



'Truly Be Me'

Supporting Children in the Community who have Experienced Domestic Violence and Abuse

FINAL REPORT



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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

Overview of the Evaluation

An evaluation of the Child and Youth Programme Community which forms part of the Child and Youth Service at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS) was conducted to review the practice and impact of the programme since its inception in 2018. The overall aim of the research was to evaluate the programme as it operates currently and to look to support the growth and development of the programme into the future. The evaluation was accomplished using case study research which involved conducting in-depth interviews with children, mothers and stakeholders associated with the planning, organisation and delivery of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The objectives of the evaluation were:

Objectives: programme impact

- ✓ To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their lives.
- ✓ To explore women's experiences of their family's involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their family.
- ✓ To explore service pathway and assessment process to establish if family needs are being met by the Child and Youth Programme Community.
- ✓ To evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these are translated into practice.
- ✓ To identify and explore the 'blocks' that present for children accessing and engaging with supports provided by the Child and Youth Programme Community.

Objectives: situational and external context and environment

- ✓ To explore issues of 'timing' related to the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these impact on the journey of recovery for women and child(ren).
- ✓ To examine issues related to 'safety' and how these can impact on family engagement with the Child and Youth Programme Community.
- ✓ To assess the space that is currently available for the Child and Youth Programme Community from the perspective of children, women, and stakeholders.

Objectives: Post programme

- ✓ To explore the views of children and women who have completed the Child and Youth Programme Community in terms of level of supports provided and returning to the programme for further supports as required.

Summary of Key Findings

Findings from this research show that the Child and Youth Programme Community is an imperative element of the of the Child and Youth Service at MWRSS. Through the programme children in the community who experience domestic violence and abuse can access a safe, supportive and nurturing environment where they can express how they feel and process their emotions. The Child and Youth Programme Community fosters a feeling of safety for children and facilitates the development of strong therapeutic relationships between participating children and the Child and Youth Support Workers at MWRSS. Children access the programme for a variety of reasons including trauma, mental health concerns, difficulty processing complex family dynamics, exposure to unsafe situations and problems with emotional expression and communication. The child centred and child lead nature of the programme ensures that recovery from domestic violence and abuse is focused on the needs of the child and that it takes place at a pace set and determined by the individual child. Findings from the research presented in this report show that the programme is exceptionally beneficial to children who experience domestic violence and abuse in their lives. Furthermore, the programme has a very meaningful impact on the child and their family. The evaluation identified three main themes, each of which consisted of two sub-themes as shown on the next page.

Theme	Description of Theme
Theme 1: Safe, Supportive and Therapeutic Space	<p>This theme represents how the Child and Youth Programme Community at the MWRSS provides a safe, supportive, confidential, and nurturing environment where children who experience domestic violence and abuse feel that they can be themselves and freely express and process their emotions. This is characterised by two key elements: the creation of a safe space and the development of strong therapeutic alliances between the children and the Child and Youth Support Worker of MWRSS. The sub-themes which make up this theme are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Safe Space • Therapeutic Alliance
Theme 2: Programme Access and Delivery	<p>This theme explores the various access pathways to the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS, highlighting its structure and delivery from the perspectives of children, mothers, and stakeholders. It also reveals the reasons children accessed the programme, such as trauma symptoms, mental health concerns, difficulty processing complex family dynamics, exposure to unsafe family situations, and problems with emotional expression and communication. The sub-themes which make up this theme are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and Pathways • Programme Structure
Theme 3: Programme Impact and Enhancement	<p>This theme explores the positive impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community on children from the perspectives of all participants. Particularly significant was the programme's capacity to extend benefits beyond individual children to the whole family unit, with mothers gaining new insights into their children and reporting improved family relationships and family well-being in the context of domestic violence support. The theme also identifies some key areas for enhancing the Child and Youth Programme Community, including the need for increased staffing and resources and the need for transitional support when families leave the refuge. The sub-themes which make up this theme are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programme Benefits and Impact • Programme Enhancement

Hear from the Children and Young People who completed the Child and Youth Programme Community

"Anger was explored well, anger towards like certain people and certain things that affected you, just dragging you down. Using up your energy that didn't need to be used. I just think it helped me like become a bit more like just happier with myself in general."

Boy aged 15 years



Because my family members went through the same thing as me, but they feel different on how they feel about it compared to how I feel about it.

Girl, 14 years old

Like I just feel safe in general to talk just to come here [scheduled session in playroom], if I'm stressed and like this just made me feel safe.

Girl, 12 years old

"I loved coming here because I felt that I could be honest. Everyone was so understanding, and they didn't judge me."

Girl, 12 years old



"Anna* always said if you want to talk, I'm here, but if you don't want to talk you don't need to."

Boy, 12 years old

Hear from the Children and Young People who completed the Child and Youth Programme Community



I think I stayed quiet about something for months, which felt like years for me, but you only realise how bad it was and how wrong it was ... It's [being in the Child and Youth Programme Community] had such an impact on my feelings and how I deal with them, it was just really, really good.

Girl, 12 years old

Since I came here, I never felt judged by Anna*, like not once.
Girl, 16 years old

"Children are afraid to speak up in general. I have a lot of mates that I have tried talking to... They don't speak up about it [domestic violence and abuse]."

Boy, 14 years old

Yeah, just she [Child and Youth Support Worker] listens, and I like when she listens. : It makes me feel, it's, I don't really know how to describe it just makes me feel better.

Girl, 11 years old

Sometimes you didn't need to talk and if you were feeling sad ... you could just come in and just play."

Boy, 14 years old



Hear from the Mothers who completed the Child and Youth Programme Community

"More times I was crying that I wasn't fit to help him [son] with his emotions because I was so broken too so I just felt I can't help this child like he needs somebody, he needs someone professional as well."

"He definitely was having some issues with kind of holding negative self-belief. He was kind of able to say to me "oh well, you know Anna* has taught me that I can challenge that".

"It's different for them to talk with me and with somebody from outside. So, they were pushing me actually mam, mam, mam I want to come back, I want to come back".

"Straight away from the first session with Anna* she [child] bounced out, so she did...she's fantastic [better mood and happier] after the ten sessions with Anna*".

"That domestic violence lens is very important too because I have all boys. So, for me it's very important that they understand what's normal and what's not normal [behaviour within the family]"



Hear from the Stakeholders:

"It's just really important that the children feel valued and feel like they have a safe space, there's a place to go to ... someone that's kind of just for them, on their side".

"We'd be there to help them, just to make sense of it and put words to these experiences that can be almost too big for such young children to make sense of".

"I suppose the work we do we like to think it's very much based on children's rights and if mam has the right to a key worker and support, we feel that children should have an equal right to a key worker, someone who is going to support the recovery that they need".

"It's just really important that the children feel valued and feel like they have a safe space, there's a place to go to ... someone that's kind of just for them, on their side".

I suppose it's a wrap around support for the whole family, you know when they come in the child has their one to one or play therapy It's not a case of like a child comes in and they do all the work and then they're sent out, you know it is that kind of piece where both mam and child are both being supported in the recovery.



Recommendations

The recommendations from the evaluation are:

Recommendation 1	The Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS) is an individualised, child centred and child lead programme that provides a safe pace for children who experience domestic violence and abuse to express how they feel and process these experiences. The programme provides children with essential emotional safety and support which is invaluable to them and their family. We recommend that MWRSS continues to offer the Child and Youth Programme Community as part of the suite of services offered by the organisation via their Child and Youth Service.
Recommendation 2	The children, women and stakeholders who took part in this evaluation collectively emphasised the positive impact of the role of the Child and Youth Support Worker to children and families in the community setting. We recommend that this role continues to be available to children in the community and that all specialised domestic violence services in Ireland offer supports to children and families in the community who are experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Furthermore, we recommend that an additional role is sought in MWRSS's core CUAN ¹ funding to enable the service to continue to grow and meet the needs of children and families in the community of Meath.
Recommendation 3	Children interviewed for this research expressed how they enjoyed attending for supports outside of their home setting. The physical play spaces in the service contributed to children's feeling of safe space. We recommend that all specialist domestic violence services provide designated and age-appropriate child spaces to deliver therapeutic services to children and families who are experiencing domestic violence and abuse. We also recommend the inclusion of relevant funding for adequate spaces in Cuan policy so that specialist domestic violence services can provide supports to children and families in the community setting.
Recommendation 4	The women and stakeholders interviewed for this research all spoke about programme access and pathway. Findings show that families and professionals have a different access pathway to the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The online referral system provides a streamlined and efficient access point for professionals. Furthermore, it helps to break down access barriers for external agencies that are seeking supports for women and children which has resulted in improved interagency collaboration and increased service reach for children in the community. We therefore recommend that MWRSS continues to operate its online referral system via the online referral form ² . However, it is advised that to continue with the online referral form, extra staffing support is required to manage the increase in referrals that this has created. We recommend the inclusion of relevant funding in Cuan policy.

¹ Cuan, the new statutory domestic, sexual and gender-based violence agency in Ireland launched on 28th February 2024.

² The provision of this online form has increased the number of referrals being made thus increasing waiting list times.

Recommendation 5	Findings show that there are barriers associated with children's access to the Child and Youth Programme Community. The programme takes place in the post-separation period for families and often families are engaged with the court system on access issues. We recommend that the issue of consent is dealt with immediately in court situations to ensure that the child or young person is not obstructed from attending recovery therapeutic supports. We also recommend that further research is conducted to fully explore the blocks which exist for children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse in accessing recovery therapeutic supports.
Recommendation 6	Findings from this research have demonstrated that there is a need to raise awareness within the community regarding the supports that are available to women and children who experienced domestic violence and abuse. We recommend that MWRSS is supported and resourced in disseminating its service offerings to the surrounding community including schools, health services, Tusla services, relevant community organisations and all Garda stations in the county of Meath. This will help to raise awareness in relation to children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse and how they can be best supported in their recovery.

Conclusion

The evaluation presented in this report features the experiences of children and women who have completed the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. Findings highlight that the programme is exceptionally impactful for children and families who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. The programme is child informed, child focused and child led which facilitates the creation of safe space to enable children to commence their journey of healing. This evaluation has highlighted that blocks do exist when women seek specialist domestic violence and abuse support services for their children. Children have rights that are independent to that of their parents therefore access to specialist services such as the Child and Youth Programme Community should not only be facilitated but expedited. The provision of specialist services to children who experience domestic violence and abuse needs to be prioritised so that children can begin to recover and move forward from such experiences.

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Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS) is a specialist service for women and children who are impacted by domestic violence and abuse in the Meath area. Founded in 1987 in Navan by a local women's voluntary group, the organisation initially provided refuge accommodation with the help of volunteers in a donated building space. Core funding became available and was secured from the then titled North-Eastern Health Board³ and in 1992 the organisation purchased their refuge building. Following the acquisition of the refuge building and with the assistance of funding from the Department of Housing the refuge was extended to incorporate living and workspace. In 2003 the organisation progressed further through the development of an outreach programme so that women in the community who were experiencing domestic violence and abuse could be supported. Today MWRSS operates as a comprehensive service through the provision of a 24-hour / 365 day a year helpline, refuge accommodation, outreach, counselling, court accompaniment, children's programme and advocacy for women and children who experience domestic violence and abuse. Furthermore, the organisation has a new and innovative Cuan funded pilot project called 'Zero Tolerance Meath' which it is envisaged will help inform how Ireland can move towards a whole society response to the prevention of gender-based violence.

In 2023 MWRSS helpline took 1,122 calls and their outreach and community team took 124 direct phone calls for support. The refuge provided accommodation to 92 women and 93 children, an increase of 41% from the previous year. MWRSS provided 392 court accompaniments, an 81% increase from 2022. In 2024 the Child and Youth Service managed 204 referrals for children in total, 105 referrals for children in refuge and 99 referrals for children in the community setting. Furthermore, MWRSS increased their counselling services significantly providing 540 sessions to 93 women and 66 sessions of play therapy to children (MWRSS 2024).

³ Incorporated Counties Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan

The core mission of MWRSS is to empower women and children who experience domestic violence and abuse to embark on a journey towards safety, well-being, and recovery. The organisation does this through the provision of women and children centred specialist support services. The four core values underpinning the strategic plan for MWRSS as an organisation are services that are 1. Women and child centred 2. Inclusive 3. Accountable and 4. Trustworthy (MWRSS 2024). The Child and Youth Service was added to the suite of services available at MWRSS in 2019 and it currently has three full-time professional workers with social care backgrounds. The primary focus of the Child and Youth Service is to support children to recover from their experience of domestic violence and abuse. It does this through the provision of a variety of supports such as play therapy, a psycho-educational programme, adolescent counselling, group programmes and parenting support. The Child and Youth Service operates a two-pronged approach to programme delivery notably the Child and Youth Programme Refuge for children who are in refuge, and the Child and Youth Programme Community for children who remain in the community setting. The voice of the child is a fundamental component of the overarching Child and Youth Service as highlighted in previous research conducted by Hollywood et al (2023). Furthermore, the pivotal role of the Child and Youth Support Worker in the healing journey of the child who has experienced domestic violence and abuse has been emphasised (Hollywood et al 2023). The study presented in this document follows on from the Hollywood et al (2023) work since it presents the findings from an evaluation conducted on the practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS).

1.2 The Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS

When children live in a home where there is domestic violence and abuse, they are directly impacted by the abuse which is a violation of their human rights. Children have a right to quality and specialist supports that are on a par with other victims of gender-based violence to assist them in their journey of recovery. As previously revealed, at MWRSS the Child and Youth Service operates a two-pronged approach to programme delivery since it is available children and women who are in refuge (Child and Youth Programme Refuge) and available to children and women who are living in the community setting (Child and Youth Programme Community) and who are in a safe space to engage with supports. Work with children and

young people on the Child and Youth Programme Refuge takes place exclusively onsite at the refuge whereas work with children and young people on the Child and Youth Programme Community takes place in the playroom at the refuge and in other offices associated with a variety of professionals for example office of a play therapist.

Previously the Child and Youth Programme Refuge has been evaluated and a proposed best practice model of work with children in refuge in Ireland has been put forward (Hollywood et al 2023). There are however unique challenges associated with providing supports to children and young people in the community thus this is an area worthy of exploration. If supports for children and young people who experience domestic violence and abuse are to be maintained and developed, it is imperative that the challenges associated with the provision of such supports in the community setting are explored and evaluated likewise.

The key objectives of the Child and Youth Programme Community are:

- To provide a safe space for children to understand and recover from their experiences of domestic violence and abuse.
- To support children and their family.
- To develop a support plan for each individual child when they come into the service which is based of pyscho-educational materials and encourages using creative engagement tools.
- To work in a trauma informed manner with each child/family that comes into the service.
- To provide support to women on parenting after domestic violence and abuse.
- To work in participation with children at all times and to promote the child's voice.
- To incorporate Tusla's Child and Youth Participation toolkit.
- To ensure that children and young people have their voices heard within the service and act accordingly with this.

Within the community setting a family can self-refer to the programme or an internal or external service can also refer the family to the programme. The Child and Youth Support Worker then completes an initial assessment which is followed by the development of a designated support plan for the child or young person. Typically, a child or young person will be offered one-to-one supports, will progress to play therapy and a group programme if applicable. There are however many blocks that occur during the course of this work, blocks which mainly present due to the continuation of post separation abuse. When blocks arise,

they can manifest due to issues surrounding consent, service provision can be interrupted due to the preparator, there can be lengthy court access cases or there can be child protection concerns. The study presented in this report is an evaluation of practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS highlighting the blocks which exist in relation to this type of work and as set out in the tender call.

1.3 Development of a Logic Model

For this research a logic model was used to map the Child and Youth Programme Community for the evaluation. Logic models are visual presentations of a project or a programme which are used to design, implement, and evaluate programmes (Mohn, 2024). Logic models offer a way to describe and share an understanding of relationships among elements necessary to operate a programme or effect change (Hyland and Comiskey, 2024). They provide a clear road map to a specific end (Knowlton and Philips, 2012). The process of developing a logic model should begin by bringing all key stakeholders together to share an understanding of the programme. A logic model consists of three major components: **inputs, outputs, and outcomes** as shown in Table 1 on the next page. The researchers worked with key stakeholders to develop a logic model for the Child and Youth Programme Community and report the programme's inputs, outputs, and outcomes. A visual representation of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS is presented in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Examples of inputs, outputs and outcomes to be included in a logic model

Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes
Resources used for the programme (human, funding, equipment, technology) Programme activities (examples of the programme's activities with the above resources).	Direct products of the programme's activities, divided into activity outputs and participant outputs. Activity outputs include the number of classes, hours, or weeks the programme runs for. Participant outputs are the demographics of the individuals and families reached. Outputs indicate if the programme has delivered the intended programme to the intended audience	Outcomes are the specific changes in the program participants' behaviour, knowledge, skills etc. Divided into short, medium and long-term Short-term outcomes should be attained within 1-3 months. They can be considered learning and may include increased awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations. Medium-term outcomes should be achievable within a 4–6-year framework and are the actions acquired as a result of the program. Examples would be behaviour change, practice, and decisions. Long-term outcomes include changes in conditions, including human, economic, civic, or environment. The final outcomes of the program are the fundamental intended or unintended changes occurring in the participants or the community as a result of the program activities within 7-10 years.

1.4 Research Aim

To conduct an evaluation of the practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS).

1.5 Project Objectives

1.5.1 Objectives: Programme impact

- ✓ To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their lives.
- ✓ To explore women's experiences of their family's involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their family.
- ✓ To explore service pathway and assessment process to establish if family needs are being met by the Child and Youth Programme Community.
- ✓ To evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these are translated into practice.
- ✓ To identify and explore the 'blocks' that present for children accessing and engaging with supports provided by the Child and Youth Programme Community.

1.5.2 Objectives: Situational and external context and environment

- ✓ To explore issues of 'timing' related to the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these impact on the journey of recovery for women and child(ren).
- ✓ To examine issues related to 'safety' and how these can impact on family engagement with the Child and Youth Programme Community.
- ✓ To assess the space that is currently available for the Child and Youth Programme Community from the perspective of children, women, and organisational staff.

1.5.3 Objectives: Post programme

- ✓ To explore the views of children and women who have completed the Child and Youth Programme Community in terms of level of supports provided and returning to the programme for further supports as required.

1.6 Summary

This section has provided an overview of MWRSS the Child and Youth Programme Community which it offers as a part of its services to women and children who are experiencing domestic violence and abuse. This section has also set out the aim, objectives and rationale behind the research commissioned by MWRSS.

Section 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This section provides a detailed overview of the research methods which were adopted to conduct the evaluation of the practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

2.2 Research Design

2.2.1 Case study research

Case study research, the methodology chosen for the research presented in this report, is a type of empirical inquiry that sets out to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in-depth, and within its real-world context (Thomas 2016, Yin 2018). When utilising case study research, it is imperative to define 'the case' and 'the context' at the outset of the study. In this research 'the case' is the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS and 'the context' is the community where the programme is delivered. The context is comprised of, and influenced by economic, social, political, and historical elements which are all considered in case study research. Although case study research can incorporate both qualitative and quantitative evidence, the case study in this research is built upon qualitative data sources since qualitative evidence is deemed most suitable for exploring the experiences of the participants who took part in, and who delivered, the programme under evaluation.

The primary attribute of case study research is that it uses multiple 'sources of evidence' including but not limited to; interviews, focus groups, direct observation, participant participation, archival records, documents, and physical artifacts. In case study research it is the designated 'units of analysis' that form the case, and for the evaluation presented in this report the **main units of analysis** are the interviews with the children and the interviews with the mothers. An overview of the various 'units of analysis' is presented below:

Main unit of analysis 1: Interviews were conducted with children using creative participatory techniques. A collage activity (for children aged 4 – 9 years) and a task-based drawing activity (for children aged 10 – 16 years) were used to capture the voices of the children who have engaged with the Child and Youth Programme

Community at MWRSS. The interviews accompanying the participatory techniques focused on the children's experiences of the programme, what meaning the programme has had for them and how it has impacted their lives.

Main unit of analysis 2: Interviews were conducted with mothers of children who have engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. Mothers were asked about their pathway to the programme and how the programme has impacted on the life of their family and specifically on their child.

In addition to the main 'units of analysis' there were also sub-units of analysis that contributed to the formation of the case, these are presented below:

Sub-unit of analysis 1: Interviews were conducted with practitioners and staff who deliver the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. These interviews focused on elements of timing of the programme, environment, communication, and the wider context of the programme.

Sub-unit of analysis 2: Interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders and personnel to explore the theoretical underpinnings of the programme and how these are translated into practice.

Sub-unit of analysis 3: An evaluation exercise called the 'Handprint Evaluation' was conducted with mothers of children who had taken part in the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The focus of the 'Handprint Evaluation' was on the programme itself, the support offered via the programme and areas of note for improvement within the programme.

Sub-unit of analysis 4: Fieldnotes were recorded in the form of direct observations collated by the researcher in the field. These fieldnotes focused on the facilities and amenities that are available to children who engage with the programme.

An overview of 'the case' and 'the context' inclusive of the main and sub-units of analysis are presented in Figure 1 on the next page.

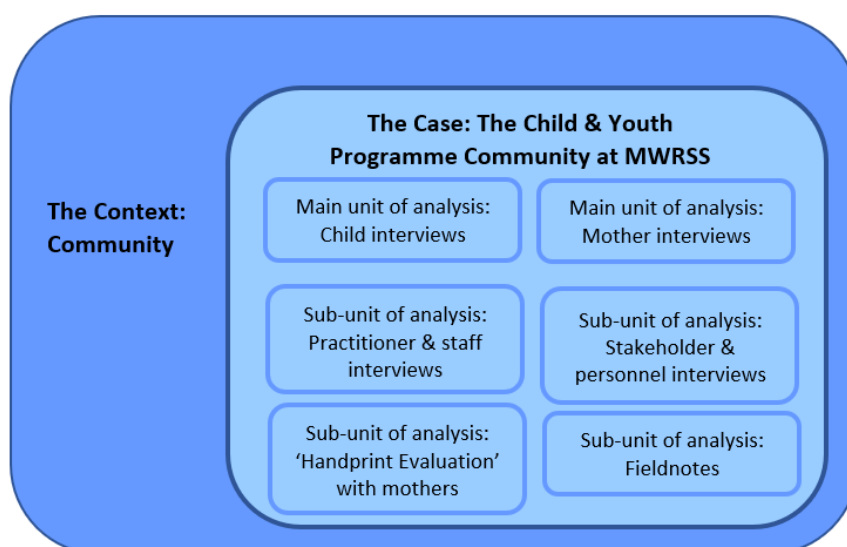


Figure 1: The Case and Context

2.2.2 The voice of the child

This research utilised a qualitative research approach in the form of case study research. Qualitative research approaches focus on understanding the meaning, experience, and perspectives of individuals or groups. Through the use of case study research, the team conducting the study were able to explore and examine the experiences of the children and women who have taken part in the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. In addition, case study research facilitated an evaluation of the impact of the programme including the situational and external context and environmental factors affecting the programme and its delivery.

Conducting research with children differs considerably to conducting research with adults (Hollywood 2020). The researchers adopted the Lundy Model of Child Participation (see Figure 2 on the next page) as the scaffolding for the planning and design of the data collection techniques for the child interviews. The model provides a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation as laid down in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1992). It incorporates four elements of space, voice, audience, and influence (Lundy 2007) when considering hearing the voices of children.



Figure 2: The Lundy Model of Child Participation

The data collection techniques designed and chosen for this research were art-based. Art-based techniques were deliberately chosen for the child interviews because such techniques are a recognised channel for children to express their views on a variety of topics (Hollywood 2020). The subject matter in this research is sensitive however the research team are well experienced in conducting research with children on sensitive topics. The team are also cognisant that art-based techniques and visual methods are particularly helpful for children to recall and explore both positive and negative life experiences (Kleine, Pearsons and Poveda 2016). This is an important consideration since participating children had experienced domestic violence and abuse, the art-based techniques were helpful to the children to express their feelings about their journey of recovery through the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

This evaluation was informed by the Ethical Review and Children's Research in Ireland (Felzmann et al 2012) and guided by the principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice. It was also underpinned by article 3.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), which states:

"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration".

The principles of beneficence, respect for human dignity and justice were all considered during the design and data collection phases of the evaluation. The study was reviewed by the Data Protection Officer, Trinity College Dublin and the Research Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Trinity College Dublin, approval from both was granted on the 14th of June 2024. All project team members completed Children's First training provided by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and GDPR training provided by Trinity College Dublin in accordance with EU child protection and research policies. Obtaining informed consent and assent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and ensuring that the children's rights to participation were respected, as set out in the Declaration of Helsinki, were all adhered to in this research.

2.4 Sample

The sample for the study was derived from a database of women and children who had utilised and engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS, the staff and practitioners who deliver the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS and stakeholders relevant to the service.

2.5 Recruitment

Children, mothers, staff, stakeholders, and practitioners were all recruited through MWRSS. During the recruitment phase of the study posters and flyers outlining the research were displayed at communal locations around the refuge where women, staff and practitioners would see them. 'Study Information Packs' consisting of; a letter of invitation, a consent form and a participant information leaflet were prepared and sent to the gatekeeper for distribution to women, staff, stakeholders, and practitioners who met the inclusion criteria. The gatekeeper advised potential participants to contact the researcher directly if they required additional information. If women, staff, stakeholders, and practitioners wished to participate, they were instructed to sign and return their consent form to a sealed consent form collection box located in the main office at the refuge.

2.6 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

2.6.1 Inclusion criteria

- Women and children who have engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.
- Children between the ages of 4 and 16 years who have engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.
- Staff, stakeholders, and practitioners who deliver the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

2.6.2 Exclusion criteria

- Women and children who have not engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.
- Children under the age of 4 years.
- Children over the age of 16 years.
- Women and children who do not speak English proficiently.
- Staff, stakeholders, and practitioners who do not deliver the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

2.7 Data Collection

Data collection with participating children comprised of individual face-to-face, audio recorded interviews which took place in the playroom at MWRSS. Data collection with participating mothers comprised of individual face-to-face, audio recorded interviews which also took place in the playroom at MWRSS. Data collection with participating staff, stakeholders and practitioners comprised of audio recorded, individual interviews that took place either face-to-face or over the phone, depending on what was most convenient for the participant. Table 2 on the next page provides an overview of the data collected for the research.

Table 2: Overview of data collected

Participant Category	Data Collected	Number of Participants
Child	'My Favourite Activity' 'The Wheel' Face-to-face interview	11 Boys (n=4) Girls (n=7)
Women	Handprint Evaluation Face-to-face interview	10
Staff, stakeholders, and practitioners	Face-to-face interview OR Telephone interview	8
Total number of participating individuals		29

2.7.1 Interviews with children

Interviews were conducted with children between the ages of 4 and 16 years who had taken part in the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The participating children would have availed of 1:1 sessions with the Child and Youth Support Worker, adolescent counselling, play therapy or group therapy as part of the programme. Children would have taken part in several different therapies on offer via the programme. The interviews with the children were conducted onsite at the refuge as this is where the children came to engage with some of the programme activities, the refuge playroom was familiar to all participating children. A child friendly information sheet was used to explain the study rationale to the children. Irrespective of parental consent the assent⁴ of the child was actively sought prior to each interview. Once the children were fully informed and agreed to take part in the research, they were asked to sign an assent form to confirm their understanding and agreement to participation.

For the child interviews two task-based drawing participatory techniques were used. One drawing activity called 'My Favourite Activity' was used for children aged 4 to 9 years. For this participatory technique children were asked to do a drawing or collage of the activity / engagement that they enjoyed most while participating in the Child and Youth Programme Community. Children were provided with paper and drawing and collage materials to complete their activity. The second participatory technique called 'The Wheel' (O'Connell et

⁴ The child's affirmative agreement to participate.

al 2015) was used for children aged 10 to 16 years. A picture of 'The Wheel' (Figure 3) was presented to the children and they were asked to think about the activities / engagements that they took part in for the Child and Youth Programme Community and what they liked and disliked about the activities / engagements. The children were also asked to think about what they would like to change about the Child and Youth Programme Community and about how their voice is heard within the programme. Children were given the option of writing on 'The Wheel' itself or creating their own drawing of 'The Wheel'.

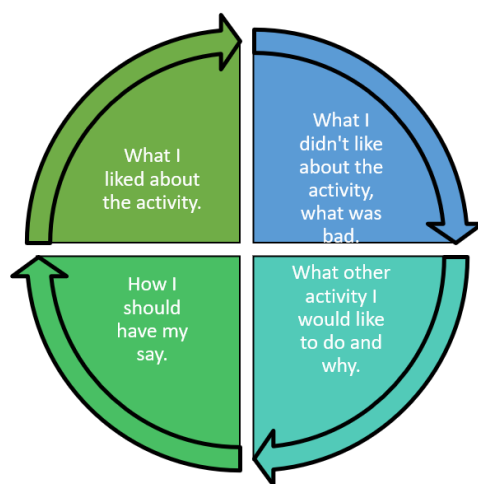


Figure 3: The Wheel Drawing Activity

After the drawings were complete and prior to the commencement of the interview, the researcher explained the 'traffic light' (Hollywood 2020) system to each of the participating children. The 'traffic light' system is a set of laminated traffic lights that is used for conducting interviews with children. The objective of the traffic light system is to provide the child with a non-verbal means of bringing the research interview to a standstill (red light) if they are asked a question that they do not wish to answer. The child can then advance on to the next question (green light) when they are ready to proceed with the next interview question. When conducting research with children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse there is always the potential for sensitive issues to emerge therefore it was important that the children have a nonverbal means of opting to skip any questions that they do not want to answer. The inclusion of the 'traffic light system' adds to the study's credibility because it ensured that children only answered the questions that they want to answer and want to talk about. The inclusion of this system also ensured that children were not coerced into

answering questions that they did not want to answer or discuss topics that they did not want to talk about. The interviews were audio recorded and the focus of the interviews was on the children's experiences of the Child and Youth Programme Community, what meaning the programme had for them and how it impacted their journey of recovery. In total, 11 children took part in the research.

2.7.2 Interviews with mothers

Interviews with the children's mothers were conducted face to face and audio recorded. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and the interview guide was developed following consultation with the child and youth team. The focus of the interviews with the mothers was on their experience of access to and having their child take part in the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. Mothers were asked about how the programme impacted on the life of their family and specifically on their child. Mothers were also asked about elements of timing of the programme, consent, communication, and their experience of the wider context of the programme. At the end of the interview the mothers a short one-page evaluation called the 'Handprint Evaluation' (Appendix 2) was given to each mother to complete. The 'Handprint Evaluation' sheet was presented in plain English (in line with NALA⁵ guidelines) and focused on the Child and Youth Programme Community.

2.7.3 Staff, stakeholder and practitioner interviews

Interviews with staff, stakeholders and practitioners took place either face-to-face or via telephone depending on what was most convenient for the participant. All interviews were audio recorded and followed a semi-structured interview guide which was developed following consultation with the child and youth team. The focus of the interview schedule was on programme pathway, service provision, situational and external context and engagement of families post programme.

⁵ National Adult Literacy Agency www.nala.ie

2.7.4 Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes in the form of direct observations were collated by the researcher in the field. The fieldnotes focused on the facilities and amenities that are available to children who engage with the Child and Youth Programme Community.

2.8 Data Management

The data gathered was managed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo™ (version 20) the computerised qualitative data analysis software produced by QSR International. All data sources including the child artwork, child interview audio, mother interview audio, one-page evaluations, and staff, stakeholder and practitioner interview audio was all imported into an NVivo software file. The use of NVivo is significant in this research as it is a pragmatic means of maintaining an audit trail which is an essential component of case study research (Bergin 2011). The maintenance of an audit trail is a central means of developing confirmability within a qualitative research study.

2.9 Data Analysis

The analysis of data in case study research can be achieved in several different ways since analytic procedures within case study research have not been 'set in stone' or prescribed. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-step approach to thematic analysis was the chosen analytical strategy for this case study research since all the data gathered was qualitative in nature. Table 3 on the next page provides a detailed outline of the six-step approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012).

Table 3: Six-step approach to thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2012)

Six-step approach to thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2012)	
Step 1: Familiarisation with the data	Involves the researcher becoming completely immersed in the data by listening and relistening to the audio. Initial analytical observations are noted.
Step 2: Generate initial codes	This is the commencement of the systematic analysis of data through coding. Codes, as building blocks of analysis, identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that may be relevant to the evaluation.
Step 3: Searching for themes	A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the evaluation and represents a patterned response or meaning within the data set.
Step 4: Reviewing potential themes	Developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and the entire data set. Essentially this is a quality check of potential themes against the data set.
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	The researcher defines the theme and states clearly, what is unique about the theme. This phase requires deep analytical work, the crucial shaping-up of the analysis into specific themes.
Step 6: Generating the report	Within qualitative research, writing and analysis are interwoven activities. The purpose of the report is to produce a compelling story of about the data based on the analysis.

2.10 Summary

This section has provided a detailed account of the research methods that were employed to conduct the evaluation of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. It offered a thorough description of the study design and procedures, recruitment, ethical considerations, recruitment, data collection and management associated with the study.

Section 3: Findings

3.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings from the study which set out to evaluate the practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS). When reporting on 'the case' in case study research the aim is to tell the story of the evolution, development, and experience of the case of interest. In this research 'the case' is the Child and Youth Programme Community and 'the context' is the community where the programme is delivered as detailed in Section 2. The reporting of findings in case study research has been described by Yin (2018) as 'composing' and this he attributes to the fact that case study research does not follow any specified conventional format. The case in this research is a single case, comprising of two main units of analysis and four sub-units of analysis. The units of analysis and data sources have been presented and explained in Section 2. The findings of this research are organised under three themes which were formed following a complex triangulated analysis of the various data sources. In line with the final step of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) each theme has been given a name and a description. An overview of the themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Safe, Supportive and Therapeutic Space	A Safe Space Therapeutic Alliance
Theme 2: Programme Access and Delivery	Access and Pathways Programme Structure
Theme 3: Programme Impact and Enhancement	Programme Benefits and Impact Programme Enhancement

3.2 Theme 1: Safe, Supportive and Therapeutic Space

This theme represents how the Child and Youth Programme Community at the MWRSS provides a safe, supportive, confidential, and nurturing environment where children affected by domestic violence and abuse feel that they can be themselves and freely express and process their emotions. This is characterised by two key elements: the creation of a safe space and the development of strong therapeutic alliances between the children and the Child and Youth Support Worker at MWRSS. The physical and emotional safety created by the Child and Youth Programme Community allows children to feel safe enough so that they can express how they feel without the fear of judgement or pressure, and this is directly supported by the creative approaches used within the programme. The creative approaches used with children in the programme reinforce confidentiality and a feeling of safety for the participating children. The feeling of safety is enhanced by the strong therapeutic relationships that are fostered and developed between participating children and the Child and Youth Support Worker who provides understanding and non-judgemental attentive listening that differs from family support.

Children who engage with the programme feel that they can truly be themselves which enables them to process their emotions at their own pace and to speak openly about their experiences without the worry of burdening family members. The combination of a safe, secure environment and trusted therapeutic relationships with the Child and Youth Support Worker creates a unique, safe space where children can begin to make sense of their experiences with domestic violence and abuse. Furthermore, children feel especially supported by professionals who not just understand their journey but who also respect their individual needs. The data sources which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the table derived from the NVivo study database (Appendix 3).

3.2.1 A Safe Space

The Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS strives to help children process and articulate feelings and experiences related to domestic violence and hurting at home. It also gives children the skills to enhance their ability to cope and manage stress, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and anger. This sub-theme represents how the Child and Youth Programme

Community is viewed as a critical, safe space where children affected by domestic violence and abuse can express themselves freely and begin to process their experiences. This sub-theme focuses on how the safe space created via the programme provides children with essential emotional safety and support.

Children interviewed voiced how the programme offered an environment where they feel safe to express and be themselves. Children highlighted the freedom to be honest as a critical element of the programme. This is evident in the below interview excerpts:

Child: *Like I just feel safe in general to talk just to come here [scheduled session in playroom], if I'm stressed and like this just made me feel safe.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

Child: *It [session with CSW] was just one-on-one, and I could just talk about anything.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G14)

Being able to speak honestly was emphasised by the children as being a core element of the programme which they enjoyed and specifically not having to 'put on an act' as explained in the below excerpts:

Researcher: *So, would it be fair to say then that you felt that you could be honest about how you were feeling?*

Child: *Yeah, yeah. 100%.*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

Child: *You know the way sometimes you have to put on an act when you are meeting someone ... you don't have to [do that] in here because there's no one else in here other than you and whoever your therapist is.*

Boy, 16 years old (F6_B_14)

The very welcome feeling of safety, not having to put on an act and feeling able to be true to oneself is clear in this child's drawing of 'the wheel' as shown on the next page.

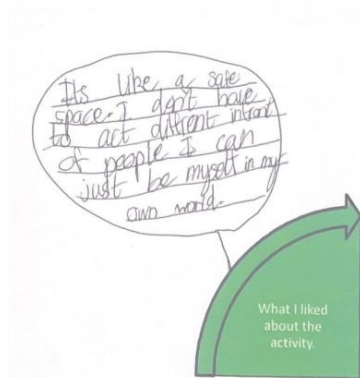


Figure 4: The Wheel drawing activity by boy, 14 years old (F6_B_14)

The establishment of the sense of safety for children on the programme is greatly facilitated by the commitment to confidentiality which is embedded into the programme. Children interviewed were knowledgeable regarding confidentiality and confident that what they shared during scheduled sessions would not be divulged with anyone else as shown in the below excerpts:

Child: *It's a place where whatever you say, she [Child and Youth Support Worker] keeps it there, and it's just a nice place to let out your feelings.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

The importance of having a "safe person" in their support worker was also emphasised, which added to the child's sense of safety and privacy and allowed children the safety and freedom to explore their emotions.

Child: *You know she's [Child and Youth Support Worker] a real safe person; it's like you can tell her everything.*

Girl, 12 years old (F3_G_12)

The programme's methods use creative and practical techniques for establishing safe space for children to speak freely and to express their emotions regarding domestic violence and abuse. This creative approach is noteworthy since in addition to creating safe space for children to talk about how they feel it also creates a focus on confidentiality which children require to be able to talk about this difficult issue in their lives. One child explained their experience of this technique:

Child: *We did this thing, and we had like a treasure box, so at the start of the day we'd open it and then at the end of the day we'd close it, and then you had to stop talking. So, you don't say anything when the treasure box is closed.*

Boy, 12 years old (F4_B_12)

The Child and Youth Programme Community is child centred and child lead. This was evident throughout the interviews with the children specifically as children explained how they did not have to talk about their feelings if they did not want to, they could just enjoy some therapeutic play time as explained below:

Child: *Sometimes you didn't need to talk and if you were feeling sad ... you could just come in and just play.*

Boy, 14 years old (F6_B_14)

The programme operates at the pace of the individual child ensuring to meet their needs with the core aim of helping children to process the complex emotions associated with the experience of domestic violence and abuse. The child led nature of the programme is evident below:

Child: *Anna⁶ always said if you want to talk, I'm here, but if you don't want to talk you don't need to.*

Boy, 12 years old (F4_B_12)

Furthermore, the programme philosophy is based on the terms of the child which is outlined in the below excerpt:

Child: *Sometimes like I would come in and I'd be like I'm not ready to talk about that yet, but I have sessions left so I'm just going to do my own thing in this one.*

Boy aged 14 years (F6_B_14)

⁶ * The pseudonym Anna will be used throughout this document as the name of the Child and Youth Support Worker

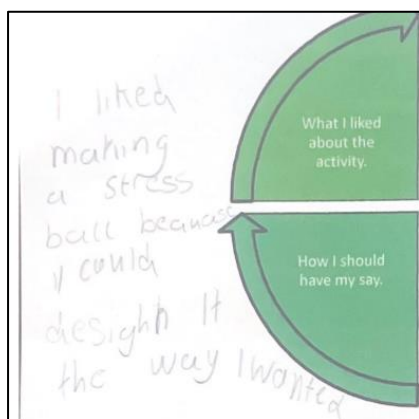


Figure 5: The Wheel drawing activity by girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

The programme helps children to deal with complex emotions relating to their experience of domestic violence and abuse. It is the children themselves who notably guide the approach to communication. Children interviewed expressed the freedom to engage with the programme completely on their terms and with the absence of pressure which is particularly significant and helpful to the children.

Many of the children expressed a preference to attend sessions for the Child and Youth Programme Community on site in the playroom as this contributed to a feeling of safety for them as explained:

Child: *I prefer them [sessions] here [on site in the playroom] because it's real like colourful and it's real like homely so it's really nice ... I feel more safe here [in the playroom], because it like, just makes me very happy coming here.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

Another child acknowledged that home was her happy place and coming to the playroom to explore her feelings about domestic violence and abuse allowed her to protect that space.

Researcher: *Do you think it would have been more difficult if it was somewhere like at home or somewhere in a personal space?*

Child: *Yeah, I think so, because ... I feel like ... if it was my home space I don't want it in my happy place. That's [home] my happy place and like you know.*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

Findings indicate that the absence of judgment is a critical element of creating a safe space for children within the Child and Youth Programme Community. Children repeatedly spoke about feeling accepted without judgement as highlighted below:

Child: *Since I came here, I never felt judged by Anna*, like not once.*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

Another child had this to share:

Child: *Anna* was like really understanding and sweet and kind so she like didn't judge me or anything or say anything.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

The importance of not feeling judged is also evident in the below segment (Figure 6) from 'The Wheel' drawing.



Figure 6: The Wheel drawing activity by girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

The impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community extends beyond what happens during the scheduled sessions with the individual children. It is clear from the findings that the programme provides a broader sense of safety, security and support as poignantly observed by this child:

Child: *Children are afraid to speak up in general. I have a lot of mates that I have tried talking to... They don't speak up about it [domestic violence and abuse].*

Boy, 14 years old (F6_B_14)

The importance of having a safe space where children affected by domestic violence and abuse can freely express themselves and process their experiences was echoed by many of the stakeholder participants. Stakeholders recognise and acknowledge the significance of providing a safe space for children where they feel valued, listened to and not judged so that they can explore their feelings and begin to rebuild their lives. Stakeholders are also mindful that children need specialist support that is exclusively for them and independent of their mother, one stakeholder explained:

Stakeholder: *It's just really important that the children feel valued and feel like they have a safe space, there's a place to go to ... someone that's kind of just for them, on their side.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Another stakeholder acknowledged how the Child and Youth Programme Community helps children to feel safe and also helps them to begin to rebuild their life after experiencing domestic violence and abuse, they had this to say:

Stakeholder: *So, it's nice that they [children] have the space they can go where, you know there's no judgement, there's just compassion and just guidance of how to get back on their feet again and to build a better life for themselves and their families.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

This stakeholder also emphasised how the provision of safe space enables children to engage in deeper therapeutic work:

Stakeholder: *We'd be there to help them, just to make sense of it and put words to these experiences that can be almost too big for such young children to make sense of.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of making the refuge a safe place for children to receive therapy. Ensuring the safety of children in the playroom at the refuge went beyond providing a secure environment for self-expression; it also involved risk assessment and protecting children from any potential risks associated with being there.

Stakeholder: *And the biggest thing for us is that they're in a safe place to engage. So you know ... the perpetrator is no longer living in the home. And that if there is access going on that we would kind of risk assess and make sure you know is it safe for a child to kind of come in and talk about their experiences of domestic violence.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

3.2.2 Therapeutic Alliance

This sub-theme showcases how the Child and Youth Programme Community fosters a strong, long-lasting therapeutic alliance between the Child and Youth Support Worker and the child thus creating trusting relationships independent of family support. Through the voices of

children, parents, and stakeholders, findings reveal how these relationships provided crucial support for children experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

The foundation of a therapeutic alliance is built on a genuine, comfortable and natural connection between the Child and Youth Support Worker and the child. The evidence from the child interviews demonstrates this in several ways. One child detailed how she felt that she 'clicked' with her Child and Youth Support Worker and how much it made her feel comfortable and able to talk, she had this to say:

Child: *I remember me and Anna* clicked really well ... yeah, she made me feel really comfortable. She made it very easy to feel like I can say what I want to say, you know, she's so nice, like she just, we just get on so well and like she's just so nice whenever I'm here.*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

Another child remarked how the tone of voice used by their Child and Youth Support Worker made her feel comfortable and cared for:

Child: *It was just the way she [Child and Youth Support Worker] was like speaking and she wasn't like speaking like she didn't care or anything.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Findings indicate that the Child and Youth Support Worker and their relationship with the child is absolutely crucial to the programme and its success. One child highlighted the significance of their role in his 'The Wheel' drawing where he wrote the name of his Child and Youth Support Worker to depict the best thing about the programme. See drawing (Figure 7) below.



Figure 7: The Wheel drawing activity by boy, 12 years old (F4_B_12)

The use of effective communication techniques by the Child and Youth Support Worker for the activities used in the programme strengthens the natural rapport developed by the Child and Youth Support Worker and the individual child. Findings indicate that the Child and Youth Support Worker who organises and runs the Child and Youth Programme Community is a highly skilled professional. The Child and Youth Support Worker utilises an informal, friendly and non-judgemental approach to programme delivery and incorporates this into the therapeutic techniques used for the programme. This is particularly effective for participating children since potential barriers can be avoided. One child explained the informal approach of the Child and Youth Support Worker and how it made them feel, they had this to say:

Child: *Not very serious, like, sit down now, and we'll talk about how you feel; it was more just laid-back, like talking about whatever you want to talk about....that made it very easy to feel like I can say what I want to say, you know .*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

The importance of listening emerged as an essential component of building therapeutic relationships within the programme. Children emphasised how valued they felt when the Child and Youth Support Worker actively listened to them and to what they had to say. Children recognise that the listening is active and not just passive as it leads to tangible support and check-ins at later stages in the therapy process. Children also voiced the impact of being heard. They had this to say:

Child: *Yeah, just she [Child and Youth Support Worker] listens, and I like when she listens.*

Researcher: *How does it make you feel when you feel you have been listened to?*

Child: *It makes me feel, it's, I don't really know how to describe it just makes me feel better.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

Findings clearly showcase that children who take part in the Child and Youth Programme Community feel listened to, one child provided this explanation:

Researcher: *Do you feel that people here listen to what you have to say?*

Child: *Oh absolutely. Like I'd say to Anna* I think I need help with this certain person, I don't like what they are doing. Or there's someone else involved, and she [Anna*] would make sure stuff gets done and she would never leave*

you without knowing that everything was okay. You know when you come here, you know something is going to be done about it.

Girl, 12 years old (F3_G_12)

Follow up check ins were also highlighted as being important:

Researcher: *Is there anything that you can think of that made you feel that your voice is heard?*

Child: *Well yeah, like in maybe the next session they [Child and Youth Support Worker] would go over, like able to ask questions on it a few weeks later, have a little check up on it and see how it's going.*

Boy, 15 years old (F8_B_15)

The depth and long-lasting connection between the children and the Child and Youth Support Worker involved in the Child and Youth Programme Community is evident in the children's interviews where the children disclosed strong positive feelings. Children explained how much they looked forward to their scheduled sessions, how much they enjoyed the sessions and how they felt that their connection with their Child and Youth Support Worker was a long-term connection and not just a short-term thing. The below interview excerpts showcase the strength of support felt by the children who engaged with the programme:

Child: *I have loved every minute of being here with Anna*.*

Girl, 12 years old (F3_G_12)

Child: *I'd looked forward to it [scheduled session] so I could tell her [Child and Youth Support Worker] everything about the week.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Child: *She [Child and Youth Support Worker] said that as I got older, I'm welcome to come back.*

Girl, 16 years old (F1_G_14)

Findings indicate that the therapeutic relationship that develops between the children and the Child and Youth Support Worker during the programme offers a unique, confidential and separate space for the children to process their emotions. This is important since children have indicated that they want and need support outside of their own family as explained by a child on the next page:

Researcher: *If you were to try and describe to somebody how it [the Child and Youth Programme Community] has been helpful, how would you describe it?*

Child: *Like at the start with when I first started, I did talk to my mam, but I still wanted a bit more and when I came here it made me feel happier like. I just felt better to talk.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

Access to support outside of the family, confidential independent professional support, is both wanted and needed by the children as shown in the below interview excerpt.

Child: *I just feel like it's better to speak with, like it's obviously good to speak with your mam but just better to speak with someone that won't say anything.*

Boy, 14 years old (F6_B_14)

It is clear that the Child and Youth Programme Community provides much needed professional support to the children to take part in the programme.

Child: *I like talking to someone, like Anna* helped me a lot because I feel like she could understand me more than my family, if I told my mam about something I feel like she wouldn't understand as much as Anna*.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

Children who participated in the programme recognise the significance of having a separate space to process their feelings independently. Children are also aware that other family members who share their experience of domestic violence and abuse may process their experiences very differently.

Child: *Because my family members went through the same thing as me, but they feel different on how they feel about it compared to how I feel about it.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Having the opportunity to confide in a professional via the programme is valuable to the children as many children are reluctant to confide in their mother for fear of causing further distress to then in what is an already distressing situation.

Child: *If I felt uncomfortable like something that would make me anxious, I knew I wanted to talk about it, but it was hard to. Like if you talk about something that is hard to talk about with your mam, you don't want it to be on your mam's mind for ages.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

This perspective was also echoed by mothers who recognise their limitations and the need for external professional help when it comes to supporting their children through experiences of domestic violence and abuse.

Mother: *It was the need to reassure them, although I reassured them all the time ... "don't be worried about me, I'm fine". They were still worried. So, I knew they needed professional help, basically. My help and telling them that "I'm going to be okay don't worry", I know it wasn't enough. So, I knew they were struggling with that.*

Mother (F6_M)

Mother: *I know I'm explaining things, but I knew they were hiding a lot from me.*

Mother (F6_M)

Mother: *I think they could talk to me about it but just I feel like they needed somebody more, somebody else to listen ... I think sometimes they think I don't understand.*

Mother (F1_M)

Many of the participating mothers also acknowledged the child's need for an independent therapeutic alliance that offers a separate space for their children to process their feelings about domestic violence and abuse.

Mother: *It's different for them to talk with me and with somebody from outside. So, they were pushing me actually mam, mam, mam I want to come back, I want to come back [to the playroom for scheduled session on the programme].*

Mother (F5_M)

Mother: *you are obviously doing your best but there's only so much you can say, only so much positives you can bring.*

Mother (F8_M)

Children having access to support outside of the family and independent of their mother was highlighted by stakeholders as being of considerable worth for a variety of reasons. Stakeholders believe that there is unique value associated with providing independent therapeutic support to children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse, and this is a source of indirect support to mothers also.

Stakeholder: *It might be just a break away for mam, to have the one-on-one*

time so that somebody else is listening to them, that it's not just them and mam.

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

Stakeholder: *It's amazing that the children have a space to come to, that is independent of mam's supports.*

Stakeholder (Stk_8)

Stakeholders also acknowledged the child's need to have an alliance that allowed for complete emotional honesty when processing difficult feelings about domestic violence and abuse without the feeling of any potential consequences.

Stakeholder: *But you know that's their space to discuss their emotions and that they're not being disloyal.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Stakeholder: *For a child to have a space to say I feel really angry, or I feel really upset or I'm annoyed at my mam and that it's ok to say and to share that without any repercussions.*

Stakeholder (Stk_8)

3.3 Theme 2: Programme Access and Delivery

This theme explores the various access pathways to the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS, highlighting its structure and delivery from the perspectives of children, mothers, and stakeholders. It also reveals the reasons children accessed the programme, such as trauma symptoms, mental health concerns, difficulty processing complex family dynamics, exposure to unsafe family situations, and problems with emotional expression and communication.

Findings show that access to the programme is of significant value for children who experience domestic violence and abuse in their lives. Access involves a complex relationship of pathways, facilitating factors but also barriers which collectively impact children's ability to receive support. Mothers and stakeholders view the multi-faceted referral system as vital since it provides immediate access to services especially for families in crisis. Furthermore, the multifaceted referral system works towards reducing barriers for professionals and families since there are multiple entry points for support. The data sources which contributed

to the development of this theme can be viewed in the table derived from the NVivo study database (Appendix 3).

3.3.1 Access and Pathways

Findings show that all children interviewed accessed the Child and Youth Programme Community because of issues associated with experiencing domestic violence and abuse and due to the need for support regarding these experiences. The impact of this experience on children manifests differently in individual children. One mother described the physical problems that her child experienced because of stress associated with domestic violence and abuse in their family, she had this to say:

Mother: [name of child] was kind of complaining of stomach pain and he couldn't sleep, and he was just not himself and I knew he needed some sort of intervention. He was having a lot of constipation and a lot of bowel [problems], but they [medical professionals] said it was all stress related.

Mother (F4_M)

For other children the experience of domestic violence and abuse in their family was the source of great emotional upset, an upset which kept them awake at night.

Mother: I could hear [name of child] crying himself to sleep at night; obviously the person I was with wasn't a very nice man.

Mother (F6_M)

Some mother discussed the emotional distress, expressions of unhappiness, dark thoughts and signs of anxiety that their children expressed as a result of experiencing domestic violence and abuse in the family.

Mother: I think inside he [child] was struggling. He was saying "I don't feel happy, I don't like myself", he was saying a few dark things that I didn't like.

Mother (F6_M)

Mother: She [daughter] shuts down, like completely shuts down. She'd be very numb ... you'd do everything like trying to comfort her but you don't even know what you are comforting because there's no emotion, it's just pure shut down not being able to deal with her feelings. And she just doesn't know how to cope with them.

Mother (F7_M)

Many of the mothers interviewed spoke about the challenges associated with perpetrators speaking badly of them to their children. Complex family dynamics like this is the source of confusion for children and children feel conflicted and struggle with divided loyalties between parents and exposure to parental manipulation.

Mother: *She [daughter] didn't want to be listening to her dad talking negatively about me. But obviously she didn't want to say that to him, so then I felt the need to say it to him but then as a result of that he felt that she had in some way gone behind his back.*

Mother (F2_M)

Perpetrator manipulation was cited as problematic on several occasions during the interviews with the mothers. Manipulation directed towards children causing fear and acting as a barrier for children to access the support that they need.

Mother: *He [child] was so sick for a couple of weeks one particular time, and it was because [his father] was manipulating him saying "sure come with me, it's the last time you'll see me. Because I could be in the graveyard.*

Mother (F4_M)

The catalyst for seeking help and support from the refuge came as a result of reaching a crisis point with some situations involving Tusla⁷ and one child disclosing issues at home to his teacher in school who responded appropriately.

Mother: *My husband wouldn't allow [Child] to come with me, and [Child] went to school one day and he said [to his teacher in school] "I'm afraid to go home to my dad". So that's when it kicked off and Tusla and everything and I just thought no I need to do something here.*

Mother (F6_M)

Feeling emotionally drained and overwhelmed motivated some mothers to seek support for their children since they did not feel able to provide the support that they knew their child needed as explained on the next page:

⁷ Tusla: The Child and Family Agency

Mother: *More times I was crying that I wasn't fit to help him [son] with his emotions because I was so broken too so I just felt I can't help this child like he needs somebody, he needs someone professional as well.*

Mother (F4_M)

While another mother expressed gender-specific concerns, with particular trepidation noted for her sons and the importance of them knowing about normal and non-normal behaviour and attitudes towards women and about domestic violence and abuse. She had this to say:

Mother: *That domestic violence lens is very important too because I have all boys. So, for me it's very important that they understand what's normal and what's not normal [behaviour within the family].*

Mother (F4_M)

For the participating stakeholders many spoke about the importance of children accessing support services to help them to process and deal with the trauma that they have experienced as a result of domestic violence and abuse in their lives. Several stakeholders specifically noted the behavioural challenges and complex emotions experienced by children and how confusing this can be for them.

Stakeholder: *Sometimes they [children] can come and they can have a lot of kind of behavioural issues, so they might be expressing a lot of anger, other times it can be the total opposite and they can be very withdrawn.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

Stakeholder: *I would have worked with families and there'd be certain children where you could see like they were struggling.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

As previously highlighted, all of the children who engaged with the Child and Youth Programme Community did so because of domestic violence and abuse. Many of the children would have experience of feeling unsafe as a direct result of the abuse. Findings show that taking part in the programme is a source of safety and security for children. When children take part in the Child and Youth Programme Community, they are enabled to feel both safe and secure which is a basic primary human need.

Researcher: *So, you came in here [to scheduled session in the refuge] feeling*

sad because you felt unsafe?

Child: Yeah, in my dads.

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

The mother of one child spoke about the incidences which caused her children to feel unsafe and how this increased their need for support and access to the programme, she had this to say:

Mother: *There was issues with her dad around safety and security and alcoholism and various things that came to light ... issues around drinking and drink driving, and you know not feeling safe.*

Mother (F3_M)

Findings reveal multiple referral pathways as key entry points to the Child and Youth Programme Community. Mothers learned about the programme and were referred through various channels including when they sought help from An Garda Síochána (Irish police), when they contacted Women's Aid⁸ and when they spent time staying in the refuge emergency accommodation.

Mother: *I had to get a restraining order for my ex, and the Garda on the phone told me about it [Child and Youth Programme Community].*

Mother (F1_M)

Mother: *I rang Women's Aid on the helpline. And yeah, I was put in contact with this centre here [refuge].*

Mother (F2_M)

Stakeholder: *It could be that family have been in the refuge for however long and then they're moving out of the refuge, and we might put the referral into the Child and Youth Programme Community so we can continue that support for the family.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

For many women the refuge helpline, which operates 24 hours a day 365 days a year, provides crucial and immediate support to women and children who are impacted by domestic violence and abuse. When women contact the refuge helpline, they are able to access much

⁸ Women's Aid is a national, feminist organisation working to prevent and address the impact of domestic violence and abuse since 1974.

needed services for themselves and also for their children. Findings show that this is an efficient and easy access point for women in need with a direct referral pathway for therapy for their children.

Stakeholder: *Or they [women] are ringing for support for themselves, and it's identified that there are children there who also may be in need. So, they would be referred in that way.*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

Stakeholder: *There's the helpline. So, the mum right ring on the helpline and through conversation there it might come up that you know the children are struggling at the moment, and mum would like supports for them.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Women can also phone the helpline and ask directly for help for their children.

Stakeholder: *And women can self-refer, just to say that as well. So, if they pick up the phone and they want to speak to one of us that's no problem.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

The access pathway point for professionals to the Child and Youth Programme Community currently on offer from the refuge is in the form of their online referral system. Professionals such as social workers can navigate to the refuge home website, scan the QR⁹ code and make a referral. Several stakeholders spoke encouragingly about this referral pathway which they believe streamlines and enhances programme accessibility. Stakeholders also noted that this referral pathway system has directly improved interagency links, increased the reach of the service and they consider that more children are referred to the Child and Youth Programme Community as a result of this particular pathway access point. Below stakeholders describe how more social workers are making referrals because of the online QR code system:

Stakeholder: *You know where we're seeing a lot more referrals now from social workers.*

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

Stakeholder: *We recently have an online referral form for external agencies, and that's been really utilised so far, which is great, especially by social work.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

⁹ QR code is a quick response code

The below stakeholders highlight the easy accessibility and efficiency of the online referral system.

Stakeholder: *It's easy; there's a link, click [on] it, you know, so that say the likes of social workers or doctors can just scan a code and they can refer people into Anna* that way.*

Stakeholder (Stk_4)

Stakeholder: *Social workers don't have the time to be ringing, now it's so much easier for the and therefore more children are reached and therefore more children will benefit from the programme.*

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

Additional access pathways include more complex and time intensive processes such as internal referrals, external agency referrals, coordination with outreach services and interagency collaborations, all of which work together as shown in the interview excerpts on the next page.

Stakeholder: *If they [child] were in refuge with us, then we would refer them on to Anna* in a few months' time.*

Stakeholder (Stk_4)

Stakeholder: *Our outreach services, if they're out in court dealing with the mam and mam mentions that they have children, they're kind of told what supports are available there for the children.*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

Stakeholder: *It's great to have that connection made with social workers as well because obviously they're dealing with domestic violence every day. So even for them to know that we're here, we can support the cases too.*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

The mothers interviewed praised the very quick response they received from the refuge when they made contact to seek help for their children. Mothers were informed about the Child and Youth Programme Community and told that the programme could be accessed while remaining in the community. Mothers felt that they were listened to by the staff at MWRSS on the helpline regarding the concerns that they had for their children. Mothers felt that the help they were seeking became available to them very quickly, much quicker than they had expected. This high-level responsiveness is significant because it is in contrast with other services such as health care services where it is widespread practice to be put on a waiting

list. Moreover, this high-level responsiveness matches the urgency of family need and demonstrates a firm understanding of the crisis experienced by families impacted by domestic violence and abuse. The below interview and Handprint Evaluation excerpts on the next page highlight the responsiveness of the service.

Researcher: *Did you find it [access to the Child and Youth Programme Community] an easy process?*

Mother: *A million percent, it was just a phone call and speaking to someone.*

Mother (F6_M)

Mother: *The lady [on refuge helpline] was very helpful, they straight away asked me when I can come in [to discuss child starting the programme], the organisation is so quick here, it is yes.*

Mother (F6_M)

Think about the Children's Community Programme at MWRSS and answer the following:

The thumb (1): something good, something I really liked about the programme

Very easy access

Figure 8: Handprint Evaluation by mother (F6_M)

The quick response of the service is particularly evident in the below interview excerpts:

Mother: *when I was looking for therapy [for my children], within a month maybe six weeks [I had access] and then the second time I'd say within four weeks. You kind of felt that once you reached out to the service, that you know somebody had listened and they were actually working on it. You didn't feel like you were on a list and just waiting and then the momentum is gone, and you know you really felt that it was dealt with there and then.*

Mother (F2_M)

Mother: *She [Child and Youth Support Worker] organised that one of the play therapists contact me, and it happened fairly quickly, I would say. It was all within four to six weeks, so I was very lucky. It was quite a quick thing.*

Mother (F2_M)

Findings have uncovered the critical issue of post-separation abuse in the form of denial or resistance of consent from fathers as a significant barrier to accessing the Child and Youth Programme Community at the MWRSS. The complex issue of refusal or resistance to parental consent for access to therapy from fathers creates many challenges and barriers for families trying to access support. Consent from a child's father for programme participation is required if the father has visitation access to their children. Some of the mothers interviewed stated that their child's father did not believe that their child needed therapy to help process their experiences resulting from domestic violence and abuse, one mother explained:

Mother: *Because you know dad [the child's father] would be like "why do you need counselling? There's nothing wrong with you". I used to be saying "why wouldn't you sign counselling forms for your children. They need it like".*

Mother (F6_M)

In other families' children who had commenced the programme had to disengage due to fathers not agreeing to their child receiving support via the Child and Youth Programme Community as outlined below.

Mother: *There was a problem with the dad ... so like there was danger because yes, he [the child] was coming here [to the refuge for the programme], and so we need to stop [Therapy].*

Mother (F5_M)

For one mother, the impact of the father's refusal to give consent was profound and resulted in one of her children being denied access to the service entirely.

Mother: *For the second child they were never able to access this service because of that [consent], the father blocked him using the service. His father rang the refuge, he said basically he wasn't going to give consent, even though the application was made and the therapy approved. They [Child and Youth Team] just thought with the situation it was better off not to enrol him in something his father could turn up on the doorstep, that kind of uncertainty.*

Mother (F8_M)

This created a very difficult and emotionally challenging situation for the mother who was doing her best to seek help and support for her children in their recovery from domestic violence and abuse.

Mother: *So, it's very, very, it's a very disheartening and difficult situation to be in when your children are your most precious commodities.*

Mother (F8_M)

For other children, the father's resistance to providing consent resulted in lengthy delays in accessing play therapy which is a recognised worthwhile therapy for children who have experienced trauma in their lives.

Mother: *I had to get his [fathers] signature for play therapy, and he wouldn't give it for months. So [Child] had to wait and wait.*

Mother (F4_M)

Findings indicate that some children are being manipulated in the post separation period by their father's by being told that they don't need support and should not engage with the Child and Youth Programme Community. This creates feelings of confusion for children and also prevents children from accessing a service that potentially could be very beneficial for them. One child explains how her father tried to persuade her not to take part in the programme.

Child: *Because like my dad had said to me that I don't need therapy and that I shouldn't be going to it. So, I just decided not to go.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Findings indicate that many mothers experience additional post separation abuse when they try to get support for their children via the programme. When mothers ask their former partner to sign the consent form for programme participation for their child, they report being subjected to verbal abuse and finding themselves in a position where they are experiencing fear. Currently mothers have no option but to ask their child's father to sign the consent form for the child to access the services. One mother who was returning to the service seeking support for domestic violence and abuse explains her experience of pursuing consent.

Mother: *This time I had to get the signature, but he was not happy. I got the signature for [Child 1] and [Child 2], but I think he thought he was signing for one. If I went back with a piece of paper for consent again, I don't think he would sign it this time. And he gave me a hard time [about asking for the signature].*

Mother (F8_M)

The difficulty about asking for consent from perpetrators was reported by several mothers.

Mother: *He [father] was not happy about it and made that very clear. He used not nice language to describe the service. He wasn't happy about it but did it [signed the form].*

Mother (F3_M)

Although not related to the Child and Youth Programme Community one mother reported having to make a very significant sacrifice to secure consent so that she could initiate a private therapy service for her child. This highlights the lengths some mothers must through to get support for their children. She explains:

Mother: *[to get consent signed] For the private therapy, I had to drop a protection order.*

Mother (F7_M)

Participating stakeholders also spoke about the challenges associated with consent. One stakeholder noted that the refuge is a protective factor for children who experience domestic violence and abuse when it comes to accessing therapeutic services as consent is not required if the children are staying in the refuge. They explain:

Stakeholder: *The issue with consent with Dad. Because when they're in refuge you didn't need consent, so I could just work away and the second they leave its consent [is required]. Not all the time, but sometimes. And that can put blocks in [in the way of the service].*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Another stakeholder noted the challenge associated with consent when the perpetrator still has access to the child.

Stakeholder: *Consent can be a huge block, so if the child is still seeing dad or has contact with the perpetrator, who is dad in this case, you know that we would require consent from both parents. So that can present as a huge block.*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

Delays in seeking support and accessing therapeutic services was highlighted by another stakeholder who noted that this created a situation of missed opportunity for the child.

Stakeholder: *[Dad refusing to give consent] can delay the children getting support, that's such a shame for the children because they're really being missed at that crucial time.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Some stakeholders believe that fathers refuse to consent to their child's participation in the Child and Youth Programme Community because they want to continue to maintain control over the family post separation or because they believed that the father doesn't want the domestic violence spotlight on them. They had this to say:

Stakeholder: [Dad withdrew consent] *because the child was starting to kind of develop their own coping skills, being able to say no and different things like that.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Stakeholder: *I think you know, for some men, they don't want their children to be linked in with a DV [domestic violence] service because it's putting a light on them and their behaviour.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Stakeholders who work with children who experience domestic violence and abuse recognise the social and legal complexities of obtaining parental consent, including the significant issue of the safety of the child versus the need for therapy. One stakeholder acknowledges that fathers have a right to know about the therapy that is being sought out for their child.

Stakeholder: *Of course, dads have a right to know, they're a parent as well but it's just a shame in some circumstances it's kind of, it's a pity it has to be so black and white.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Another stakeholder while acknowledging the rights of father noted that children have right also, rights that are independent of their parents.

Stakeholder: *I suppose the consent piece is a massive, massive block to our work. And I do understand it, dads have rights as well, but I would question the children's rights in it because children are being denied access to supports every single day.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

This stakeholder considered the issue more complex when the child remains living in the community and notes that asking for consent for programme access might actually place the child in danger.

Stakeholder: *Because obviously with consent is a huge barrier in the community piece because of access with dad and it may not be safe for the child to be getting any sort of therapy or interventions from a domestic violence service. So, it may put them in more danger to look for consent.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Findings show that consent is a significant block for children accessing the services offered by the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The consent block is identified as being greater for children who remain in the community setting. Indeed, many of the stakeholders voiced great concern and frustration regarding the issue of consent especially when conducting community work with families. This stakeholder observes that consent is a very significant block and it's a counterinitiative block since children need the service, the service is available however children are unable to access it, they explain:

Stakeholder: *Consent is an issue, and it is a block that we come up with [against] more than we feel we should. It is a huge struggle because you have children that have experienced some of the worst trauma you could possibly imagine and yet when a need is identified and when a support is there, ready for them, they're actually denied that support.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

This stakeholder notes that the consent issue is greater in the community and directly associated with post separation abuse.

Stakeholder: *Post-separation abuse is a huge bit to the community work, and it is definitely something that needs to be looked at more in terms of the legal side of it and the court side of it. Because the avenues that are there just might not be the best suited for families that are experiencing domestic violence.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

3.3.1 Programme Structure

The Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS employs a range of therapies to ensure children have a safe, supported space to help them work through their experiences of domestic violence and abuse with qualified therapists. The comprehensive, child-centred approach provides coping mechanisms and tools for children to help manage the trauma associated with their experiences. Programme pursuits incorporate various therapeutic

activities and interventions tailored to the needs of each individual participating child. This sub-theme outlines the flexibility and responsive nature of the programme structure from the perspective of the children, mothers, and stakeholders. It demonstrates the individual and group sessions, with activities ranging from creative arts to play therapy.

The Child and Youth Programme Community commences with an assessment of the needs of the child. This assessment is conducted by the Child and Youth Support Worker with the mother first, and then with the child. The Child and Youth Support Worker meets with the mother to establish the family situation and what their child has experienced to date in relation to domestic violence and abuse. One stakeholder explains:

Stakeholder: *Meet with the parents first to discuss, you know, their life to date, and you know what they've kind of experienced.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

The Child and Youth Support Worker then meets with the child to commence the process of rapport building, to establish assent and to assess the needs of the child from their perspective.

Stakeholder: *When they [child] first come in, you know, we would chat to them about, you know, do you know why you're coming here and if they do want to talk about anything.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

The assessment helps to determine the most appropriate support pathway for each child. The Child and Youth Programme Community is a child centred and child lead programme meaning that the needs of the child are first and foremost and the voice of the child is sought and respected throughout each and every aspect of the programme.

The programme uses a range of creative and therapeutic activities to help children express their feelings and experiences. During the child interviews the children frequently spoke about activities such as drawing, making slime, working with clay, painting, creating feeling treasure boxes, playing with musical instruments and other sensory materials. The 'Word Cloud' on the next page showcases the variety of activities that are utilised during the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

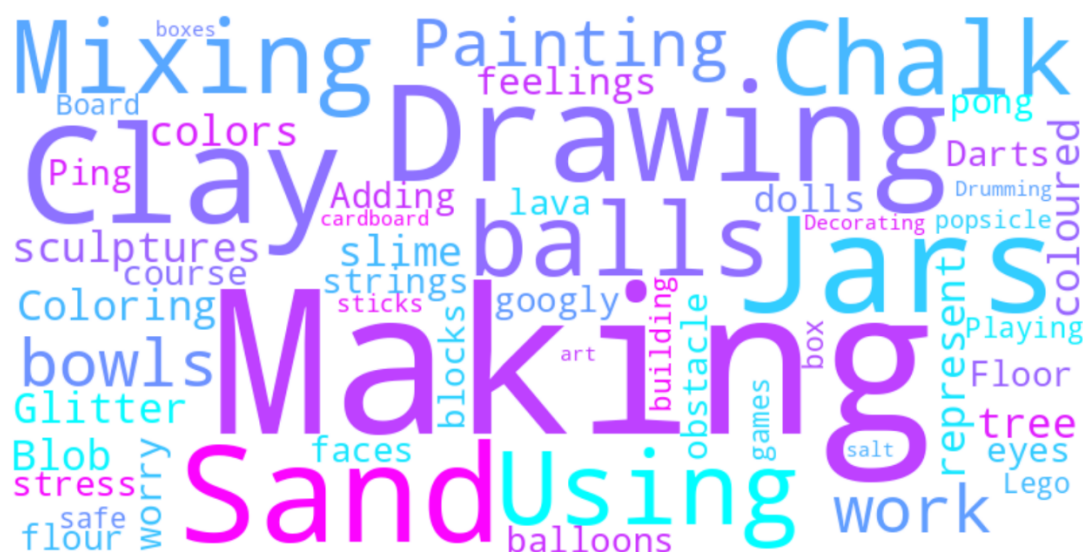


Figure 9: NVivo 'Word Cloud' from child interview transcripts

The programme explores children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse via creative techniques. Feelings and issues associated with safety are also explored via innovative mediums such as arts and crafts, this child explains.

Child: *We done a lot of like painting about what was happening at home. And then we done drawing, we done clay about a safe box, and then we done popsicle sticks about motivational quotes, they were called.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Creative visuals and models (Figure 10 on next page) are used to explore feelings with children and to help children to express and make sense of the feelings that they are having because of their experiences at home.

Child: *There was like iceberg things like at the top it would be like feelings and stuff. But at the bottom there would be like deep feelings. How you would be feeling inside.*

Girl, 11 years old (F9_G_11)



Figure 10: The Wheel drawing activity by girl, 8 years old (F7_G_8)

Within the programme the therapeutic process often incorporates symbolic activities to help children to express and process their emotions relating to their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. One very effective activity mentioned by a number of children was the emotion jar as described by this child:

Child: *We did a lot of, like a glass jar, and you put sand in it, of different colours. And it was like your feelings, and then if you mix that all up, then all colours go combined. So, it would show your feelings. So, if you mix it, then your feelings will be calm.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Therapeutic tools such as the 'blob tree' is used within the programme to commence sessions, to help establish how the child is feeling at the commencement of the session and to help establish how the child wishes to proceed. The 'blob tree' is a simple yet effective tool that helps children to express how they are feeling and to work through their feelings which creates an understanding for children who may be confused by their feelings. This child explains using the 'blob tree' to explore feelings of sadness.

Child: *We talked about being sad, we did a blob tree, and we say like how we are feeling and like you don't have to, but you can colour in a person. And some of them are showing like happy, sad, other feelings like brave. I loved the blob tree because I can express my feelings with it by drawing and colouring.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

The 'blob tree' is effective for use with boys and girls alike.

Child: *We did this like blob tree, so it was people, and you colour in which one you are feeling and then explain it.*

Boy, 12 years old (F4_B_12)

Many of the mothers interviewed commented on how the programme uses art therapy to help children to express and navigate how they are feeling and noted the values of the programme techniques. One mother describes being emotionally moved by the work done with her child and the Child and Youth Support Worker on the programme, she says:

Mother: *And he did a piece of artwork for Anna* at the time and it's actually quite emotional, because he did this kind of angry monster... Because it's a physical symbolisation of what a child has gone through. They are not always going to be able to verbalise what they've gone through.*

Mother (F8_M)

The child also remarked on how this activity helped him to express the anger that he was feeling.

Child: *Well I just like, they gave me a big piece of clay and I got to like mould it into whatever I wanted, and I just made like a big like angry kind of monster looking thing.*

Researcher: *Why did you do that in particular?*

Child: *Just eh...just like a feeling I had, just kind of how I felt like anger or whatever.*

Boy, 15 years old (F8_B_15)

The Child and Youth Programme Community is a child centred and also child led programme. Staff working on the programme are cognisant of the fact that due to the child led component of the programme combined with the level of trauma experienced by some children, the twelve sessions on offer may not actually be enough for some children. This means that programme staff often have to organise additional support outside of the programme as explained by the following stakeholders.

Stakeholder: *You know children who have so much trauma behind them as well, like the 12 sessions just wouldn't be enough for them to fully explore that because it's very much done at their pace.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

Stakeholder: *And then following Anna*, then they may be referred to play therapy. And then following play therapy you know they may be referred on somewhere else if needed like CAMHS¹⁰ or somewhere like that, you know.*

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

¹⁰ CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Interview data from all participants shows that the programme is child centred, and child led from beginning to end.

Stakeholder: *But also that they [child] can be involved with their support plan and you know the sessions, they're not set in stone, it's very much based around the children's interests and what's going on for them.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Domestic violence and abuse affects the whole family and an important element of the programme identified by stakeholders is the concept of a 'wrap-around' service for the family, where support is not just concentrated on the child during the Child and Youth Programme Community but integrated with the wider family.

Stakeholder: *The Child and Youth Support Worker and case manager will come together and kind of best support that family as a whole because we're really aware that it's not ok to just deal with mam over here and the children over here. We're really trying to make sure that we're providing a wraparound piece for the whole family.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Stakeholder: *I suppose it's a wrap around support for the whole family, you know when they come in the child has their one to one or play therapy It's not a case of like a child comes in and they do all the work and then they're sent out, you know it is that kind of piece where both mam and child are both being supported in the recovery.*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

The programme also recognised children as independent rights-holders, as emphasised by one stakeholder:

Stakeholder: *I suppose the work we do we like to think it's very much based on children's rights and if mam has the right to a key worker and support, we feel that children should have an equal right to a key worker, someone who is going to support the recovery that they need.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

3.4 Theme 3: Programme Impact and Enhancement

The previous theme looked at access and pathways to the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. This theme explores the positive impact of the Child and Youth

Programme Community on children from the perspectives of all participants. Findings reveal that children showed significant emotional growth through exploring and processing their feelings and developing practical coping skills. Additionally, mothers reported notable behavioural changes in their children and improvements in family dynamics as a direct result of the programme.

The programme's impact and effectiveness are evidenced through children's positive experiences, stakeholder observations, and the programme's ability to provide immediate relief from stress while building long-term coping strategies. Particularly significant was the programme's capacity to extend benefits beyond individual children to the whole family unit, with mothers gaining new insights into their children and reporting improved family relationships and family well-being in the context of domestic violence support.

However, stakeholders and participants identified some key areas for enhancing the Child and Youth Programme Community, including the need for increased staffing and resources, with stakeholders emphasising that one Child and Youth Support Worker in the community cannot adequately meet the needs of service users, noting gaps in adolescent services and the need for transitional support when families leave the refuge. Children suggested improvements to the programme, such as developing group-based services for peer support, incorporating outdoor activities, and offering joint parent-child sessions. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for greater awareness in schools, improved accessibility through outreach workers for rural areas, and sustainable core funding to ensure programme continuity. The data sources which contributed to the development of this theme can be viewed in the table derived from the NVivo study database (Appendix 3).

3.4.1 Programme Benefits and Impact

This sub-theme focuses on the programme's positive impact on children and how it enables children to process their feelings about experiencing domestic violence and abuse. It also focuses on how the programme helps children to develop a variety of coping mechanisms which enable them to manage their emotional responses to their experiences. Findings indicate that the coping mechanisms acquired via the programme have a meaningful and

positive impact on children's behaviour and well-being. The programme's success in helping children to develop coping mechanisms is evident in the children's ability to use the skills they learn during sessions but also their ability to transfer these skills to other areas of their daily lives. Participating mothers and stakeholders reported on the positive impact that the programme had on the children. One mother observed a marked improvement in her child's mood when she started the programme, she said:

Mother: *Straight away from the first session with Anna* she [child] bounced out, so she did. She just clicked straight away with Anna*, she just was always so happy coming out [of programme sessions].*

Mother (F1_M)

Another mother noted the significant improvement her child made throughout the course of the Child and Youth Programme Community.

Mother: *When I think of her then to now, now she's fantastic [better mood and happier] after the ten sessions with Anna*.*

Mother (F3_M)

Mother's interviewed noted profound changes in their children's emotional well-being, ability to communicate, emotional regulation and ability to speak up for themselves as a result of taking part in the Child and Youth Programme Community as evidenced in the interview excerpts and Handprint Evaluations on the next page.

Mother: *He was saying "I don't feel happy, I don't like myself", he was saying a few dark things that I didn't like ... obviously he hasn't said anything like that in the last year and a half. A million percent he's thriving into this good person.*

Mother (F6_M)

A mother had this to say about communication:

Mother: *I seen a massive change in her communication*

Mother (F2_M)

Emotional regulation was highlighted by this mother in the Handprint Evaluation:

Little finger (5): something else I would like to say

Thoroughly enjoyed her time with Anna*. She has learned to regulate her emotions better and a lot happier in herself.

Figure 11: Handprint Evaluation by mother (F7_M)

Another mother commented on the progress she noted in her child in relation to emotional regulation:

Mother: *She more communicates [she communicates more], before when she was upset; angry; she was screaming, she [would] shout, and there was no conversation with her. That's changed, she was explaining [how she feels], sometimes I was like oh my God that's my child!*

Mother (F5_M)

This mother placed emphasis on the improvement she noted in her child ability to express their feelings following the programme:

Middle finger (3): I think the Children's Community Programme at MWRSS is important because

Very, it helped my daughter with communication, sharing her feelings.

Figure 12: Handprint Evaluation by mother (F5_M)

For some mothers the programme was valuable for their child as it taught them to speak up and to say what they think and feel as noted by this mother in the Handprint Evaluation:

The index finger (2): something I learned about my child since they completed the programme

She [child] has learnt how to use her voice

Figure 13: Handprint Evaluation by mother (F2_M)

Stakeholders also observed an improvement in children's behaviour and communication as a result of taking part in the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. Stakeholders

remarked how the programme helps children to express how they are feeling during this difficult period in their life.

Stakeholder: *Parents or the foster carers can notice that the challenging behaviour has become less or like that if they're [the child] withdrawn that they're kind of started to express themselves a little bit more, you know saying when things are bothering them or things that are difficult for them.*

Stakeholder (Stk_1)

The Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS is a place where children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse feel that they can release their feelings and communicate how they really feel as shown below:

Child: *It's a place where whatever you say, she keeps it there, and it's just a nice place to let out your feelings.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

This showcases the significance of having access to a programme like the Child and Youth Programme Community because for some children who experience domestic violence and abuse in their lives, they don't always feel that they can say how they feel or speak about what they think as shown in the below interview excerpt:

Child: *I think I stayed quiet about something for months, which felt like years for me, but you only realise how bad it was and how wrong it was ... It's [being in the Child and Youth Programme Community] had such an impact on my feelings and how I deal with them, it was just really, really good.*

Girl, 12 years old (F3_G_12)

When children experience domestic violence and abuse it can be a very confusing time for them and especially difficult to process the array of feelings associated with the experience. The Child and Youth Programme Community helps children to release these feelings, but it also helps children to process the feelings they are having at a pace set by themselves. Several mothers stated how beneficial the programme was for their children especially in helping their children to release feelings and process those feelings following a critical incident as indicated in the interview excerpt below:

Mother: *Just in relieving the pressure in her head like you know, it was a very difficult time when it all came to a head there [crisis situation].*

Mother (F3_M)

The level of support provided to children and mothers by the Child and Youth Programme Community is very evident in the data collected. It is important that children are listened to during and after situations where they have experienced domestic violence and abuse because children have a lot to say, and they do want to be heard as shown below:

The index finger (2): something I learned about my child since they completed the programme

My children want to be heard and the refuge is the only place they can be heard.

Figure 14: Handprint Evaluation by mother (F3_M)

The opportunity provided by the Child and Youth Programme Community for children to release their emotions is exceptionally important because many children who experience domestic violence and abuse internalise their feelings. One of the children interviewed spoke about the burden of internalising feelings and how being able to talk to the Child and Youth Support Worker on the programme enabled her to feel free, she said:

Child: *I felt better that I talked about everything. And felt more free because I kept everything inside [before the programme]. It feels bad that like everything is inside and I want to let it out.*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)



What I liked about the activity "I loved drawing since they allowed me to express my feelings" by Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

The programme provides the opportunity and means for children to process contained emotions, helping children to move from emotional suppression to expression. Findings show that children experience significant emotional unburdening through their participation in the Child and Youth Programme Community which is reflected in their emotional transformation.

This child revealed how the programme helped her to process the feelings that she was having.

Child: *Like it's [Child and Youth Programme Community] helped me with like my anger and all, because every time I came out it was like loads of weight like coming off my shoulder. I felt like relieved, like a weight off my shoulder and I was really happy about that.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

In addition to the Child and Youth Programme Community helping children to express their emotions findings show that the programme also helps children to develop a deeper emotional awareness and the ability to process more complex emotions. Children on the programme learn how to recognise and challenge negative emotional patterns. One mother highlighted how much the programme benefited her child in this way.

Mother: [name of child] *has turned a huge corner* [from participating in the programme].

Mother (F3_M)

One of the children explained how the programme helped him to process and understand deep emotions, he said:

Child: *Anger was explored well, anger towards like certain people and certain things that affected you, just dragging you down. Using up your energy that didn't need to be used. I just think it helped me like become a bit more like just happier with myself in general.*

Boy aged 15 years (F8_B_15)

Children learn how to challenge and question how they are feeling to help them work through complex feelings and thoughts as indicated below:

Mother: *He definitely was having some issues with kind of holding negative self-belief. He was kind of able to say to me "oh well, you know Anna* has taught me that I can challenge that".*

Mother (F8_M)

The development of coping and processing skills to help children work through complex emotion was also emphasised by stakeholders.

Stakeholder: *Its [the Child and Youth Programme Community] structured in a way that you kind of get the kids to open up and give them tools to help them with whatever problems that they're going through.*

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

Although the Child and Youth Programme Community helps children to process their feelings about domestic violence and abuse it is also a welcome distraction from what is going on at home for some children. This underlines the child centredness of the programme and how the programme is completely child lead. Children do not have to talk about their experiences until they are ready to do so. The programme engages activities that help children to use positive coping methods to deal with their feelings and emotions relating to domestic violence and abuse. Many children identified the impact of how specific activities helped them to temporarily set aside their emotions and feelings until they were ready to work through them.



Child: *With Anna* we done a lot of activities and just got my mind off it [what was going on at home] ... it took a lot off my mind, I felt more like a kid [I was able to feel more like a kid].*

Girl, 16 years old (F2_G_14)

Many of the children spoke about the art and craft activities that they did during the programme and how these creative activities helped them from an emotional perspective. This child explains how making slime helped her to take her mind off not feeling safe and feeling uneasy.

Child: *Well one time I was sad and sad about feeling unsafe, so we did slime, and it was, that was on Tuesday. And it helped me get my mind off how I was feeling and made me happier.*

Girl, 11 years old (F3_G_11)

Another child had the same experience when she engaged with painting on the programme.

Child: *Like when I was painting, I was just kind of like I wasn't thinking about anything but the painting, So it was like taking my mind off everything, like [everything] bad so I was just painting so it was really good.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

When asked if coming to the refuge to partake in the Child and Youth Programme Community was helpful, one 12-year-old boy said:

Child: *Yeah, yeah, I'd say it is because like if you are feeling bad you just like to take your mind off it because doing activities and stuff.*

Boy, 12 years old (F4_B_12)

Children gained practical tools for managing their emotions and anxieties. One mother described a particularly effective coping strategy which her child gained from the programme.

Mother: *I remember I think that was Anna* gave her [child] a little toy, that toy has a zip, and she [Anna*] told her [child] all the worries she has she can write [them] on the piece of paper and put inside of that [the toy], and if she did that the worries in the night will go [the worries would go away at nighttime].*

Mother (F5_M)

Children also learned practical tools that could be used outside of the programme in other areas of their lives such as in school as explained by this child below:

Child: *Anna* made me a little booklet with like breathing techniques, if I was stressing then I can like use a breathing technique. And I still have that to this day, and I bring it to school.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

During the programme children learn about stress management strategies through art and craft, mechanisms that they can take home and use whenever they need as explained below:

Child: *We [child and the Child and Youth Support Worker] made like a little jar which if I'm stressed or something I can shake it and then like all the glitter and all the stuff like pop out.*

Girl, 12 years old (F5_G_12)

Parents reported continued use of these coping mechanisms beyond the timeline of the Child and Youth Programme Community.

Mother: *Even the fact that he mentioned it [coping mechanism learned during the programme] last week you know, like it's a good while since he was there [at the playroom to take part in the programme] he still remembered stuff and he had referred to it.*

Mother (F8_M)

Findings indicate that the programme has a calming effect on participating children. Children who take part in the programme feel safe and they learn to understand and process complex emotions associated with the experience of domestic violence and abuse as explained below:

Stakeholder: *You can see the transition from the child coming in, anxiety, angry, afraid, not knowing, doesn't feel safe. And then they gradually are engaging with you every week and you can see them, you know calmer. Knowing how to, you know address their big feelings as we call them.*

Stakeholder (Stk_5)

The programme is significantly impactful since it provides support for the whole family and in particular women. Mothers interviewed expressed how they felt that a weight was lifted from them when their children took part in the programme since they knew that their children were getting the help that was very much needed as highlighted in this interview excerpt.

Researcher: *Do you think that that [child's participation in the programme] helped you?*

Mother: *Yeah, because it took like a weight off me. Because then I knew she was getting what she needed and she was getting help, you know whatever helped she needed.*

Mother (F1_M)

Furthermore, the impact of the programme is evident through the finding that programme participation helps to educate children about domestic violence and abuse. This is significant since awareness helps to break the cycle of abuse as explained:

Stakeholder: *Well, I think for women and children it's really important that they get this recovery piece and the support after what they've experienced because for children it's giving them an opportunity to learn kind of what's ok and what's not ok in relationships. So that they aren't going into relationships in the future and getting into the same cycle.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

3.4.2 Programme Enhancement

Themes thus far within this report have outlined the positive benefits and impact that the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS has on children who experience domestic violence and abuse. Participant interviews have revealed several key areas where the programme could be enhanced.

A prominent discourse from participating women and stakeholders is the need for increased resources for the programme and for staffing within the programme. Numerous stakeholders emphasised that one Child and Youth Support Worker in the community setting is not adequate to operationalise the programme effectively despite the best efforts of the service.

Stakeholder: *I do think from a service provision we try and do an awful lot, and it is a lot for one Child and Youth Support Worker to kind of maintain.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Stakeholders also noted that the costs associated with programme delivery are currently not encompassed by core funding and this is problematic as outlined below:

Stakeholder: *From my perspective, increase the multi-year commitments to the programme costs. Because so much of the programme funding is not funded through our core brand [funder] ... what we've been working on a lot is to try and resource the core funding to increase the staffing.*

Stakeholder (Stk_3)

Domestic violence and abuse support typically focus on the woman however numerous mothers and stakeholders articulated that children require support also. This is a significant finding since participants in this research have a firm understanding about the impact of domestic violence and abuse on children and families. Furthermore, children have rights that are independent of their parents and children's needs differ to the needs of adults which is also understood by participants of this research. One stakeholder had this to say:

Stakeholder: *I mean more of these community workers [Child and Youth Support Workers in the community] would be great. I think the focus is usually always on the woman which absolutely, but the children are just as impacted so I think they [children] need more advocates, more key workers [Child and Youth Support Workers].*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Stakeholders who work directly with children on the programme are exceptionally experienced professionals in the area of domestic violence and abuse. These professionals have innovative ideas that would enhance and develop the Child and Youth Programme Community however a lack of resources and reliable core funding prevents this from happening as explained on the next page:

Stakeholder: *We've all these ideas, and we get very excited about what we could do, but resources are a struggle.*

Stakeholder (Stk_6)

Ironically one stakeholder emphasised the need to raise awareness regarding the supports that are available to women and children who experienced domestic violence and abuse however they are concerned that if awareness is raised, this could increase service demand, and the refuge may not be able to meet an increased demand due to a lack of Child and Youth Support Workers in the community.

Stakeholder: *I definitely think there's a role for much greater awareness raising about the supports that are there. And I can see the risk in that, if you raise too much awareness [and] you can't meet the demand.*

Stakeholder (Stk_3)

This stakeholder also highlighted how many counties in Ireland have no domestic violence and abuse supports available for children which they believe children should be entitled to, they had this to say:

Stakeholder: *But like you know, places where there's no local domestic violence services have no services at all for children, specialised services. So, you know, we're lucky that we do have it in some ways in Meath, but we still have limited capacity. So, like, I think people should know about it, I think it should be a standard entitlement. I think it should be core funded.*

Stakeholder (Stk_3)

In addition to the recognition of the need for domestic violence and abuse services for children, findings also reveal a specific need for adolescents since the period of adolescence brings unique challenges for the young person. This stakeholder explains.

Stakeholder: *Teenagers are kind of almost forgotten about in some incidences. You know they are a huge piece to take on that just aren't, it isn't always feasible for one person [one Child and Youth Support Worker].*

Stakeholder (Stk_7)

Transition support for children from refuge back into the community was also put forward by stakeholders as being an area currently under-resourced.

Stakeholder: *Something I noticed was the gap kind of between supporting children when they leave refuge, like that transition piece into the community.*

Stakeholder (Stk_2)

Raising awareness about domestic violence and abuse in schools was cited by a number of participants. Stakeholders put forward that school principals are not aware of the services that are available, and this is a missed opportunity.

Stakeholder: *I was talking to a friend of ours who is a school principal and he would have had no idea there was any sort of support service [domestic violence and abuse] for children in Meath.*

Stakeholder (Stk_3)

One stakeholder put forward that outreach work needs to be undertaken with schools to raise awareness about domestic violence and abuse.

Stakeholder: *Even maybe to have like an outreach worker that could maybe go into schools and have some sessions with kids. So that they're not isolated from rural areas.*

Stakeholder (Stk_4)

3.5 Summary

This section has presented the research findings from the evaluation of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The findings have been presented under three themes which were formulated following a complex thematic analysis process involving the triangulation of multiple data sources. The findings presented are supported throughout by verbatim interview extracts from participating children, women and stakeholders ensuring a thorough representation of experiences and perspectives from all key participants.

Section 4: Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Introduction

The aim of the research set out in this report was to conduct an evaluation of the practice and impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS). MWRSS provide services to women and children on the premise that children who experience domestic violence and abuse are entitled to equivalent quality, specialist supports which are on par with that of their mother. The Child and Youth Programme Community is a part of the Child and Youth Service at MWRSS, the primary aim of which is to support children to recover from domestic violence and abuse. Hearing the voices of children is crucial to the work of MWRSS who acknowledge that children are direct victims of domestic violence and abuse, and this is a violation of their human rights. MWRSS commissioned this research to evaluate the impact of the programme since its inception in 2018 and to look at the growth and development of the programme into the future. The evaluation was conducted using case study research and a qualitative approach was maintained throughout the methodological process. The objectives of the evaluation were:

Programme impact

Objective	Achieved
To explore children's experiences of their involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their lives.	✓
To explore women's experiences of their family's involvement in the Child and Youth Programme Community and what it means / how it has impacted on their family.	✓
To explore service pathway and assessment process to establish if family needs are being met by the Child and Youth Programme Community.	✓
To evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these are translated into practice.	✓
To identify and explore the 'blocks' that present for children accessing and engaging with supports provided by the Child and Youth Programme Community.	✓

Situational and external context and environment

Objective	Achieved
To explore issues of 'timing' related to the Child and Youth Programme Community and how these impact on the journey of recovery for women and child(ren).	✓
To examine issues related to 'safety' and how these can impact on family engagement with the Child and Youth Programme Community.	✓
To assess the space that is currently available for the Child and Youth Programme Community from the perspective of children, women, and organisational staff.	✓

Post programme

Objective	Achieved
To explore the views of children and women who have completed the Child and Youth Programme Community in terms of level of supports provided and returning to the programme for further supports as required.	✓

4.2 Overview of the findings

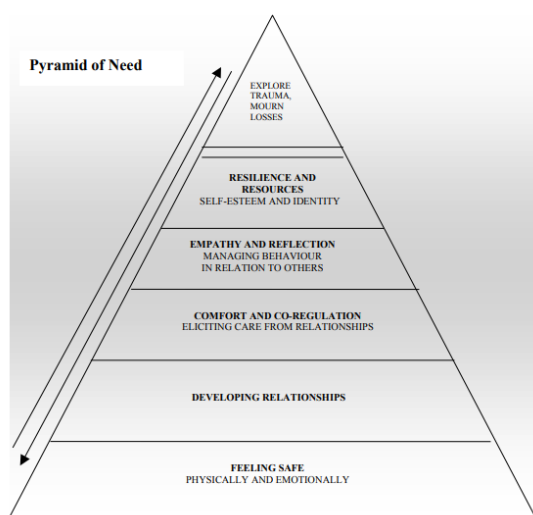
Domestic violence and abuse is on the rise with Women's Aid reporting 40,048 disclosures of abuse in 2023, 4,253 of which were against children (Women's Aid 2024). When children experience this type of trauma in their lives it can impact their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development in addition to their behaviour towards others (Chudzik and Corr 2025). There has certainly never been a greater need for specialist support services for victims of domestic violence and abuse, especially for child victims. It has previously been highlighted that Ireland is significantly lacking in specialist services and supports for children (Barnardos 2016) therefore the evidence generated from the evaluation presented in this report is welcome. Currently the majority of the services that are available for children are provided by refuges affiliated with SAFE Ireland¹¹ with exceptionally limited services available to the children of women who remain in the community setting and don't or can't access refuge accommodation services (Barnardos 2016).

Findings from this research showcase that the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS is remarkably successful in supporting children in the community who experience domestic violence and abuse. This child centred and child led programme utilises trauma informed and creative approaches to create safe space for children to be able to engage with the Child and Youth Support Worker and express how they feel. A systematic review by MacRae et al (2024) found that art-based methods are effective to use with children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse to help them to express their trauma, put their emotions and experiences into words thus supporting the processing of traumatic experiences. Children who participate in the Child and Youth Programme Community feel safe

¹¹ www.safeireland.ie Safe Ireland works to create confident, competent community-based responses to domestic, sex, gender and sexuality-based violence, whenever it occurs.

to explore and process their feeling at their own pace and in confidence with the Child and Youth Support Worker. This is a very significant finding since evidence to date clearly indicates that children who experience domestic violence and abuse want and need to have their emotional well-being needs met in addition to their physical safety needs, which is often the main focus of domestic violence and abuse services (Nobel-Carr et al 2020).

Helping children to overcome the complex emotions and resulting behaviours following the experience of domestic violence and abuse is challenging for families and professionals alike (HSE 2012) however this evaluation shows that the Child and Youth Programme Community is exceptionally successful in assisting children.



The Child and Youth Programme Community is tremendously effective in creating safe space for children physically and emotionally. This is noteworthy since physical and emotional safety is the very foundation of the 'Pyramid of Need' which outlines the hierarchy of needs required to effectively meet the therapeutic needs of traumatised children as demonstrated in Figure 15 on the left.

Figure 15: The Pyramid of Need by Golding (2015)

Children need to feel safe both physically and emotionally to be able to engage in therapeutic activities that explore their experiences of domestic violence and abuse.

In addition to creating safe space for children physically and emotionally the Child and Youth Programme Community fosters the development of trusting relationships between the Child and Youth Support Worker in the community and children and mothers. The development of strong and trusting relationships is another requirement in the hierarchy of need put forward by the 'Pyramid of Need' (Figure 15) as essential for meeting the therapeutic needs of traumatised children. Children who experience trauma such as domestic violence and abuse often require a skilled and knowledgeable adult to support and help them to co-regulate their

emotions (Golding 2015). Findings from this research show that the role of the Child and Youth Support Worker in the Child and Youth Programme Community facilitates this through the use of creative and engaging activities with the child. The experience of domestic violence and abuse can create a variety of diverse feelings and emotions for the child which can be confusing. Children may struggle to make sense of what they have been experiencing at home. Within the Child and Youth Programme Community, the Child and Youth Support Worker provides crucial support to the child to help them to express how they feel and to work through making sense of those feeling in a therapeutic manner which is child focused, and most importantly child led. MacRae et al (2024) have identified that providing children with the tools to help them to express how they are feeling not only supports children to process their experiences, but it also gives children a voice in a context which they are often seen as 'invisible victims' thus enabling them to regain some control and autonomy.

This development of empathy and reflection is another requirement in the hierarchy of need within the 'Pyramid of Need' set out by Golding (2015). The research presented in this report shows that children who experience domestic violence and abuse want to talk about their experiences, they have a lot to say, and they want to be listened to. Findings underscore the impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community and more specifically the impact of the role of the Child and Youth Support Worker in the community setting. Children interviewed for this research placed emphasis on their relationship with the Child and Youth Support Worker within the programme and how this relationship helped them to feel listened to. Furthermore, children noted being able to talk with the Child and Youth Support Worker and not ever feeling judged which is very significant considering past work has identified that it can be difficult for children and families to speak about domestic violence and abuse due to fear, worry, stigma, embarrassment, confusion and feelings of shame and guilt (Barnardos 2016, Nobel-Carr et al 2020).

The experience of domestic violence and abuse is exceptionally challenging for children and their mothers. Much of the support available focuses on women and there is a distinct lack of support services for children, especially in the community setting (Hogan and O'Reilly 2007). Findings from this research show that children want support services that are separate and

independent from that offered to their mother. Many of the children voiced how much they valued the exclusive time they were afforded with the Child and Youth Support Worker in the programme and they explained how they could say things to them that they felt they could not, or did not, want to say to their mother for fear of upsetting her or placing an emotional burden on her. This finding shows that children sincerely want and need support that is impartial because the issue of concern is too close to their family. Children also want support that takes place away from their home and on 'neutral' and nonaligned ground. Findings exhibit that although children distinctly do want to talk about their experiences of domestic violence and abuse, this is difficult for them. Children interviewed for this research appreciated having somewhere to go outside of their home for their sessions in the programme, children felt that they could talk about their feelings with greater ease when not in their own home.

This research places emphasis on the physical, emotional and psychological impact that domestic violence and abuse has on children as told by mothers in the face-to-face interviews. Participating mothers explained the complex impact that the abuse had on their children. Furthermore, they detailed how this impact, combined with the post separation abuse which ensued, prompted them to seek access to the Child and Youth Programme Community to help their children. The issue of post separation abuse has been highlighted in this research as being significantly problematic especially when mothers want to gain access to therapeutic services for their children. A systematic review of qualitative evidence has also identified post separation abuse occurring in the context of when children have contact with their fathers, as being a cause of great upset for children and the source of considerable distress (Aria et al 2021).

For women and children, access to the programme is greatly enhanced by the presence of the refuge helpline which operates 24/7, 365 days a year and is managed by professional staff. When women phone the helpline, they can speak with professionals who understand domestic violence and abuse and the associated complexities for the women and children involved. The provision of the scannable QR code online has been a significant addition for programme pathway access especially for practitioners in the community who are seeking

support for women and children. However, the provision of this supplementary efficient access point has instigated an increase in referrals which in turn has created significant demand on refuge services. This surge in demand for services has led to increased waiting list times and the refuge has had to make the difficult decision to suspend the scannable QR code until secure funding is sources to adequately support and develop this component of their service.

Although access to the Child and Youth Programme Community is forthright for women, children and professional's, findings denote that post-separation abuse is a momentous barrier for children attending recovery therapeutic supports. Indeed, refusal to consent for healthcare and therapeutic supports by former partners has been highlighted as a form of post separation abuse and coercive control (Aria et al 2021, Spearman et al 2024). Regulation regarding domestic violence and abuse has been evolving gradually in Ireland. The introduction of the Domestic Violence Act in 2018 was a welcome development following Irelands ratification of the Istanbul Convention¹². Although the Act does present robust levels of protection for women it does not do enough for children who experience domestic violence and abuse. More recently in Ireland the State has explicitly recognised that children are victims of domestic violence and abuse in their own right via the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026 (Department of Justice 2022). This strategy shows a willingness on the part of the State to recognise and support children who experience this type of trauma in their lives. If this acknowledgement of children and their experience is to be put into practice, then the findings from this research need to be embraced by relevant policy makers. Qualitative research on the views of children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse has the potential to empower a child centred understanding of the experience for children (Aria et al 2021) which in turn will enable professionals to be better equipped to meets the needs of children in their journey of recovery.

¹² The Council of Europe's human rights treaty opposing violence against women and domestic violence, opened for signature on 11 May 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. The convention aims to ensure that women are free from violence.

4.3 Recommendations

The recommendation from the evaluation are:

Recommendation 1	The Child and Youth Programme Community at Meath Women's Refuge and Support Services (MWRSS) is an individualised, child centred and child lead programme that provides a safe pace for children who experience domestic violence and abuse to express how they feel and process these experiences. The programme provides children with essential emotional safety and support which is invaluable to them and their family. We recommend that MWRSS continues to offer the Child and Youth Programme Community as part of the suite of services offered by the organisation via their Child and Youth Service.
Recommendation 2	The children, women and stakeholders who took part in this evaluation collectively emphasised the positive impact of the role of the Child and Youth Support Worker to children and families in the community setting. We recommend that this role continues to be available to children in the community and that all specialised domestic violence services in Ireland offer supports to children and families in the community who are experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Furthermore, we recommend that an additional role is sought in MWRSS's core Cuan ¹³ funding to enable the service to continue to grow and meet the needs of children and families in the community of Meath.
Recommendation 3	Children interviewed for this research expressed how they enjoyed attending for supports outside of their home setting. The physical play spaces in the service contributed to children's feeling of safe space. We recommend that all specialist domestic violence services provide designated and age-appropriate child spaces to deliver therapeutic services to children and families who are experiencing domestic violence and abuse. We also recommend the inclusion of relevant funding for adequate spaces in Cuan policy so that specialist domestic violence services can provide supports to children and families in the community setting.
Recommendation 4	The women and stakeholders interviewed for this research all spoke about programme access and pathway. Findings show that families and professionals have a different access pathway to the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. The online referral system provides a streamlined and efficient access point for professionals. Furthermore, it helps to break down access barriers for external agencies that are seeking supports for women and children which has resulted in improved interagency collaboration and increased service reach for children in the community. We therefore recommend that MWRSS continues to operate its online referral system via the online referral form ¹⁴ . However, it is advised that to continue with the online referral form, extra staffing support is required to manage the increase in referrals that this has created. We recommend the inclusion of relevant funding in Cuan policy.

¹³ Cuan, the new statutory domestic, sexual and gender-based violence agency in Ireland launched on 28th February 2024.

¹⁴ The provision of this online form has increased the number of referrals being made thus increasing waiting list times.

Recommendation 5	Findings show that there are barriers associated with children's access to the Child and Youth Programme Community. The programme takes place in the post-separation period for families and often families are engaged with the court system on access issues. We recommend that the issue of consent is dealt with immediately in court situations to ensure that the child or young person is not obstructed from attending recovery therapeutic supports. We also recommend that further research is conducted to fully explore the blocks which exist for children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse in accessing recovery therapeutic supports.
Recommendation 6	Findings from this research have demonstrated that there is a need to raise awareness within the community regarding the supports that are available to women and children who experienced domestic violence and abuse. We recommend that MWRSS is supported and resourced in disseminating its service offerings to the surrounding community including schools, health services, Tusla services, relevant community organisations and all Garda stations in the county of Meath. This will help to raise awareness in relation to children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse and how they can be best supported in their recovery.

4.4 Study strengths and limitations

Findings from this research provide a robust examination of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS enabled by the adoption of case study research methodology. All research has strengths and limitations, and these will now be duly acknowledged.

4.4.1 Study strengths

- The strength of case study research lies in its capacity to examine multiple units of analysis, this provided a rich, in-depth understanding of how the Child and Youth Programme Community impacted the journey of recovery for children.
- Careful consideration was given to the ethical issues associated with this research as presented in Section 2. Recruitment of women, children and stakeholders was conducted ethically and fairly. To ensure that the findings of the study were representative of the participants, children's drawings were included in the analysis and a triangulation of data sources was conducted. Collectively these approaches increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.
- Currently there is a deficit of knowledge relating to how children in the community setting who experience domestic violence and abuse can be best supported to recover

from such experiences. This research addresses the deficit and presents an in-depth account of the impact of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS.

- This study was designed to ensure that the voices of children who experience domestic violence and abuse in the community were captured and listened to. Using creative participatory research techniques, the voices of children aged four to sixteen years were heard. Children were asked about their experiences of the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS, and an in-depth account of these experiences was created.
- The research interviews were conducted by highly experienced qualitative researchers. This helped the development of rapport between researchers and participants and created a calm and relaxed atmosphere whereby participants felt safe to share their experiences.

4.4.2 Study limitations

- A limitation of the evaluation is the limited generalisability of findings to other programmes or contexts; however, this was addressed through detailed description and careful documentation of context, via the development of a logic model which contextualised the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the Child and Youth Programme Community.
- Recruitment for this research was challenging for several reasons. Children needed to have completed the Child and Youth Programme Community in full to participate. Sometimes children do not get to complete the programme due to issues associated with post-separation abuse.
- Children needed to be at a certain point in their recovery to be able to participate, all children are different therefore not all children who completed the programme were suitable for recruitment.
- The programme is delivered over a number of weeks however due to the child led nature of the programme the programme duration varied from child to child which impacted on the sample size.

- Children who live in the community setting typically continue to attend school therefore data collection had to be moved to evenings and weekends to work around school time.

4.5 Conclusion

The evaluation presented in this report features the experiences of children and women who completed the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS. Findings highlight that the programme is outstandingly impactful for the child who has experienced domestic violence and abuse and also for the whole family. The programme operates as a child focused and child lead programme whereby safe space is created for children to enable them to commence their journey of healing. This evaluation has also demonstrated that blocks do exist when women seek specialist support services for their children. The provision of specialist services to children who experience domestic violence and abuse needs to be prioritised so that children can make sense of what has happened in their life and look to move forward from such experiences.

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Appendices


Appendix 1: Logic Model for the Child and Youth Programme Community at MWRSS

Logic Model for the Child and Youth Programme Community: One -To- One Sessions		
Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes
<p>Resources: Full-time Child and Youth Support Worker. One worker has been funded by Cuan. Materials and equipment funded by Mason and Hayes Curran. Facilities: Safe and confidential space located within the refuge services. Equipped room designed to be child-friendly and welcoming for adolescents. Programme activities: Assessment: Initial assessment: Risk assessment and support plan completed with parent to identify child's individual needs and most suitable support. One to one developmental session: Weekly developmental sessions based on child's individual needs. Parent consultations: Regular contact with mother to discuss progress, and strategies for support at home.</p>	<p>Activity outputs: Individual sessions with 8 – 10 children every week. Average duration 45 mins.</p> <p>Participant outputs: children and young people aged between 6 -17.</p> <p>Parent involvement: Mothers.</p>	<p>Short term: Increased safety awareness: Children and Families have a better understanding of safety planning and managing risk. Enhanced coping skills: Children have an improved use of coping mechanisms and tools to help manage stress, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and anger. Children have an increased use of positive self-talk and relaxation techniques. Enhanced emotional expression: Children become more able to articulate feelings and experiences related to hurting at home.</p> <p>Medium-term: Children have: Higher levels of resilience in coping with future challenges. Improved self-esteem and self-worth. Continued use of healthy coping strategies. Better academic performance and school attendance. More stable and supportive home environment.</p> <p>Improved relationships: Better communication and relationships within the family unit. Supporting the mother-child relationship post separation.</p> <p>Long term: Final outcomes: Reduction in the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence and abuse. Increased community awareness and support for children affected by domestic violence and abuse. Enhanced collaboration among community organisations. Informing policy changes to better support children affected by domestic violence and abuse through demonstrated programme success.</p>

Logic Model for the Child and Youth Programme Community: Play Therapy		
Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes
<p>Resources: 2 full-time Play Therapist's contracted by MWRSS.</p> <p>Facilities: Safe and child friendly spaces delivered within the refuge services and occasionally in Therapists practice in Navan and Trim.</p> <p>Programme activities: Provide play therapy sessions to children who have been referred by Child and Youth Support Worker Community.</p>	<p>Activity outputs: Individual play therapy: 12 one-on-one sessions initially on a weekly basis and scope to extend sessions if required.</p> <p>Parent-Child Play sessions (Filial Therapy) Sessions involving non –abusing parent to strengthen the parent-child bond.</p> <p>Participant outputs: Children aged from 4 – 12 years.</p>	<p>Short term: Children have a safe supported space to help work through their experiences with a play therapist. Increased Awareness: Children and parents have greater awareness of the impact of domestic violence and abuse and the role of play therapy. Emotional Expression: Improved ability of children to express emotions through play. Access to Support: More children accessing domestic violence support services. Reduced Trauma Symptoms: Initial reduction in symptoms of trauma, anxiety, and behavioural issues. Improved Safety: Enhanced feelings of safety and security for children.</p> <p>Medium-term: Enhanced Academic Performance: Improved focus, attendance, and performance in school. Stronger Parent-Child Relationships: Strengthened bond and communication between children and non-abusive parents. Increased Engagement: Greater involvement in positive activities and community programmes. Resilience: Improved ability to handle stress and adversity, especially in the context of domestic violence.</p> <p>Long term: Improved Self-Esteem: Increased Self-esteem and self-worth. Policy Influence: Positive changes in policies and practices related to children's mental health and domestic violence services. Breaking the Cycle of Abuse: Children recognize abusive behaviours as wrong, leading to a reduced likelihood of perpetuating or accepting abuse in their own relationships, ultimately preventing the cycle of domestic violence from continuing into the next generation.</p>

Logic Model for the Child and Youth Programme Community: Adolescent Counselling		
Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes
<p>Resources: Trained child and adolescent therapist funded by Mason and Hayes Curran.</p> <p>Programme activities: Provide adolescent counselling sessions to young people who have been referred by the Child and Youth Support Worker.</p>	<p>Activity outputs: 12 sessions in total delivered on a weekly basis and scope to extend sessions if required.</p> <p>Participant outputs: Young people aged between 12 - 17 years.</p>	<p>Short term: Young people have a safe and supported space to work through their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. Skill Development: Improved coping skills, stress management, and communication abilities. Access to Support: More adolescents accessing domestic violence support services. Reduced Symptoms: Initial reduction in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Improved safety: Enhanced feelings of security and safety. Improved Family Dynamics: Better communication and relationships within families.</p> <p>Medium-term: Enhanced Academic Performance: Improved focus, attendance, and performance in school. Stronger Peer Relationships: Healthier interactions and relationships with peers Increased Engagement: Greater involvement in positive activities and community programmes. Resilience: Improved ability to handle stress and adversity.</p> <p>Long term: Successful Transitions: Smooth transitions to adulthood, higher education, and employment.</p> <p>Community Impact: A community that is more supportive and aware of adolescent mental health needs.</p> <p>Policy Influence: Positive changes in policies and practices related to adolescent mental health services.</p> <p>Final outcomes: Policy influence: positive changes in policies and practices related to adolescents and domestic violence services supports.</p> <p>Breaking the cycle of abuse: Adolescents recognise abusive behaviours as wrong, leading to a reduced likelihood of perpetuating or accepting abuse in their own relationships, ultimately preventing the cycle of DV from continuing into the next generation.</p>

Appendix 2: Handprint Evaluation Mothers



The thumb (1): something that was good for me and my child here at the refuge

The index finger (2): something I learned about myself and my child while I was here

Middle finger (3): something that was difficult for me and my child(ren) while we were here at the refuge

Ring finger (4): in the future something that I think should be included for women and children at the refuge


Little finger (5): something else I would like to say

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Appendix 3: Theme by Data Source

	Child Interviews	Child Drawings	Mother's Interviews	Handprint Evaluations	Stakeholder Interviews
T1: SAFE AND THERAPEUTIC SPACE	72	5	9	6	5
T2: PROGRAMME ACCESS AND DELIVERY	45	3	188	2	74
T3: PROGRAMME IMPACT AND ENHANCEMENT	122	9	48	14	109

Appendix 4: Handprint Evaluation Child and Youth Support Worker



The thumb (1): a therapeutic intervention / activity that I think worked well with the children

The index finger (2): something new I learned or discovered about play or creative engagement with children at the refuge

Middle finger (3): a therapeutic intervention / activity that I think did not worked very well with the children and why

Ring finger (4): something that I think we should consider for children in the future

Little finger (5): something else I would like to say

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