



**PARENTAL BLAME
AND THE PDA
PROFILE OF AUTISM**

Part II

**THE EXPERIENCES OF
DOMESTIC ABUSE
SURVIVORS**

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Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism:

The experiences of domestic abuse survivors.

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“I felt I re-experienced the abuse from him through the professionals not acknowledging the truth and blaming me.”

“I was blamed for having been a survivor of domestic abuse ... as if I chose to be abused, rather than them do a full [autism] assessment...”

“My abusive ex also blamed me and used the system to continue his abuse.”

Introduction

‘Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism’ was published in February 2023 - a study extensively detailing parent-carer experiences of navigating systems of assessment and support for their autistic-PDA children.

When analysing the data returned for this study, it became apparent that there was a small cohort of parent-carers for whom their additional experiences of surviving domestic abuse further impacted their experiences of navigating the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) systems. The experiences of blame shared by these families were shaped by the professional responses to their vulnerabilities as domestic abuse survivors.

Some parent-carers re-experienced the trauma of their prior domestic abuse due to the way involved professionals conducted themselves. Others felt that their children’s access to autism assessment and support pathways were obstructed by professional over-focus on previous experiences of domestic abuse.

Several parent-carers shared how their ex-partners harnessed the systems of assessment and / or support to continue perpetrating abusive behaviour towards them.

Such experiences are overlooked or ignored by supporting professionals to the great detriment of involved families who are often having to deal with multiple streams of blame (directed to themselves by others) whilst trying to advocate for their autistic children’s needs and rights.

Disability-specific professionals should recognise the specific vulnerabilities of parent-carers who have been subjected to domestic abuse and ensure that SEND systems provide safe and accessible routes to accessing support for their children.

About The Author

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Alice Running (she/her) writes about autism to create space for autistic voices. She regularly writes about the autistic experience, inclusivity and justice and has had articles published in iNews, Metro, Huffington Post, The Big Issue, Yahoo, SEN Magazine, The Mighty and Special Needs Jungle.

Alice is author of the best-selling book, 'Helping Your Child with PDA Live a Happier Life' (2021) (Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

In February 2023, Alice co-published 'Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism', a study into the experiences of parent-carers navigating systems of support for their autistic children.

Alice blogs at www.theautvocate.wordpress.com.

She is an autistic person and lone parent to two autistic young people.

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Methodology

Data for this analytical, addendum report was taken from the survey undertaken as part of the study ‘Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism’¹.

This original survey was undertaken in April 2022 and was designed utilising a range of questions, to return both quantitative and qualitative information. The original survey was disseminated via social media platforms and was accessible worldwide. Respondents were self-selecting and we acknowledge that those parent-carers who had received blame for their child’s autistic presentation may have been more motivated to complete the survey than those who hadn’t (although we did receive a wide range of participants, with 12.2% of respondents stating that they had not experienced blame whilst navigating the SEND system, and 87.8% of respondents stating that they had).

There were 1016 respondents to the original survey, with 90.6% of respondents stating they were based in the United Kingdom.

Of the 1016 respondents, 58.7% categorised themselves as parenting as part of a couple, with 27.9% of respondents categorising themselves as a lone mother.

52.5% of survey respondents identified themselves as being neurodivergent.

Within the survey we did not ask any specific questions relating to respondent’s experiences of domestic abuse / intimate partner violence. However, there was a cohort of parents (predominantly lone mothers) who independently shared their experiences of domestic abuse, and explained how such experiences interacted with and impacted their navigation of the SEND system for their autistic children.

The question which elicited the most additional information around respondent’s experiences of domestic abuse was: “As parent/guardian, have you ever volunteered information to professionals regarding your family when it was not specifically requested? Please explain.”

¹ Jata-Hall, D and Running, A. (2023). Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism. [Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism | PDA Society Resources](#)

30 out of 1016 survey respondents indicated that they had experienced domestic abuse at some point in their adult lives. (2.95%)

17 of these 30 respondents who had experienced domestic abuse, also identified as being neurodivergent – (56.7%). This is slightly higher than the comparative statistic for the general survey population, whereby 52.5% identified as being neurodivergent.

Information from the survey data, in relation to the 30 respondents who had self-reported instances of domestic abuse, was transferred into a secondary raw data table from which information was thematically coded around three concepts:

- 1. How are experiences of navigating SEND systems similar to experiences of domestic abuse?**
- 2. Can experiences of domestic abuse amongst parent-carers obstruct access to autism assessment and / or support for their children?**
- 3. Are perpetrators of domestic abuse using tools of blame to continue their abuse via the SEND system?**

To explore how experiences of navigating SEND systems may be considered similar to experiences of domestic abuse, information given to us by survey respondents was compared against criteria for abusive behaviour, as described by Women’s Aid (UK). Further, data relating to type and frequency of word choice (used by respondents when describing experiences of domestic abuse) was additionally analysed.

To explore how experiences of domestic abuse amongst respondents may obstruct access to autism assessment and / or support for their children, information given to us by survey respondents was compared against the NICE guidelines for ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder in under 19’s’.

With a relatively small population sample it is not my intention to draw any firm conclusions. I am merely using this data to draw attention to the specific experiences of a group of people who are uniquely, and adversely, affected by the current practices of many professionals working within the SEND system.

1. How are experiences of navigating SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) systems similar to experiences of domestic abuse?

67% (20 / 30) of respondents who had noted their prior experiences of domestic abuse, reported experiences of navigating the SEND system matching the criteria for abusive, coercive, and controlling behaviour (as per Women's Aid UK definitions).

#384 *"...I felt I re-experienced the abuse from him through the professionals not acknowledging the truth and blaming me."*

#409 *"...I'm being slandered, gaslighted and bullied all over again. Same as what we have escaped from."*

#423 *"...I've been through domestic abuse in the past and this has me feeling the same way."*

Women's Aid UK provide detailed descriptors of how domestic abuse can present. Women's Aid UK categorise features of domestic abuse as:

- Destructive Criticism
- Pressure Tactics
- Disrespect
- Breaking Trust
- Isolation
- Harassment
- Threats
- Denial

To view these descriptors in detail, refer to ‘Recognising Domestic Abuse’, Women’s Aid UK.²

² Women’s Aid. (2022). Recognising Domestic Abuse. www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/recognising-domestic-abuse

Table 1: Reported professional behaviour and how it matches domestic abuse criteria.

| Respondent | Domestic Abuse Criterion | Secondary Criterion | Reported Professional Behaviour (in response to parent-carer navigating SEND system for autistic child) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| #12 | Pressure Tactics | No choice in decisions | <i>"My abusive ex-husband had been involved against my wishes..."</i> |
| | Disrespect | Withholding help | <i>"...and services refused to me unless he could be involved."</i> |
| #17 | Pressure Tactics | No choice in decisions | <i>"Professionals continue to tell me I have to communicate with my child's father...even though he...continues to abuse me verbally and emotionally."</i> |
| | Pressure Tactics | Threat of child removal | <i>"I am terrified my child will be removed"</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | | | <i>because of this judgemental attitude.”</i> |
| | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>“I am constantly being accused that parental conflict is to blame.”</i> |
| #283 | Disrespect | Not listening | <i>“Judge ignored the evidence of his disability...”</i> |
| | Denial | Denying disability | <i>“Judge ignored the evidence of his disability...”</i> |
| #293 | Disrespect | Not listening | <i>Respondent reports that professionals seek alternative reasons for autistic presentation in child, despite information presented by parent-carer.</i> |
| #384 | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>“...it was considered I had lack of boundaries with my child.”</i> |
| #388 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>“I was blamed for having been a</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| | | | <i>survivor of domestic abuse..."</i> |
| | Disrespect | Withholding help | <i>"...rather than them do a full [ASC] assessment."</i> |
| #396 | Pressure Tactics | Threats | <i>"...my safety was threatened..."</i> |
| | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"Significant blame has been placed on me..."</i> |
| | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"...and a lot of gaslighting and blame shifting was done on the school's part."</i> |
| #409 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"...school...stating that it was my behaviours causing my son's issues..."</i> |
| | Pressure Tactics | Threats | <i>"The school referred us to social work..."</i> |
| | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"[Professionals said] ...it was my behaviours causing my son's issues due to escaped domestic violence."</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | | | <i>"I'm being slandered, gaslighted and bullied all over again."</i> |
| #423 | Denial | Gaslighting | <i>"I feel gaslit by the local authority...makes me question my own sanity..."</i> |
| #446 | Pressure Tactics | Threats of child removal | <i>"Huge anxiety as under constant threat of child being removed..."</i> |
| #496 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"Accused of fabricating illness..."</i> |
| #511 | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"My ex-partner was abusive...it is then used as an excuse for my son's behaviour..."</i> |
| #529 | Disrespect | Refusal to help | <i>"[Professionals] asked questions about domestic abuse...and then used this to deny an autism assessment."</i> |

| | | | |
|------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| #616 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"History of DV used against me as the school said I had poor boundaries..."</i> |
| | Disrespect | Refusal to help | <i>"I believe history of DV...led to years of zero support or diagnosis."</i> |
| #723 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"...seen as me being uncooperative and refusing to co-parent...I'm constantly being told I must move on..."</i> |
| | Pressure Tactics | Threat of child removal | <i>"...we are still on CP [Child Protection] ..."</i> |
| | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"...ongoing abuse and my raising this is seen as parental conflict..."</i> |
| #754 | Denial | Denial of disability | <i>"...domestic violence is always the reason, never the ASD."</i> |
| #862 | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"...domestic violence...repeatedly used against me and</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | | | <i>blamed for my daughter's needs by the school..."</i> |
| #888 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"I was told she'd probably witnessed abuse and the fact that I was...stressed was contributing to her problems."</i> |
| | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>"I was told... the fact I was overworked and stressed was contributing to her problems."</i> |
| #957 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"...it is continually implied that I will always provide inadequate care for children...coming from a previously abusive relationship."</i> |
| #993 | Destructive Criticism | Accusations | <i>"[Professionals said] I'm overcompensating, too soft..."</i> |

| | | | |
|--|--------|---------------------------------|--|
| | Denial | Placing responsibility on other | <i>“The domestic abuse we experienced, I’m overcompensating, too soft, [professionals] wanting an excuse for my child’s issues...”</i> |
|--|--------|---------------------------------|--|

Table 2: The frequency of abusive practices employed by supporting professionals.

| Specificity of abuse | Frequency of types of abusive behaviour reported |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Destructive Criticism | 10 |
| Pressure Tactics | 6 |
| Disrespect | 6 |
| Denial | 11 |

This data demonstrates how those parent-carers of autistic children who have also experienced (prior) instances of domestic abuse, have been exposed to behaviour from supporting professionals that can be described as emotionally harmful.

Domestic abuse survivors, when navigating systems of support for their autistic children, were exposed to instances of destructive criticism, pressure, disrespect, threats, and denial from SEND professionals. The use of denial and destructive criticism was slightly more prevalent than the use of disrespect and pressure tactics.

When sharing their accounts, respondents frequently used words relating to the on-going nature of their exposure to harmful behaviour from professionals; “repeatedly”, “constantly”, “continually” were used to describe their experiences of blame.

#17 *“...I am constantly being accused that parental conflict is to blame...even though he...continues to abuse me verbally and emotionally...”*

#446 *“...Huge anxiety as under constant threat of child being removed...”*

#723 *“...I’m constantly being told I must move on, and everything is historic...they don’t recognise that his on-going accusations are on-going abuse...”*

#975 *“...It is continually implied that I will always provide inadequate care for children...”*

#971 *“...used the system to continue his abuse...”*

That respondents frequently used language to describe the ongoing nature of abuse directed towards them via professionals working in the SEND system, is revealing given that longevity is often a prevailing characteristic of domestic abuse experiences. For many survivors of domestic abuse, abuse is often ongoing over long periods of time. Information collated by Woman’s Aid UK

showed that ‘46.2% of women in refuges had spent between two and ten years in the abusive relationship’³.

I would suggest that for parents who have already (potentially) experienced several years of domestic abuse, to be subjected to further, and similar, behaviour from professionals involved with their children is to place these parents (and their children) at risk of harm.

Safeguarding procedures state that ‘*domestic abuse may have a long term psychological and emotional impact*’ on both parent and child(ren), also identifying domestic abuse as ‘*an act or a pattern of acts of ... intimidation ... that is used to harm, punish or frighten their victim.*’⁴

Reflective practice for professionals should be routinely undertaken to ensure that those SEND professionals with safeguarding duty ensure that their own professional behaviour and practice does not exhibit elements of abusive behaviour (as described above).

³ Women’s Aid. (2022) The Impact of Domestic Abuse. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-impact-of-domestic-abuse/>

⁴ Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership. (2022). Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Procedures: Domestic Abuse. https://www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/gloucestershire/p_dom_viol_abuse.html

2. Can experiences of domestic abuse amongst parent-carers obstruct access to autism assessment and / or support for their children?

40% of parent-carer respondents who had shared details of (prior) domestic abuse, reported occasions where involved professionals placed focus exclusively on familial issues relating to domestic abuse, rather than pursue autism-specific assessments and / or provision.

#17 *"...I am constantly being accused that 'parental conflict' is to blame for my child's issues, due to our divorce..."*

#388 *"I was blamed for having been a survivor of domestic abuse and being in abusive relationships as if I chose to be abused rather than them do a full assessment at home and at school with my child."*

#511 *"...with regards to the history with my ex-partner...it is then used as an excuse for my son's behaviour...'it's no surprise he's violent when he's angry if he's seen his dad do x, y, z, to his older sibling'..."*

#529 *"[Professionals] asked questions about domestic abuse and personal life in front of daughter, then used to deny autism assessment and suggest attachment disorder."*

#616 *"History of DV used against me as the school said I had poor boundaries, and my child only didn't want to go to school as he was worried about me. My perpetrator had been out of our lives for three years by this time...I believe history of DV, and the child's mixed race, led to years of zero support or diagnosis and parent blaming."*

#754 *"...my ex-husband domestic violence is always reason, never the ASD..."*

#862 *"I offered information regarding separation from ex-husband after domestic violence and going through court for child arrangements order and*

this has been repeatedly used against me and blamed for my daughter's needs by the school."

#888 *"Came out of abusive marriage when R was three. Worked full-time. I was told that she'd probably witnessed abuse and the fact I was overworked and stressed was contributing to her problems."*

#975 *"Dad is chaotic and abused me. They focus on this instead of the LA and school failures."*

#993 *"...the domestic abuse we experienced...[professionals] wanting an excuse for my child's issues..."*

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) **Guidelines** for recognising children and young people who may be autistic, make recommendations as follows⁵:

1.2.2 Always take parent's or carer's concerns and, if appropriate, the child's or young person's concerns, about behaviour or development seriously, even if these are not shared by others. (2011)

1.2.5 When considering the possibility of autism, be aware that: signs and symptoms may not be accounted for by disruptive home experiences or parental or carer mental or physical illness. (2011)

For the 40% of parent-carer respondents who had reported being subjected to (prior) domestic abuse (represented above), NICE Guidelines relating to the recognition of autism in children and young people were not always followed.

In these circumstances involved professionals have focused predominately upon familial issues relating to parent-carer experiences of domestic abuse which has led to the exclusion of other explanations for a child's presentation of need (autism). Furthermore, parent-carer respondents have not been listened

⁵ NICE Guidance. (2011; 2017). Autism spectrum disorder in under 19's: recognition, referral, and diagnosis. Clinical guideline [CG128]. <https://www.nice.org.uk>

to when they have attempted to advocate for their children's autistic needs to be met.

10 families (from the cohort of 30 families who had self-reported experiencing domestic abuse) had received NO diagnosis of autism for their child, at the time of completing the survey – (33.3%). 163 families from the general survey population (of 1016) had received NO diagnosis of autism for their child, at the time of completing the survey – (16.04%)

As per the conclusions of 'Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism'⁶ the ramifications of excluding the possibility that a child's presentation is due to unassessed, or unsupported, or unmet autistic need, are that the child ultimately suffers. When the type of support offered by professionals is not in line with an autistic child's need, the child's presenting 'difficulties' may be exacerbated, thus perpetuating a further cycle of parental blame and lack of appropriate support.

⁶ Jata-Hall, D and Running, A. (2023). Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism. [Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism | PDA Society Resources](#)

3. Are perpetrators of domestic abuse using tools of blame to continue their abuse via the SEND system?

13% of parent-carer respondents who shared (prior) experiences of domestic abuse, also reported their abuser utilising elements of the SEND system to place blame (for their child's disability presentation) with them, in a continuation of coercive, controlling, and abusive behaviour.

#316 *"Dad hasn't been physically part of son's life for years as he was very strict and full of double standards which son couldn't deal with. He blamed me for being too soft, told me I was neglecting our child..."*

#384 *"My child's dad first suggested to professionals my parenting is the problem. He suggested I had fictitious illness by proxy, my daughter already had an autism diagnosis, so this was soon discarded by professionals, however it was considered I had lack of boundaries with my child because I didn't tell her off or discipline her following verbal outbursts or challenging behaviour incidents. I knew this wasn't appropriate as my child was struggling with anxiety."*

"They didn't challenge Dad at all for his behaviour towards my child (she told them he had placed his hands round her neck and was scared). He was aggressive towards me, and all this was seen as problems between the parents."

#957 *"It took years for child's autism to be accepted as non-existent father said child was just badly behaved due to the way I was raising him."*

#971 *"We have lost a few years of our lives through social services and family court – abusive ex also blamed me and used the system to continue his abuse."*

It is concerning that within these examples, SEND professionals are seemingly believing perpetrators of abuse without undertaking critical analysis of all available information, nor listening to mothers objectively. By not remaining professionally curious to the possibility that a father's account may be a continuation of abusive patterns of behaviour, SEND professionals are supporting patterns of abuse.

Additionally, professionals working with families of autistic children should be aware that it can be common for non-resident parent-carers to not recognise autistic presentations within their child and that non-recognition of autistic presentations within a child by one parent does not equate to the other parent exaggerating or fabricating issues.

Dr Judy Eaton explains why this may be⁷:

“Often this involves the non-resident parent claiming that they ‘do not see any difficulties’ when the child or young person is spending time with them, and attributing any challenges experienced to ‘poor parenting’ on the part of the parent who spends most time with the child. There is a great variation in understanding of Autism amongst expert witnesses and this is further complicated if the child is ‘masking’ or holding things together at either school, the non-resident parent’s home, or both. Very often in these situations, the child is only sufficiently comfortable to be their true self in the place where they feel safest.”

Without this professional understanding, of both autistic presentations and patterns of abusive (coercive, controlling) behaviour, mothers may find themselves subjected to serious allegations of harm. Dr Eaton writes that⁸:

“In some cases, this can lead to accusations of Fabricated or Induced Illness, where one parent is accused of effectively making up the difficulties that have been reported. Once a case has progressed this far, each ‘side’ in the dispute (whether this is about support, education, custody, or access arrangements)

⁷ Eaton, J. (2022). When parents disagree over the need for an assessment. Help For Psychology. <https://help4psychology.co.uk/blog/when-parents-disagree-over-the-need-for-an-assessment/>

⁸ Eaton, J. (2022). When parents disagree over the need for an assessment. Help For Psychology. <https://help4psychology.co.uk/blog/when-parents-disagree-over-the-need-for-an-assessment/>

will have their own legal representation, and each side will employ their own expert witnesses to present their case. In this situation, it is often the side whose expert presents the most convincing evidence (as far as the judge is concerned) who will effectively win.

The problem is that in this situation no one really wins.

This can, and does, lead to children and young people failing to access an appropriate assessment and/or diagnosis. There is a growing awareness of the potential difficulties in terms of support, mental health problems, and long-term outcomes for those children and young people who are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed. The collateral damage and trauma caused for the parent who has effectively ‘lost’ their fight, for an assessment and, most probably had their parenting scrutinised in a less than complimentary manner, will last for years.”

One must also consider the long-term impact of having a parent who either rejects a given diagnosis of autism for their child, or who rejects their child’s innate autistic presentation. When assessing allegations of emotional harm, professionals consider the impact of future harm – the child may not currently be exposed to harm, but harm may occur in the future should matters persist. This is why the issue of parental denial must be considered a serious risk to the future well-being of an autistic child.

“There are many in the autistic community who accept their autistic identity with pride. We all want acceptance from our parents, we want unconditional love...It is crucial to feeling secure, and to having resilience within a world not fully accommodating to difference. By not accepting a child’s diagnosis of autism, is to potentially deny their identity...”⁹

⁹ Running, A. (2019). When parents refuse to accept that their child is autistic. Wordpress. <https://theautvocate.wordpress.com/2019/01/23/when-parents-refuse-to-accept-that-their-child-is-autistic-autism-sen-pathologicaldemandavoidance-mentalhealth>

4. The experiences of autistic and neurodivergent parent-carers.

56.7% of parent-carer respondents who shared (prior) experiences of domestic abuse, additionally identified themselves as neurodivergent (predominantly autistic). In the general survey population (data taken from ‘Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism’¹⁰), 52.5% of parent-carers identified as being neurodivergent.

When considering the experiences of neurodivergent parents (predominantly autistic mothers) with regards to interactions with professionals supporting their autistic children, and their own experiences of being subjected to intimate partner violence, it is important to understand how being autistic impacts susceptibility to both being blamed and being subjected to abuse.

Findings from ‘Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism’ showed that of the 10.93% of parent-carer respondents that were subjected to erroneous safeguarding procedures (blaming parents for the child’s autistic presentation), 76.57% of those parents identified as being neurodivergent.

That autistic mothers are more susceptible to being blamed for their autistic children’s presentation has been known for some time. A study from 2016, concludes that *“mothers with autism would benefit from far more and better tailored support. Allegations of fabricated illness, and high rates of surveillance by social services suggest there may be more discrimination towards mothers with autism.”*¹¹

Likewise, it has also been known for some time that autistic adults are more susceptible to being subjected to abuse, particularly by persons well known to them. A survey conducted by the National Autistic Society in 2014, found that *“half of autistic adults were abused by someone they regarded as a friend”*.

¹⁰ Jata-Hall, D and Running, A. (2023). Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism. [Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism | PDA Society Resources](#)

¹¹ Pohl, A. L et al. (2016). Positive and Negative Experiences of Mothers with Autism. Autism Research Centre, University of Cambridge. International Society for Autism Research. <https://insar.confex.com/insar/2016/webprogram/Paper22166.html?s%3Fs%3Fs?s%3Fs%3Fs>

Further, “37% had been forced or manipulated to do something they did not want to do.”¹²

That autistic parents (predominantly mothers) are more susceptible to being blamed by professionals and abused by persons known to them, exposes them to the most serious aspects of safeguarding procedures – child removal.

A case review from 2020 discusses how “*the Local Authority...sought to place D and E for adoption...this was strongly opposed by [mother]...on the basis that the majority of the assessments undertaken...had been undertaken prior to her diagnosis of autism and without the necessary adjustments having been made. The court found that [mother’s] diagnosis of Autism...was highly significant. Many of the features of [mother’s] presentation which had given rise to concerns on the part of the Local Authority were features of this diagnosis ...*”¹³

Professional misunderstanding and lack of specialist knowledge around autistic and neurodivergent presentations in parents can have serious consequences. When professional lack of understanding is combined with an autistic parent being targeted and abused by the other parent, poor outcomes for both the autistic parent and autistic child are compounded.

¹² Stothart, C. (2014). Survey Reveals Half of Autistic Adults Abused by Someone They Regarded as a Friend. Community Care. www.communitycare.co.uk

¹³ Sutcliffe, Anna. (2020). Childcare Proceedings and Autistic Parents. Local Government Lawyer. www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk

Conclusion

For the parent-carer respondents featured within this report, they have received blame twice; once for navigating systems of support for their autistic children, and again for having experienced domestic abuse. For these families, their vulnerabilities are not supported by involved professionals but are used against them, potentially leaving them susceptible to the most extreme aspects of parent-carer blame, child removal.

Parent-carers of autistic children who have also experienced domestic abuse, shared how they have been retraumatised by the working practices of involved professionals. Some parent-carers felt that pathways to autism-linked assessments (for their children) were obstructed by professional over-focus on ‘historical’ instances of domestic abuse. Additionally, some parent-carers shared how professional practice and some aspects of SEND support enabled abusive ex-partners to continue in their perpetrating of abusive behaviours.

It is imperative that professionals involved with safeguarding autistic children understand how frequently parental blame occurs for parent-carers attempting to gain useful assessment and support services for their autistic children. Safeguarding professionals should also understand how blame specifically impacts and interacts with those families who have experienced domestic abuse. It is particularly worrying to note that some mothers of autistic children have experienced their abusive ex-partners harness SEND systems to continue their perpetration of abusive behaviour.

The findings of ‘Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism’¹⁴ show that it is neurodivergent, lone mothers who are especially vulnerable to being blamed for their children’s autistic presentations. Because of this, it is important to note that 57% of respondents who had shared their experiences of domestic abuse, self-identified as being both neurodivergent and a lone mother.

¹⁴ Jata-Hall, D and Running, A. (2023). Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism. [Parental Blame and the PDA Profile of Autism | PDA Society Resources](#)

Neurodivergent, lone mothers continue to be marginalised and this should be recognised by all professionals working within systems of SEND.

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