



Parenting Through the Trials

Resources For Helping Children Through Intimate Partner Violence

Children respond to abusive family situations in different ways at different ages. Let's begin by looking at what you might expect from your child in the short-term. Then we'll look at the long-term.

Preschool-Aged Children

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health, young children who witness intimate partner violence may regress. This might look like thumb-sucking or wetting the bed again. It might look like severe separation anxiety. It can also present by increased whining or crying. They may have trouble falling or staying asleep. They may also act like they're afraid (by stuttering or hiding) because they are afraid.



School-Aged Children

While younger children seem to present more as afraid, children in this age group appear sad or aloof. They're more apt to feel guilty about the abuse and blame themselves for it. Their self-esteem and self-worth suffer. They may not participate in school activities either because they don't believe they are good enough or because they're ashamed of their family situation and don't want people to find out about it. Their grades may suffer, either because they have trouble concentrating or because they just don't care. (What value are grades at school when you're worried about your mom being killed by your dad?) On the other hand, they might get really good at school because it is where they can feel like they have some control. These children may have fewer friends than others due to their low self-esteem or fear of people finding out about their family situation. They may get into trouble more often (also as a means of control, or as a cry for help). Psychosomatic symptoms like headaches and stomachaches are common too. (1)



Teens

Teens who witness or experience abuse may act out, often in anger because they don't know how to deal with their feelings. They may start fights or become bullies. They're also more likely to get in trouble with the law. (This behavior is more common in boys than girls. Girls are more likely to be withdrawn and depressed.) Both may skip school. They're also both more likely to engage in risky behaviors, like having unprotected sex and using alcohol or drugs. They are likely to have low self-esteem, so making friends and allowing people to get close to them is often difficult.

Long-Term Effects

Children from homes in which domestic violence has happened at least once are at greater risk for repeating the cycle as adults by either becoming an abuser themselves or by choosing an abusive partner. Boys who grow up seeing their moms abused are 10 times more likely to abuse their female partners as adults. Girl who grow up in homes where their fathers abuse their mothers are more than six times as likely to be sexually abused as girls who grow up in non-abusive homes. Maybe this is your story too. ⁽¹⁾

“ The single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence later in life is whether or not they grow up in a home where there is domestic violence. - UNICEF Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children ⁽²⁾ ”

Children who witness or are victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse are also at higher risk for health problems as adults. Physical health problems can include diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and other problems. Mental health conditions can include depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, substance abuse, and more. ⁽¹⁾

Those who experience Childhood Domestic Violence are...

6x

More likely to
commit suicide

50%

More likely to abuse
drugs or alcohol

74%

More likely to commit
a violent crime ⁽²⁾

How can I help my children recover from seeing or experiencing domestic violence?

- Help them feel safe. What can you do to help them feel safe? Make a safety plan for you and your children. Consider leaving the abusive relationship. Consider moving to a new location. Consider whether you need to stop allowing certain people to come around. What needs to be done to help your children believe that their physical and emotional needs are going to be met? This is part of being and feeling safe. Also, keep in mind that children feel safe when they believe their caretaker is safe. The fear of losing you and therefore being alone in the world or alone with their abuser is real and valid. What are you doing to keep yourself safe?
- Talk to your child about the importance of healthy relationships. Help them learn from the abusive experience by talking about what healthy relationships are and are not. This will help them know what is healthy when they start romantic relationships of their own. (If you don't know the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships yourself, educate yourself about it. That knowledge will be important for all of you!).
- Talking to them about their fears. Let them know that they can be honest with you about their fears. *A personal word of caution, guard against getting defensive. It's easy to feel like their fears are your fault and a reflection of your bad parenting. If you get defensive with them, they will stop talking to you honestly. You don't want that. They need an adult they can trust. If you can't handle being that adult, get them a counselor who can listen objectively.
- Help them find a support system. They say it takes a village to raise a child. You don't need to be everything for your child. School counselors, mental health counselors, and teachers or coaches they can trust can be great resources. (Be aware that the people in that list are likely mandatory reporters, meaning that they are legally required to report domestic violence or abuse if they suspect it.) Helping your child make friends with other kids and involving them in peer support groups are good options too.
- Learn more about how to listen and talk to your child about domestic violence.
- Let them know that it's not their fault or your fault.
- Talk to them about boundaries. (Learning about boundaries is good for everyone. I recommend the book *Boundaries Updated and Expanded Edition: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend.) Let your child know that no one has the right to touch them in ways that make them feel uncomfortable, including family members, teachers, coaches, or other authority figures. Also, explain to your child that he or she doesn't have the right to touch another person's body without their permission.
- Get them professional help. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of counseling that may work well for children who have experienced violence or abuse. CBT is especially helpful for children who have anxiety or other mental health problems as a result of trauma. Your doctor can recommend a mental health professional who works with children who have been exposed to trauma. Many domestic violence organizations also have ⁽¹⁾

support groups for kids. These groups can help children by letting them know they are not alone and helping them process their experiences in a nonjudgmental place. ⁽¹⁾

Before You Go

Children in homes where there is domestic violence are likely to experience abuse themselves. Witnessing domestic violence is traumatic. Being abused by those who are supposed to love and protect a child is too. In order to explore what is best for your child(ren) long-term, we have to look at child abuse as well.

What Is Child Abuse?

Child abuse is one or more actions that result in serious harm or risk of harm of a child. This can be active, like physical or emotional abuse, exploitation, neglect, or death (example: someone beats your child). It can also be passive, as in the caregiver fails to act and it results in serious harm or risk of harm (example: someone beats your child and you don't stop it). Child abuse can also include neglect. Neglect is intentionally failing to provide physical, emotional, and psychological well-being for a child, such as withholding medical care, affection, verbal affirmations, and intellectual/educational stimulation. Children can be abused by a parent, caregiver, or another person who has responsibility for them, and even an older child. ⁽¹⁾

What are some types of child abuse?

Legal definitions differ across jurisdictions, but the general types of abuse will help you determine if your child(ren) or someone else's has been abused:

- Physical abuse - this is a non-accidental physical injury from beating, kicking, shaking, throwing, stabbing, burning, whipping, etc. a child.
- Sexual abuse - this is any sexual act on a child, by an adult or older child (including verbal seduction, intercourse, oral sex, and manual stimulation). Use of force or a threat of force is not required because the United States does not believe that any type of sexual act with a child is ok, even if the child says they are willing.
- Emotional abuse - this is classified as behavior that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth, such as constant criticism and threats.
- Psychological abuse - similar to emotional abuse, is behavior that affects a child's sense of worth. The example given by the U.S. Office on Women's Health is harsh demands and yelling.
- Child neglect is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs. This includes:
 - Adequate food
 - Clothing
 - Shelter
 - Education
 - Supervision

- Medical care
- Mental/social well-being
- Safety⁽³⁾

While all of the types of child abuse are important and should be dealt with appropriately (i.e. you love, protect, and provide for your child(ren) as a parent should), I want to caution you to be careful about neglect. If you are living in a domestic violence situation, it's easy (and it can feel necessary) to just focus on what you need to do to survive. That is necessary in the short-term, if you are trying to get away from the abuser. Hopefully *In Case I'm Murdered* and the resources in it can help you with that. If you choose to stay in the violent relationship long-term, then neither survival, nor your negative coping mechanisms (like drinking or disassociation), nor your mental health issues (like depression or PTSD) is an excuse to neglect your child(ren)'s needs. That is the point of this resource. If you stay in the violent relationship, you may be your child's only shield from how bad things can be. You may be the only one who can begin the steps listed above to help them recover and protect them from being tainted by abuse for the rest of their lives.

Yes, we're talking about your child(ren) here, but we're also talking about more. We're talking about them in adulthood and whether or not they have a drinking/drug problem, whether or not they're being beaten by their significant other, whether or not they are doing time in jail or prison. We're also talking about your future grandchildren. If your child(ren) grows up and continues the cycle of abuse, your grandchildren will be in the same position that your child(ren) are in now. And if nothing is done, their children will likely be too.

If you do not believe that leaving your abuser is the right thing to do at this time, then please see to the emotional needs of your child(ren). Do what you can to help them feel safe, talk to them about their fears, teach them about healthy relationships and boundaries, help them find a support system, get them in counseling, and let them know that the domestic violence is not their fault. We can't give what we don't have, so you may need to do those things for yourself first. Learn about domestic violence (the cycle, the tactics, and the abuser's belief systems), get yourself a support system, learn about healthy boundaries and how you actually deserve to be treated, and learn about how YOUR beliefs keep you stuck in abusive relationships.

I will believe that you and your children deserve better, for you, until you can believe it for yourself!

1. Domestic violence and children. (2019, April 2). Retrieved from <https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/domestic-violence/effects-domestic-violence-children>
2. The Impact. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://cdv.org/what-is-cdv/the-impact/>
3. About Child Abuse and Neglect (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/child-abuse-neglect/about-issue?gclid=CjHx4KTTm88CFURahgodQogL3w>