

The "Where I'm At" project is an innovative initiative that seeks to create a nurturing and secure environment for children entering the refuge. It is rooted in the principles of providing holistic [support](#) to children and is committed to offering an avenue for personal growth and development, allowing them to transition into their new surroundings with resilience and creativity.

The experiences of children exposed to domestic violence are multifaceted and can have profound implications for their emotional well-being, behavior, and overall development. Interventions aimed at mitigating the long-term impacts associated with experiencing DV play a crucial role in a child's journey to recovery. Children require tailored support that acknowledges their unique experiences and empowers them to heal and thrive.

in 2022 alone, the "Where I'm At" project engaged with 80 children.

Research findings

The combination of skilled staff and the "Where I'm At" project offerings collectively eased the transition into refuge for many of the women and children interviewed.

The significance of the role of the Children's Support Worker (CSW) was emphasized by the findings from this evaluation and the participating children unanimously expressed that they would like more time with the Children's Support Worker as they enjoyed and valued their sessions greatly.

The CSW plays a vital role in the transition of the child into refuge and adaptation to their new environment. The CSW role allows MWRSS to:

- offer a superior service to women and children in their transition into the refuge
- afford children the much needed one-to-one time to engage in play and creative activities which will help children to make the transition to their new environment
- afford women some private time to be able to engage with their own key worker about their safety plan and family requirements
- give support to the women and children staying at the refuge individually and together as a family

Recommendations

1. The "Where I'm At' project and the Children's Program are key elements in the creation of a welcoming and safe space for children when they come into refuge. Researchers recommend that funding for the project should be mainstreamed so that the program activities provided by the "Where I'm At" project can be resourced adequately.
2. The children, women and staff who took part in this evaluation collectively emphasized the positive impact of the role of the Children's Support Worker to women and children in refuge. Researchers recommend that this role continues to be available to children in refuge. They also recommend that this role be made available to children in all refuges in Ireland and the significance

- of the role reflected in relevant government policy.
3. The "Where I'm At" project and the Children's Program are child centered and trauma informed. Researchers recommend that MWRSS continue to maximize the range of play that is offered to children who use the service and include play suitable for children with disabilities or neurodivergence.
 4. Researchers recommend that staff at MWRSS continue to listen to women and children in refuge and specifically continue to give voice to children to children in refuge in relation to the services and the amenities available at the refuge.

Proposal of best practice model of work with children, in refuge in Ireland

Following on from the evaluation researchers have proposed a best practice model of work with children, in refuge in Ireland. The focus of the model centers around three key stages:

1. Welcome and assessment
2. Development of a program of support
3. Supporting the transition out of refuge

Each stage has specific aims to support the child in their journey of recovery following their experiences of domestic abuse. Effective implementation of the model requires the presence of a Children's Support Worker who can work with Refuge Keyworkers to support the child and woman when they enter the refuge and through their journey in the service.

Niall Muldoon, ombudsman for children, said, "As ombudsman for children I am delighted to launch this research because it is the first time

that we have heard directly from the children who are living through the horror and trauma of domestic abuse.

"This research clearly highlights that children are also victims of that abuse and need to be considered in the design and resourcing of domestic refuges. It also spotlights the important role that a Children Support Worker has in helping children to cope with trauma of having to flee their home and seek refuge within the care of others.

"I believe this research marries well with the commitments made by the state to recognize and support children as victims, in their own right, within the 3rd Domestic, Sexual, and Gender Based Violence Strategy. I commend the Meath Women's Refuge & Support Services and the researchers from Trinity College for this excellent piece of work and I hope it will lead to better services all around the country where children are a core part of the refuges and their support is fully resourced."

Dr. Eleanor Hollywood, associate professor in children's nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College, said, "The 'Where I'm At' project is an initiative that seeks to create a nurturing and secure environment for children when they enter refuge. An evaluation of the initiative has found that the project is significantly valuable to children and women who are in refuge as a result of domestic abuse.

"The evaluation has also highlighted the importance of the role of the Children's Support Worker in supporting children individually and within their family. Our study recommends that a Children's Support Worker should be available to children in all refuges in Ireland."

Sinead Smith, CEO, Meath Women's Refuge & Support Services, said, "The third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence published last year recognizes for the first time in Ireland that children are victims of domestic violence in their own right. On World

Children's Day, we are asking that their right to safety, well-being and to be heard by decision makers under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are recognized and fully resourced.

Generous support from the RTE Toy Show Appeal at Community Foundation Ireland has facilitated us to fund a full time Children's Support Worker role for three years and this evaluation with Trinity College Dublin. The findings clearly show the huge impact of professional support for children who have experienced domestic violence and that these roles should be continued as a key component of refuge services going forward.

"We ask Tusla and the new Domestic, Gender and Sexual Violence unit at the Department of Justice to give serious consideration to mainstreaming these roles into local domestic violence services across the country."

Katie Carry, children's team leader, Meath Women's Refuge & Support Services, said, "When there is violence and abuse at home, children experience deep trauma which can last a life-time. Through one-to-one support, a focus on safety, creativity and play, children can be supported in their recovery and well-being.

"As enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Ireland is a signatory, all children have a right to express their views, feelings and wishes on matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.

"We strive to embed this ethos in our service and are focused today on sharing the words and feedback of children we work with the Ombudsman for Children and relevant government officials."

More information: Eleanor Hollywood et al, An Evaluation of the

'Where I'm At' Project at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS), *Trinity College Dublin* (2023). [DOI: 10.25546/104111](https://doi.org/10.25546/104111)

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