





Family violence in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Family violence and child abuse happens in all communities, in every socio-economic, cultural, class and religious group

“The violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be viewed as a system of the breakdown of traditional culture and gender roles brought about by contact with non Indigenous society”. Research conducted by Paul Wilson criminologist in 1982 compared rates of violence and conditions in different Aboriginal reserves. He found that the rate of violence was higher in communities where alcohol was legally available, where Aboriginal people from different tribes and localities were forced to live together, where traditional culture had not been preserved and in communities with larger populations. (Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce)

David Mc Knight (1986) in his research on Mornington Island “that fighting was greater than past due to what he called the supercamps, some 600 people or more from different tribal groups. And D Riches also refers to the fighting in Aboriginal supercamps in “the anthropology of violence. These and other historical factors underlying family violence must not stop us from tackling the problem. You can make a difference:

- Step in and provide information to help the family who is in need of help, including the abuser/s
- If you are the one in the violent situation and there are children involved, take the step and talk to someone you can trust and seek help.
- Learn more about the abuse of children, how to avoid it and how to help children get over it
- Always encourage parents in their parenting skills
- Encourage kids to act out, talk or paint about feelings, especially those that may be worrying them. Kids need to know it is okay to talk about violence or abuse
- Make sure children know that family violence is not their fault
- Help children make an escape plan from violence that is easy for them to remember

Photo: Kenny Bedford

family violence



- Tell children it doesn't just happen to them, that it happens to lots of children and that there are lots of people who think it is wrong and some can help.
- Encourage children to pick out an elder, health worker or teacher they can go to and ask for help.
- Make sure you let the children know that they are very special people
- You should be able to discuss concerns about a child's safety with welfare services in your area. Check them out.

Children who have been witness to or part of family violence will benefit by having someone to talk to and services that will help them make sense of their feelings and confusion.

There should be options available but if there is not, start creating the support systems in your own areas to deal with this for yourselves and the children.

- Know that they are not alone
- Talk about the feeling that hurt them and their body
- Know that family violence is a grown up problem and is not their fault
- Know that violence is wrong and we need to stop it
- Learn to fix the problem without fighting
- Spend time with grown ups that help us in a good way
- To feel confident and happy and healthy
- Be upset over losses like leaving home and country and someone moving on
- Be able to trust some people and to feel safe
- To be able to work out of their body feeling about the adults around them that participate in family violence especially the offenders so that they are not scared of what they know is wrong

In what way can your service and community improve to meet the needs of your children who need to work out some of these things. Refer to other parts of Through Young Black Eyes for help to get you going or report back to us with programs and projects you have that are good and work.

All members of a family and community have a right to feel safe from family violence.



Family Violence and Domestic Violence

Increasingly, the term 'family violence' is being used in place of 'domestic violence'. The difference between these related terms may be unclear or easily confused by members of the community. It is important to distinguish the difference between the two.

The definition of domestic violence has evolved over the years as researchers and practitioners have learnt more about the variety of abusive behaviours that can occur between offenders and victims.

Domestic violence generally refers to violent or abusive behaviour between two people in a relationship, including spouses, defactos and same sex couples. It describes the strategies used by an offender (usually male) to exercise power and control over their partner through threats, violence, abuse and other intimidating ways.

It has only been recently that we have recognised that the impact of domestic violence can also extend beyond a 'couples' relationship to other members of a family, household or community – especially children.

Indigenous communities recognise this extension of domestic violence and how it can apply across all intimate relationships in a family and community. For this reason the broader term 'family violence' is being used. It is also preferred because it takes into account the diversity and complexity of kinship ties in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities.

Family violence includes inter-generational violence and abuse and recognises all victims, whether they are affected directly or indirectly. Perpetrators and victims of family violence can include parents, uncles, aunts, (step) children, (step) siblings, cousins, grandparents, in-laws and distant relatives. An individual can be a perpetrator and a victim at the same time in a family situation.

In this handbook, family violence refers to the actions and harm caused when an individual tries by physical and/or psychological means to dominate or control another family member. It also encompasses any harm that may extend to additional members of the family.

“Children who witness parental (or family) violence have reactions similar to those of children who are direct victims of abuse”

(American Psychological Association, 1996)



forms of family violence

Family violence can be inflicted in a number of ways and involves a wide range of behaviours. The various forms of family violence are usually grouped into the following categories and may overlap.

Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Social Abuse
Verbal Abuse	Emotional or Psychological Abuse	
Economic Abuse	Spiritual or Cultural Abuse	

Children can be affected by, exposed to, or witness, any of these forms of abuse. Where family violence occurs around children, they are also at high risk of suffering one or more forms of associated abuse whether it be directly or indirectly. Most of the following examples of the forms of family violence are against the law.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse includes directly assaulting a person, their child, pet or property and includes the use of weapons and reckless behaviour. Related examples include:

- pushing, slapping, punching, biting, kicking, choking, inflicting burns, hair pulling, shaking
- using a weapon, eg, spearing, flogging with a stick, belting, stoning
- destroying property or possessions, eg, clothes, personal items, furniture
- being cruel to pets, including in front of family members
- dangerous driving of vehicles and marine vessels that frightens or endangers others
- locking people out of the house
- overworking someone or keeping them from getting enough sleep

Sexual Abuse

This form of family violence refers to adult family members only. Abuse of this nature that is inflicted on children is known as Child Sexual Assault – see Section C.

Sexual abuse can also be a form of physical abuse, but because of the specific nature or trauma associated with the experience by survivors, it is grouped differently. This abuse may include any kind of forced sex or making someone feel degraded through sexual acts. Examples include:

- trying to force someone to have sex or take part in sexual acts against their will
- actually forcing someone to have sex against their will (this is rape and is also a crime between married couples)
- using an object, penis or other part of the body to penetrate vagina, mouth or anus without permission or consent



family violence

Witnessing family violence or living in a setting where violence is apparent can have a significant traumatic effect on children

- injuring sexual organs
- hurting someone during sex
- forcing someone to have unsafe sex, ie, without protection against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases
- forcing someone to take their clothes off or to remain naked against their will
- being made to pose for pornography, eg, photos, videos or in front of others
- being made to look at pornographic photos or view other pornographic materials including videos and internet sites
- being forced to watch, observe or take part in sexual activities, voyeurism and exhibitionism
- criticising sexuality or using sexually degrading comments or names, eg, slut, whore
- sexual harrassment

Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse is the use of continual put downs which can occur in public, private or in front of friends or family. The perpetrator usually focuses on intelligence, sexuality, body image and capacity or worth as a parent, partner or member of the family or community. Examples of words or phrases that may be used include:

- stupid, brainless, idiot, thick
- slut, bitch, big hole, tart, dog, cunt
- fat, shitface, ugly; or expressions like “you think ya look good”, “what ya tryin’ a prove?”
- useless; or “good for nuthin’”, “can’t cook”, “can’t even look after ya kids”

Verbal abuse can also include:

- intimidating behaviours
- threats to harm or kill a person, children, relative or pet
- threats to destroy property or possessions
- harrassment

Verbal abuse is closely related to psychological or emotional abuse.

Psychological or Emotional Abuse

Psychological abuse results in making a person feel blamed that they are the problem in a relationship or family. It includes constant comparisons with other peers, which works to lower the victim’s confidence, self esteem and self-worth. Behaviour which neglects or withdraws from any interest in and engagement with the victim is also included here.



Spiritual or Cultural Abuse

Spiritual or cultural abuse is about using power and control to deny a partner or family member their human, cultural or spiritual rights and needs. This form of abuse may also include the misuse of culture or religion as a reason for family violence. Another example is to insult or run down a person in relation to their cultural background or religious preference or practices. Further examples include:

- denying access to cultural land, sites, or family
- denying access to cultural or spiritual ceremonies or rites
- preventing religious observances or practises
- forcing religious ways and practices against a person's own beliefs
- denying a person their cultural heritage

Social Abuse

Social control and isolation may also be used as a form of abuse. Isolating a person from family and friends is a commonly reported example of social abuse. Examples of social abuse of a family member may include:

- not being allowed to contact, visit or see friends or family
- not being allowed to plan or attend social events or move around socially
- not being able to make telephone calls without permission or supervision
- prevention from learning or speaking English or other languages that improve (or mask from the perpetrator) communication with others
- having limited or no personal freedom
- not being able to make or keep appointments, eg, with a doctor, without permission, supervision and/or in the presence of the offender
- having limited or no decision-making role in the family

Economic Abuse

Economic abuse involves the unequal control of money/finances in a relationship or family. Examples include:

- complete control of monies and income by offenders
- preventing a family member from access to their own money or bank accounts
- unrealistic expectations of spending patterns and budgeting
- controlling how other family members spend their income
- forcefully taking money from family members
- threatening family members for money



how does family violence impact on our children?

Family violence can affect all ages and members of a family, including babies and children. Increasing research over the last decade has helped to expose the possible extent of family violence and the effect it has on children and young people. Greater attention is especially being given to the emotional and psychological suffering of kids who witness family violence.

Children, regardless of age, are always affected if there is violence or abuse between their parents and or other family members. Family violence may result in separation between children and family. This may include time out with family, or from family, moving back home to family or as far away from the abuser/s as possible, to another state or territory, or as a last resort to a refuge. It may be for the last time. This time you are sure you are never going back again.

Where there are children their feelings count too.

A child's right to safety is the most important thing. The perpetrator may not hurt the child/ren normally but out of anger, pain, rejection, jealousy and many other feelings may in fact take it out on the children. Someone needs to assess if this would happen in the early fazes of the separation and if they feel it is very possible the child/ren need to be kept from contact until a time when it is felt safe.

Weeks, months and even years in a violent environment can have a terrible effect on children and yet despite the violence so can separation. Their world though violent was familiar and though unpredictable it was still predictable. They move out of the familiar into many times, the unpredictable and even though some may think I hate him/her and never want to see them again they have thoughts and feelings such as:

- What is going to happen to me
- What is going to happen to us
- Where are we going to live
- Who will look after us
- Will they find us and kill us
- I want to stay with Dad

What children are needing at this point is as much love and safety as they can get from family and other adults. This is not always possible for the separating parents so those assisting need to help them

- To find someone for them and the children to talk to as well as supports
- Encourage the children to talk about or draw their feelings
- Look to getting support with their parenting
- Make contact with domestic violence and aboriginal legal services

family violence



- Encourage parents to discuss their future plans with the children so that they are not left in a fearing position
- Try to have some things around them which are their favourites or a comfort to them
- If need be follow through with legal advice

Children may experience family violence in one or more of the following ways:

In the home or community situation where family violence occurs, children:

- may be aware of family violence behaviour
- are often present as witnesses
- may try to intervene or seek help
- may become targets of violence and abuse themselves

Where family violence takes place around children, they are also at high risk of suffering one or more forms of associated abuse whether directly or indirectly.

- As a direct victim of physical and emotional abuse.

In homes and communities where family violence takes place, there is a high risk of children suffering physical and emotional abuse. Similarly, in these settings there is also a high coincidence of parent and child abuse.

- As indirect victims of physical injury

A child may be hurt when trying to protect another member of the family (usually their mother) who is being threatened or attacked by an offender. For example they might be knocked to the ground or struck by a fist, weapon or thrown object. It is not uncommon for a child that is being held or carried by a victim at the time of an attack to be injured as a result. Violence is often directed at pregnant women.

- As victims of psychological trauma

Children who live with violent parent(s) or family members, even if they are not physically abused, experience emotional and psychological trauma which may be as damaging as the impact of physical abuse.

Even when the violence is not seen, children are generally aware that it is happening around them through the obvious tension, fear and distress that they are attuned to in their parents and other family members.

Children suffer huge pain, distress, fear and eventually anger from physical and emotional blows inflicted by a family member on other loved ones. These young victims live in an environment characterised by fear, frustration, anger, cruelty and violence.



family violence

Children will react differently to family violence situations

Not all children will be affected in the same way and there is no predictable response to family violence for any individual child. Some, especially older children, may attempt to intervene to assist or protect the primary victim, usually their mother. Others may be shocked into a terrified silence by what they witness.

The way family violence may impact on children depends on a number of factors, including:

- the nature, degree and extent of family violence they are exposed to
- the age of the victim, including age of onset/ceasing of family violence
- the relationship the child has with perpetrator(s) and/or other victim(s)
- the predictability of the violence and abuse
- the amount of support or intervention they receive within the family when the violence and abuse is exposed
- the personal resilience of the victim

The effects of family violence on a child can vary according to the stage of their development. The following guide is a reflection of these differences.

INFANTS are likely to:

- show signs of poor health and development
- have bad sleeping patterns
- cry and scream more than normal
- be reactive to their environment
- refuse to feed, or withdraw from feeding
- be particularly affected by emotional deprivation

TODDLERS are likely to:

- suffer distress when witnessing family violence
- suffer from frequent illness
- experience behavioural problems such as severe shyness, low self-esteem and trouble in day care
- be more likely to have social problems such as hitting, biting, hair-pulling or being argumentative

PRESCHOOLERS are likely to:

- believe that everything revolves around them and is caused by them and therefore blame themselves for the violence and abuse they witness

family violence



- react in different ways, eg, some may display distress openly, others may hide it; many experience strong mixed feelings or show more physical and verbal aggression

PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN are likely to:

- begin to learn that violence is an appropriate way of resolving conflict in human relationships.
- have difficulty with school work
- have the highest clinical levels of depression and aggression (girls especially)
- experience common symptoms: difficulty in concentrating, fighting with peers, rebellious behaviour, anxiety and withdrawal

ADOLESCENTS are likely to:

- see family violence as their parents' or family's problem – not theirs
- access social networks outside the family
- regard the victim in a family violence situation as being responsible
- have their adolescent development and future adult behaviour negatively affected
- develop depression (girls especially)
- show aggressive behaviour, sometimes assaulting mother and/or other family members (boys especially)
- be prone to violent delinquency, severe marital violence, potential child abuse and increased psychological distress.

(adapted from James, M [1994])

According to Hurst (1998), "If (children) show little or no signs of being affected, don't kid yourself. They know, even if they can't put it into words. Children can recover from violence but it has to stop and stay stopped. The following are facts regarding the effect of violence/abuse on children:

- the longer it has gone on, the greater the effect.
- the more extreme the violence/abuse, the greater the effect.
- the more they have seen and heard, the greater the effect.
- the more random or unpredictable the violence/abuse, the greater the effect.
- the younger they are when they are exposed to a violent/abusive climate, the greater the effect.
- the sooner the violence/abuse stops, the sooner they can begin to recover.



family violence

If a child grows up in a climate of family violence, their physiological health and development will be compromised. It will affect how they feel about themselves, how they feel and respond to other people and their ability to form healthy relationships in later life.

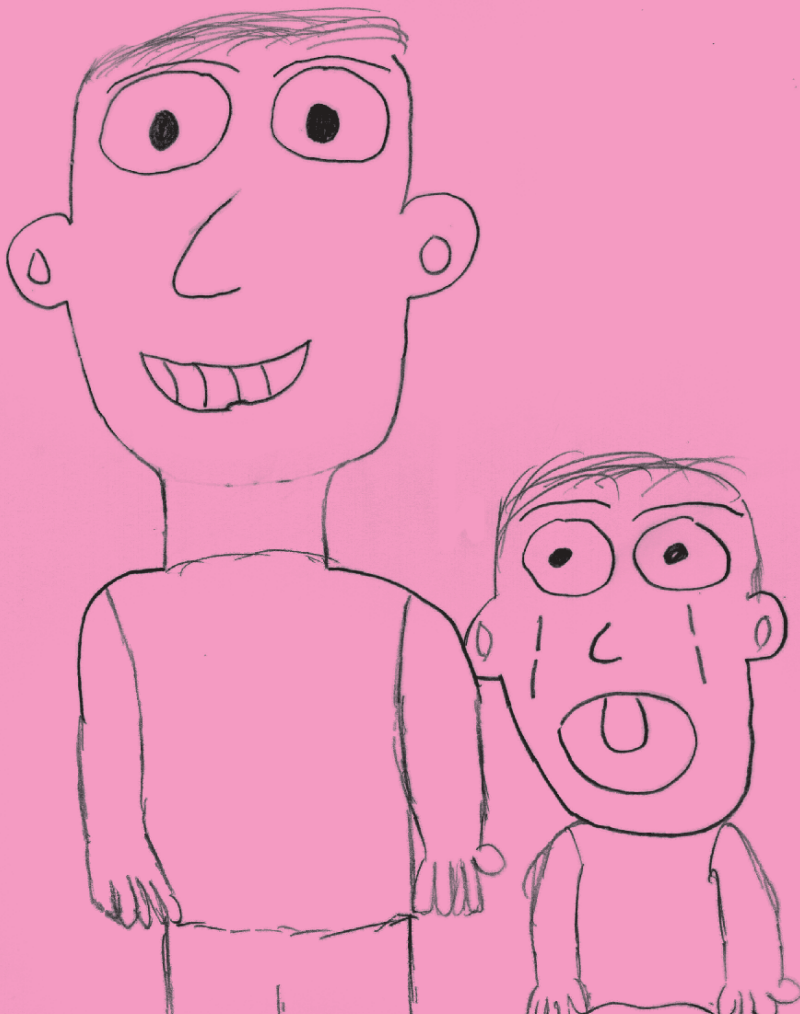
The following examples discuss how and why exposure to family violence may impact on a child.

- **Family violence denies children of their right and sense of personal safety**

Because children know the perpetrator, fear and vulnerability replace the environment of basic trust essential for healthy development. A child not only loses the sense that their family is safe but also views the world around them as unsafe, which can affect all of their relationships.

- **Children are presented with poor role models**

When parents and other family role models are in a violent relationship, the children in the family are faced with the psychological choice of identifying with the aggressive nature of the perpetrator or with the helpless feeling of the victim. This encourages the next generation of violence or victimhood.



Why be stupid and fight?
You know it's not right
Why do families fight?
They should do it out of sight
So their children don't see it
As it can hurt and damage them for life
Drinking alcohol and smoking pot
Can often start violence a lot
Stop violence as it can affect your future
Violence, it doesn't suit ya
So stop violence because we don't need it!

Amanda Theophanous, aged 14



- **Children learn to use aggression as the main way to solve problems**

Family violence teaches children to handle problems in a negative way. They may adopt these methods themselves to achieve what they want. This way of relating to others can interfere with the development of strong friendships and healthy relationships.

- **Children may become fearful and withdrawn**

This may occur because they view the world around them as a hostile place and they want to avoid drawing attention to themselves. This may lead to further victimisation and bullying by other children at home, at school or in the community because they are too scared to assert or defend themselves.

- **Children often blame themselves for causing a parent's anger/violent behaviour or for the harm caused to the victim**

Young children are not mature enough to understand a family violence situation and it is easy for them to become confused and feel responsible for the incidents that result in violence. They are likely to feel bad, worthless and sad as a result.

- **Children may blame themselves for not being able to stop or prevent the family violence**

Older children may feel helpless to prevent attacks of family violence and ashamed by their inability to intervene, even though they badly want to. This can make them feel anxious, angry, helpless and ashamed.

- **Children may 'switch off' to help protect themselves from emotional trauma**

They learn not to feel and not to empathise as a way of coping with life in an environment of arguing and fighting. This may also lead to poor personal development and difficulties in forming friendships and relationships with other people.

- **Children may have difficulty concentrating**

This often interferes with a child's ability to learn and participate at school and in other activities like sport. The anxiety they feel becomes a major distraction and they may habitually "switch off" at times when it is important for their learning to be listening and participating.

- **Children may suffer from post-traumatic stress**

This leaves them feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and helplessness.

- **Children may not be getting the care they need from parents or family**

When adults are traumatised by violence they may be less able to support others and help their children to come to terms with what is happening around them.



family violence and children: truth and lies, facts and myths

Some of the lies and myths about family violence:

- it doesn't affect the kids
- the children will forget about it
- the children are too young to know what's going on
- it doesn't affect babies
- kids affected by family violence will always 'bounce back', and get over its effects
- talking to the kids won't help or will only confuse them
- affection and buying the children treats will make up for the violence
- the perpetrator is otherwise good to the kids so they'll be ok
- as long as the children aren't hit they won't be affected
- it won't affect their education and development
- it'll teach the kids to be strong and tough
- life's always good when you're a kid
- it's part of our culture
- it's normal and acceptable
- violence is a way to show love

As they grow up, children who witness family violence without help are more likely than not to copy the unhealthy behaviour of parents and carers when they become adults — as the perpetrator, victim or both.

Some of the truth and facts about family violence:

- it happens in all communities, at all levels of society
- it can seriously harm children physically and emotionally
- it can impact on infants and babies
- kids are affected, even if they don't see the violence
- it prevents kids from feeling safe
- it can interfere with a child's development and education
- it can affect a child's relationships with other people
- it can give kids nightmares, headaches, stomach pains and regular sickness
- it damages a child's self-esteem and confidence
- children often believe it's their fault
- it can lead to substance abuse in children
- children learn how to behave from family role models
- talking about the problem with kids can help them
- effects on a child are reversible with the right help and support
- there are services that can help children and families

Children who witness family violence have a higher chance of being abused themselves.

family violence



DON'T BASH THE LOVING OUT OF ME

The party's over and I sit here waiting
for you to come through that door
My guts are all twisted up inside
and I'll go through it all once more
If there's any female Gods up there,
why can't they make you see
You're bashing your head against the brick wall
Bashing the loving out of me
The good times don't make up for the bad
In the beginning I thought they could
Sure, we had our fights and arguments
But the making up was good
Life was a game, till the babies came,
More pressure and jealousy
While you lash out your emotions
You bash the loving out of me
You cry to me after, and swear you'll change
And you beg me not to leave you
But it builds up and then I go through it again
So how can I believe you
I turn away from the fear in my babies' eyes
That everyone but you can see
You will kill a child's pride in their daddy
And bash the loving out of me
Some people have to fight from the day we're born
But it's us women who are black and blue
It's our love that gives us strength to carry on
Like the love I have for you
I live sick with fear of your rages
When the violence I dread will break through
Don't ever think I'm not pushed to the brink
But I don't bash the loving out of you
Deep wounds fester where you can't see
Take them out of there, confront them
Don't bash the loving out of me
You can imprison my body, my heart, and my head
Kill my spirit, or set it free
Don't use emotional blackmail, your feet, or your fists
To bash the loving out of me

By Maureen Watson





family violence

DREAMING TO NIGHTMARE

Violence is our big shame
But the word violence doesn't go with our name
It affects everyone
And it could happen to anyone
Black and white, rich or poor
Violence comes knocking at any door
Look at the problem in the face
Cause I gotta tell you now it destroys our race

Dreaming to nightmare

Violence is not our way

Victims feel that they're to blame
Then do bad things just to ease the pain
Turn to drugs, pills and crime
They feel afraid and feel confined
They look for ways to run away
They don't wanna keep on livin' that way
I can say it now and all night long
It's the abuser who's in the wrong

Dreaming to nightmare

Violence is not our way

It's the kids who feel the pain
And live each day in cold, black rain
Living each day in poverty
Walking to school with injuries
It's a nightmare but to them it's a life
Ten year old sister threatens brother with a knife
We gotta wake up outta this nightmare
And show the kids that we really care

Dreaming to nightmare

Violence is not our way

Lyrics (and music): Malcolm Gollan (1999)



how do we identify children who may be victims of family violence?

The behaviours of a child affected by family violence can be a signal that they and their family need support, help or information to assist them.

Children may display signs of their distress by one or more of the following immediate or short term effects of witnessing family violence:

- negative feelings of fear, anger, depression, grief, shame, despair and distrust
- anxious, nervous and withdrawn behaviour
- a lack of confidence and an increasing sense of powerlessness
- disturbed sleep and nightmares
- delays or problems with language development in young children
- physical reactions including headaches, stuttering, stomach cramps, eating difficulties, frequent illness
- unusual bed-wetting or soiling
- a change in personality, eg, used to be happy and outgoing but now quiet and reserved
- cruelty to animals
- behavioural problems, eg, running away from home
- use of aggressive language and behaviour
- developmental delays caused by low self-esteem, poor concentration, poor school performance, difficulty relating to peers
- substance abuse including petrol, glue and aerosol sniffing

The long term effects of witnessing family violence suggest that children:

- may grow up thinking violence and abuse in relationships is normal
- are likely to act out behaviour they have witnessed as they grow up
- are more likely to grow up thinking that boys and men can and should be violent towards girls and women (boys especially)
- may grow to accept family violence as normal and choose or remain with a partner who treats them in the same violent way (girls especially)
- may develop a belief that fear is normal in a relationship or family are likely to learn that violence is the way to solve conflict and disagreements



how can we help to support children who may be victims of family violence?

The effects of family violence on children can be very damaging, but the good news is that the effects are reversible if children are able to get effective help. The sooner they get help, the better. Caring for children who have grown up in an environment of family violence helps to stop the violence continuing into the next generation.

Here are some steps you can take to assist and protect children living in fear:

- seek/provide information to assist the entire family who is in need of help, including the abuser (s) in the situation.
- if you are in a violent situation where children are involved, take a first step by talking to someone you can trust. Seek help.
- learn more about child abuse, how to avoid it and how to make up for it.
- if you are a parent seek ways to improve your parenting skills.

“Kids aren’t affected by family violence”

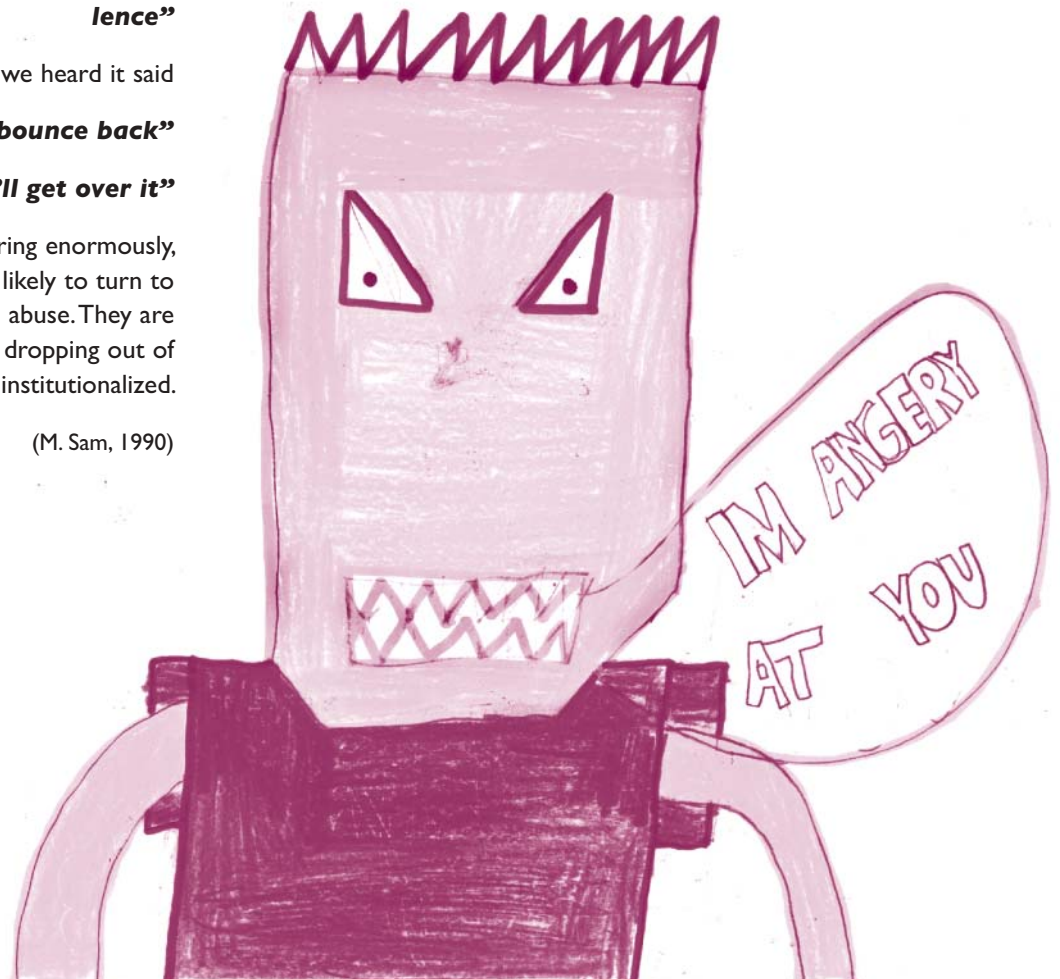
How many times have we heard it said

“Kids will always bounce back”

“They’ll get over it”

The fact is, kids are suffering enormously, they feel hurt and are more likely to turn to alcohol and other substance abuse. They are running away from home, dropping out of schools and being institutionalized.

(M. Sam, 1990)



family violence



- encourage kids to talk or draw about their feelings especially the things that might be worrying them. It helps kids if they can express themselves openly about violence.
- make sure the children know the family violence at home is not their fault.
- help children to make a safety plan which is easy for them to remember and follow.
- let the child know they are not the only victim – other children have also had similar experiences.
- encourage children to have a support network – there are other people who care – like elders, relatives, health workers, teachers and counsellors.
- assure the child they are a very special person.
- you can discuss concerns about a child's safety with the welfare services responsible for child protection in your state.

Children who have experienced family violence will benefit from counselling and other services designed to help them make sense of the feelings, emotions and confusion that have built up inside them.

There are a number of options available to help children in your community, individually or in groups with other kids. Maybe your community has no specific services but it can still act in ways to help children at a local level. If not, your local Council, health service and school may be good starting points.

These are the sorts of issues that are generally addressed to help children come to terms with the effects of family violence. It is important for children to:

- realise they are not alone
- identify and express painful feelings
- understand that family violence is an adult problem and it's not their fault
- know that violence is unacceptable
- learn ways to solve problems without violence
- connect with positive adult role models
- develop confidence and healthy self-esteem
- grieve over losses that result from leaving home and community
- develop the trust and security that has been missing in their lives
- deal with the powerful mixed and confused feelings towards parents, especially the family violence offender.

Can your service and community improve to meet the needs of children who may need help? Refer to the handbook directory.



information for families

who may be working through a separation

(Adapted from Dale Hurst, 1998)

Family violence may result in a separation between parents or carers. This might include time out with family, moving to another community or taking refuge in a shelter. It might also be a final and definite separation from a violent situation.

If a separation happens where there are children involved, they need to be considered too.

Separations in healthy relationships rarely happen without pain or grieving. When it comes to a separation crisis point in violent relationships, there may well be bargaining, panic, anger and hurt – all in all a very traumatic time for both partners. For this reason it can be a time of increased danger. Because a child's right to safety is the most important thing, in some situations it may be better for a child not to have contact with a relative who is violent.

The point of separation can build up and intensify over a period of time – hour by hour, day by day; sometimes it can take weeks, months or years. If you can understand that adults involved in this situation can be feeling low and out of control, consider also what it must be like for the children.

Separation may be the best thing for a child's future but at the time, it can be a terrifying situation for them to come to terms with. They may be wondering:

“What will happen to our family?”

“What will happen to me?”

“Do I have to make a choice between mum and dad?”

“Who will look after me?”

What children need at this point is as much safety and certainty as they can get from parents and other adults. This can be very challenging and may, at times, feel impossible for the adults involved.

Here are some useful options for mothers or carers of children who have separated or are leaving a violent situation:

- seek counselling and support groups for yourself and your children
- encourage your children to talk or draw about how they are feeling
- seek parenting support
- contact domestic violence and legal services
- tell your children of your plans for the future
- if you are leaving your home with your children, take favourite toys and some of their familiar items
- seek legal advice

family violence



Dale Hurst (1998) offers the following guidelines for family violence offenders. These might be useful for all family members who may be considering, or going through, a separation.

- Commit yourself to being non-violent or non-abusive towards your partner.
You may need help to do this. Be honest with yourself – your kids need you to be.
- Be prepared to compromise your own needs for your children's sake.
Your kids need stability and safety. Staying in their own home reduces the trauma and damage for them, but it means you'll probably have to move out. This may make you feel very angry and resentful. You might think:
"After all those years I worked!" or "Why should I go?"
These reactions are understandable, but you need to swallow your pride and think differently.
- Don't think in terms of winning or losing.
There are no 'winners' in separations. There might be a lot of things to sort out, for example: property, custody, access to children and your feelings. Everyone will have to struggle with their lives being turned upside-down.
- Separate the adult issues from those relating to the welfare of the children.
The basic message is, don't put the kids in the line of fire. This will need you to be focused and disciplined, the responsible adult way to be. As one therapist says: "If you must fight, it's better that it is over money than the kids!" That might be a better priority, but you don't have to fight over either.
- Let your children know you will still be in their lives in an ongoing way.
During the time of separation you may feel so hurt or angry that you want to run away from it all, including your family. Remember: feelings are one thing, actions are another. Assure your children that you'll still be there for them, and act on it, even if you don't want to or feel you are unable to. The children need to hear it.
- Time heals.
It may feel as if nothing can heal your pain or hurt. Experience indicates that it will probably be harder for you if you've been in a long-term relationship that started when you were young, especially if you started it as a teenager. There will come a time when you are able to have a healthy relationship with your kids, even though at the time of separation it may be emotionally challenging each time you see them.



family violence

- Your goal is to minimise damage to the children.

There will always be some damage, so expect the kids to show signs of this. These do not only happen from living with violence and abuse, but also from other kinds of trauma – like the separation of parents. Your task as a parent or carer is to minimise the damage.

- It is your responsibility as an adult parent to find out and learn as much as you can about what your kids are going through, and how to help them.

There is a lot of help out there: family, information, counsellors, telephone help lines, peer groups, health workers and doctors.

- It is your responsibility to get help during this difficult time.

Offenders who don't get help can cause a lot of unnecessary damage. Brave, thinking men look for help. They are the ones who will cope better and help their kids to cope better.

- Break your thoughts down into short, medium and long term ideas.

Our thinking can get messy during a crisis. A good way of coping through a crisis is to sort out your priorities. Having time out to think is important. Exercise helps too including walking, playing sport, fishing, hunting, going out bush. Clear your mind.

When you are separated from your partner there may still be a lot of unresolved issues and feelings to deal with. Children at this point may be very vulnerable to parents who are feeling weak or not thinking clearly. It's easy to use the kids to get back at a partner or to act as spies or informers – this can be very damaging to the children. Responsible parents who love their kids make sure they are the priority in a separation.

Being strong and unselfish during a time of separation requires discipline and focus.

The following advice may help to guide to help yourself and children through this time.

- The welfare of the children must come first.
- Stability and consistency build safety for kids.

Don't let them down. Be there when you say you will. Don't say one thing and do another. Be on time, don't keep your kids hoping and waiting for you or a promise.

- Don't put your children in the cross-fire

Sort out your issues privately from the children. Don't argue in front of them. If you have to talk or meet about an issue that may flare up, avoid having the children around.

family violence



- Don't use children as your spies or allies.
This is totally unfair to them and you are treating them as pawns in your own game. These kinds of actions are very destructive. They need to love you both – not be confused and forced to choose between you.
- Let your children know you're OK, because they'll be worried about you.
Your kids will pick up on your feelings. Talk about how you're feeling with them. If you're getting help or counselling explain this to them. If you're not getting help, consider your options for support.
- Let your children know you still love them.
Your children will need to be assured regularly that you love them and will always be there for them and that you will strive to share and maintain an ongoing, healthy relationship, even though mum and dad no longer live together.
- Don't ever threaten suicide – this will terrify your children and damage them in the long term.
If you feel suicidal, it's a warning sign. Get counselling or talk to someone immediately.
- Don't pretend to yourself – or your children – that they would be better off if you and your partner were back together.
Remember the violence and abuse? Your children are already damaged by this. Kids can be happy and healthy with separated parents. They just need to know and feel they are loved and that mum and dad are taking responsibility for their own lives.
- Don't favour one child over another.
All children are very aware of how they are being (mis)treated. This sort of behaviour can be very damaging to children and will affect their life-long relationships with each other. If you find yourself doing this, seek help.
- Try and keep parenting rules similar between the two households.
Consistency equals safety. There is parenting help out there if you need advice about setting and enforcing household rules.
- If you form another relationship, expect the children to have difficulty with this.
Seek advice and learn how best to deal with your situation.
- If your partner forms another relationship, you may need help to think clearly.
Being a jealous maniac won't help your kids. Remember the children will need help to adjust and so might you. It's not a time to gang up on your partner, it's an opportunity to earn respect, from your family and children.

“Kids aren't affected by family violence”

How many times have we heard it said

“Kids will always bounce back”

“They'll get over it”

The fact is, kids are suffering enormously, they feel hurt and are more likely to turn to alcohol and other substance abuse. They are running away from home, dropping out of schools and being institutionalized.

(W. Carr, 1990)



family violence

- You will always be their parent, no one can ever replace you.

The simple reality is, children need adults around them who love them. If a new person in their life cares for them and treats them responsibly they will benefit from that. It's up to you to maintain your relationship with them as well.

- Expect to feel pain when your children have spent time with you and it's time for them to go again.

That's real. They will feel pain too. Feel the pain but act responsibly. Talk to someone you trust about your feelings – it helps. With time the pain will ease.

- Expect to feel pain on special occasions like anniversaries, birthdays and Christmas.

Again, time will help to heal this pain. Find some support and think and act responsibly around these times.

- Look for and enjoy new opportunities with your children.

When you have been in an unhappy relationship, it often affects your ability to relate to your kids. Now you are no longer in it, you may be surprised to find you can see them and their needs more clearly. You may even find that your relationship is strengthened and deepened.