Examples of what coercive control can look like as experienced by a child co-victim

Vulnerability factors (immigration status, financial precarity, disability, perinatal status, etc.) can be used by the child's father/stepfather to reinforce his control over his partner and the children.

Monitoring and Control

- The child's father/stepfather wants them to tell him everything their mother says and does.
- He monitors the child and demands to know where they are, where their mother is, what she is doing and who she is with.
- He hides or withholds information or documents pertaining to the child (medical care, passport, school records).

Threats

- The child's father/stepfather threatens suicide if they refuse to live with or spend time with him.
- He threatens to kill or harm their pet.
- He threatens to separate them from their mother or their siblings.

Blaming

- The child's father/stepfather blames them for his own abusive behaviour (towards the child or their mother).
- He blames them for breaking up the family and says that it is all their fault.
- He makes the child feel guilty when they refuse to spend time with him.

Financial Abuse and Withholding of Resources

- The child's father/stepfather prevents them from seeing professionals who would support their development or well-being.
- He refuses to pay child support or contribute towards their extracurricular, sports or cultural activities.
- He restricts their mother's food or clothing budgets.

Sexual Abuse

- The child's father/stepfather sexually disparages their mother in front of them.
- He exposes himself in front of the child or exposes them to sexual activity.
- He makes inappropriate sexual comments about the child or teenager.

Child and Mother Sabotage

- The child's father/stepfather demeans their mother or questions her parenting skills in front of them.
- He prevents their mother from breastfeeding or soothing the child, or helping them with their homework.
- He does not allow the child to speak their mother tongue.

Isolation

- The child's father/stepfather restricts meaningful contact with their grandparents or cousins, or speaks poorly of their relatives.
- He prevents them from participating in school activities or gives them the silent treatment if they see friends.
- He speaks poorly of meaningful figures in the child's life (teachers, professionals, friends, etc.).

Gaslighting

- The child's father/stepfather accuses them of lying or having made up or exaggerated the abuse.
- He tells them that their mother is crazy, that she made it all up or that she doesn't want to care for them anymore.
- He insults or threatens them, and if the child reacts, he tells them that it was a joke or that they are too sensitive.

Humiliation

- The child's father/stepfather mocks them for their appearance, abilities or disability.
- He does not allow them free access to the bathroom.
- He insults or demeans them.

Abuse using Technology

- The child's father/stepfather uses their phone or tablet to spy on them and monitor their or their mother's activities.
- He uses GPS to track where they go with their mother.
- He regularly insists on having video calls with the child on the mother's custody days to monitor what they are doing and where they are.

Judicial Violence

- The child's father/stepfather tries to set up a custody arrangement that requires in-person transfers or abundant communication.
- He brings false accusations to the DPJ/youth protection.
- He does not respect the custody ruling.

Physical Abuse

- The child's father/stepfather pushes, hits or strangles them.
- He mistreats the child's pet.
- He breaks or throws out their things or toys.

Gendered language is used in this tool to bring visibility to the fact that conjugal violence is largely perpetrated by men against women.

Inspired by: West Island Women's Shelter, *Coercive Control and Its Impacts on Children Who Are Victims of It*, 2022; Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, *Coercive Control Toolbox*, 2022.

REGROUPEMENT DES MAISONS POUR FEMMES VICTIMES DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE

This project was funded by

Secrétariat à la condition féminine

Québec

The Experiences of Children Exposed to Conjugal Violence: Understanding Their Reality through the Lens of Coercive Control

Scope of the Phenomenon

- **In Quebec, 1 in 5 children** has witnessed or learned about psychological or physical abuse from one of their parents towards the other in the previous year[1]. Among these children, over **65%** are also direct victims of violence or abuse[2].
- **In Canada, 34%** of youth protection cases involve exposure to conjugal violence[3].
- In Quebec, from 2023-2024, the DPJ (youth protection services) received an average of **50 reports per day** for exposure to conjugal violence[4].
- **12% of children** in Quebec have a mother who was a victim of conjugal violence during her pregnancy or during the child's first two years of life (perinatal period[5]).

Children Are Not Just Witnesses, but Co-Victims

MYTH A child is affected by conjugal violence only if they see or hear incidents of violence, or has been the target of violence.

REALITY A child suffers the consequences of conjugal violence simply by growing up in a family where the daily atmosphere is one of fear, tension, control and restriction, even if there is no physical violence.

Behaviours that compromise the child's well-being and health

The coercive control that the child's father is exercising is a behaviour that he chose. This choice has major and harmful impacts on the children[7] :

- Mental health: anxiety; low self-esteem; feelings of terror, guilt, confusion, despair, or helplessness; post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.
- Physical health: headaches, stomach aches, bedwetting, loss of sleep, growth delay, eating disorders, etc.

This abuse calls into question the father's ability to provide a safe and caring parental environment.

When coercive control is present, there is a greater risk that the father will[8] :

- manipulate the child with the goal of controlling or harming the mother;
- sabotage the mother-child relationship;
- be violent towards the child directly;
- weaponize the legal system to maintain control over the mother post-separation: false allegations, instigating multiple legal processes, etc.

To understand the experiences of children exposed to conjugal violence, it is imperative that we consider the full breadth of the strategies of control put in place by their father/stepfather. The cumulative effect of these strategies is what immerses the children in a climate of restriction, uncertainty and fear[9].

« We're afraid of putting him in a bad mood because that can lead to... something else.
We never know how he's going to react. We do what we can, but we're walking on eggshells.[6] »

Tips for Seeing beyond Violent Incidents

- Coercive control creates a constant atmosphere of uncertainty and unsafety that has long-lasting impacts on the child's sense of safety.
- Even when they are not the direct target, the child experiences the effects of the restrictions imposed on their mother, such as isolation, monitoring, loss of autonomy and limited choices.
- The coercive control that the child's father/stepfather exercises can harm the mother's ability to fully exercise her role as a parent. This could include unilaterally imposing parenting rules, limiting the mother's autonomy, discrediting her or sabotaging post-separation communication and collaboration.
- Coercive control does not always stop after separation. It can continue or even intensify over time. This could include bringing false accusations, threatening to go after the children or abusively instigating multiple legal processes.

1 Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Family Violence and Neglect in the Lives of Québec Children*, Gouvernement du Québec, 2024.
2 *ibid.*
3 Public Health Agency of Canada. *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008: Major Findings*. Ottawa, 2010.
4 *Quand la violence conjugale est au cœur de la vie de l'enfant — Bilan annuel de la Direction de la protection de la jeunesse*, MSSS, Gouvernement du Québec, 2024 (in French).
5 Institut de la statistique du Québec, op. cit.
6 This quote from a child was taken (and translated) from: *Expérience, ressources et besoins des enfants exposé·e·s à la violence dans le couple*, Anne Cattagni et al., Unité de médecine des violences, Suisse, 2024.
7 MSSS, *Guide de pratique clinique – Repérage et analyse de situations d'enfants exposés à la violence conjugale*, 2024 (in French).
8 Simon Lapierre and Alexandra Vincent, *Le meilleur intérêt de l'enfant victime de violence conjugale : Enjeux et réponses sociojudiciaires*. Québec : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2022 ; Simon Lapierre and Isabelle Côté, *Il se prenait pour le roi de la maison! : Des enfants parlent de la violence conjugale*. Montréal : Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2018 ; Emma Katz, *Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2022.
9 Contrôle coercitif — *Lois, politiques et pratiques en matière de violence conjugale*, ed. Simon Lapierre, Isabelle Côté and Michèle Frenette. Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2025 (in French).

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