

Domestic violence and children

Domestic violence (often called 'family violence') can include physical, verbal, sexual or emotional abuse. Children who witness regular acts of violence have greater emotional and behavioural problems than other children. Even very young children can be profoundly frightened and affected.

Contrary to popular belief, witnessing episodes of violence between people they love can affect young children as much as if they were the victims of the violence.

If the abused partner fears for their safety, or for the safety of their children, it is important to take the children away from the situation as soon as possible.

Short-term effects of domestic violence

A child's response to repeated domestic violence depends on a number of factors including their age, gender, personality and family role. Some of the immediate effects can include:

- Blaming themselves for the violence
- Experiencing sleeping difficulties, such as nightmares
- Regression to an earlier stage of development, such as thumb sucking and bedwetting
- Becoming increasingly anxious or fearful
- Displaying aggressive or destructive behaviour
- Starting to withdraw from people and events
- Becoming a victim or perpetrator of bullying
- Starting to show cruelty to animals
- Experiencing stress-related illnesses, such as headache or stomach pain
- Displaying speech difficulties, such as stuttering
- Misusing drugs and alcohol (in young adults).

Long-term effects of domestic violence

A child growing up in an abusive household learns to solve their problems using violence, rather than through more peaceful means. Some of the long-term effects may include copying their parental role models and behaving in similarly destructive ways in their adult relationships.

Children may learn that it is acceptable to behave in a degrading way to other people, as they have seen this occur in the violent episodes they witnessed. Appropriate support and counselling will help children to grow up learning how to relate to others with trust and respect.

Drug and alcohol dependence

Some parents who are dependent on alcohol or other drugs are unable to care for their children appropriately and may hurt or neglect their children. For some, the dependence on alcohol or drugs is so overwhelming that it takes priority over everything else, including looking after their children's needs.

Children need consistency in their routine if they are to develop trust and a sense of security, which some parents who are dependent on alcohol or drugs may be unable to give them. Problematic parental drug and alcohol use may affect the child in the following ways:

- Not getting all their nutritional needs met
- Experiencing school and learning problems
- Developing emotional problems related to anxiety or stress
- Loss of trust in adults

- Having an increased risk of mental illness or suicide in later life
- Developing an increased risk of substance misuse.

Seek support to stop the violence

Domestic violence does not resolve itself. If you seek support to take action against violence, it shows your child that abuse is not acceptable and should be stopped. There are professional organisations that can help both partners to confront and change their destructive behaviours.

See your doctor for advice and referral, or call a parenting or domestic violence helpline. A parent who has problems with alcohol or other drug dependence needs professional treatment, including counselling or medical treatment. In the meantime, keep all harmful substances out of the reach of children.

How to help your child

You can help your child emotionally recover from domestic violence in many ways:

- Get support to take action against the violence.
- Protect children from violence by taking them to a safe place.
- Tell the child that abusive behaviour is wrong and be a role model for other ways of managing anger and solving problems.
- Reassure the child that none of the violent episodes were their fault in any way.
- Tell them how much you love them and cuddle them often.
- Encourage them to talk openly about their feelings.
- Get extra help for your child if necessary.
- Enlist a trusted adult to provide your child with emotional support.
- Seek professional help, such as counselling, for all family members.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, dial triple zero (000) to call police or ambulance
- Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria (24 hours) Tel. (03) 9322 3555 or 1800 015 188
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia) Tel. 1800 737 732 – free telephone counselling hotline (24 hours, 7 days)
- 1800RESPECT – for real-time online counselling.
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Relationships Australia Tel. 1300 364 277 – for support groups and counselling on relationships, and for abusive and abused partners
- Mensline Australia Tel. 1300 789 978
- National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN)
- Your doctor

Things to remember

- Children who witness regular acts of violence have greater emotional and behavioural problems than other children.
- Some of the immediate effects may include nightmares, anxiety, withdrawal and bedwetting.
- Seeking support to take action against domestic violence shows your child that abuse is not acceptable and can be stopped.

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NAPCAN

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