

# Children who live with domestic violence

The women's shelter  
Open 24 hrs  
Phone: 561 1205

**The office phones numbers of the  
Women's Shelter are:  
561 3720 and 561 3740**

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## Children and domestic violence

In order for any child to develop as a strong, positive individual adequately adjusted to itself and its surroundings, its domestic environment must provide the basic conditions necessary to promote physical and emotional development, health and general well-being. The home is the place in which the basis of human happiness is laid, and the parents have the strongest influence.

For a child to grow and develop successfully, a variety of basic needs must be fulfilled. These include:

- Physical care, such as food, clothing, shelter, rest and protection from danger;
- Emotional growth, including touching, affection, comfort, respect, approval, support, patience, encouragement and stimulation.
- Positive interaction with adults capable of instructing and imposing discipline based on fairness, caring and tolerance.
- Clearly defined rules and a stable environment.

Children who live with domestic violence are at high risk of not having these basic needs fulfilled. At the same time, they are under continual pressure from the many types of stress that violence creates. Many parents in a violent relationship believe they can isolate their children from its consequences, but in reality this is far from being the truth. Such parents are often surprised to discover that their children are capable of describing violent episodes down to the smallest detail, and have become „experts“ in their parents' moods and reactions. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that children do not have to be victims of violence themselves or to have witnessed it in order to suffer from its effects. Indirect involvement can also have serious consequences, as when, for example, a child is in the next room and hears and senses what is happening. In addition, children often witness the consequences of domestic violence. Perhaps they see a parent out of control, a weeping mother filled with fear, anxiety or injured, objects broken or a family pet destroyed. On top of all this comes the stress of living in a home where the atmosphere is constantly filled with tension, and no one knows what the next moment will bring.

## Emotional and physical neglect / Behavioural and Emotional Problems

The effects of domestic violence on children can be divided into a number of categories. These are defined by the nature and frequency of the violence involved, and whether the environment in which they live provides them with sufficient stability with respect to permanence of place of residence, schooling and forming friendships.

Among babies (0-1 yrs), exposure to domestic violence results in a failure to fulfil their basic emotional needs. This is often revealed by a failure to grow and develop physically, sleep disorders, and neglect in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. The absence of stability and regulation in their daily lives makes these babies insecure, while the lack of emotional stimuli results in a failure to mature emotionally. Emotional deprivation also means that these babies make few demands on those around them, their silence and general listlessness are often mistakenly interpreted as meaning that they are quiet and content by nature. In some cases, they can also suffer physical injury as a result of violence between their parents.

Among infants (2-5 yrs), exposure to domestic violence results in the same symptoms described above, and these may be accompanied by behavioural and emotional problems arising from an inability to form satisfactory relationships with their parents and other children. They may become aggressive, noisy, rowdy and destructive, or listless, lethargic and dependent.

At the same time, the atmosphere of constant fear, unhappiness and tension that accompany domestic violence means that parents are unable to cope with the everyday stresses and strains of caring for and rearing an infant. As a result, these children are in danger of serious neglect.

**Children who live with domestic violence are at high risk of not having basic needs fulfilled.**

## **Domestic Violence - Closely Guarded Secret / Children Suffer in Silence**

As they reach school age, children look to their parents as their principal role models and source of guidance. They learn mainly from what they see, rather than from what they hear. If exposed to domestic violence, children in this age group tend to blame themselves, and try to change things by being „good.“ When they realise that this does not work, hopelessness, guilt and anxiety take over. In many cases, these children suffer in silence. Violence becomes a part of their daily lives and a closely guarded secret. Some may develop an abnormal sense of responsibility towards their families, particularly younger siblings, and as their mothers come increasingly to rely on them, they may become „special friends.“

***In many cases, these children suffer in silence. Violence becomes a part of their daily lives and a closely guarded secret.***

Children of this age who are caught up in domestic violence bring their problems with them to school in a variety of ways. They may experience difficulty defining social boundaries between themselves and others, which can result in a number of problems. Limited in their ability to resolve

everyday disputes, they may become either abnormally aggressive or unable to defend themselves. At the same time, difficulty in exhibiting behaviour deemed appropriate by their peers and teachers gives rise to a new set of problems. Messages of concern and complaints may pass from school to the home, aggravating an already tense situation and causing the child to feel even worse, unless the situation is handled with great care.

Children in this age group also experience problems understanding and verbalising their feelings, or expressing unhappiness by any means other than physical illness. Typically they complain of headaches, stomach pains, or a range of other symptoms. In such cases, it is important for adults to listen, and bear in mind that domestic violence is one of these children's most closely guarded secrets.

## **Emotionally Homeless Teenagers**

Teenage years can prove especially difficult for children who live with domestic violence. Not only do they face the range of problems described above, but are also at risk in several other ways. Even in the best of circumstances, the sweeping physical and emotional changes that take place during adolescence can often prove traumatic and difficult to deal with, and these are magnified in the case of teenagers forced to live with domestic violence. In addition to the confused feelings usually associated with puberty, they face a whole range of conflicting emotions, including shame, guilt, despair and humiliation. Deep inside, they often nurse a hope that someone will come to their rescue, and they fluctuate widely between hope, despair or a numbing feeling of having no control over their lives. As they become sexually aware, teenagers also tend to follow the example set by their elders, in terms of both the role of the sexes and relations with others, and those who live with domestic violence often experience great difficulty in bonding with other peer groups. Faced with these frustrations, they may exhibit anti-social behaviour, become over-responsible towards their families, or cut themselves off from others and become socially isolated. They may develop a love-hate relationship with their parents, while despairing of the situation in which they find themselves. At a time of their lives when they have a deep basic need for security and emotional support from their parents they find neither:

***Teenage years can prove especially difficult for children who live with domestic violence.***

Research has shown clearly identifiable links between domestic violence and a wide variety of anti-social behaviour among teenagers, ranging from drug abuse, depression and prostitution to attempted and actual suicide.

Denied of a stable environment to provide them with love, care and emotional support, children forced to live with domestic violence live in a perpetual state of anxiety, fear, anger, lack of self-control, inadequacy and confusion. For some, their experiences will scar them for the rest of their lives, setting an indelible mark on their relationships with others. As their experience of normal domestic life is limited or non-existent, they may often turn to violence themselves as a means of solving conflicts or differences with others. Denied of care and support by an abusive parent, many of these children may be best described as emotionally homeless.

## What does the Women's Shelter offer you?

- Shelter and support to help yourself
- Complete anonymity and confidentiality
- Contact with other women with similar experiences
- Facilities for children unable to attend their own nursery or school
- Consultation sessions for non-residents, preferably by appointment
- A 24-hour telephone service: 561 1205 (Hotline), 800 6205 (Freephone)

## The Women's Shelter provides:

- 1) Shelter for women and children unable to live at home due to intolerable mental or physical abuse by a husband, partner or other family member, and for women who have been raped.
- 2) Information and advice to victims of domestic violence, to encourage increased education and heightened public awareness on its nature and consequences, and to ensure that society provides those who suffer from it with the necessary legal protection and practical support and assistance.

## Important points to remember

- Take an active stance against domestic violence.
- Domestic violence is a crime - children suffer most.
- Violence against children is everyone's business. Involvement is vital whenever there is reason to suspect it.
- The right to privacy in the home does not cover domestic violence.
- Helping children who are victims of domestic violence can be a matter of life and death, and directly affect their future well-being.
- We should all join together to ensure that children lead a life free from violence.

When attempting to help a child who is a victim of domestic violence, it is important to remember the following:

- Domestic violence is most likely to be a closely guarded secret.
- Ensure that the child feels safe with you, can trust you, and feels that you believe what it says.
- Remain calm and composed, both verbally and emotionally
- Only make promises you can keep.
- Show the child that there are ways of getting help, and that you will make sure it continues to get help in the future.
- Seek advice and support from others. Take things slowly to ensure that the help the child receives is the best and most effective possible.