

## Domestic Violence Risk Assessment

WillisPalmer has developed a formalised, structured risk assessment protocol for assessment in cases of proven or alleged domestic violence. Our multi-disciplinary team of consultants are trained in the use of the DV:RAF (Domestic Violence: Risk Assessment Framework) and we have developed robust quality assurance systems to ensure compliance with the framework and its requirements.

### 1. Methodology

There are essentially three approaches to conducting a risk assessment: unaided clinical judgment, actuarial and structured professional judgment. Risk assessments based solely or primarily upon clinical constructs or unstructured psychiatric or psychological evaluation have now been widely discredited - even experienced clinicians fail to predict future violence in cases where violence would have been readily predicted from a small number of straightforward evidence-based risk indicators such as previous acts of violence.<sup>1</sup> Actuarial methods rate the individual concerned against a fixed set of risk indicators using a predetermined numerical weighting system, and are of limited value in family court assessments. In structured professional judgment approaches, the assessor arrives at a formulation of risk after considering a wide range of empirically validated risk factors. Because of the limitations of other risk assessment approaches, Calvin Bell has developed a model for assessing domestic violence risk based upon structured professional judgment: The Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Framework,<sup>2</sup> which comprises the format for this assessment (and which has been adopted by other experts in the field).

We acknowledge that risk assessment remains a formidably difficult task and is best understood as an estimation of probabilities: an informed, defensible judgement, the quality of which depends upon the skills, knowledge and experience of the assessor, their familiarity with the empirical literature, the rigour with which the assessment is undertaken, and the quality, quantity and accuracy of the information available.

### 2. Risk categories

In our report we will apply the following categories of risk (the probability of harmful behaviour occurring):

<b>negligible</b>	<b>low</b>	<b>moderate</b>	<b>substantial</b>	<b>high</b>
very unlikely to occur	unlikely to occur	may occur (a 'real possibility')	likely to occur	very likely to occur

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Skeem, J.L. et al, 2009. Psychological Science in the Courtroom. The Guildford Press. London.

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For the purpose of quantifying the severity of violence, the following categories apply:

minor	moderate	severe
acts such as grabbing, pushing or slapping that are unlikely to leave a significant mark, result in injury or require professional medical attention	acts such as punching, kicking or head-butting that are likely to result in temporary injury and warrant some form of professional medical attention	acts of extreme violence such as strangulation, forceful blows to the head or striking with an object, that are likely to result in serious or permanent injury, or death

For the purpose of quantifying emotional and psychological abuse, the following categories apply:

minor	moderate	severe
occasional rejection, criticism, insults, name-calling, 'put-downs' etc that are unlikely to have a lasting negative impact on the victim's self-esteem	rejection, criticism, insults, name-calling, 'put-downs', humiliation etc that are sufficiently pernicious or frequent to undermine the victim's self-esteem	frequent rejection, criticism, insults, name-calling, 'put-downs', humiliation etc that are likely to have a devastating impact on the victim's self-esteem

### 3. Definitions

Violence and abuse have proven to be concepts which defy easy definition. Domestic violence and child maltreatment are no exception, and, as yet, there is no professional consensus on the definition of these terms. For the purposes of our assessments we understand violence to mean actual or attempted physical harm. While recognising that domestic violence is typically characterised by a constellation of behaviours which comprise the exercise of control and the misuse of power by one intimate over another (rather than episodic incidents of aggression), throughout our report we will employ the Home Office's definition of domestic violence: "any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality".

As for significant harm, section 31(9) (as amended) of the 1989 Children Act offers guidance: where the question of whether harm suffered by a child is significant turns on the child's health and development, his (sic) health or development shall be compared with that which could reasonably be expected of a similar child. Section 120 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 extended the definition of 'significant harm' within the 1989 Children Act to include 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another'. Benjamin (1991) describes significant harm as: "a compilation of significant events, both acute and long-standing, which interact with the child's ongoing development, and interrupt, alter, or impair physical and psychological development".

### 4. Process

Following receipt of referral we will identify the appropriate practitioner to undertake the assessment and when agreed by the commissioning organisation the work will be completed within 6 weeks of receipt of instructions.