



Child First: Safe Child Contact Saves Lives



We fully support the new campaign by Women's Aid called [Child First: Safe Child Contact Saves Lives](#), which calls on the Government, family court judiciary, Child and Family Courts Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), and other involved services to make child contact safer for women and children. [The report Nineteen Child Homicides](#), which details serious crime reviews into the deaths of children in the past ten years, is essential reading for everyone concerned about the safety of children. Safe child contact has always been an essential demand of our campaign.

[Our campaign started](#) in response to two cases in the media: the [Oxford gang case](#) involving the sexual exploitation, abuse and rape of young girls whilst service providers and the police ignored the victims and the murders of [Mathew \(10\) and Carla \(5\) Stevenson](#) by their father. Julian Stevenson killed both of his children with a kitchen knife on the first unsupervised contact he had with them following a divorce. Matthew and Carla are not part of the 19 Children Homicides report because they were killed in France, however, Stevenson was a British national and the murders were given huge press coverage here. The British press made excuse after excuse for Stevenson: if only the French courts had given Stevenson access to his children on his terms, then he wouldn't have been forced to kill them. The fact that Stevenson's previous access had been supervised by his ex-wife or a social worker BECAUSE of his history of violence went unnoticed by many. The Daily Mail went so far as to quote a "judicial source" who claimed that the murder was caused due to child contact being "insufficient for his needs".

Child contact is not about the needs of the father. It is about the rights of the children. In the UK at least, child contact orders under the Children Act 1989 should consider the welfare needs of the child as [paramount](#). This should mean that the courts consider the emotional and physical safety of the child(ren) when making a decision for a contact order. If we assume that the law is adhered to and that contact with a non-resident parent is set up in order to meet the needs of the child, being at risk of violence or in this case, murder, is certainly not about the needs of the child(aren). It is about the presumption of children as the property of fathers.

19 children killed in a ten year period due to informal or formal child contact arrangements with a violent father is an absolute disgrace, but it is only part of the story. Every single day, children are forced into unsafe situations with violent fathers where they continue to experience abuse or are forced to watch the father abuse the mother at handovers. We see statements from Cafcass and the [family court judiciary](#) which state that the children witnessing domestic violence is not a



sufficient reason to deny contact with a father, even though mothers are labelled incompetent for being victims of domestic violence and failing to "protect" their children from viewing - the same is not said of the perpetrator. We see courts label men who murder their ex-wives labelled "[good fathers](#)", even when the mother is killed in front of the child.

We need a fundamental overhaul of child protections, Government policy and the family courts to protect children. It needs to start by ending the presumption that violent men are entitled to access their children. It needs to hold violent men accountable for their abuse. It needs Government policy advisors and all staff involved in child protection undergoing specialist training in domestic violence and abuse to challenge their assumptions about men's rights to children and the harm caused by children. We need the family courts to stop facilitating the abuse of women by their former partners through the courts. We need children to be raised without the fear of violence. We also need a fit-for-purpose child maintenance agency that recognises that men who refuse to pay child maintenance are perpetrating financial abuse and that it is also a sign of a high risk perpetrator.

Our children deserve so much better from the Government, family courts, Cafcass and judiciary. 19 children is too many. 1 child is too many. Please sign the petition below and write to your MP to put children first.

[PETITION](#)

We are calling on the Government and family courts to ensure there are no further avoidable child deaths as a result of unsafe child contact with a perpetrator of domestic abuse. In order for this to happen the family courts must be a safe place for all the children and survivors of domestic abuse that are relying on them to protect them from further harm.

Two ways they can do this are by:

1. Ensuring that domestic abuse is identified and its impact fully considered by the family court judiciary and that child arrangements orders put the best interests of the child(ren) first and protect the well-being of the parent the child(ren) is living with, in accordance with Practice Direction 12 J Child Arrangements & Contact Order: Domestic Violence and Harm.
2. Ensuring survivors of domestic abuse attending the family court have access to protection measures, similar to those available in criminal courts. Survivors of domestic abuse should always have access to a separate waiting room or area and judges must ensure there are separate exit times from court to allow the survivor to leave safely.

There is a form letter that you can use to send to your MP asking them to sign up to Child First [here](#).