

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.

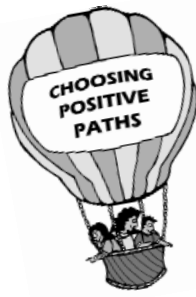
The main focus of the brochures is domestic violence – that is, intimate partner violence – and its effects on children. We also touch on issues of child abuse and other violence experienced by children, usually included in the term family violence.

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:

- **dealing with the effects of domestic violence**
- **talking with your child about difficult issues**



Parenting: talking about behaviour & the effects of violence



Many people find themselves wondering how they can talk with their child about difficult issues or traumatic events. Things that are often **hard to talk about** include a parent's violence and the child's behaviour, social relationships or school performance.

Domestic violence impacts on a child's life in many different ways. You may find that your child's behaviour becomes more difficult, or that they suddenly become 'too good'. Their concentration might suffer and they might be uninterested in hobbies, school work or other activities. They might find it hard to make or keep friends. For older children this might be because they are trying to keep their home life a secret. For younger children, it might be because they find it hard to share or play easily.

This brochure offers some **practical ideas** and tips that could help you and your child through this difficult time.

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 way
- **Actively listen** to them and allow them to show their feelings; tell them that it's okay to feel what 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!'



What can I do or say?

Whether you are separating from your child's partner 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, for 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 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.



Your child is **withdrawn or aggressive** (for example, biting or hitting)

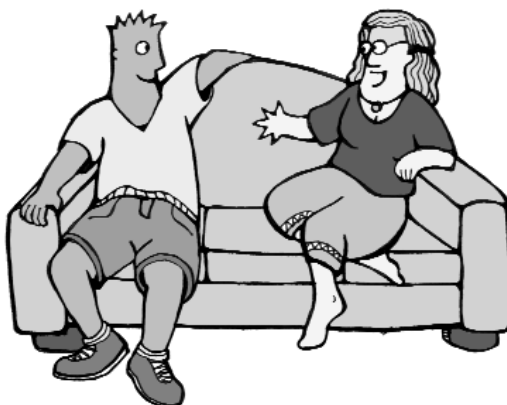
Children who have experienced violence have a wide range of behaviours. At one end of the spectrum, a child might be withdrawn. At the other, they might act out or be aggressive to you, other adults or other children. They might seem to be copying their aggressive parent.

Your child might show any of these behaviours at various times.

Your child needs to know how to express their feelings in a positive way. They need firm messages that it is never okay to hurt somebody.

What could I do?

- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings, worries and understanding of the situation
- Consider whether counselling might help your child
- Talk with your child about ways of showing feelings ... especially about safe ways of showing anger
- Be clear with your child about what behaviour is okay and what is not okay. Make this specific and suitable for their age. For example, *'It's not okay to scream and kick your friends at Day Care'* or *'It's not okay to hit someone'*.



Your child saw or heard you being hurt by a family member

Your child does not have to witness violence first-hand to be affected by it. If they know that another family member has hurt you physically or emotionally, they might be very sad and confused. Depending on their age, your child might also feel betrayed, hurt and angry.

Your child's feelings might impact on their behaviour in many different ways. See the age-specific brochures in this kit for more information about how your child might react.

What could I do?

- Give your child lots of care
- Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling
- Tell your child that the violence is not their fault (for example, you could say, *'It's never your fault if Daddy hits me. Daddy is wrong and Daddy is responsible.'*)
- Tell your child that violence is never okay (for example, you could say, *'What happened was not okay and it's not safe to stay here so we are going to...'*)
- Tell your child what to do if they feel unsafe
- Tell your child what to do if anyone ever hurts them (for example, *'Tell Mummy or tell a teacher'*)

If you have left the violent or dangerous person, it will help your child to say *'We are safe now.'*

If you and your child are still in danger, then you need to make a safety plan. See Brochure 1 for ideas.



Your child was assaulted or abused by a family member

There are people who can help your child to deal with their experience. Contact the Gatehouse Centre at the Royal Children's Hospital on (03) 9345 6391, the police or ask a Domestic Violence Outreach Worker for advice.

These people can also help your child learn about safe and unsafe touching. This is especially important if they have been sexually abused.

What can I do?

- Give your child lots of care
- Encourage them to talk about how they are feeling

Tell your child:

- That the violence is never their fault (for example, you could say, *'Even if you have done something naughty, it's never okay for someone to hurt you. Daddy was wrong to hit you.'*)
- That violence is never okay
- What to do if they feel unsafe
- What to do if anyone ever hurts them (for example, *'Tell Mummy or tell a teacher'*)



Your child has low confidence or self-esteem or lacks social skills

Children who have experienced violence often lack social skills such as sharing and playing. This can mean that they find it hard to make friends. It can also affect their school performance.

Your child's self-confidence might be low because of their lack of social skills. It could also be low because being assaulted or abused by a family member has made them believe they are a bad person.

What can I do?

- Give your child lots of care
- Encourage them to talk about what happens at school and when they're playing with their friends (but don't push them to name friends)
- Tell your child when they do something well
- Identify and encourage positive behaviours, preferably straight away. For example, you could say, *'It was great that you asked Micky to play with you.'*
- Name and praise activities that your child is good at. For example, you could say *'That's a great story you wrote'* or *'You're such a good swimmer'*
- Help your child to participate in activities that they enjoy and are good at. For example, football, gym or music.



There are many services and professionals who can help you and your child to recover from your experiences of violence.

These include:

- Social workers
- Maternal and Child Health Nurses
- Children's workers within domestic violence services
- Counsellors (some work specifically with children)

Specific Victorian services for children and young people include:

GateHouse Centre,
Royal Children's Hospital
9345 6391
(a service for children up to 16 years who have been sexually abused)

Royal Children's Hospital
Mental Health Service
1800 445 511
(for children 0 -15 years with significant mental health problems)

ORYGEN
Youth Mental Health Programs
1800 888 320
or VIA PAGER 9483 4566

Also, in the **Northern Suburbs**
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
(Austin Hospital)
(0-15 years) 9496 3620
(15 years plus) 1800 888 320

Self-Expression Activities

Tips for these activities

- **Listen to your child** and let them know you **understand** how things are for them
- Let your child **cry and be sad** if they need to
- Talk with your child about ways of **showing feelings** ... especially about safe ways of showing anger
- Reassure your child (and yourself) that it is **okay to be angry**, it's just not okay to hurt anyone!
- Ask your child to tell you about their pictures if they want to, but don't push them to talk. It's important that these activities stay fun and that your child doesn't feel pressured

You don't have to be an expert to use these activities. Use your judgement, and if you are at all worried about anything your child says or if you are unsure about using these activities, then seek advice from a qualified professional.

Some people who might be able to help are:

- **Social workers**
- **Children's workers**
- **Counsellors**

You can find these people at your local Community Health Centre, regional Parenting Service or local Council.

For other suggestions, see Brochure 10 – Who Can Help?

Here are some drawing activities you can do with your child to help them talk about their feelings, worries or experiences.

You could sit down with your child and draw too. While you are both drawing, or afterwards, ask your child to talk about their drawing. Often, children will express a lot this way, which opens up possibilities to talk about changes, feelings and worries.

Children do sometimes draw strange things! It doesn't necessarily mean they are disturbed. If your child draws something that worries you, ask them to tell you about it and seek advice from a qualified professional if you are still concerned.

Family/Self Drawings

Age: 5-10
Materials: Paper
Textas or pencils

Ask your child to draw a picture of, for example:

- Their family doing something together
- Their new house and/or their old house
- A picture of themselves
- Themselves at school

Dream Drawings:

Age: 4-10, maybe to 12
Materials: Paper
Textas or pencils

Draw a person sleeping in bed, dreaming. This could be shown by a large cartoon-like thinking-bubble.

Ask your child to draw in the bubble what they think the person might be dreaming. Or you could also ask them to draw the person's good dream and bad dream.

Ask your child to tell you about their drawing. You could ask if they have ever had those type of dreams.

This is another playful and gentle way of opening up possibilities to talk about things, especially if children are having nightmares.

Paper Plate Faces

Age: 4-9
Materials: Paper plates
Textas or pencils

Ask your child to draw faces showing different feelings on the paper plates (happy, angry/mad, sad, scared). You could join in too and make your own, which would make a game of the whole activity.

These become masks that you and your child can use to show (and maybe talk about) how they feel about a place, a person, or about things that happen.

You could ask questions of your child, such as:

- 'Which face do you have on when you go to school?'
- 'Which face do you have on when it's bed-time?'
- Which face do you have on when you see Dad?

Encourage your child to hold the chosen plate/mask up to their face. Let them ask you questions too. You could ask them about the faces they choose, for example, 'Why do you have your happy/sad face on at school?'