

# UNDERSTANDING IMPACTS

Risks for Children & Young People living in violent situations ...



# How Are Children Affected by Domestic & Family Violence?

*"Dad was always nagging at her and she was hardly ever happy. Plus he used to hit mum and make her cry ... They hardly ever talked. I could just tell they weren't happy".*

Regardless of whether a child is a direct victim or an indirect victims, any exposure to abuse will result in tremendous emotional abuse. There are a number of risks for children who are living in Domestic Violence situations.

## **Domestic violence robs children of their sense of personal safety:**

Since it is perpetrated by someone they know. Fear and vulnerability replace the basic trust children need in order to thrive and develop. Children not only lost their sense that their family is safe, but also see the rest of their world as unsafe. This can affect all of their relationships.

## **Experiencing direct or indirect abuse:**

- A man who abuses his wife may also abuse his children
- A woman who is abused may vent her rage and frustration on her children
- The child may 'accidentally' be hurt when he / she tries to stop an attack on his / her mother

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

- Feeling helpless and overwhelmed with anxiety
- Children may display heightened fears - this may include; fear of the dark, of being left alone, of going to school, or phobias. These fears act as a manifestation of the fear they live with at home.
- Children who accompany their mothers to a refuge or other new homes may experience problems even though they now feel safe. Support from refuge staff is important in helping with the trauma of moving and losing their familiar surroundings and possessions. School-aged children in particular miss the social support of peers they know in their own neighbourhood and at school.

## **Parents may be less able to help their Children:**

- When adults are traumatised by violence they may be less able to help their child make sense of what is happening, as they might do in other frightening situations.
- Children may be inadvertently neglected as the primary care giver may be unable to provide for the physical, intellectual, and developmental needs of a child.
- Children may have poor hygiene. They may appear unkempt or dirty as a result of neglect.



# 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.



# How Do Children React to Domestic & Family Violence

## 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.*



# What Are Children Learning from Violent Relationships

Children learn significant messages about behaviour and gender roles from parents who are role models. When exposed to family violence, they may incorporate this behaviour in their relationships and activities as children and later as adults, resulting in an intergenerational pattern of violence.

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## Children may learn inappropriate attitudes and behaviours, such as:

- That one way to cope with stress is through the use of violence.
- That it is possible to love and hurt someone at the same time. It is acceptable for men to abuse women, including husbands to hit wives.
- That violence is an appropriate way of resolving problems. Violence is an effective way to solve problems, win arguments or to accomplish your goals.
- That it is legitimate to use physical force to get what you want.
- That violence can and should be used to make someone behave or do the right thing.
- Men are strong and cruel, women are weak, helpless victims - and such inequality in relationships is normal.
- That it is alright to use violence when other things do not work. There are few, if any, consequences for violent acts.

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## How domestic & family violence affects learning:

Additionally, children may have difficulty concentrating at school, thinking instead about what might be happening at home. This anxiety is a major distraction and impacts on the child's ability to learn. Children may also habitually switch off at school, having learnt to do this to cope with the violence at home.

