



CHOICES ARE NOT ALWAYS FREE

Understanding How Victims of Domestic Abuse Make Choices

Coercion and control, by definition, removes a person's ability to make valid and informed choices. Victims of domestic abuse are not choosing freely – they are navigating a landscape of fear, pressure, manipulation and survival. Understanding the type of choice at play is essential for accurate assessment, safe intervention and truly child-centred practice.

THE GOAL FOR PRACTITIONERS



- Look beyond the behaviour.
- Understand the context.
- Identify the type of choice.
- Assess the impact on the child.

THE FIVE TYPES OF CHOICES IN THE CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

1 FALSE CHOICES

The illusion of choice when options are engineered or removed.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

The abuser creates 'choices' but ensures there is only one accepted option.

EXAMPLES

- "You can speak to your mum, but only with me listening."
- "You can go out, but only at 2pm and be back by 4pm."
- "You can wear that top, or we're not going."
- "You can stay here, or I'll take the kids and leave."
- "You can tell me what happened, or I'll decide what I think happened."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children learn that choices are controlled, not real. They may believe they have no voice, no power and must comply to keep the peace and stay safe.

2 SURVIVAL CHOICES

Choices made to stay safe, minimise harm or protect self or children.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

Decisions driven by fear, threat or the need to survive another day.

EXAMPLES

- Keeping quiet to avoid violence or escalation.
- Agreeing to demands to prevent punishment.
- Hiding money or important documents.
- Withdrawing from friends or family to avoid conflict.
- Not reporting abuse to protect children or avoid further harm.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children live in fear and hyper-vigilance. They adapt by being quiet, compliant or invisible. This affects their sense of safety and self-worth.

3 FORCED CHOICES

Choices made under threats, intimidation or coercion of consequence.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

The abuser uses threats, punishment or consequences to force a decision.

EXAMPLES

- "Do this, or I will beat you."
- "Do this, or I will take the children."
- "Do this, or you'll be homeless."
- "Do this, or I'll hurt someone you love."
- "Do this, or I'll tell everyone your secrets."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children witness fear, intimidation and sometimes violence. They may internalise fear, develop anxiety, or believe threats are normal.

4 MANIPULATIVE CHOICES

Choices shaped by guilt, blame, gaslighting or emotional manipulation.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

The victim is manipulated into believing that harmful choices are their idea or responsibility.

EXAMPLES

- Blame shifting: "If you keep behaving this way, you're gonna make me hurt."
- Gaslighting: "Do this, or are you too sensitive to accept what I'm saying?"
- Guilt tripping: "If you really loved me, you would..."
- Playing the victim: "I do everything for you and this is how you treat me."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children absorb distorted messages about blame, responsibility and love. It damages their self-worth and ability to trust.

5 VALID & INFORMED CHOICES

Choices made freely, without coercion, with full information, and with real options.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

The person has safety, support, information, time and autonomy to make decisions.

EXAMPLES

- Choosing to leave when safe and supported.
- Accessing services without fear or control.
- Making parenting decisions based on the child's best interests without interference.
- Setting boundaries and seeking help.

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Children experience safer, more stable parenting in a healthy environment in which they can thrive and build secure attachments.

COERCION AND CONTROL: WHY CHOICES ARE NOT VALID

Coercive control is a strategic pattern of behaviour used to dominate, isolate and punish.



ISOLATION

Limits who they can see, talk to or trust.



MONITORING

Constant surveillance creates fear and suppresses freedom.



INTIMIDATION

Threats, looks, actions or damage to property.



THREATS

Harm to self, others, pets or children.



DEGRADATION

Undermines self-worth, confidence and independence.



ECONOMIC CONTROL

Controls money, resources and access to basic needs.



THE RESULT

The victim's ability to make valid and informed choices is removed. Their behaviour is shaped by force, fear, manipulation or survival – not freedom.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR PROFESSIONALS

What may look like 'choices' or 'behaviours' can easily be misinterpreted without understanding the context of abuse.



LOOK BENEATH THE PRESENTATION

Behaviour is not the whole story. Consider the power, control and fear behind it.



AVOID VICTIM BLAMING

Do not judge choices without understanding the coercive context they are made in.



FOCUS ON IMPACT ON THE CHILD

The child experiences the consequences of coercion every single day.



ASSESSES FOR COERCION AND CONTROL

It should be a routine part of assessments in all adult and child cases.



SUPPORT SAFETY, CHOICE & EMPOWERMENT

Work to restore safety, information, options and autonomy for the victim and children.



COLLABORATE AND CHALLENGE SYSTEMS

Ensure services understand the dynamics of abuse and respond safely.

KEY REMINDERS

- ✓ Coercion and control removes freedom of choice.
- ✓ Victims adapt to survive – this is not weakness, it is coping.
- ✓ Behaviour is shaped by context, not character.
- ✓ Every decision must be considered in the context of safety and power.
- ✓ Our role is to see clearly, respond safely and advocate effectively.



If the abuse stopped, the fear ended and the control lifted...

What choices would they make then?

That is the person you need to see.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ❓ What evidence is there of coercion and control in this situation?
- ❓ Which type of choice is most likely influencing this person's behaviour?
- ❓ How would this decision look if they were living in safety and freedom?
- ❓ What impact is this dynamic having on the child right now and over time?
- ❓ What would the child say if they were asked about daily life at home?



CHOICES ARE NOT ALWAYS FREE.
COERCION REMOVES FREEDOM. UNDERSTANDING RESTORES CHOICE.

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THE FREEDOM TEST

THE SEVEN CONDITIONS OF VALID CHOICE

Before we ask
"Why did they make that choice?"
we must ask
"How much freedom existed
inside that choice?"



THE HOUSE OF FREEDOM

Valid and informed choice is built on seven essential conditions. Remove enough pillars and the roof collapses. The choice remains, but the freedom does not.



VALID AND INFORMED CHOICE

1

PHYSICAL SAFETY



- Can they disagree safely?
- Can they say no safely?
- Can they leave safely?
- Can they make decisions without fear of violence?

WITHOUT SAFETY
THERE IS NO FREEDOM

2

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



- Can they think clearly?
- Can they express disagreement?
- Can they trust their own judgement?
- Can they make decisions without intimidation?

FEAR DISTORTS
DECISION MAKING

3

FINANCIAL FREEDOM



- Can they survive independently?
- Can they access money?
- Can they provide for themselves and their children?
- Would financial dependence punish a decision?

POVERTY CAN BECOME
A TOOL OF CONTROL

4

RELATIONAL FREEDOM



- Can they contact family?
- Can they seek support?
- Can they maintain friendships?
- Can they access help without consequence?

ISOLATION REDUCES
FREEDOM

5

INFORMATIONAL FREEDOM



- Do they know their rights?
- Do they understand available options?
- Do they have accurate information?
- Can they access independent advice?

PEOPLE CANNOT CHOOSE
OPTIONS THEY CANNOT SEE

6

TIME AND SPACE



- Have they had time to think?
- Have they had time to plan?
- Have they had time to reflect?
- Are they making decisions under pressure?

URGENCY OFTEN
BENEFITS CONTROL

7

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE



- Can they imagine a different future?
- Do they believe change is possible?
- Do they believe support exists?
- Can they see a pathway beyond abuse?

HOPE EXPANDS
CHOICE

THE FREEDOM METER



**0 – 2 PILLARS PRESENT
COERCED CHOICE**
The decision is primarily shaped by fear, control and survival.



**3 – 4 PILLARS PRESENT
CONSTRAINED CHOICE**
Some freedom exists, but major barriers remain.



**5 – 6 PILLARS PRESENT
PARTIALLY FREE CHOICE**
Choice exists but vulnerabilities continue to influence decision making.



**7 PILLARS PRESENT
VALID AND INFORMED CHOICE**
The person has realistic freedom, safety, information and alternatives.



**REFLECTIVE QUESTION
FOR PRACTITIONERS**
Before we describe a decision as a choice...
Which of the seven conditions of freedom were actually present when this decision was made?



KEY INSIGHT
The existence of a decision does not prove the existence of freedom.
A person may appear to have choices. What matters is whether they have the conditions necessary to make those choices safely, freely and meaningfully.



KEY TO REMEMBER
Domestic abuse does not simply influence decisions.
It systematically removes the conditions required for valid and informed choice.



**FREEDOM IS BUILT.
FREEDOM CAN BE REMOVED.
FREEDOM CAN BE RESTORED.**
Our role is to see the conditions, understand the coercion, restore freedom and create safety.

♥ UNDERSTAND THE CONDITIONS. SEE THE COERCION. RESTORE THE FREEDOM. PROTECT THE CHILDREN.

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THE FREEDOM TEST

HOW FREE AM I TO MAKE MY CHOICES?

BEFORE MAKING A DECISION, ASK:

If I chose the opposite option today... what would happen?

You deserve to make choices that are safe, respected and truly yours.

FREEDOM STARTS WITH AWARENESS.

1 SAFETY If I chose the opposite option... Would I fear violence, intimidation, threats or punishment?	No	A little	Sometimes	Often	Almost certainly
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2 MONEY If I chose the opposite option... Would I lose access to money, housing, transport, food or essentials?	No	A little	Sometimes	Often	Almost certainly
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3 RELATIONSHIPS If I chose the opposite option... Would I risk losing important relationships or contact with my children?	No	A little	Sometimes	Often	Almost certainly
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4 EMOTIONAL PRESSURE If I chose the opposite option... Would I be blamed, guilty, manipulated or made to feel responsible?	No	A little	Sometimes	Often	Almost certainly
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5 FREEDOM OF THOUGHT If I chose the opposite option... Could I think clearly without fear, panic, confusion or pressure?	Completely	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely	Not at all
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6 TIME If I chose the opposite option... Would I have enough time and space to consider it properly?	Yes	Mostly	Sometimes	Rarely	No
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

UNDERSTANDING YOUR SCORE



GREEN ZONE

"I can choose differently and remain safe."

This is closer to a valid and informed choice.



AMBER ZONE

"I technically have options, but there are significant costs attached."

Freedom is restricted. Support may be needed.



RED ZONE

"I know what would happen if I chose differently."

Fear, punishment, loss, intimidation or control are shaping the decision.

THIS IS NOT FREE CHOICE. THIS IS COERCION.

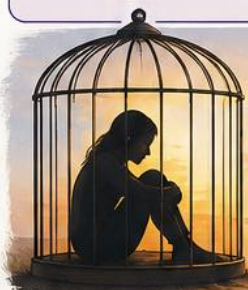


THE KEY QUESTION

If the consequences of saying "No" are severe...

IS IT REALLY A CHOICE?

Or is it a consequence-managed decision?



FREEDOM IS NOT WHETHER YOU CAN SAY YES.

FREEDOM IS WHETHER YOU CAN SAFELY SAY NO.



REMEMBER

- You are not alone.
- You are not to blame.
- Support is available.
- Your safety matters most.



YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO:
BE SAFE. BE RESPECTED.
BE HEARD. BE FREE.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Contact a domestic abuse service in your area or call:
 Call 999 in an emergency
 National Domestic Abuse Helpline
 0808 2000 247 (24/7)



YOU DESERVE A LIFE WHERE YOUR CHOICES ARE RESPECTED AND YOUR FUTURE IS YOURS.

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INFOGRAPHIC 3 PRACTICE TOOL FOR LEARNING

“Before we judge a decision, let's understand the conditions shaping it,”

THE FREEDOM BARRIERS MAP

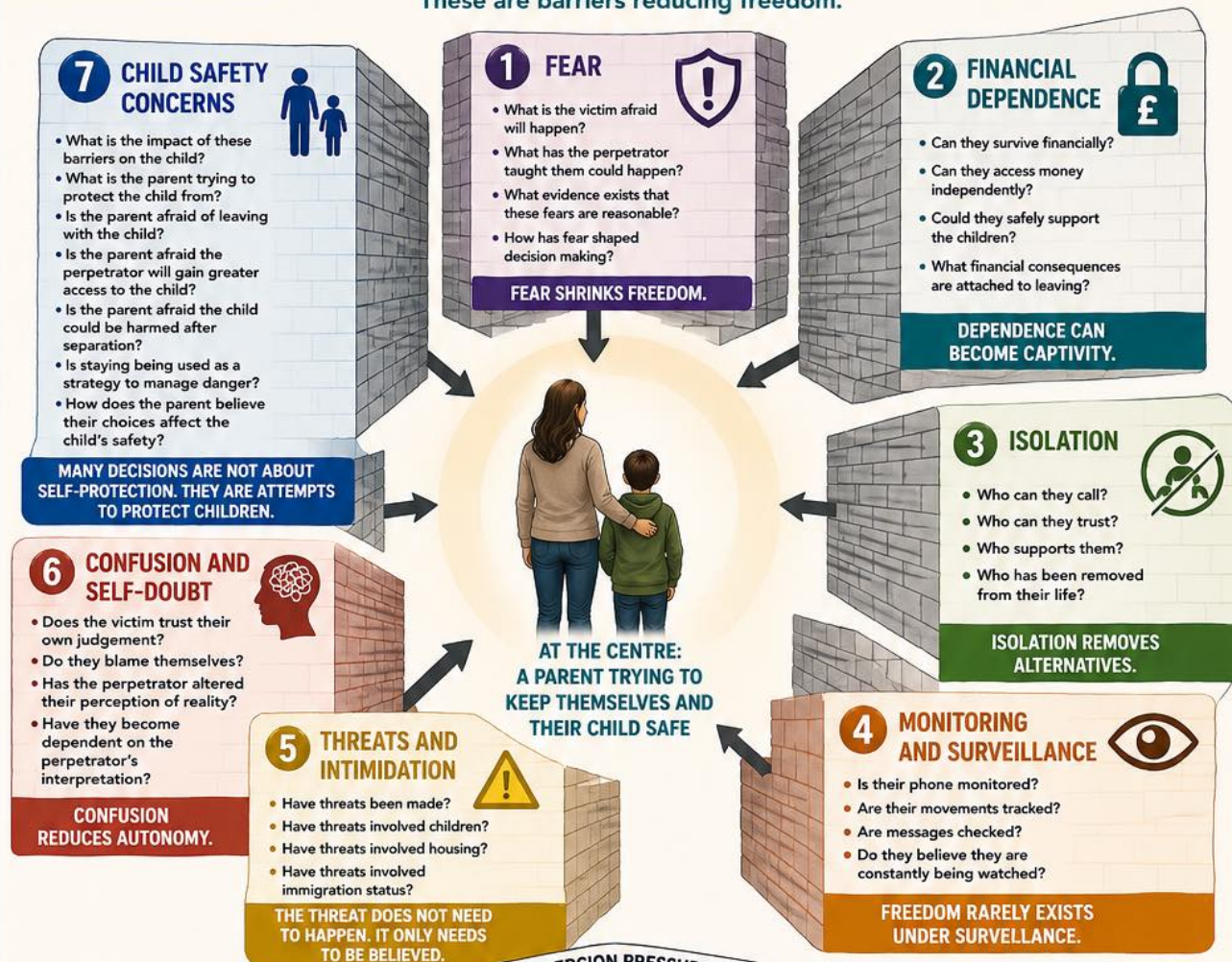
THE FORCES THAT REDUCE FREEDOM AND SHAPE APPARENT CHOICES

These are not reasons people stay.
These are barriers reducing freedom.

CORE QUESTION FOR PRACTITIONERS



Before analysing behaviour, can we clearly identify the barriers shaping that behaviour?



LOW COERCION

Freedom largely intact. Victim can access support and alternatives.



MODERATE COERCION

Choice is becoming increasingly constrained. Some options remain, but barriers are significant.



HIGH COERCION

Decisions increasingly shaped by abuse. Options are limited and risky.



EXTREME COERCION

Survival mode dominates. Valid and informed choice is unlikely.

THE CHILD IMPACT QUESTIONS



- What is the impact of these barriers on the child?
- What is the child learning about relationships?
- Is the parent afraid of leaving with the child?
- Is the parent afraid of what may happen to the child after separation?
- Is the parent making decisions to manage danger rather than exercise freedom?

CHILDREN ARE ALWAYS IMPACTED, EVEN WHEN THEY ARE NOT PRESENT.



THE PRACTICE TEST

If these barriers disappeared tomorrow, would:

- The decision remain the same?
- The behaviour remain the same?
- The fear remain the same?
- The child experience life differently?

IF THE ANSWER IS NO:
The behaviour may be a consequence of coercion rather than preference.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION



Before asking:
“Why doesn't the victim leave?”
Ask instead:
“What forces are making leaving unsafe, impossible, dangerous or unimaginable?”

KEY INSIGHT



We often analyse the branch and ignore the roots. The behaviour is visible. The coercion is often hidden.



KEY TO REMEMBER

The greater the coercion, the less freedom exists. The less freedom exists, the less meaningful it becomes to judge behaviour without understanding the conditions producing it.



PEOPLE DO NOT MAKE CHOICES IN A VACUUM.

Every choice sits inside a set of conditions. To understand the decision, first understand the barriers shaping it.



INFOGRAPHIC 4 PRACTICE TOOL FOR LEARNING

THE FREEDOM RESTORATION MAP

FROM SURVIVAL TO VALID CHOICE

SURVIVAL

- Fear
- Control
- Isolation
- Dependency

FREEDOM

- Safety
- Confidence
- Support
- Choice

We do not create freedom
by demanding different decisions.
We create freedom by changing
the conditions around the decision.

COERCION AND CONTROL

THE FREEDOM BRIDGE

Freedom is not a single decision.
Freedom is built condition by condition.

1 SAFETY



- Is the immediate risk reducing?
- Can the parent disagree safely?
- Can the parent say no safely?
- Can the parent make decisions without fear?
- Is safety increasing over time?

Without safety
there is no freedom.

2 STABILITY



- Is housing secure?
- Is income stable?
- Are practical needs being met?
- Are barriers reducing?
- Is day-to-day life becoming more predictable?

Stability expands
available options.

3 SUPPORT



- Who stands beside this parent?
- Who helps during crisis?
- Who reduces isolation?
- Who increases safety?
- Who helps sustain change?

Support creates
resilience.

4 UNDERSTANDING



- Does the parent understand coercive control?
- Do they understand available options?
- Do they understand their rights?
- Do they understand the impact on the child?
- Do they understand how control operates?

People cannot choose
options they cannot see.

5 CONFIDENCE



- Is self-belief increasing?
- Is self-blame reducing?
- Is confidence returning?
- Is independent thinking increasing?
- Is agency being restored?

Confidence
restores agency.

6 CHILD SAFETY



- Is the child safer?
- Is the child less fearful?
- Is emotional security increasing?
- Is the child experiencing less control and abuse?
- Is the child's daily lived experience improving?

Child safety is
the destination.

THE CHILD IMPACT TEST



- Is the parent afraid of leaving with the child?
- Is the parent afraid of what will happen if the child goes to school?
- Is the parent afraid of seeking help?
- Is the parent afraid of disagreeing?
- Is the child living with fear, tension, unpredictability or control?
- What is the child learning about relationships, power and safety?

Children experience the consequences
of adult freedom and adult control.

THE FREEDOM STAIRCASE



Freedom grows when conditions grow.

THE PRACTICE TEST



WRONG QUESTION

Why doesn't the parent leave?



BETTER QUESTION

What conditions still need to
exist before leaving becomes
genuinely safe?

The focus shifts from judging
decisions to understanding constraints.

THE SOCIAL WORK TEST

WE DO NOT MEASURE SUCCESS BY:

- Assessments completed
- Meetings held
- Referrals made
- Plans written
- Contacts recorded
- Tasks ticked off



The goal is not activity.
The goal is increased freedom and safety.

WE MEASURE SUCCESS BY:

- Increased safety
- Increased freedom
- Reduced coercion
- Increased confidence
- More support
- Better childhoods

KEY INSIGHT



The opposite of
coercion is not
separation.

The opposite of
coercion is freedom.

KEY TO REMEMBER



People do not need
to be persuaded
into freedom.

They need the
conditions that make
freedom possible.



THE GOAL IS NOT TO CHANGE THE DECISION.

THE GOAL IS TO CHANGE THE CONDITIONS
SHAPING THE DECISION.

WHEN FREEDOM GROWS,
DIFFERENT CHOICES OFTEN FOLLOW.



INFOGRAPHIC 5 PRACTICE TOOL FOR LEARNING

THE CHILD FREEDOM TEST

HOW MUCH FREEDOM DOES THIS CHILD HAVE TO BE A CHILD?

Children do not simply experience abuse.

Children experience also the freedom or restriction created by abuse.

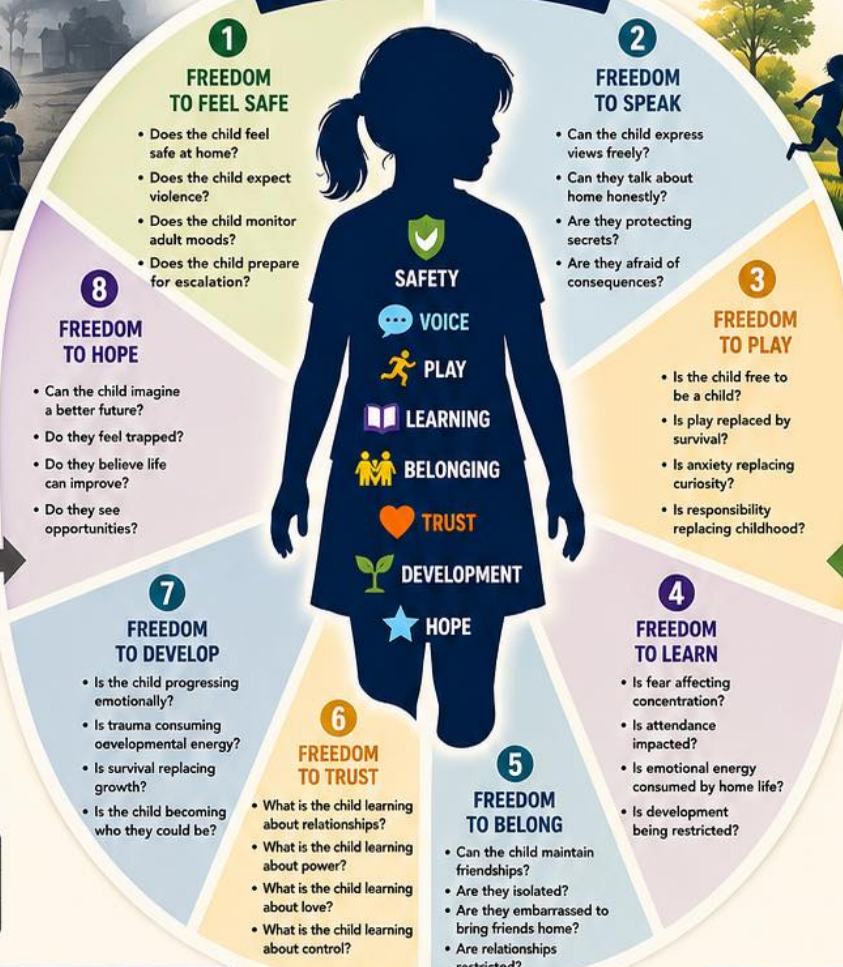
WHEN FREEDOM IS RESTRICTED

- Fear
- Walking on eggshells
- Parentified
- Hypervigilant
- Keeping secrets

WHEN FREEDOM IS PRESENT

- Play
- Safety
- Learning
- Belonging
- Exploration

THE CHILD FREEDOM WHEEL



FORCES THAT TAKE FREEDOM

- FEAR
- CONTROL
- CONFLICT
- INSTABILITY
- ISOLATION
- TRAUMA
- PARENTIFICATION
- UNCERTAINTY

These forces reduce childhood freedom and increase survival.

CONDITIONS THAT CREATE FREEDOM

- SAFETY
- PREDICTABILITY & STABILITY
- SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS
- OPEN COMMUNICATION
- EMOTIONAL SECURITY
- OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN & PLAY
- RESPECTED IDENTITY
- HOPE & POSITIVE FUTURE

These conditions grow freedom and restore childhood.

THE CHILD FREEDOM METER



The more domains of freedom, the more childhood can thrive.

THE DOMESTIC ABUSE TEST



The absence of violence is not the same as the presence of freedom.

THE CHILD IMPACT QUESTION

Before asking:
"Why doesn't the victim leave?"

Ask instead:

What childhood is this child currently living?

How much freedom does this child have to be a child?

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION QUESTIONS

- Is the child adapting or developing?
- Is the child surviving or flourishing?
- Is the child becoming smaller or bigger because of this environment?
- What freedoms has abuse removed?
- Which freedoms have been restored?
- What evidence do we have?



THE MORAL TEST

WE DO NOT MEASURE SUCCESS BY:

- Assessment completed
- Conference held
- Visit completed
- Referral made
- Plan written
- Report filed

WE MEASURE SUCCESS BY:

- Child sleeps better
- Child worries less
- Child plays more
- Child learns more
- Child trusts more
- Child hopes more



KEY INSIGHT



Domestic abuse does not only control victims.

It controls childhood.

Safeguarding is also the restoration of childhood freedom.

THE QUESTION IS NOT WHETHER THE CHILD WITNESSED ABUSE.
THE QUESTION IS HOW MUCH OF THEIR CHILDHOOD HAS BEEN TAKEN AWAY BY IT.

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SUPERVISION QUESTIONS FOR DOMESTIC ABUSE

COERCIVE CONTROL IS NOT ONE INCIDENT. IT IS A SYSTEM.

CHILDREN SEE IT FEEL IT LIVE IT CARRY IT

VICTIMS DO NOT MAKE VALID AND INFORMED CHOICES.

They are forced, manipulated, coerced, given false choices, or making survival choices.

1



Before we analyse the victim's behaviour, can you describe in precise behavioural

detail what the perpetrator did to construct the conditions and environment in which the victim's apparent choice became dangerous, unsafe, or interpreted as not prioritising the child?

THIS QUESTION EXPOSES:

- The architecture of coercion
- How power stripped away choice
- Why her responses were survival, not preference

2



Why are we analysing the victim's behaviour

more than the perpetrator's abuse, and what have we done to meaningfully understand, disrupt, and hold accountable the perpetrator's controlling behaviour?

THIS QUESTION CHALLENGES:

- Victim-focused thinking
- Systemic drift towards managing her
- Our discomfort with confronting perpetrators

HOW DOMESTIC ABUSE IMPACTS VICTIMS...

- FEAR OF VIOLENCE OR ESCALATION
- FINANCIAL CONTROL AND DEPENDENCY
- ISOLATION FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS
- MONITORING AND SURVEILLANCE (phones, location, social media)
- GASLIGHTING AND REALITY DISTORTION
- THREATS TO TAKE THE CHILDREN
- SEXUAL COERCION AND HUMILIATION
- DEGRADATION, INTIMIDATION AND PUNISHMENT
- NO ACCESS TO SAFE ALTERNATIVES

3



What actual conditions for a valid and informed choice has this intervention created, and if those conditions do not exist, on what basis are we claiming the victim freely chose anything?

THIS QUESTION DEMANDS:

- Safety from further harm
- Financial independence
- Secure housing
- Legal protection
- Belief, respect and support
- Freedom to think without fear
- Time, space and options

ADVICE WITHOUT THESE CONDITIONS IS NOT CHOICE. IT IS COERCION DRESSED AS FREEDOM.



REMEMBER:

If the victim does not disclose, does not leave, the question is not "Why didn't she?" It is "What is he still doing?"

THE CHILD IS WATCHING. THEY ARE LEARNING. THEY ARE ABSORBING. THEY ARE HURTING.

...AND HOW IT IMPACTS CHILDREN

- WITNESSING FEAR, VIOLENCE AND ABUSE
- LIVING IN CONSTANT FEAR
- BLAMING THEMSELVES
- ROLE REVERSAL (looking after mum)
- ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND HYPERVIGILANCE
- DISRUPTED SLEEP, CONCENTRATION AND LEARNING
- LOSS OF TRUST IN ADULTS AND SYSTEMS
- NORMALISING CONTROL AS 'RELATIONSHIP'

4

Has this intervention become more focused on managing the victim's behaviour than understanding, disrupting, and containing the perpetrator's abuse and control?

A REFLECTIVE QUESTION FOR MANAGERS AND SERVICES



What is our service really focused on?



Are we demanding evidence of coercive control – and acting on it?



Does our recording centre her behaviour or his abuse?



Do victims feel believed, protected and supported by us?



Are we creating safety or adding to risk?



What will children remember about how we responded?

OUR ROLE IS NOT TO JUDGE HER CHOICES.

OUR ROLE IS TO DISRUPT HIS ABUSE.



PERPETRATOR ACCOUNTABILITY + VICTIM SURVIVAL + CHILD SAFETY
OUR ANALYSIS MUST REFLECT REALITY. OUR ACTIONS MUST CREATE SAFETY.

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