

Children 4 - 12



GROWING UP IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

If you are being physically or psychologically abused by your partner it can have a serious impact on your child's development.

Children experience domestic and family violence in many ways. Not only do they see what is happening around them, but they may hear the violence, sometimes from another room. Children can be involved in violence if they intervene, or are in the way during a violent incident. Sometimes they live with the results of what violence does to their family.

Children need safe, loving, secure environments to grow into strong, confident young people who are able to navigate the highs and lows of life. Environments where there is violence, 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 domestic violence has a worse effect on children's development and adjustment than separation or divorce.

Whether you decide to stay in the abusive 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 children. It provides strategies for you to protect your children against its consequences.

Children's early life experiences influence how they develop into adults. When children are young they develop trust, learn how to take turns and share, and practise how to solve disagreements using words. As they grow older they learn about making friends and making choices, they develop confidence in their achievements and learn how to manage their anger and frustration. One of the most common ways that children learn is by copying what they see around them.

Living with domestic and family violence may incorrectly teach children that:

- Aggression and force is an acceptable way to get what they want.
- No adult can be relied upon.
- Showing disrespect to women is acceptable behaviour.

Most children don't confide their 'secret' to anyone because they are ashamed and others knowing this information would only make them more vulnerable.



Many people don't understand the deep emotional harm children can suffer when domestic and family violence is part of their lives.

When children see or hear violence around them they are at risk of experiencing some of the following consequences:

- Difficulty in making or keeping friends.
- Behaviour problems at home and school.
- Learning difficulties.
- Temper tantrums and aggression.
- Constant illnesses (headaches, stomach aches).
- Inability to sleep, nightmares, bedwetting.
- Depression or anxiety.
- Guilt.
- Anger.

CHILDREN SAY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS

- When the person who is hurt is someone they love.
- When the violence happens in their home.
- When the hurt is deliberate.
- When the person who is using the violence is someone they trust.
- When the children think that it is their fault. (Maxwell & Carroll-Lind, 1998)

WHAT CHILDREN ARE THINKING WHEN VIOLENCE IS HAPPENING AROUND THEM

- I try and make myself invisible – often I will hide under the bed or in a cupboard.
- I'm worried about my mum. I'm worried that she'll be killed.
- I feel helpless. I can't do anything to make it stop.
- I love both my parents, but when I see one hurting the other I'm confused.
- I'm worried that my school friends will find out about what happens in our house.

PROVIDING SAFETY AND PROTECTION

Children rely on their families for safety and protection. They can see and feel the tension, terror and aggression that domestic and family violence creates.

Children need reliable and positive relationships where they can seek comfort and emotional safety during times of stress and fear. They need:

- The violence to stop.
- To feel safe.
- To be cared for.
- To know what is going to happen next in their lives.
- To be comforted.

CHILDREN DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEX NATURE OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

- They are torn between supporting the parent who is being abused and loving the parent who is the abuser.
- They justify the abuse by blaming alcohol, stress or their own bad behaviour to help them deal with the idea that their parent is abusive.
- They worry about what they could have done to prevent the violence.
- They may lose faith in their mother for being unable to protect them.

Children are often able to describe violent events that they have not seen, but have been able to hear while they are hiding in other rooms.



WHAT YOU CAN DO...

Violence is the sole responsibility of the person who uses it; it is not your fault. However, there are things that you can do to lessen its impact on your children even if you are unable to remove them from the situation. Providing positive parenting and role modelling and being aware that your children are also experiencing domestic violence, and talking to them about it, can help them overcome its damaging effects.

Even if you think your children have not seen or heard the violence, chances are they know what is happening. They can feel the tension and fear.

How to help your children:

- Talk to your children about their feelings, their worries and their hopes and dreams.
- Support your children to make reliable and positive relationships with extended family, friends, teachers and others in your child's social world.
- Help your children to control their own behaviour by setting a positive example.
- Reassure your children that it is okay to have feelings and to express them in acceptable ways.
- Play with your children – board games, ball, walk on the beach, sing songs together.
- Show your children respect and help them to show respect for others.
- Show your children that you are interested in them. Support their achievements in school and/or sporting games.
- Tell your children often that you love them and that you are proud of them.

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.

The most powerful support for young children's development is a positive, supportive relationship with their main (non-abusive) carer.



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.

Sources:

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