

# Choosing Positive Paths

## Parenting a primary schooler who has experienced violence

5 to 12 years

Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common. According to Australian statistics (2012), women are most likely to experience violence from a male partner or ex-partner. Three quarters of women who experience family violence are mothers or care for children. Almost half said their children had seen or heard the violence. People caring for a child who has experienced family violence are often worried about how the child is affected.

Children respond to what's going on around them.

For children, experiencing family violence means knowing about, seeing or hearing violence in their home. It also means the child themselves can be hurt, abused or controlled. All forms of violence in the family affect children and are types of child abuse. A child's ability to cope can depend on many things.

You can do a lot to help.

This brochure can help you understand and

support children who have experienced family violence. Most family violence is directed at women so the language used here is for mothers ('you').

However, the information is also helpful for other primary carers – fathers, grandparents, aunts, family friends and foster parents. The phrase 'your child' means 'a child in your care'; 'dad' or 'father' refers to the child's other parent.

### This brochure contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on primary schoolers
- Activities you can try together
- Stages of development

During or after an experience of family violence, your children will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. It is common for children to feel:

- Confusion about what is happening and why
- Fear of being hurt or of you being hurt
- Sadness about the violence, any changes to the family and their own losses
- Anger about what is happening

### How primary schoolers think

Children of this age show their feelings in words and actions. They are questioning many things and finding out how their world works. Their feelings about their parents are likely to be complicated. The way children see the world can be very different to the way adults see things, so it's important to notice and ask how your child is feeling.

Children can sense how their mothers or carers are feeling. If you can appear relaxed and calm for your children, they are more likely to be relaxed and calm.



# The impact of family violence

Children need time and support to recover. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your child can begin to heal from their experience.

If your child has experienced violence they could:

- Return to behaviour from when they were younger
- Be easily upset, have trouble calming down, worry a lot, feel unwell with tummy aches or headaches
- Wet their bed, have trouble sleeping, nightmares, or want to sleep with you
- Be withdrawn or aggressive (hurt themselves or others)
- Take on adult worries or roles
- Find it hard to make friends; they could try to keep their experiences a secret, especially from their school friends
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Replay things they have heard or seen
- Feel guilty or confused about loving someone who has hurt you or who has hurt them

- Feel responsible for the arguments, violence, or for their parents breaking up

Ways that you can help your child:

- Give them lots of hugs, cuddles and kisses, care and reassurance
- Give simple and truthful explanations and responses that suit your child's age
- Tell your child that the violence is never their fault
- Ask if they have any worries at school, home or with friends
- Spend time together doing things you both enjoy
- Try to keep to your parenting routines - regular play, meal, and sleep times

For other ideas, see the tips and also brochures 7 and 8.

## Tips

### Behaviour and feelings

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviour they have seen. Sometimes children worry about this too. It's important to discuss these worries with your child.

All children need to learn which behaviour is okay and which is not. For example, it is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit or hurt anyone. Talk with your child about ways of showing feelings, especially safe ways of showing anger.

The best way for your child to learn about expressing their feelings and worries is to be surrounded by adults - men or women - who provide safety, stability and love.

Things you can do:

- Encourage them during activities, for example, 'You draw really well,' or 'Well done'
- Be curious about your child's feelings and behaviour and show that you understand things are hard, scary or frustrating for them. Let your child cry and be sad if they need to
- Notice what makes your child feel happy
- Don't feel you always have to hide your feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together
- If your child does or says something that is upsetting for you, try to stay calm in your tone and actions, so you can understand what they are trying to share



# The importance of play

Children who have experienced violence can have mixed feelings that they can't express in words. They may be less confident and slower to try new things.

Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings and helps them to develop:

- Physical skills such as catching, throwing, holding and drawing
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving
- The ability to communicate and to play and share with others
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions

Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings. Play can help them to develop their confidence and work through their worries.

For some mothers who have experienced violence, playing with their child can feel difficult and strange at first. Just being with you child, sitting with them and watching what they do is good.

Playing can help your relationship and help you to understand how they see the world. For you, play can be a great way to relax and to have a good laugh.

## When you are playing together:

- Follow their lead, but make sure the game is safe
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing
- Be patient. Be fair and compete at your child's level
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes
- Have fun!



# Activities to try together

You might find the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child. It could take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you. These are some activities that can help:

- Provide a balance between time spent with friends, by themselves and with you
- Active play, like ball or running games, skipping, dancing or bike riding
- Quiet games such as puzzles, cards and dominoes. Board games help children to understand rules and consequences
- At this age children can watch or play G-rated games and videos – preferably for no longer than two hours a day
- Trying new things or practicing what they love (e.g. cooking or making models and crafts) helps children to feel good about themselves
- Simple chores like cleaning their room and making their bed help children learn responsibility
- Encourage your child to have hobbies or special collections
- Help children explore their world by going into the garden, playing at the park, riding a bike
- Children often have many questions! Talk with them about how things work and what other people are doing. If you don't know the answer, try to find out together



# Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. This is a time when children are questioning many things and finding out how their world works. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress. Children often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again.

## 5 to 8 years

Understands many new words  
Forms friendships  
Enjoys challenges  
Is very physically active and muscle strength increases  
May be afraid of the dark

## 8 to 10 years

Enjoys the company of others and plays well  
Is increasingly independent  
Can see parents as humans who make mistakes  
Rituals, rules and secret codes are common  
Body strength and coordination are getting better

## 10 to 12 years

Sees the point of view of others more clearly  
Can understand ideas without direct experience  
May have growth spurts but generally steady growth  
Almost as coordinated as an adult by age 12  
May be entering puberty and experiencing changes

## Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful, especially in stressful circumstances. Some women living with family violence find it hard to cope because they feel like they can't protect their child.

You are one of the people who know what is good for your child. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and to your child. It's also important to listen and learn from people whose wisdom and experience you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a mother, it can help to talk things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other mothers. You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, social workers or counsellors. You can find these people and support groups for mothers and children at your local community health centre, local council or call **WIRE Women's Support Line** or **Parentline 13 22 89** (7 days/8am-12pm).

If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair out or biting themselves), call the **Royal Children's Hospital** on **1800 445 511** for advice. If you are worried that your child is being sexually abused, call the **Gatehouse Centre** on **9345 6391**.

## Crisis services

If you are in immediate danger call:  
**Victoria Police 000**

### Safe Steps

1800 015 188  
24hr family violence response line for women

### Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491  
24hr family violence support line for men

## Women and children's services

If you think you are experiencing family violence contact the service in your region (Mon-Fri, 9-5):



### Berry Street

Northern suburbs  
(03) 9450 4700

Grampians  
(03) 5330 5000



### Women's Health West

Western suburbs  
(03) 9689 9588

## Referral services

Call these services to find the closest family violence service to you:

### WIRE Women's Support Line

1300 134 130

### 1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732

Please photocopy any part of this parenting kit freely. For extra copies call Women's Health West or Berry Street, or download the kit from our websites: [www.whwest.org.au](http://www.whwest.org.au) or [www.berrystreet.org.au](http://www.berrystreet.org.au)

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