

Supporting Children Through Domestic and Family Violence

Every child has the right to feel safe, respected and heard.

Children who experience domestic and family violence (DFV)—even if they don't "see" it—can be deeply affected. With the right support, children can recover, build resilience and thrive.

This is a Child-Safe guide for parents, caregivers, families and community with key strategies for supporting children through the trauma of domestic and family violence.

1. ENSURING SAFETY FIRST

- Prioritise the child's physical and emotional safety if it's safe to, remove them from immediate danger.
- Create a safety plan with the child (age appropriate)
- Keep emergency numbers accessible
- let the child know 'you are not responsible for adult behaviour'.

2. PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

- Reassure children that the violence is **not their fault**, and they are not responsible for the actions of adults.
- Help them name feelings (angry, scared, confused)
- Offer safe ways to express their feelings such as talking, drawing, or play.
- Validate their emotions without judgement.

Children need emotional validation to process their experiences. Without it, they may internalise trauma, leading to feelings of **self-blame, shame**, and long-term emotional difficulties.

3. MAINTAINING STABILITY AND ROUTINE

- Where possible maintain daily routines such as school, bedtime, and regular meals.
- Be a calm, consistent presence in their lives.
- try to prepare children for changes 'here's what will happen next...'

Routines provide a sense of **safety predictability and control**, which is comforting for children who have lived with chaos and instability.

4. ENCOURAGING OPEN COMMUNICATION

- Let children know they can talk about their experiences without fear of punishment or shame.
- Use **age-appropriate language** to help them understand what's happening.
- Listen actively and acknowledge their fears, questions, and concerns.
- Avoid pressuring them to talk, let them lead the conversation
- Encourage questions and answer simply and honestly

Open communication helps children feel **heard, valued, and less isolated**. It builds trust and strengthens their relationships with safe adults.

HOW MIGHT DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE IMPACT CHILDREN

When a person chooses to use violence toward a parent or caregiver, children are affected even if the behaviour is not directed at them. The person using violence creates an environment of fear that shapes the child's daily life, safety, and emotional wellbeing.

5. ISOLATION

How a child may experience isolation:

- They are stopped from seeing people who matter to them
- They feel like they only have one person they can rely on
- Their contact with others is monitored and controlled
- They hear untrue or hurtful things about people they care about
- They feel bad or worried about spending time with others

6. INTIMIDATION AND THREATS

How a child may experience intimidation and threats:

- A child may feel unsafe even when no one is being hurt physically
- A child may be afraid when the parent or caregiver tries to leave or get help
- A child may change their behaviour to avoid making things worse
- A child may try to protect their parent or siblings
- A child's emotional and physical wellbeing may be affected

7. DIGITAL ABUSE

How a child may experience digital abuse:

- A child may feel watched or unsafe at home and outside
- A child may sense fear or stress around technology
- a child's device may be used to track or monitor location
- A child may change their own digital behaviour making them unsafe or vulnerable
- A child may learn to self-monitor to keep the peace
- A child's emotional wellbeing may be affected

8. VERBAL ABUSE

How a child may experience verbal abuse:

- They hear repeated put-downs or blaming language, sarcasm or insults disguised as humour
- Yelling or harsh tones may make them anxious or on edge
- They may try to manage or avoid conflict becoming very quiet or trying not to draw attention
- They may internalise blame or responsibility
- Believing they caused the anger or yelling

It is important to recognise that the parent or caregiver experiencing abuse is not to blame

When a person uses intimidation, threats or violence toward a parent or caregiver, children are harmed even if the behaviour is not directed at them. The person who chooses to use violence creates an environment of fear that shapes the child's daily life, safety, and emotional wellbeing.

If you recognise these signs in your or anyone's relationship— it is important that they know they are **not alone**, and **support is available**. Reaching out is a brave and important step toward **healing** and **safety**.

6. MODELLING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

- Demonstrate respectful, non-violent, and emotionally healthy interactions.
- Teach children about **boundaries, consent,** and healthy emotional expression.
- Emphasise **that abuse is never acceptable** in any relationship.

Children learn from what they see. By modelling positive behaviour, they gain tools to build respectful, healthy relationships in the future.

7. ADDRESSING TRAUMA AND EMOTIONAL HEALING

- Be patient with emotional or behavioural responses such as anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, or nightmares.
- Offer reassurance and teach calming techniques like deep breathing, mindfulness, or relaxation.
- Encourage creative outlets like art, journaling, or music.

Trauma may manifest in many ways. Without proper emotional support, children are at greater risk for long-term challenges such as **PTSD, depression,** or emotional dysregulation.

8. HOW DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IMPACTS BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Domestic violence can have serious, long-term effects on brain development:

- **Chronic stress** can overstimulate the brain's stress response system, increasing risk of anxiety and emotional dysregulation.
- **Trauma** can alter brain structures such as:
- **Amygdala** (emotion and fear responses)
- **Hippocampus** (learning and memory)
- **Prefrontal cortex** (decision-making and impulse control)
- Affected children may struggle with concentration, memory, and problem-solving.
- Early trauma can impair the ability to form healthy relationships and trust others.

These changes can impact education, behaviour, emotional health, and future relationships.

9. EMPOWERING CHILDREN WITH CHOICES

- Offer opportunities for small, age-appropriate decisions to help restore their sense of control.
- Encourage participation in activities that boost **self-esteem** and **confidence**.
- Teach **problem-solving** and **self-advocacy** skills.

Empowering children builds resilience and reminds them that their **voice matters**. Restoring autonomy is a critical part of healing.

Every Child Deserves to Feel Safe, Heard, and Supported

With the right support, care, and interventions, children can recover from the impacts of domestic and family violence. They can heal, grow, and build the resilience needed for a healthier, safer future.