

Exposure to family violence and its effect on children

This fact sheet provides information about family violence and its harmful effect on children, as well as providing general information about ways to lessen its impact on children.

How does family violence affect children?¹

Children's exposure to family violence can take many forms, including:

- being subjected to deliberate or accidental violence
- overhearing violence
- intervening on behalf of a parent or other person, and
- experiencing the aftermath of violence, such as
 - being cared for by a distressed or withdrawn parent
 - helping to care for a hurt or distressed parent
 - seeing injuries and/or property damage
 - helping clean up mess or damage
 - going to the doctor or hospital with an injured parent
 - being present when police or emergency services attend, and/or
 - being asked to not tell anyone about the event.

Effects of family violence on parenting behaviour

Perpetrators of family violence frequently:

- show a lack of warmth
- use coercive and manipulative tactics
- are inconsistent with discipline
- use harsh discipline
- express anger towards the child/ren, and
- are uninvolved in parenting.

Exposure to violence can result in the victim parent:

- changing the way they parent in front of the abusive parent to avoid more anger and abuse
- being less able to meet the child/ren's needs due to the stress of the abuse
- experiencing depression and other mental health problems that can affect parenting, and
- using harsh discipline due to stress (this has been found to stop when the family is safe).

Children generally experience more than one type of exposure to family violence. This may be different for each family, or for children within the same family, or at different times within the same family.

Effects of family violence on children

Children of all ages have been found to have more problems when they have been exposed to family violence, particularly coercive and controlling family violence.

Research has consistently found that children who are exposed to family violence have higher levels of emotional and behavioural problems than children who have not. Children who are in violent homes are also at a greater risk of physical abuse or having their physical and emotional needs neglected.

Younger children are more vulnerable than older children because they are with their parents more frequently, and are more dependent on their parents for care and protection. Teenagers exposed to family violence may be more aggressive to their parents and other acquaintances and constantly be at greater risk of retaliation.

Children exposed to family violence are at greater risk of:

- having difficulties controlling their emotions
- developing depression or antisocial problems such as delinquency or violent behaviours, particularly as teenagers
- developing poor relationships with both parents
- developing poor reading and language skills, and
- having difficulties making and maintaining friendships.

When family violence is combined with other problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse and mental health concerns, children are at even greater risk of developing emotional, behavioural, social and educational problems.

Protective factors

Not all children are affected in the same way by family violence. A range of factors have been identified as being 'protective' for children, such as:

- parenting that provides structure, warmth, emotional support and positive reinforcement, and
- positive support from other adults outside their immediate family, such as relatives, family friends and teachers.

Providing children with an environment in which they feel both physically and psychologically safe is an important priority.

After separation

The risks to child development associated with exposure to family violence do not necessarily stop following the separation of the parents. This is due to the ongoing risk of family violence and its impact on parenting practices.

The time around separation is a high risk period for victims of family violence, particularly when there has been a history of coercive and controlling violence. This can also be a time when family violence first occurs.

Parenting plans that promote the safety and healthy adjustment of children are needed.

Assistance or further information

Family Relationship Advice Line

The Family Relationship Advice Line has a range of fact sheets and other information on family law services, including: children's contact services; counselling; family dispute resolution; parenting orders program; post-separation cooperative parenting; and supporting children after separation.

Phone: 1800 058 321

Website: www.familyrelationships.gov.au

National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line

Phone: 1800 737 732

Website: www.1800respect.org.au

Police or ambulance

Call 000 at any time if you are worried about you or your child/ren's safety.

LifeLine

Phone: 131 114

Website: www.lifeline.org

Translating and interpreting

Phone to gain access to an interpreter in your own language.

Phone: 131 450

Website: www.tisnational.gov.au

Kids Help Line

Telephone counselling for children and young people.

Phone: 1800 551 800

Website: www.kidshelp.com.au

Australian Childhood Foundation

Counselling for children and young people affected by abuse.

Phone: 1800 176 453

Website: www.childhood.org.au

Relationships Australia

Support groups and counselling on relationships, and for abusive and abused partners.

Phone: 1300 364 277

Website: www.relationships.com.au

Our Place Online

An online forum for men and women who have suffered abuse in all its forms: psychological, verbal, physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse. The forum is run by a community of volunteers all over the world. Our Place aims to help educate and support those wishing to heal from the damage done.

Website: www.our-place-online.net

¹ Hardesty, J., Haselschwerdt, M. & Johnson, M. (2012) Domestic Violence and Child Custody, Chapter 13, in K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd Eds. Parenting Plan Evaluations: Applied research for the Family Court, Oxford University Press, New York