

# Choosing Positive Paths

## Parenting The effects of violence on children's behaviour

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 – regardless of their age – do know and 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:

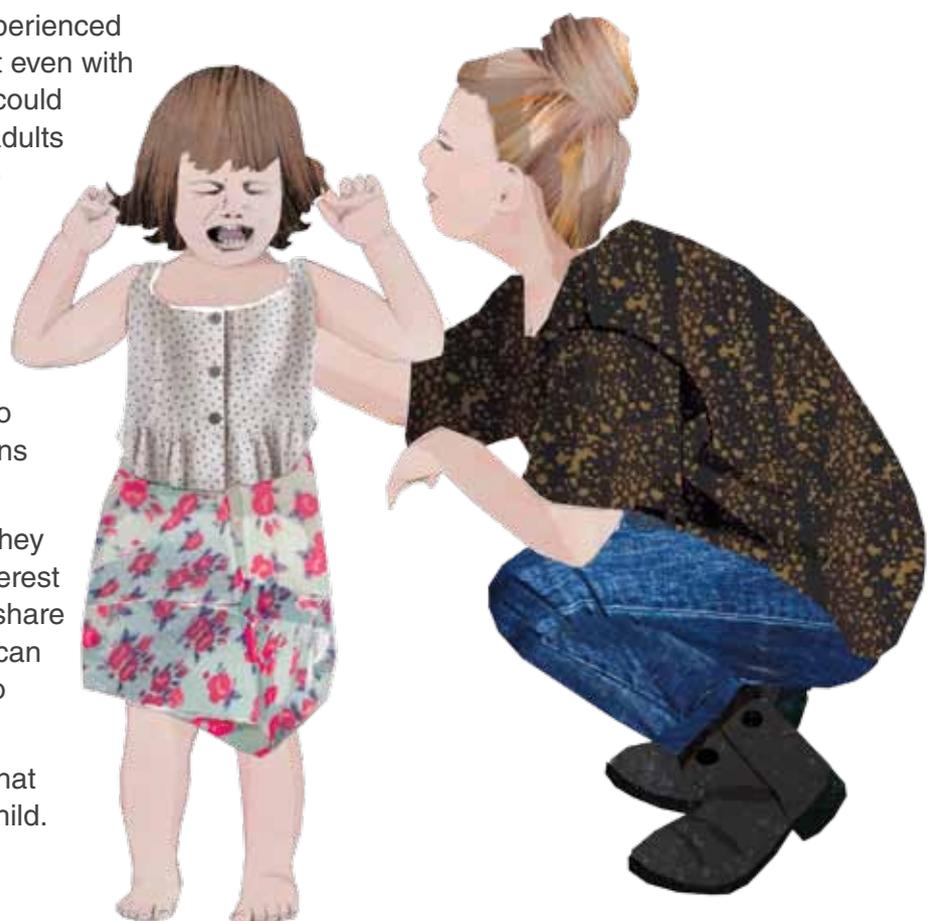
- Dealing with the effects of family violence as a mother
- Talking with your child about family violence

Many mothers and children who have experienced family violence find it difficult to talk about even with each other. Some mothers worry talking could make things worse, but if children know adults are trying to understand them, it can help children make sense of their experiences and feelings.

Family violence affects a child's life in many different ways. You may find that your child's behaviour becomes more difficult, or that they suddenly become 'too good', for example taking on adult concerns and responsibilities.

Their concentration may suffer because they are worried and tired. They might lose interest in hobbies, school work or find it hard to share or play easily. Making or keeping friends can also be difficult because they are trying to keep their home life a secret.

This brochure offers some ideas about what you can do or say to help you and your child.



# Connecting

## Things you can do

- Give them lots of care, affection and comfort
- Discuss the situation using words and ideas that suit their age
- Tell them that the violence or separation is not their fault
- Notice when they are trying to behave well, describe what you see in a positive voice, 'It's nice of you to share'
- Actively listen and allow your child to show their feelings; tell them it's okay to feel the way they do
- Tell them what behaviour is okay and not okay
- Make plans with the people helping to keep you and your children safe, e.g. family violence workers, police, family, friends
- Teach your child what to do if anyone hurts them or they feel unsafe, for example, 'Tell mummy or a teacher'
- Teach your child how to be safe. For example, to call 000 or a trusted adult in an emergency

## Things you could say

- 'I can see you're feeling really sad right now'
- 'It's okay to feel scared when somebody yells'
- 'Feeling upset or angry at me or your dad is understandable'
- 'It's important to share what you're feeling. Thanks'
- 'I love you!'
- 'You're so clever/good/smart!'

# If your child knows you were hurt

Children often know about family violence even if you think they haven't seen or heard anything. Your child will experience a range of emotions including fear, sadness, confusion, anger, betrayal and hurt. Their feelings might impact on their behaviour in many different ways and over a long period of time. See the age specific brochures for more information about how your child might react.

## If your child was hurt

Sometimes children don't talk about their experiences until they feel safe. It can be upsetting for mothers to realise the extent of the violence their children have experienced. If you have more than one child, don't assume that each child's experiences were the same.

There are people who can help you and your child to deal with their experience. Contact the Gatehouse Centre or the police or ask a family violence worker for advice. This is especially important if your child has been sexually abused.

## What can I do?

- Give your children lots of love
- Encourage your child to be a child; remind them they don't need to be the parent
- Remind them the violence is never their fault. For example, you could say, 'Even if you've been naughty, it's never okay for someone to hurt you, including grown ups'
- Be aware that your children may fight with each other more than usual. Be aware of their safety and try limits to help them understand hurting is never okay
- Be curious about how your child plays. Children can act out the violence they have experienced and may play roughly with toys. Use play to help them talk about what has happened
- Teach your child about safe and unsafe touching
- If the person who used violence is no longer living with you, it will help to say, 'We are safe now and people are helping us'

If you and your child are still in danger, you need to plan for your safety.

See brochure 1 for ideas.



## If your child is acting aggressively (e.g. biting or hitting)

Children who have experienced violence can behave in very different ways at different times.

They might withdraw or become controlling and aggressive to you, other adults or other children. They might seem to copy their violent parent.

### What can I do?

- Talk with them about how to safely show strong feelings, especially safe ways of showing anger, e.g. jump ten times and then talk about it or blow all the anger into a balloon and let it out
- They need a clear message that all feelings are okay but some behaviour is not okay. It's never okay to hurt someone emotionally or physically
- Be clear about what behaviour is okay and not okay. For example, you could say, 'It's okay to feel disappointed when you lose the game' but 'It's not okay to scream and kick your friends'
- Consider whether counselling could help you and your child



## If your child has low confidence or self-esteem or lacks social skills

Children who have experienced violence may feel alone and that no one can relate to their experiences. They may find it hard to share or play and find it hard to make friends. Being tired or worried about their home life can affect their school performance. Being hurt by a family member can mean they believe they are a bad person.

### What can I do?

- Do fun things together
- Notice what your child enjoys and praise them
- Focus on the positives, preferably straight away. For example, you could say, 'it was great that you included your sister in the game'
- Encourage them to talk about what happens at school and when they're playing with their friends
- Help your child to participate in activities that they enjoy and are good at, such as football, gym or music



# Activities to try together

You might find the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child. It can take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you.

Creative activities can help your child express their feelings or experiences. You don't have to be an expert to try them. Here are some drawing activities you could do with your child. Children sometimes draw strange things! If your child draws or says something that worries you, be curious and calmly ask about it. Seek advice if you notice a pattern of concerning behaviour or images.

## Tips for these activities

- Listen and show you care about how your child feels
- Let them cry and be sad if they need to
- Reassure them (and yourself) that it is okay to have feelings, including anger and sadness,
- Invite your child to tell you about their picture but don't push them to talk. These activities should be fun
- See brochures 2-7 for more ideas

## Dream drawings

**Age:** 4-12

Draw a person asleep. Show that they're dreaming by drawing a large thought-bubble. Ask your child to draw a good dream and bad dream in the bubble. You could ask if they have ever had those types of dreams. This is a gentle way of talking about things, especially if your child is having nightmares.



## Paper plate faces

**Age:** 4-9

Ask your child to draw faces showing different feelings on paper plates or paper (happy, angry, sad, scared, funny, surprised, excited). Do your own to make it a game.

Use the masks to talk about how you feel about things that happen. Ask questions like, which face do you use when you go to school? At bedtime? When you see grandma/dad/your friend? Let them ask you questions too.

Ask about the faces they chose, e.g. 'I wonder why you used that face at school/during class/at play time/at after care?'

## Who can help?

If you are worried about your child's behaviour or would like new parenting ideas, talking with somebody whose knowledge you value may help. You could talk to doctors, social workers, youth workers and counsellors. Specific Victorian services for children include the **GateHouse Centre**, **Royal Children's Hospital** for children up to 16 years who have been sexually abused, call **9345 6391**; the **Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service** for children 0-15 years with significant mental health problems call **1800 44 55 11**; **ORYGEN Youth Mental Health Programs** on **1800 888 320** or **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service** at **Austin Hospital** on **9496 3620**.

## 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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