

Babies & Toddlers

AND THEIR FATHERS



KEEPING THEM SAFE

If a mother is being physically or psychologically abused by her partner, it can harm the 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 separation will deprive their child of a family relationship, there is strong evidence to suggest that domestic or family violence has a worse effect on children's development and adjustment than separation or divorce. Even if the relationship ends, in most cases both parents will still have contact with their child. This factsheet is designed to assist fathers to build a healthy relationship with their child, to assure them that they love them and help them feel confident about their ability to consistently care for them.

Pregnancy should be a joyous time for both parents – the celebration of a new life who will be part of the plans they have made together. The mother's health and the health of the baby should be both parents' first priority.

If a mother experiences physical and/ or sexual abuse during her pregnancy, the baby may experience a number of consequences including:

- Late or no pre natal care
- Delays in brain growth
- Early delivery
- Low birth weight
- Foetal trauma, injury or death

Living with ongoing domestic or family violence can damage the development of babies' and toddlers' brains. This damage can be permanent.

So what does the unborn baby feel when their mother is being abused?

We know that people play their favourite music to their unborn baby when they are pregnant, to make them feel calm and loved. Ask yourself, 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?



The birth of your baby can cause changes in your relationship. Your partner may feel tired and stressed with the added pressure of becoming a new mother. You may feel left out and jealous. Talk about your feelings and listen to hers.

Thinking that babies and toddlers are too young to be affected by domestic and family violence is a mistake.

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

- Hurt by thrown objects
- Dropped, stood on or hit
- 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 a baby or toddler experiences violence at home they can:

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- Be withdrawn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

Domestic and family violence causes so much fear, worry and stress for parents, that they are often unable to comfort and soothe their babies and toddlers to help them feel safe.

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.

Continuing tension, fear and aggression in their environment, can interfere with babies' and toddlers' development of trust and independence.

"I thought my kids were too young to know what was going on, that it wouldn't affect them..."



DO YOU RECOGNISE THE IMPACT OF YOUR ACTIONS AND THE EFFECT IT MAY BE HAVING ON YOUR CHILDREN?

Ask yourself these questions...

- Do I regularly shout or swear at my partner?
- Do I force my partner into having sex?
- Do I control my partner's spending, phone bills or who they talk to?
- Do I expect my partner to ask permission before spending any money or going out?
- Have I ever pushed, slapped or grabbed my partner?
- Do I prevent my partner from seeing friends or family?
- Are my children or my partner afraid of me?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these questions, then you have used domestic violence in your relationship.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO CHANGE THE SITUATION?

There are people who can provide confidential counselling and referrals. There are programs that can help you change the behaviour which has led you to using domestic violence and reduced your family's confidence in your ability to care for them. The priority is the safety and wellbeing of your child, partner and yourself.

Contact DVConnect Mensline on 1800 600 636 (9am-midnight, 7days a week) or Mensline Australia on 1300 789 978 (24hrs) for free, non-judgemental, confidential help and advice to help you stop your violent behaviour.

“It wasn't until I heard another bloke in the (men's) program talking about his behaviour, that I realised the way he was treating his wife, his family, was wrong. Worst of all, that meant what I was doing to my family was wrong too.”

FIND YOUR CLOSEST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICE

A list of domestic and family violence services in Queensland is available at:

<http://qlddomesticviolencelink.org.au>

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

call DVConnect Mensline on 1800 600 636 (9am-midnight, 7days a week) or Mensline Australia on 1300 789 978 (24hrs).

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MAKE YOUR BABY OR TODDLER FEEL LOVED AND SECURE

- Get to know your baby's/toddler's moods, signs of tiredness or distress. Hold her/him closely, rock gently and use gentle tones to soothe and comfort her/him when distressed. Babies get a special feeling of security when comforted by their father when they are frightened or upset
- Look 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 her/him
- Play short games with your baby/toddler – gentle tickles, peek-a-boo, sing nursery rhymes or read to your baby/toddler
- Say positive and encouraging words like “good girl/boy; you're beautiful; daddy 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 daily life predictable and helps her/him feel secure



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The Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research receives defined term funding from the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services to undertake research and develop educational resources pertaining to domestic and family violence in Queensland.