

DOMESTIC & FAMILY VIOLENCE

Children 4 - 12 Years

Children need safe environments to grow into healthy and well-adjusted adults.

- ... **Environments** where there is violence, intimidation, uncertainty and fear are not safe.
- ... **These environments** are not good for children.
- ... **Ongoing and abusive** parental conflict has a worse effect on children's development and adjustment than separation or divorce (*Jaffe et al 1990*).
- ... **Some people feel** they do not have a choice to leave a violent relationship.
- ... **Even if they do leave** the relationship, the children will, in most cases, continue to have contact with the person using violence.
- ... **This very often results** in the abusive person continuing to exert some control and violence through their contact with the children.

This factsheet talks about the **effects of** domestic and family **violence on children**.

It talks about **strategies** for adults to help **protect** children **against these effects**.

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

The emotional scars might be harder to see, but they can affect children for the rest of their lives.

Children do not understand domestic and family violence the same way as adults:

- they often blame themselves
- they often worry that the violence will kill their parent or family member
- they often believe that they are responsible for stopping the violence.

Children rely on their family for safety and protection. It is often very traumatic for children to see and feel the tension, terror and aggression that domestic and family violence creates.

These children need strong, positive and reliable relationships.

They need:

- the violence to stop
- to feel safe
- to be soothed
- predictability in their environment
- reassurance
- comfort

Ongoing domestic and family violence can stop parents from providing these things (*McIntosh 2000; Knowlton & Schultz 1999*).

...But my kids don't see it...

Even if you think your children have not seen or heard the domestic or family violence, chances are the children know that it is happening.

Research with children tells us that kids know much more about what goes on in their family than we think (Edelson 1999).

Kids are very good at detecting tension and fear between the people important to them. Kids are also very good at reading the feelings of adults.

CONTACTS LIST

If you are in immediate danger
call 000

dvconnect (24 hrs) - Ph: 1800 811 811
Domestic and family violence telephone
service for women, children and young
people

dvconnect Men's Line
Ph: 1800 600 636
(Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)

Kids Help Line (24 hrs)
Ph: 1800 551 800

Parentline - Ph: 1300 30 1300
(8am – 10pm 7days/week)
Confidential support, information and
referral for parents

**If you are worried that a child is being
abused, contact the Department of
Families:**

General enquiries

Ph: 1800 811 810, or
(07) 3224 8045 (Brisbane)

After hours & emergencies

Ph: 1800 177 135, or
(07) 3235 9999 (Brisbane)

*For a list of area offices look in your White
Pages under Department of Families*

Community Child Health Service –
Telephone Information & Advisory Service
Ph: 1800 177 279 (outside Brisbane)
Ph: 07 3862 2333 (Brisbane)

Lifeline (24 hrs) - Ph: 13 11 14

Men's Line Australia (24 hrs)
Ph: 1300 789 978
Information, support and referral

Disability Information & Awareness Line
- Ph: 1800 177 120 or (07) 3224 8031
(Brisbane)

Immigrant Women's Support Service
Ph: (07) 3846 3490 (Brisbane)
Website: www.iwss.org.au

Kinections

Counselling line
Ph (07) 3435 4300 (Brisbane)
Parenting courses
Ph: (07) 3435 4343 (Brisbane)
Website: www.kinections.com.au

Relationships Australia
Ph 1300 364 277

Legal Aid Queensland
Women's Legal Aid - Ph: 1300 651 188
Domestic Violence Unit
Ph: 1300 651 188 (men and women)

Women's Legal Service
Ph: 1800 677 278 or
(07) 3392 0670 (Brisbane)

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Women's Legal and Advocacy Service**
Ph: 1800 442 450

Local Contact:

...**Children's reactions vary** depending on their age, how often the violence happens and how parents and other adults respond to the child's distress.

...**Initially it may be difficult** to tell if a child is affected by the violence in her/his family. This is because the trauma of seeing the violence often results in the child 'splitting off' from their strong feelings and memories. In these cases, the child might sometimes seem 'spaced out', very quiet, or behave as though nothing has happened (*McIntosh 2000; Briere 1992*).

All Children Need...

... **A reliable and positive relationship** with their caregiver, where they can seek comfort and emotional safety during times of stress and fear.

...**This enables a child to predict his/her world**, feel safe, seek and receive comfort, calm him/herself, build positive relationships, consider others feelings, cope with stress and become confident adults.

A reliable and positive relationship is vital to helping children manage the stress and trauma in their lives.

Looking after the needs of your children when you are in an abusive relationship is extremely difficult. It's very important to take good care of yourself - find ways to keep contact with friends and family; make sure you *have a safety plan* if, for whatever reason, you remain in the relationship; **Ask for help.**

REMEMBER: There are people who can help you and your children confidentially, regardless of whether you want to leave the relationship or stay. The priority is the safety of you and your children. (See the Contacts List on the left for details).

Pre-school and Primary Aged Children

"I feel scared: I tell Mum. I want her to tell the police so they'll stop it" (eight year old girl)
(Irwin et al 2002 p 90).

There is a wide range of ages in this group of children; however, there are many similarities in how these children are affected by domestic and family violence, and how they understand it.

...The first ten years of life is the time where the brain does the most developing. Ongoing domestic or family violence can interfere with the way the brain grows.

...A number of long-term problems can develop like: not managing emotions well, impulsive behaviours, hyperactivity, aggression, not appreciating others' feelings and learning difficulties (*Perry 2002, 2001, 1997; Shore 1997*).

...For children in this age range, parents are very important role models.

...Living with domestic and family violence teaches children that:

- they are not safe
- aggression and force is the best way to get what you want
- feeling frightened and getting abused is a normal part of a relationship.

...Children do not have an adult understanding of domestic and family violence ...

- They are likely to blame themselves for the conflict and violence that is happening in their family
- These children often understand that the violence has a purpose
- They worry that the violence will cause death
- They worry about what they could have done to prevent the violence
- They often try to protect their parent and other family members from the violence.

Just like babies and toddlers, preschool and primary school aged children react strongly to tension, fear, aggression and uncertainty in their environment.

These reactions often cause **feelings** such as:

...**terror, dread, fear and worry...**

...**sadness and helplessness...**

...**numbness...**

...**anger, guilt or self-**

blame...

Is my child affected?

Behaviours in children who are living with domestic or family violence often include:

...personality changes

...poor concentration and problems with school work

...aggression, hyperactivity, disobedience

...disturbed sleep or nightmares

...withdrawal, low self esteem

...appearing 'spaced out' or showing no emotion about anything

...always on the look-out for signs of future violence or conflict.

Children who live with domestic and family violence often have problems making friendships with other children or keeping these friendships.

"I'd go and start a fight with my step-father so he'd stop fighting with Mum and fight with me instead. So he'd go off after me to my room and leave Mum alone"

(Irwin et al 2002 p112).

The damage that living with domestic or family violence creates for children mounts up with each experience.

...If children are not given the chance to sort out their reactions in a safe environment, this damage can have long-term effects.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Get support for yourself – find ways to keep in contact with family, friends, professional help. Kids look to parents for reassurance, security and certainty – getting support and help for yourself is an extremely important way to help your child.

Make a decision to keep you and your children safe – there are people who can help you.

- ... Support your child to make reliable and positive relationships with good adult role models – maybe other family members, friends, parents of friends or teachers
- ... Reassure your child that he/she is not to blame for the conflict and violence. The person using violence is responsible for choosing their behaviour
- ... Tell your child often that you love them and that you are proud of them
- ... Take opportunities to discuss and practice non-violent and respectful ways to solve problems
- ... Show your child that you are interested in her/him. Ask them what they think and feel, ask them about their friendships and school experiences
- ... Help your child to learn how to manage strong feelings and calm down – eg: practice deep, slow breathing, help them to create a safe and special place in their imagination where they can visit when they're feeling bad, encourage them to talk about their feelings and worries
- ... Make opportunities for your child to build on their skills and to experience success, pride and strength – eg: join gymnastics or a sport (individual or team) or a club with other children
- ... Keep in touch with your child's teacher. Make sure the teacher or school understand your child's situation so that they can support your child.

"I just think there needs to be more people around for kids to talk to... Sometimes kids will open up if they trust someone. But if no one is talking to them and no one is saying that they're here for you, you're not going to say anything. No one told me that they would listen..." (11 year old girl) (Irwin et al 2002 p112).

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- Unite For Kids: Helping Kids and Teens Exposed to Violence website <http://bmcstage.tvision>

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