

Babies & Toddlers



KEEPING THEM SAFE

If you are being physically or psychologically abused by your partner, it can harm your baby - both before and after she or he is born.

Babies and toddlers need safe environments to grow into healthy and well-adjusted children. Environments where there is violence, intimidation, fear and uncertainty are not safe.

Whilst some people feel that leaving an abusive partner will deprive their child of a family relationship, there is strong evidence to suggest that parental conflict has a worse effect on children's development and adjustment than separation or divorce.

Whether you decide to stay in the relationship, or leave, your children will, in most cases, still have contact with the person using the violence. This fact sheet is about the effects of domestic and family violence on babies and toddlers and provides strategies for you to protect your children against its consequences.

Pregnancy should be a joyous time for you and your partner – the celebration of a new life who will be part of the plans you have made together. Your health and the health of your baby should be your and your partner's first priority.

If you are experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse during your pregnancy your baby may be affected in a number of ways, including:

- Late or no prenatal care.
- Substance abuse - if you are unable to maintain a healthy lifestyle and resort to the use of cigarettes and alcohol to help deal with the stress you are experiencing.
- Delays in brain growth.
- Early delivery.
- Low birth weight.
- Foetal trauma, injury or death.



“He started shoving me around when I got pregnant and I was covered in bruises. Then he got scared and told me not to tell the doctor. I was afraid of him, so I didn't.”

We know that people play their favourite music to their unborn baby when they are pregnant, to make the baby feel calm and loved. So, what does the unborn baby feel when their mother is being abused? What would a baby feel if:

- Their mother was screaming because she was being dragged across the room by her hair?
- Their mother was gasping for air because she was being strangled?
- Their mother was constantly anxious and fearful and unable to sleep?

Babies and toddlers are never too young to be affected by domestic and family violence.

Living with ongoing domestic or family violence affects the development of babies' and toddlers' brains. These effects can be permanent.

Babies and toddlers need lots of affection and positive attention, sensitive responses to their fears, consistent and caring discipline, regular routines and an environment that is safe and predictable.

If your baby or toddler is present during a domestic violence incident they are at risk of:

- Being hit by thrown objects.
- Being threatened with injury in order to alarm or distress you.
- Being severely traumatised.

Babies as young as six weeks show clear disturbances in response to domestic and family violence. Babies and toddlers react strongly to tension, fear and aggression in their environment.

When there is violence at home they can:

- Feel the stress and tension that their mother is experiencing.
- Experience delays in their speech and toileting.
- Be aggressive and irritable – unable to settle.
- Be too fearful to play and be 'clingy'.
- Be withdrawn.

Domestic violence causes so much fear, worry and stress for parents, that they often are not able to comfort and soothe their babies and toddlers to help them feel safe again. When babies and toddlers don't regularly find comfort, safety and security, their relationship with their parents becomes damaged. These damaged relationships can lead to serious emotional problems for the child, both now and in the future.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Violence is the sole responsibility of the person who uses it; it is not your fault. However, there are things you can do to lessen the impact of being exposed to violence on your baby or toddler even if you are unable to remove them from the situation. Providing a loving and caring environment where you are emotionally available can help your baby overcome the damaging effects of living with domestic and family violence.

"I don't want my 2 year old to see me being hurt - her look of fear is the worst pain of all."



How to help your baby or toddler:

- Get to know your baby's/toddler's moods, signs of tiredness or distress. Hold him/her closely, rock gently and use gentle tones to soothe and comfort her/him when distressed.
- Look at your baby/toddler in the eyes when you are talking to them.
- Smile and use a soothing and gentle voice when you're changing nappies, feeding, bathing him/her.
- Play short games with your baby/toddler – gentle tickles, peek-a-boo, sing nursery rhymes or read to your baby/toddler.
- Follow your child's lead in communication – mimic her/his babbles, coos, 'ba-ba-bas'; follow her/his lead in games as they make up their own versions.
- Say positive and encouraging words like "good girl/boy; you're beautiful; Mummy loves you".
- Use gentle touch and kisses and firm cuddles to show your baby or toddler that she/he is safe in your arms.
- Keep a regular routine of meal times, sleep times, bath times and quiet times. This makes your child's daily life predictable and helps her/him feel secure.
- Join a playgroup with your toddler – mixing with other parents and children can be fun and reassure you that you are doing a good job.

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR YOURSELF?

There are people who can provide confidential counselling to help you consider your options and increase your safety, whether you decide to stay in an abusive relationship, or leave. The priority is you, and your children's, safety.

Call DVConnect, for free confidential assistance on 1800 811 811 (24 hours).

Read *Fact Sheet for Women*, which includes questions women who are subjected to domestic and family violence commonly ask. It is available at: <https://noviolence.org.au/resources/fact-sheets/online/>

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT WHAT YOU'RE EXPERIENCING IS ABUSE?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does my partner regularly shout or swear at me and/or my children?
- Am I sometimes afraid of my partner?
- Does my partner hurt or threaten to hurt me or my children?
- Does my partner force me to have unwanted sex?
- Am I constantly trying to keep the peace to manage my partner's behaviour?
- Am I worried that my partner's behaviour will affect my child's development?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these questions, contact a domestic violence support service. They will provide you with free, non-judgemental, confidential help and advice to keep you and your children safe.

FIND YOUR CLOSEST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICE

A list of domestic violence services in Queensland is available at: <http://qlddomesticviolencelink.org.au>

or, if you do not have access to the Internet:

Call Womensline, DVConnect's 24 hour domestic violence telephone service on 1800 811 811.





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