

Children and Domestic Violence

How Does Domestic Violence Affect Children?

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control and dominate the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#1** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Children experience domestic violence in many ways. They may hear one parent threaten or demean the other, or see a parent who is angry or afraid. They may see or hear one parent physically hurt the other and cause injuries or destroy property. Children may live with the fear that something will happen again. They may even be the targets of abuse.

Most children who live with domestic violence can recover and heal from their experiences. One of the most important factors that helps children do well after experiencing domestic violence is a strong relationship with a caring, nonviolent parent. As a caring parent, you can promote your children's recovery by taking steps to increase safety in the family, helping your kids develop relationships with other supportive adults, and encouraging them in school or other activities that make them feel happy and proud.

HOW CHILDREN RESPOND TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Children who live with domestic violence react in many different ways. Some children find their own coping strategies and do not show obvious signs of stress. Others struggle with problems at home, at school, and in the community. You may notice changes in your child's emotions (such as increased fear or anger) and behavior (such as clinging, difficulty going to sleep, or tantrums) after an incident of domestic violence. Children may also experience longer-term problems with health, behavior, school, and emotions, especially when domestic violence goes on for a long time. For example, children may become depressed or anxious, skip school, or get involved in drugs.



The NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women's advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

The following factors affect how an individual child will respond to living with domestic violence:

- ▶ How serious and how frequent is the violence or threat?
- ▶ Was the child physically hurt or put in danger?
- ▶ What is the child's relationship with the victim and abuser?
- ▶ How old is the child?
- ▶ What other stress is going on in the child's life?
- ▶ What positive activities and relationships are in the child's life?
- ▶ How does the child usually cope with problems?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CHANGES FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Children may try to protect an abused parent by refusing to leave the parent alone, getting in the middle of an abusive event, calling for help, or drawing attention to themselves by bad behavior. They may want to be responsible for "fixing" their family by trying to be perfect or always tending to younger siblings. Some children take sides with the abusive adult and become disrespectful, aggressive, or threatening to their nonviolent parent.

Children who live with domestic violence may learn the wrong lessons about relationships. While some children may respond by avoiding abuse in their own relationships as they grow older, others may repeat what they have seen in abusive relationships with their own peers or partners. They may learn that it is OK to try to control another person's behavior or feelings, or to use violence to get what they want. They may learn that hurtful behavior is somehow part of being close or being loved.

REMEMBER...

A strong relationship with a caring, nonviolent parent is one of the most important factors in helping children grow in a positive way despite their experiences. Your support can make the difference between fear and security, and can provide a foundation for a healthy future.

IMPORTANT!

If you feel unsafe now and need help for yourself, your family, or someone else in a domestic crisis, contact

- 911 for emergency police assistance
- Your local child protective services if your children are in danger
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline. Advocates are available to intervene in a crisis, help with safety planning, and provide referrals to agencies in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the United States Virgin Islands. Call 1-800-799-7233 or go to www.thehotline.org

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

- #1 – How Does Domestic Violence Affect Children?
- #2 – Celebrating Your Child's Strengths
- #3 – Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter
- #4 – Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence
- #5 – The Importance of Playing with Your Children
- #6 – Keeping Your Children Safe and Responding to Their Fears
- #7 – Managing Challenging Behavior of Children Living with Domestic Violence
- #8 – Where to Turn if You Are Worried About Your Child
- #9 – Helping Your Child Navigate a Relationship with the Abusive Parent
- #10 – A Parent's Self-Care and Self-Reflection