Case Study: Coercive Control and the Weaponisation of Children

Disclaimer: This case study is a fictionalised account created for educational and illustrative purposes. The names and specific details have been invented, but the patterns of behaviour described are representative of real-life cases of domestic abuse and coercive control.

A list of reflective questions for practitioners have been designed to prompt discussion and critical thinking among frontline practitioners in the domestic violence field. Managers can use the questions with their team to encourage deeper analysis of practice, systemic challenges, and interventions required in cases of coercive control involving children.

The Jones Family

To the outside world, the Jones family is the picture of success. Anna Jones is a primary school assistant principal, and her husband, Mark Jones, a financial advisor. After 14 years of marriage, they have two children, 12-year-old Liam and 7-year-old Sophie, and live in a beautiful family home. Mark is seen by the community as a protective, dedicated family man.

When Anna first met Mark, he was charismatic and incredibly attentive. This 'attentiveness' quickly became constant texting, needing to know where she was 'just so he knew she was safe.' Mark would constantly praise her about how perfect she was, even announcing his love for her on social media only two weeks into their relationship. He would flood social media with photos of them together telling the world about how in love he was with her.

He soon began to subtly undermine her other relationships, making comments like, "*Your friends are fun, but they're a bit wild,*" or, "*Your family seems to criticise you a lot; I only want what's best for you.*" He'd create 'special' plans just for the two of them, making it difficult for her to see friends, who he'd then accuse of "*trying to come between them.*"

Six months into the marriage, Mark convinced Anna to open a joint bank account to "*simplify their finances,*" but he managed all the passwords and gave her an 'allowance.' He framed this as "*helping her save.*" He insisted on knowing her phone and social media passwords, claiming it was about "*total honesty*" in a relationship. When she hesitated, he acted deeply hurt, questioning her commitment. He also began to micromanage her appearance, 'suggesting' she not wear certain outfits because "*it attracts the wrong kind of attention,*" eventually evolving into him telling her what to buy & wear.

By her second wedding anniversary, Anna was financially dependent and isolated from her support system. The control was no longer subtle. Mark degraded her intelligence, calling her "*stupid*" or "*forgetful*" when she challenged his version of events (gaslighting). He had 'rules' for housekeeping and her schedule. Any attempt to regain independence was met with implicit threats - not of physical violence, but that he "*couldn't manage without her*" or that he would "tell everyone her secrets" if she ever left, leaving her feeling trapped and worthless.

When Liam was born, Anna continued to cope as best as she could, being isolated from close family and friends. Anna didn't think Mark could be more controlling but five years later, Sophie was born, and Mark took it to the next level. Mark's behaviours towards Anna became more severe 'behind closed doors' and for years he continued with intensive micromanagement of everyday tasks. She was permitted to go back to work as long as Mark felt he remained in control.

To keep Mark calm, Anna would send a screenshot of her GPS location to Mark when she reached work each morning and immediately when she arrived home. Anna was very diligent with this as she wanted to make sure she could keep going to work. In the past Mark had gone into fits of rage if he thought she was out for 5-10 minutes longer than she 'should have been.'

As a financial advisor, Mark continued to insist on controlling all family income, claiming "*I manage money for a living.*" Originally the money went into a joint account, however Mark felt that it was better if all income went into his personal account. Mark insisted that she sign a form to allow this to occur. The allowance she received barely covered regular bills and she had to justify every purchase for the children, from school trips to new clothes, often having to ask multiple times for money, reinforcing her complete dependency.

Mark consistently undermined her as a mother. If Anna set a boundary, like limiting screen time, Mark would openly override it in front of the children. "*Don't listen to Mummy, she's being dramatic,*" he'd say. "*Daddy knows what's best.*" He taught Liam and Sophie that their mother's rules were optional, and he was the ultimate authority, often calling her "*incompetent*" or "*over-emotional*" to her face. He even used the children to monitor her, asking Liam during her maternity leave with Sophie, "*What did Mummy do all day while I was at work?*"

The decision to leave finally came when Anna's supervisor expressed concern for her well-being, noting increasing anxiety and isolation. Over months they spoke in confidence and the supervisor suggested that they hear from a support service about what strategies she could put in place to help her and the children to keep safe. This external validation gave Anna the strength she needed. Six months ago, Mark needed to go away for work overnight and she saw the opportunity to make her move. With the help of support, Anna enacted her plan, took the children, and moved into a rented flat.

Mark outwardly agreed to the separation, telling colleagues, friends and family he was "*graciously tolerating*" Anna's "*mid-life crisis*" for the children's sake. But the separation didn't end the abuse; it only changed its form. "*I thought leaving would be the end of it,*" Anna later confided to a domestic abuse support worker, "*but it feels like he has more control over me now than when we lived together. He uses the kids as his little spies, and I feel like I'm suffocating.*"

Mark's tactics pivoted immediately, with the children as his primary tools. Contact time became intelligence-gathering operations. Upon their arrival with him, he would interrogate them: "*Who came to visit the new flat? Did Mummy's 'friend' David from her work come over?*" "*Send me a picture of your dinner*" and "*Was Mummy sad? Who was she talking to?*"

Mark bought Liam a new smartphone, supposedly to 'stay in touch.' Anna soon discovered Mark had activated location services, tracked Liam, and found her new address without her consent. He would demand frequent video calls, using the time to scan Anna's flat, looking for evidence of new partners or anything he could criticise. He preyed on Liam's innocence, telling him, "*I worry about your mum. You need to be my big man at home and tell me if she's okay, or if she's bringing strange men around.*"

Mark continued to actively sabotage Anna's parenting. He portrayed her as the one who "*broke up the family,*" telling the children "*Mummy doesn't love us anymore.*" He created a 'good cop/bad cop' dynamic. At his house, there were expensive gifts and few rules, making Anna's home of routines and homework seem strict and boring. With Sophie, he was emotionally manipulative, saying, "*Give Daddy a big hug, I'm so lonely now that Mummy has left me.*" He used Sophie's distress against Anna at handover of the children, claiming, "*Sophie was crying her eyes out. You are clearly not providing a stable environment.*"

Mark also controlled Anna's time through logistical disruption. He would frequently arrive late for pick-ups and drop-offs at the Children's Contact Service, knowing it would disrupt her work. He refused to communicate with her directly, insisting on speaking only through Liam, forcing their 12-year-old son to act as a messenger.

Today, Anna lives in a state of constant, suffocating anxiety, moderating her behaviour in her own home for fear of it being reported back. She is terrified to form new friendships, knowing Mark will find out and use it against her. Liam, caught in the middle, is showing signs of severe stress. His grades have dropped, and he is wracked with guilt, torn between 'reporting' on his mother and 'betraying' his father. Sophie, meanwhile, is confused and distressed. She has started bedwetting again and developed separation anxiety, believing, as Mark subtly reinforced, that the entire separation is somehow her fault.

Reflective Questions for Frontline DFV Practitioners

1. Assessment and Identification

- **Distinguishing Conflict from Control**: At what point in Anna's initial disclosure would you differentiate this situation from a "high-conflict separation" and identify it as coercive control and post-separation abuse? What specific language or behavioural indicators in her narrative are the biggest red flags?
- **Assessing Covert Tactics**: Mark presents as a "concerned father." What type of questioning techniques are most effective for uncovering the controlling nature of his actions, especially when he uses the children's wellbeing as a justification?
- **Technological Abuse**: Beyond the obvious tracking, how can we better assess the psychological impact of using children's devices for surveillance? How does this form of "proxy stalking" complicate traditional safety planning?

2. Legislation

- **Legal Intervention**: Refer to Division 6A and section 54D of the Crimes Act 1900. Could the coercive control offence apply to this scenario? What other legal options might be available such as an ADVO? Can it be used to affect the impact of coercive control in this family?

3. Intervention Strategies with Anna

- **Adapting Safety Planning**: How does safety planning need to be adapted when the perpetrator has sanctioned access to the survivor's life and home through child contact? What does a realistic "digital safety plan" look like for Anna?
- **Evidencing the Abuse**: What practical advice would you give Anna for documenting Mark's behaviour? How can we help her capture the pattern of control, not just isolated incidents? Would it be appropriate to use any technological assistance such as the Empower You App?
- **Building Resilience**: Beyond legal routes, what therapeutic strategies can we employ to help Anna build psychological capacity against Mark's remote coercion? How do we empower her to manage the children's disclosures without showing distress that could further empower Mark?

4. Supporting the Children (Liam and Sophie)

- **Addressing the Loyalty Bind**: What are the immediate and long-term risks for Liam in his role as a "spy"? How would you approach working with him to alleviate this pressure without directly vilifying his father, which could increase his internal conflict?
- **Age-Appropriate Interventions**: How would you work differently with Liam (12), who is being actively parentified, and Sophie (7), who is being emotionally manipulated? What are the distinct therapeutic goals for each child?
- **Countering Parental Alienation**: The term "parental alienation" is often misused by perpetrators. In this context, where Mark is clearly the alienating parent, how do we support Anna in countering his narrative without creating more overt conflict that the children are caught within?

5. Systemic and Multi-Agency Challenges

- **Engaging with Schools**: What are effective ways to engage the children's school? What specific information should be shared and what support should we ask them to put in place for Liam and Sophie?
- **The User of Violence's Narrative**: Mark is likely presenting a compelling, plausible narrative to professionals (e.g., his own lawyer, mediators, maybe even support services). What are the risks of professionals colluding with his narrative, and how do we proactively challenge it in multi-agency settings?