

About this brochure

People caring for a child who has experienced violence are often very worried about how that experience will affect the child. Children – regardless of their age – do respond to what's going on around them. However, **the effect on children and their recovery can depend on many things.** You can do a lot to help.

This is one of a **set of brochures** to help you understand and respond to some of the effects of violence on a child.

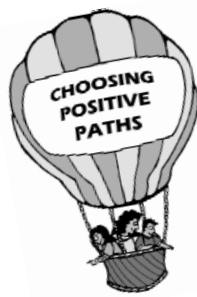
The main focus of the brochures is domestic violence – that is, intimate partner violence – and its effects on children. We also touch on issues of child abuse and other violence experienced by children, usually included in the term family violence.

The brochures talk about children who have experienced violence. This means knowing about, seeing or hearing violence against someone else. It also means being assaulted or abused by family members. All forms of violence in the family affect children.

Mostly the language in the brochures is directed at mothers. However it will also be helpful for other people who are taking on the role of primary carer – fathers, grandparents, aunts, family friends and even foster parents. In this brochure, the phrase 'your child' means 'a child in your care'.

This brochure contains tips and information about:

- **things you could say or do if difficulties arise**
- **how to help your child with moving or separation**



Parenting, talking about separating, moving house & contact



Many people find themselves wondering how to talk to their child about traumatic events. Things that might be **hard to discuss** with children include their parent's violence or abuse, separation, moving house or schools, living or not living with, and seeing or not seeing their other parent.

Your child will react to your feelings and to their own experiences at any age. What changes as they get older are their understanding, their feelings and their responses.

This brochure offers some **practical ideas** and tips that could help you and your child. It also makes suggestions about how you could **talk to your child** about the **changes** happening in your lives.

Things you could do for your child

- **Discuss** the situation using words that suit their age
- **Give them lots of care, affection and comfort**
- **Watch their behaviour and play**, for example, how they share and how they deal with not getting their own way
- Actively **listen** to them and allow them to show their feelings; tell them that it's okay to feel the way they do
- **Let them know what is okay and not okay behaviour**
- Give them lots of **reassurance** that the violence or separation is not their fault
- Do everything you can to **help them live safely** and securely

Things you could say

"I know you're feeling really sad right now"

"It's okay to feel scared when somebody yells"

"Being angry at me or your Dad is understandable"

"It's important to talk about what you're feeling"

"I love you!"

"You're so clever/good/smart!"



Contact Issues

Whether you are separating from your child's other parent for a short while or forever, there are many issues for you and your child to deal with.

One really big issue is **contact between your child and their other parent.**

Before you make arrangements, there are some things you may want to consider.

Is it safe for you or your children to see them?

Do your children **want to see** their other parent? If yes, how long and how often would be appropriate?

If it is safe for your child but **you don't feel safe or don't want to see their other parent,** your child could see them at the home of someone you all trust or at a Contact Centre (these are special places set up for families for contact visits; see **Brochure 10 – Who Can Help** on how to contact one).

If you and your child feel safe seeing their other parent, you could meet in a **public** place that is **neutral** and **safe** (for example, McDonalds, local park, local outdoor/indoor playgrounds).

If you are **concerned about the safety or wellbeing of yourself or your child,** you should seek further legal advice and/or counselling.

If Your child does not want contact with their other parent

Your child might not want contact with their other parent for many different reasons. They might feel unsafe or they might be worried about hurting you. They might resent you for making them go.

Some other reasons for not wanting contact are addressed below, but here are some general suggestions about what you could do and say.

What could I do?

- If the contact is ordered by the Family Court you need to comply, but you should also observe your child's behaviour before and after contact. Keep notes about what you think or know is happening. If your child is very distressed, then seek legal advice.
- Consider whether counselling might help your child
- For older children, you could explain that you will try to find a way to change the situation (you could ask the Family Court to appoint a Child Representative who represents your child's wishes)

What could I say?

'Some children sometimes worry that if they go and see their mum, then their dad might be upset or lonely, or if they stay with their dad, then he might be sad or lonely. Do you worry about that too?'

If yes, reassure your child that when it's safe, it is okay to spend time and have fun with both parents.

'The people who help make the rules (the courts) have said that Dad gets to have a turn to see you. I'm going to see if we can find someone who will listen to what you want, okay?'

If Your child wants to see the other parent but it isn't safe

Your child might not understand or accept that having contact with their other parent is not possible. They might resent you for 'stopping them'.



What could I do?

Let your child know that not letting them see their other parent is not intended to punish them

Let them know that you will try to find a way that they can safely see their other parent

Let them know that you understand that they miss their other parent

Your child's understanding of this situation will depend on their age.

Here are some things you could say that might be suited to your child's age.

What could I say ...

to my 2 to 5 year old, who says

'I want to see Daddy!'

'I miss Daddy!'

You could say:

'It's know it's hard when you miss your Daddy. Mummy loves you and wants you to be safe, that's why you are staying with Mummy.'

to my 5 to 8 year old who says

'Why can't I see Dad?'

You could say:

'I want to make sure you are safe, so we need to find a way for you to see Dad and still be safe.'



to my 8 to 12 year old who says

'Why can't I see Dad more often?'

'I'm going, you can't stop me'

You could say:

'I can see that you really miss Dad. How about we find out if you could see him more often?' (if safe and appropriate)

to my teenager who says

'You can't tell me what to do!'

You could say:

'I know I can't tell you what to do. I know you want to see your Dad, but I need to know that you are safe, and it's still not safe to see him on your own. We can relook at how you can see your Dad.'

'It's really important that we keep talking about this if it's upsetting you.'



Your child's other parent tries to use them against you



Many people try to use their children to get back at their ex-partner or to keep control of them.

This can take the form of:

- Asking their child about the other parent or wanting them to take messages to the other parent
- Arranging contact visits through the child rather than the other parent
- Spending lots of money or giving costly gifts and treats

This can make children feel confused about their loyalties. They might withdraw because they are scared of saying the wrong thing. They might feel resentful at being put in this situation. They might wonder whether it's okay to love both parents.

What could I do?

- Don't ask your child lots of questions about their other parent. You can't control what your child's other parent does, but you can avoid playing their game
- Don't expect your child to take sides
- Let your child know that it's okay to love both parents; and that it's okay to spend time with their other parent – as long as it's safe
- For children over five, let them know that it's not their job to pass messages between their parents. Discuss strategies for dealing with the situation, perhaps saying 'I don't know' or 'I'll have to ask Mum.'
- Talk to your child's other parent directly or through a legal representative



Your child's other parent can't meet their needs

You might feel that your child's other parent is not coping with the child's needs or not giving them the care they need. They might be letting the child get away with inappropriate or unsafe behaviour.

If you think this is happening, observe your child's behaviour before and after contact visits, and make notes if necessary. If you are concerned that your child is unsafe or being harmed in any way, then seek legal advice.

It is important that your child does not feel that you are pumping them for information. You could ask something like 'How was your weekend?', but if your child doesn't seem to want to talk, then don't push them.



Your child's other parent fails to turn up for a contact visit

If your child's other parent fails to turn up for a contact visit, they might feel disappointed, hurt, angry, sad or rejected. They might blame you or be angry with you. How you deal with this will depend on the age of the child.

What could I say ...

... to my 2 to 5 year old?

'Sometimes Dad can't make it. It's not your fault. Let's go to the park instead!'

Toddlers can often be distracted by offering another activity, but don't ignore their distress.

... to my older child?

'Sometimes Dad can't make it. It's not your fault. I can't make him turn up, but on the times where he doesn't come; how about we do something special?' (Have something special to do in case the other parent misses contact).



There are different rules at the other parent's place



Your child might get confused about what they are allowed to do, in different places.

You can't control what their other parent does, but you can be clear what you expect when your child is with you. Try not to:

- Tell your child what to do at their other house
- Criticise their other parent
- Ask your child to take sides

Always give your child clear information about what is dangerous, appropriate and safe.

There are many mixed up issues for children around separation.

Often they think that the violence or separation is their fault. They can also get confused about who they are allowed to love or feel loyal towards. They are often angry, sad and scared.

Many children feel betrayed by their violent parent. Sometimes children also feel angry with the parent who experienced the violence, perhaps feeling that they have 'broken up the family'. Older children might feel embarrassed and ashamed.

Often children don't understand that when you really separate, it is forever. They might keep wondering when you will get back together.

Finding safety for your family often means **moving house**, sometimes more than once. This is traumatic for everyone, especially children.

Children often experience uncertainty, confusion, fear and grief as a result of separation and moving house. Their routine will usually be disrupted and they might leave favourite belongings and friends behind. They might lose the sights and sounds that help them feel safe and secure.

Even children who feel happy about their move may still feel confused and a bit lost.

At these times, your child might show signs of stress or distress:

- Changed eating patterns
- Disturbed sleep or nightmares
- Wanting to sleep in your bed
- Bedwetting or toilet accidents

Being gentle and reassuring is the best way to deal with these situations. Your child will probably get back on track when things settle down.

Separating & Moving House



Your child will need help and time to feel secure in their new home.

It might help if you:

- Use **simple words** to talk about the changes that are happening
- Try to have **familiar things** to reassure them (such as favourite clothes, books, toys, doona cover or pillow)
- Keep to their **routines** as much as possible
- Give them simple **choices** that suit their age
- **Pin up** their drawings or photos
- Pick out new **landmarks**, such as parks, shops, animals or people
- **Set limits** about appropriate behaviour in their new home

Your child's response to their situation will depend on their age. Here are some things you could say that might be suited to your child's age. You could adapt them to fit your family's needs.

What could I say when...

... my 2 to 5 year old says

'I don't want this house'

'I want to go home'

'Want daddy'

You could say:

'Remember, Mummy and Daddy don't live in the same house anymore. You and I live here now'

'Where is Teddy going to live in your room?'

... my 5 to 8 year old says

'Why can't Dad live with us again?'

'Why can't I see Dad?'

You could say:

'Because Dad hurts me, it's not safe or okay for us to stay with him anymore, so we live in different houses' (or 'so sometimes we need to go to a place where we are safe')

... my 8 to 12 year old says

'I don't like this house'

'I want to go back home'

'I want my things'

You could say:

'I know it is hard to leave all your things behind and start in a new place, but this is where we live now.'

'Which room would you like?'

'Where could we hang this poster?'

... my teenager says

'I don't want to live here'

'I'm going back to Dad's'

You could say:

'I know it is hard to leave all your things behind and start in a new place, but this is where we live now. I know you want to see Dad, but I need to know that you are safe, and it's still not safe for you to see him on your own.'

'I'm glad you're talking to me about how you feel and once it's safe, we can talk again about the situation.'

