

For Mothers

Making difficult choices ...



"He hits me, but he is good to the kids" ...

No matter how caring a parent you are, at some level your ability to do your best for your children will be affected by your partner's violence. Sadly this is a time when your children are likely to need your care and attention more than ever. Until you can get the help you need to make yourself safe, your children cannot feel safe or happy knowing that their mother is being hurt.

Ask yourself if, by abusing you, the children's mother, how is he being "good to the kids"? Showing attention or affection to his children cannot make up for denying them their right to a safe and happy childhood by scaring and scarring them with violence.

Difficult Choices ...

Concern for the children is probably a major factor (if not the major factor) in whether you decide to separate, as it is for many women in abusive relationships. It is likely to be confusing and difficult for you to weigh up which situation is best for your children. You may have thought:-

"How can I take them away from their dad, whom they love, their home, their pets, their school?"

"He says he will get custody of the kids"

"Can I offer the kids anything better?"

"Are we in more danger if we leave?"

The decision to leave an abusive relationship is an extremely difficult one, particularly when children are involved. Some women endure the abuse "for the sake of the children". They are concerned about depriving the children of their father, and of not being able to afford necessities on a pension.

Many women also fear violent reprisal if they leave the relationships, retaliation aimed at them through the children, the loss of their home and the worry of "going it alone". Sometimes abusive fathers seek and are awarded residence orders with their children, or use contact visits as an opportunity to inflict further abuse against both mother and child.

Separation and divorce do not guarantee safety for abused women and their children. In fact, these can be times of greatest danger. A majority of domestic violence related deaths occur when a woman leaves or is about to leave a violent relationship. When women make the decision to leave, it is very important that they are supported in a way that gives them the most safety, with access to legal and financial information and people who will give them emotional support.

"When dad hits mum and yells, he is a monster and I am scared."



If you are living with an abusive partner ...

- If you are going to be able to help your kids, you need to get help too. There is a variety of services available for support and help.
 - Even though your children may not have been in the room, they will have been able to sense the atmosphere, so if you can, explain to them what is happening
 - Let them know it is not their role to protect you
 - Let them know that you want to know how they feel
 - Assure them that feeling frightened, angry, confused or sad is normal in this situation
 - Find a trustworthy, sympathetic adult that the kids can talk to (ie. school counsellor, relative etc.)
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If you have separated, or are leaving the situation, you can ...

- Seek counselling and support groups for yourself and your children
- Encourage your children to talk about how they are feeling
- If you leave your home, take favourite toys and some of your children's other items
- Seek parenting support
- Contact Domestic Violence and / or legal services
- Tell your children of your plans for the future
- Seek legal advice. The Family Law Act now considered the witnessing of domestic violence as harmful to the children.



Impacts of Violence & Abuse on Women's Parenting

The Children ...

Women have to deal with more difficult behaviours from children (eg. hitting, fighting, tantrums, withdrawal, school problems, bed wetting, nightmares, developmental delays, etc) both while living in the relationship and while they leave it.

Often children's behaviour escalates once they are away from their fathers, because:

- They feel safe to express their feelings
- Minor matters (eg. normal siblings rivalry) can now be played out which may have been saved up or repressed for years as they were unsafe
- Often the father's discipline has been harsh to abusive and so the mother has attempted to compensate for this by not disciplining, hence she may not have necessary disciplining skills / experience; children are used to responding to physical and / or inappropriate disciplining; children are not used to mothers in this role and may not accept it.
- Unfortunately some children will use tactics which are abusive that they have learned from dad to try to control their mother and other siblings
- Often the oldest child will assume the role of the other parent
- They are in a new environment and so are testing new boundaries
- The new environment can include extra stressors for the children, for example, new school, friends, town, no toys or familiar possessions, no other family around, etc. The children therefore need extra support.

Schools ...

Whilst some schools have a good understanding of domestic violence and some excellent policies for dealing with the issues, a few can add to the problems the mother is experiencing. An example may be when schools refuse to advise the mother if he is hanging around the school. Another is when children's behaviour is dealt with without the understanding of what is happening for the child.



Prolonged Abuse ...

The abusive parent often purposefully creates problems for the mother's parenting as an abusive tactic. He may do this by:

- Undermining her disciplining
- Encouraging children to disrespect her
- Humiliating her in front of the children
- Encouraging the children to abuse mum
- Falsely presenting himself as the abused party
- Inappropriately discussing parental problems with the children to seek support
- Inappropriately seeking sympathy/ emotional support for his adult plights
- Criticising her personally
- 'Grooming' the children. This often occurs if he is sexually abusing the children and would include destroying the mother / child relationship by encouraging the children to think that mum doesn't love them, won't help them, knows he's doing this, said bad things about them and in general not protecting or caring about them. He will also use these tactics in reverse on the mother.

These often are occurring during the relationship. This is often stepped up once a woman leaves the relationship and may then include; lies, bribes, threats (eg. to keep secrets or to lie to family court etc).

Children in houses where there is domestic violence are more at risk of being sexually abused (by dad or others) as mum may not be emotionally available and an abusive dad is rarely available or safe to speak to about these issues. This of course means added issues in relation to the children's behaviour (often either difficult to explain or to discern from the other abuse the child may be experiencing). It also means more work in supporting those children (eg. through court / counselling) if they do eventually disclose.

Isolation ...

Many parents or mothers in non-abusive relationships normally have supports in their parenting from family and friends (eg. advice, childminding, time out, sharing care, helping with disciplining, etc.) Abusive partners however often cut these supports from mothers by not allowing them contact; because the family / friends themselves don't feel safe to visit or contact; or because the woman feels too embarrassed / depressed etc. to contact others. An abusive partner may also commonly not allow a woman to put the children into childcare or become a part of a playgroup.



Impacts of Violence & Abuse on Women's Parenting

Blame and Shame ...

The mother is often blamed and held responsible for the problems of those children when they later become adults. The mother often bears the brunt of the adult child's anger at the abuse in their childhood. Unfortunately this is often without an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and a disregard for the difficulties she may have experienced in attempting to leave that relationship and in protecting them.

The mother is also often blamed by society in general for the breakdown of the relationship as part of the belief system that the woman is responsible for family harmony. Many abusive men present as angels in public so she may also be frowned upon by family and friends. There is also much negative sentiment toward single mothers in our society, that they somehow deserve and created their lot. All of these factors of course can mean that there is little support for a woman who leaves an abusive relationship, or that it is begrudged support. She usually of course is well aware of all of these stigmas and may be unwilling to ask for support.

Sometimes if the abuse by him to the children is bad enough and is reported to the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, children will be removed which is necessary in many circumstances. Unfortunately once a woman leaves this man it can take a lot of work to prove herself to the Department that she will protect the children. The process used by the Department can often be extremely disempowering and unsupportive. Women often feel like they are being punished further for being a bad mother.

Poverty ...

Once a woman leaves a relationship her ability to parent can be affected by a new-found level of poverty. Some issues are:

- Children will have to adjust to not having or doing all the things they used to
- Transport may become a big issue
- Mum may need to be creative in giving rewards for good behaviour
- Stress rises for mum when she cannot sometimes afford necessities
- Access to family outing opportunities is reduced also possibly reducing relaxation opportunities for all the family
- Children may need to be pulled out of private schools, courses, sports etc.
- The choice of neighbourhood to raise children in is limited
- Sometimes a teenage child / children may choose to stay with dad where the money is (many women would rather stay with him and suffer abuse than lose their children)

Poverty may also affect a woman who is still living with her abusive partner if financial abuse is occurring. This of course affects her parenting in similar ways.



Emotional Unavailability ...

A woman who is experiencing domestic violence is not as available as a mother for parenting as the same woman would be were she living in a non-abusive relationship. Due to trauma / oppression, an abused woman may:

- Be feeling depressed;
- Be paralysed by fear;
- Use alcohol, anti-depressants etc. to cope with the situation
- Not believe she is capable / proficient in any area;
- Not believe she is deserving of support;
- Believe any attempts she makes to change / fix a situation or to parent would fail; and
- Be purely focussed on her and the children's physical survival on a day-to-day basis.

This unavailability may show as:

- Not playing with a child or hearing their everyday stories
- A breakdown, or lack of a strong relationship with the child
- Not being able to respond to disclosure by the children, eg. of sexual abuse
- Not being able to discipline effectively – so may either hit, yell, over-discipline (this may even more to the level of child abuse) or may not discipline at all.
- Overlooking some child abuse by the partner as it seems mild in comparison or because she is unable / unsafe to act.
- Having unrealistic expectations of children
- Sharing adult issues with children inappropriately (eg. use child as a support)
- Children may feel that mum has enough on her plate and not go to her with important issues.



Impacts of Violence & Abuse on Women's Parenting

The Law ...

The Family Law Act does not cater for domestic violence issues very well. There are a few main problems that occur regularly:

- One of the main problems experienced is 'abuse on contact'. When change-over of the children is occurring, the abusive partner uses this as an opportunity to control / abuse the other partner. He may also use mid-week phone contact with the children as an opportunity to abuse mum. He may also just turn up at the house – saying he is coming to visit the children and again become abusive.
- Children may also be abused on their contact visits. It is very difficult to prove abuse to the children. Children are afraid to speak out against him if they believe he'll know they did. To stay safe they may pretend to be happy around him when counsellors / court officials etc. are around. Even if a child is saying they will probably be overruled – arguments such as 'mum coached them to say that', 'they are picking up on mum's fear', 'they just want to please mum' are made.
- Children who are saying that they do not wish to go to contact visits are usually forced by the system to go. Often there may be a list of abuses to the child by him either within the relationship or after. Mothers feel powerless to protect their children and become quite stressed. This also has a negative effect on the children's self determination and well-being – further effecting parenting.
- The parent with the children (often the mother) is forced to remain in the area, creating issues of stress and safety. Also this blocks opportunity to move closer to family support who could help with parenting.

