

# How Do Children React to Domestic & Family Violence

## Children face the psychological choice of whether to feel helpless or to identify with the aggressor:

It is not surprising that some children find it is safer to identify with the physically (and economically) more powerful one. The outcome is that these children (frequently boys) become violent and aggressive in their interactions with others. Some children actively participate in the abuse or take over the role after separation from their fathers. Aggression has been their dominant model of problem solving and they adopt this method themselves to achieve what they want.

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## Children may become fearful and withdrawn:

- Children May “Switch Off”: as a way of protecting themselves emotionally from trauma. They may have poor social skills, may be isolated from other children or may isolate themselves because of aggressive / withdrawn behaviours. As a consequences, they have few opportunities to make friends or maintain them.
- Such children attempt to blend in with others without being noticed. They may become victimised and bullied by other children at home and at school because they are too frightened to assert themselves.
- Inside the home, or around strangers, they may be stunned into terrified silence. “Frozen watchfulness” or “Frozen fright”
- Children may show emotional rejection of one or both parents. This may be expressed in conversation, through an unwillingness to talk about parent, or though reluctance to go to parents.

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## Children have a tendency to self-blame when things go wrong:

- It is likely that children may blame themselves for what is happening at home; they may also blame themselves when things go wrong at school. Alternatively, they may scapegoat excessively.
- Younger children may feel the violence is their fault - as though they have caused their parent’s anger. They do not possess the maturity to see situations from someone else’s point of view and feel responsible for incidents leading to violence. They may feel bad and worthless as a result.
- Start to react like victims – frustrated, angry and depressed when they can’t stop the violence.



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## **Children may show insensitivity to the feelings of others:**

They learn not to feel and not to empathise. Boys particularly can become desensitised by the abuse at home, with a resultant insensitivity to the feelings of others, an insensitivity to physical pain, and a belief that violence is a normal part of life. They may start using violence to solve problems with other children, to attain power over others, or to gain some sort of advantage.

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## **Children may intervene:**

- Children may take on the responsibility of protecting their mother and may also assume the role of parenting younger siblings.
- Older children may stand up to or restrain their father, or alternatively they may blame themselves for not intervening or preventing the attack: They feel helpless and ashamed.

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## **Children may develop inappropriate coping mechanisms:**

Girls in particular may develop coping mechanisms out of necessity. These may include being overly concerned about pleasing people, especially those in authority; they may behave in an overly responsible way and assume more responsibility than is usual; they may deny angry feelings; avoid conflict, withdraw completely; appear to 'switch off', and / or tell lies.

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*In the long term, children who grow up in violent homes may repeat the violence themselves.*

