

Choosing Positive Paths

Parenting a pre-schooler who has experienced violence

3 to 5 years

Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common. According to Australian statistics (2012), women are most likely to experience violence from a male partner or ex-partner. Three quarters of women who experience family violence are mothers or care for children. Almost half said their children had seen or heard the violence. People caring for a child who has experienced family violence are often worried about how the child is affected.

Children – regardless of their age – do know and respond to what's going on around them.

For children, experiencing family violence means knowing about, seeing or hearing violence in their home. It also means the child themselves can be hurt, abused or controlled. All forms of violence in the family affect children and are types of child abuse. A child's ability to cope can depend on many things.

You can do a lot to help.

This brochure can help you understand and support children who have experienced family violence. Most family violence is directed at women so the language used here is for mothers ('you').

However, the information is also helpful for other primary carers – fathers, grandparents, aunts, family friends and foster parents. The phrase 'your child' means 'a child in your care'; 'dad' or 'father' refers to the child's other parent.

This brochure contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on pre-schoolers
- The importance of playing together
- Stages of development

During or after an experience of family violence, your pre-schooler will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. It is common for children to feel:

- Confusion about what is happening and why
- Fear of being hurt, or of you being hurt
- Sadness about the violence, any changes to the family and their own losses
- Anger about what is happening

How pre-schoolers think

Pre-schoolers usually show their feelings through their behaviour. They could be teary or irritable if they feel unsafe or insecure. They are more likely to be confident and happy if they feel safe.

Pre-schoolers are beginning to test their independence and their parents' boundaries, they often think the whole world revolves around them. They may believe that the problems or violence are their fault.

The way children see the world can be different to the way adults see things, so it's important to notice and talk to your child about how they are feeling.

Children can sense how their mothers or carers are feeling. If you can appear relaxed and calm for your children, your child is more likely to be relaxed and calm.



The impact of family violence

Many parents worry that the experience of family violence will affect their child forever. Pre-schoolers need time and support to recover. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your child can begin to heal.

If your child has experienced violence they could:

- Feel responsible for arguments they hear
- Be very clingy or unwilling to try new things
- Be difficult to understand or use baby talk
- Find it hard to share
- Withdraw, become quiet, not play much
- Behave in difficult ways (e.g. doing the opposite of what you ask) and be aggressive towards you and others (e.g. bite, kick)
- Replay what they have seen or heard as a way to try and understand
- Wet their bed, have bad dreams or trouble sleeping

- Be picky or uninterested in food
- Return to behaviour from when they were younger

Ways you can help your child:

- Give them lots of affection, care and reassurance (using hugs, play and words)
- Give them simple, truthful explanations and responses
- Tell them the violence is never their fault
- Try to stick to parenting routines – regular play, meal, bath and sleep times

For other ideas, see the tips and also brochures 7 and 8.

Tips

Behaviour and feelings

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviours they have seen. Sometimes children worry about this too. It's important to discuss these worries with your child. All children need to learn which behaviour is okay and which is not. For example, it is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit or hurt anyone. Talk with your child about ways of showing feelings, especially safe ways of showing anger.

The best way for your child to learn about expressing their feelings and worries is to be surrounded by adults - men or women - who provide safety, stability and love.

Things you can do:

- Talk with staff at childcare about ways to help your child
- Tell your child what they are good at
- Listen and show that you understand that things are hard, scary, or frustrating for your child
- Let them know it's okay to talk about their mum and dad
- Let them cry and be sad if they need to
- Don't feel you always have to hide your own feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together. Let your child know that whatever you are feeling, you will be okay.

You can find more in brochure 8.



These behaviours can be common in pre-schoolers, even if they have not experienced family violence. If you are worried seek advice.

The importance of play

Children who have experienced violence usually have mixed feelings that they can't express in words. They may be less confident and slower to try new things.

Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings. It helps them develop:

- Physical skills such as catching, throwing, holding and drawing
- Confidence and the ability to work through their worries
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills
- The ability to communicate and to play and share with others
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions

Some mothers who have experienced violence can find it difficult and strange to play with their child at first. Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together. It can be useful to:

- Follow their lead, but make sure the game is safe
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing
- Be patient
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes
- Give them praise and encouragement, e.g. 'That's great colouring in!'
- Have fun!



Activities to try together

- Use old clothes, shoes and jewellery to dress up
- Pre-schoolers love to be creative. Use old boxes, paper and scraps to make things
- Encourage your child to draw and ask them about their drawing. It can be easier for a child to draw how they are feeling than to talk about it
- Praise and display your child's drawings so they can feel good about themselves
- Go to the park and explore nature by pointing out birds and insects
- Read or tell stories and encourage your child to share their feelings about the story
- Discuss feelings including happiness, sadness and anger
- Ask questions about your child's day
- Teach your child how to use buttons and zips, tie shoelaces and put shoes on the right feet. They will need help, but let them try first
- Playgroups and kindergarten are important opportunities for pre-schoolers to learn and play with other children their age



Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Pre-schoolers will test their independence and their parents' boundaries. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress, but children often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again.

3 to 3½ years

Becomes more comfortable being separated from familiar adults for a short time

Walks up stairs one step at a time

Jumps with two feet

Talks more and uses new words

Sometimes fights with other children over play things

Recognises people and things in pictures

Says 'no' more often

3½ to 4 years

Walks up and down stairs easily

Can throw and kick a ball, hop, skip and jump

Draws recognisable things and can write some letters

Concentrates for longer

Can understand why and why not

Talks a lot, mostly asking when, how and why

Begins to understand that it's good to share and wait their turn

4 to 5 years

Likes to be creative, adventurous and play make believe

Starts to learn to share

Shows a wide range of feelings

Uses parents and familiar adults as role models

Cooperates, wants to please adults

Begins to act responsibly and independently

Explores their body and what being a girl or boy is all about

Who can help

You might find the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child. It can take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you.

You are one of the people who know what's good for your child. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and to your child. It's also important to listen to, and learn from, people you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a mother, it can help to talk things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other mothers. You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, social workers or counsellors. You can find these people and support groups for mothers and children at your local community health centre, local council or call **WIRE Women's Support Line** or **Parentline 13 22 89** (7 days/8am-12pm).

If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair out or biting themselves), call the **Royal Children's Hospital** on **1800 445 511** for advice. If you are worried that your child is being sexually abused, call the **Gatehouse Centre** on **9345 6391**.

Crisis services

If you are in immediate danger call:
Victoria Police 000

Safe Steps

1800 015 188

24hr family violence response line for women

Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491

24hr family violence support line for men

Women and children's services

If you think you are experiencing family violence contact the service in your region (Mon-Fri, 9-5):



Berry Street

Northern suburbs

(03) 9450 4700

Grampians

(03) 5330 5000



Women's Health West

Western suburbs

(03) 9689 9588

Referral services

Call these services to find the closest family violence service to you:

WIRE Women's Support Line

1300 134 130

1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732

Please photocopy any part of this parenting kit freely. For extra copies call Women's Health West or Berry Street, or download the kit from our websites: www.whwest.org.au or www.berrystreet.org.au

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