

Choosing Positive Paths

Parenting Talking about separating, moving house and seeing dad

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 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:

- Helping your child with changes in your family
- Things you could say or do
- People who can help

Whether you are separating from your children's father for a short while or forever, children may experience a range of feelings. Parental separation and/or moving house can cause them to feel uncertainty, confusion, anger, fear or grief.

They may think the violence or separation is their fault. They may worry about who they are allowed to love or feel loyalty towards. They may wonder if you and their dad will get back together.

Even children who are relieved about the separation may still feel a bit lost after such a big change to their lives.

All children have a right to be protected from all sorts of harm, including conflict between parents. Children need adults to help them adapt to the changes.

This brochure offers some ideas about what you could do or say to help you and your child.

Each family's situation is unique and this information is general. If your child's father is the person using violence and he wants to see the children, you need to seek advice about risk and safety from a family violence service or police and legal advice from a lawyer.



The impact of family violence

Keeping your family safe may mean having a family violence intervention order which bans family violence and prohibits your partner from coming near you and your children. For some women this may mean separation from their children's father while they remain at home. If he doesn't stop using violence, some mothers will need to call the police or move house, sometimes more than once.

These situations can be unsettling for everyone, especially for children. They can start to show, in actions or words, their level of distress by:

- Changing their eating patterns
- Not sleeping well or having nightmares
- Wanting to sleep in your bed
- Wetting the bed or having toilet accidents
- Not wanting to go to school
- Returning to younger behaviour

Be gentle and reassuring. Your child will probably adapt to the changes when things settle down and they feel safe. It might also help if you:

- Use simple words to talk about the changes
- Ask them how they feel and thank them for sharing
- Notice how they are trying to adapt to changes
- Help them keep in touch with trusted adults they can share feelings with
- Try to stick to comforting routines, e.g. healthy meals they like, story before bed
- Make sure they have familiar things to comfort them e.g. favourite clothes, books, toys or pillow
- Give them simple choices that suit their age
- If you have moved, pin up their drawings or photos
- Explore your new neighbourhood together by visiting the park or shops
- Seek safety advice about your family's technology (See safety brochure 1)

Seeing dad

One major change after separating and/or moving house can be how your child spends time with their dad. This may be because the police or courts have issued an intervention order, or because you and your partner have decided to end your relationship.

Some people make parenting arrangements between themselves. Others get help from a mediation centre or a family lawyer to negotiate a formal parenting agreement. If it's the children's father who is using violence and he wants to see the children, it's wise to get good legal advice before you make any parenting arrangements. There are services that can help you. Some things you may want to think and ask about are:

- What is safe, for you and your children?
- What legal orders are in place and what do they mean for your children's time with dad? How long do the orders last?
- What support and advice do you need?
- What orders may you and your children need? Do you need to change your order?
- How can you safely communicate with your child's dad?

What could I say?

It can be tricky to answer your children's questions when you are still finding out yourself. Let your children know you are doing what you can, but protect them from stressful details. Children need to feel they do not have to take sides, 'for' or 'against' either parent. Don't speak badly to your child about their father. Things you can say are:

'Mum and dad still love you even though we don't live together.'

'Thanks for telling me what you feel. Can I think about what you've said and we'll talk more later?'

'The grown-ups are getting help to work out how we all see each other'

'Do you want to call aunty, granddad, (another adult you trust)?'

It's okay not to have an answer right away. Repeating what children have told you makes them feel heard, even if you can't change things to be the way they want.

Don't ask your child lots of questions about their dad. You could ask something like 'How was your weekend?' but if your child doesn't want to talk, don't push them.

If your child doesn't want to see their dad

Your child might not want to see their dad for different reasons.

They might feel unsafe or worried. They may resent you for not being able to stop them seeing their dad.

What could I do?

If there is no court order that says the children must spend time with their father, then you don't have to make them go.

Your child must spend time with dad if there is a written parenting plan registered with the court. If you don't send your child to spend time with their father, you could be taken to court for breaching the court order.

If you want to change the court order you need to go back to court.

Help your child feel more comfortable when they're with their father. Try to stay calm and positive at handover time.

Pack their favourite toy or game, make sure they have a mobile with credit and can call you.

Observe and keep notes about your child's behaviour before and after time with dad. If your child is very distressed, seek legal advice.

Consider whether counselling could help your child.

What could I say?

Some things you can say are:

'The people who help make the rules (the courts) have said that dad gets to have a turn to see you, so you'll be at his house after school on Tuesdays...'

'Some children worry that if they stay with their dad, their mum might be sad or lonely. Of course I miss you, but I'll be okay.'

If your child wants to see their dad but can't

Your children may not be allowed to see their dad when they want due to safety concerns. However, it is important to remember your child has strong and complex feelings for both parents.

Try to support your child's feelings, including missing their dad or worries about their dad.

Each child may feel very differently.

What can I do?

Explain the reasons for the rules.

Reassure your children that it's okay to love both parents and they can spend time with dad when the grown-ups have worked out how.

Be careful not to put your child in a position where they feel like they need to take sides.

What could I say?

Some other things you can say are:

'It's kind of you to worry about your dad, remember he is a grown up and he knows how to get help, just like we are'

'Is there anything that helps you when you miss spending time with dad?'

'Would you like to draw a picture or write a letter about how you feel or things you can't say?'

'I love spending time with you'

If your child's dad does not attend a contact visit

If your child's father fails to come for a contact visit, your child might feel disappointed, hurt, angry and sad or rejected.

What could I say?

'Sometimes dad can't make it. It's not your fault if he can't come'

Offer another activity, but don't ignore their distress.



If your child is unsafe

If you are concerned that your child is unsafe or being harmed in any way; for example, is your child being abused or neglected or exposed to dangerous situations? If you think this is happening:

- Observe your child's behaviour before and after contact visits, and make notes if necessary
- Speak with your lawyer and child protection to try to protect your child
- Call the police if you think your child is in immediate danger
- Make sure your child knows how to contact you or a trusted adult when they're not with you. See brochure 1 for more safety ideas



Who can help

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a mother, it may 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). For more information on legal options try **Women's Legal Service Victoria** www.womenslegal.org.au or **Victorian legal aid** www.legalaid.vic.gov.au or the **family law court** www.familycourt.gov.au

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

Women's Health West and Berry Street acknowledge the
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