

Child in considerable distress

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Introduction

Work-related requirements may be temporarily 'switched-off' when a main carer is responsible for a child who is in considerable distress (for example, if the distress is causing significant disruption to the family and a claimant's ability to undertake work-related activities). Alternatively, it may be more appropriate to tailor a claimant's commitments and work plan instead of switching-off requirements.

In circumstances where a child is in considerable distress, it may be reasonable to allow the current main carer of the child to have their work-related requirements switched-off. This will be appropriate if there is significant disruption to the claimant's normal childcare responsibilities and there is a need to provide additional care and support, for example because the child is:

- coping with the death of a parent, sibling, previous responsible carer of a child or a person living in the same household as the child but who does not pay commercial rent (for example, a grandparent)
- experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse where a police report may be available
- experiencing or witnessing violence and abuse other than domestic abuse

If the situation does not fall into any of these categories, either a domestic emergency switch-off or tailoring must be considered. See Claimant Commitment.

Violence or abuse (other than domestic abuse) may include:

- violence or assault that caused injury or wounding
- rape and sexual abuse

- harassment or stalking that causes fear, alarm or distress
- hate crimes
- witness to murder

These are examples and not a complete list.

Relevant circumstances could also include other serious traumatic events. In general, these would be incidents where a police report may be available (particularly if it relates to a crime where the child was a victim) or may involve persons or organisations such as:

- National Victim Service
- Victim Support (including the Witness Service run by Victim Support)
- Social Services
- healthcare professionals

Each child's reactions to these events will differ. Domestic abuse can often have a damaging and long-lasting effect on a child's health, development, ability to learn and their well-being.

It is important to consider the likely effect of the situation on the child and particularly what this means for a claimant and their ability to look for and be available for work.

Identifying if work-related requirements are affected

Once it is identified that a particular situation is causing distress for the child, consideration must be given to how this affects the claimant's work-related requirements. We must also consider if the situation meets the criteria for switching-off the claimant's requirements due to the child being in considerable distress.

If the situation does not meet the child in considerable distress provision, the domestic emergency or temporary childcare provisions can be considered where relevant (for example, the claimant may be unable to look for and be available for work because they are focusing on dealing with the child's distress). The child may be experiencing:

- problems at school such as being absent and deteriorating performance
- problems at home which are causing concern (for example, not eating or sleeping, unexpected or sudden withdrawal from friends or family or changes in communication)
- health-related changes or habits which may indicate stress (for example, bedwetting)

- a loss of confidence and 'clingy' or deteriorating behaviour
- a loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed
- getting into trouble with the police
- self-harming
- running away
- general sadness or distress requiring the need for a parent's emotional support

This is not a check list. These are examples of situations which may indicate that a child is in considerable distress which could then impact on a claimant's work-related requirements. Any impact must be considered and set out in the claimant commitment. See Claimant Commitment

The following examples demonstrate situations that could affect a claimant's ability to fulfil their work-related requirements:

- attending meetings with the school, Social Services, counselling sessions or healthcare professionals in connection with the child
- providing additional or alternative childcare responsibilities because the child was unable to attend school or after school activities (for example, because of ill-health, health and safety concerns, suspension or exclusion)
- having to spend more time supporting the child and being available for them
- having to make additional childcare or support arrangements for the distressed child
- having to re-organise life and family routines for the child as well as themselves

These are examples and not a complete list.

Criteria for switching-off work-related requirements

When it has been established that a claimant is responsible for a child in considerable distress, their work-related requirements may be switched-off in any of the following circumstances:

- they are currently the main carer for a child
- an event or situation has occurred which could reasonably be expected to cause the child distress
- they are providing additional care and support to the child because of their distress
- their ability to look for or be available for work is affected

If a claimant has had, or was eligible to have their work-related requirements switched-off for reasons other than a child being in considerable distress - these are also taken into account, for example:

- bereavement, see Death and bereavement
- domestic abuse, see Domestic abuse
- homelessness, see Homeless easements
- drug and alcohol treatment
- enforced separation

Duration of the switched-off period

If a claimant has not had their work-related requirements switched-off for any other reason, they can be switched-off for 1 month if they are responsible for a child who is in considerable distress.

This can be applied once in every 6 months for a total period of 2 years after the incident that triggered the child's distress (a maximum of 4 one-month periods).

If a claimant has more than one child experiencing distress, the length of time and number of periods they are entitled to have their requirements switched-off is the same. If more than 1 of the children experiences distress at different times during the 6-month period, the claimant commitment and work plan must be tailored to reflect this. See Claimant Commitment

If a claimant's work-related requirements are switched-off due to bereavement, they may be eligible for 3 further 1-month periods because their child is in considerable distress. This can be applied once every 6 months for a period of 18 months after the 6-month switch-off period for bereavement, a total period of 2 years.

If the claimant has had their work-related requirements switched-off because of domestic abuse (and they are the main carer for a child), the switch-off period is extended from 3 months to 26 weeks. This can only be applied once in every 12 months (the claimant can have the 3 month switch-off as long as they have not had a previous domestic abuse switch-off period within the last 12 months).

A claimant can have their requirements switched-off for additional periods of 1 month if their child is in distress. These additional periods can be applied once every 6 months over the next 18 months, a two-year period in total.

If a claimant has had their work-related requirements switched-off for any other reason, the one 1-month switch-off period for a child in considerable distress can

be applied. It can be applied once every 6 months for the balance of time up to a total of 2 years after the incident took place.

Impact on a claimant's commitments

A claimant's work-related requirements can be temporarily switched-off if they meet the criteria for caring for a child who is in considerable distress. However, the decision must be focused on how this specifically impacts on their ability to carry out work-related requirements (for example, if they have to undertake additional caring responsibilities as a result).

During the switch-off period, the claimant will not be required to:

- look for work
- be available for work
- attend Work Search Reviews or Work Focused Interviews

Relevant actions to be taken during the switch-off period can be agreed with the claimant. These are not mandatory and no sanction will be imposed if the actions are not completed.

Because a child's distress can re-occur, a longer-term plan must be discussed with the claimant (for example, determining how they will manage the situation if they were in work). In these circumstances, a claimant's work-related requirements can be tailored to meet their needs rather than being switched-off.

A claimant's commitments can be changed if they provide evidence that their ability to look for and be available for work is affected because they are providing ongoing support for their child. See Claimant Commitment

Providing evidence

If a claimant cannot provide formal evidence, their work-related requirements can still be switched-off if either of the following apply:

- this is the first time the claimant has reported a child in considerable distress
- it will have an effect on their ability to look for and be available for work

If a claimant makes any further applications to have their work-related requirements switched-off because of a child in considerable distress, they must provide evidence.

The evidence must show that the child's distress is having an ongoing impact on the claimant's ability to fulfil their work-related requirements. The evidence does not need to detail the fact that the child is in distress.

When assessing if the evidence is sufficient, the following must be considered:

- to what extent is the situation causing distress to the child
- what does this mean for the claimant and their ability to fulfil the work-related requirements that were agreed in their claimant commitment (see Claimant Commitment)

Each case must be considered on its own facts and merits. The child's reaction to the situation and the effect that this has on the claimant's ability to look for and be available for work will be different each time.

The types of evidence to consider include:

- evidence that the claimant has attended meetings with the school, Social Services and healthcare professionals in connection with the child
- evidence of additional childcare responsibilities because the child was unable to attend school or after school activities (for example, because of ill-health, health and safety concerns, suspension or exclusion)
- evidence of additional childcare or support arrangements including having to re-organise family routines for the child as well as themselves
- letters from any public, voluntary or charitable body who are supporting the child and the family

This is not a complete list, these are examples of suitable evidence.

The evidence can come from:

- healthcare professionals
- police officers
- National Victim Service
- Victim Support (including the Witness Service run by Victim Support)
- registered social workers
- the child's school or teacher
- faith group or religious leaders
- the claimant's employer or a representative of their trade union
- any public, voluntary or charitable body which has had direct contact with the claimant in connection with domestic abuse

The claimant is responsible for gathering and providing the evidence.

Once the claimant provides the evidence, their commitments are checked again to decide if these need to be tailored further. See Claimant Commitment.

Sources of support

This may be the first time the claimant has talked about this to any organisation, so they may not be getting support from anyone to help them deal with the situation.

The claimant must be signposted to relevant local and national organisations where they will be able to get help and support.