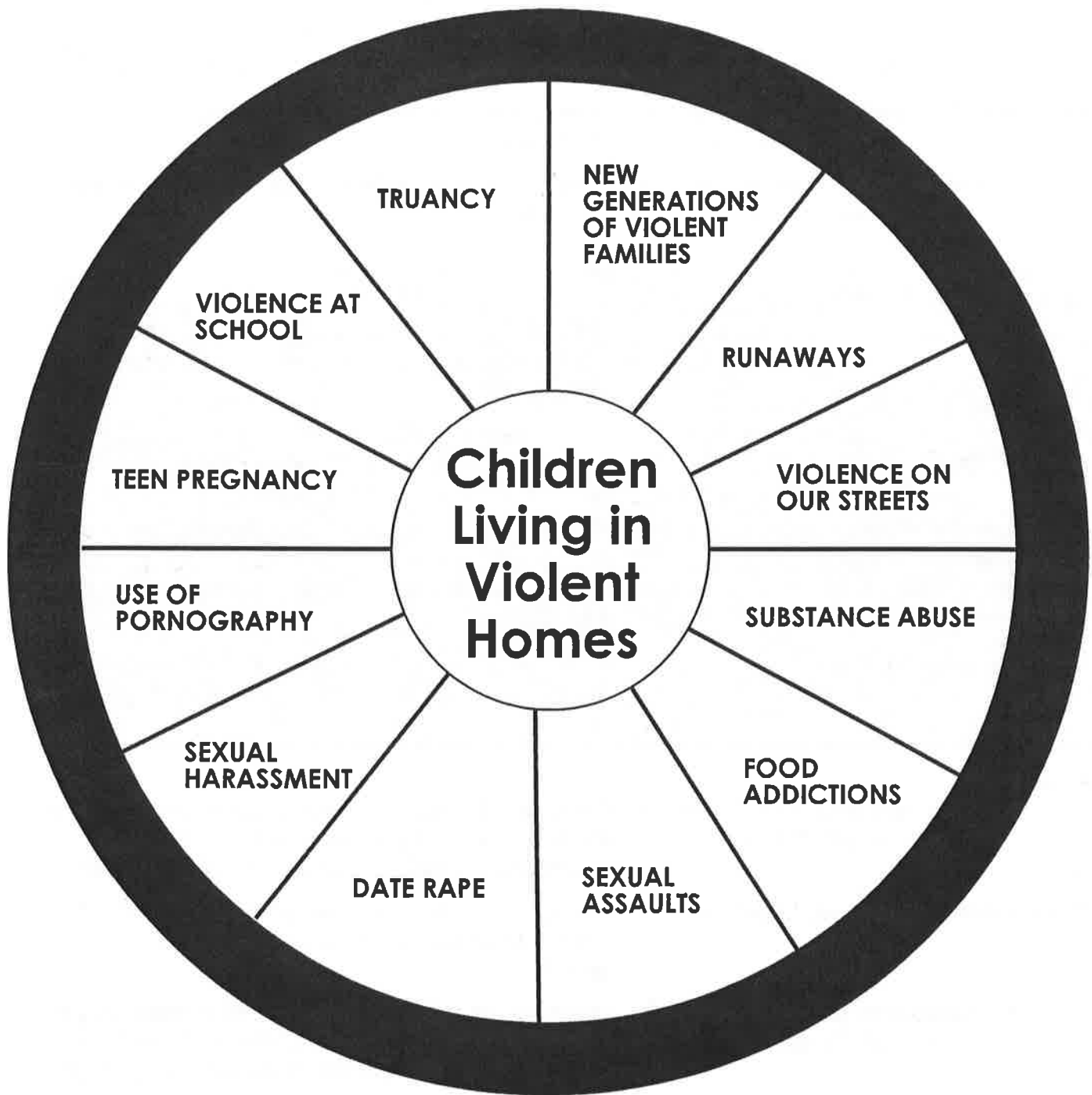


# CHILDREN COPING WITH FAMILY VIOLENCE



Developed from:  
Domestic Abuse Intervention Project  
202 East Superior Street  
Duluth, MN 55802  
218.722.4134

Produced and distributed by:



**NATIONAL CENTER**  
on Domestic and Sexual Violence  
*training • consulting • advocacy*  
4612 Shoal Creek Blvd. • Austin, Texas 78756  
512.407.9020 (phone and fax) • [www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org)



## Impacts on Children and Adolescents

### **Watching, hearing, or learning later of a mother being abused by her partner threatens young people's sense of stability and security.**

- Children and adolescents may experience increased emotional and behavioural difficulties.<sup>5, 15</sup>
- Some young people display traumatic stress reactions (e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, intensified startle reactions, constant worry about possible danger).<sup>16</sup>
- Children and adolescents living with domestic violence are at increased risk of experiencing physical injury or childhood abuse (e.g., physical, emotional).<sup>6, 9</sup>
- The abuser may use children and adolescents as a control tactic against adult victims.<sup>17</sup> Examples include:
  - ⇒ claiming the children's bad behaviour is the reason for the assaults on their mother
  - ⇒ threatening violence against children and their pets in front of the victim
  - ⇒ holding the children hostage or abducting them in an effort to punish their mother or to gain compliance
  - ⇒ withholding children's health cards or other essential documents (e.g., birth certificate, passport)
  - ⇒ talking disrespectfully about their mother to the children
- Children and adolescents may experience strong mixed feelings toward their violent parent; affection exists along with feelings of resentment and disappointment.
- Young people may imitate and learn the attitudes and behaviours modelled when woman abuse occurs in the home.<sup>7, 8</sup> They may:
  - ⇒ use violence and threats to get what they want;
  - ⇒ learn that people do not get in trouble when they hurt others;
  - ⇒ believe men are in charge and get to control women's lives;
  - ⇒ and believe that women don't have the right to be treated with respect.
- Exposure to violence may desensitize children and adolescents to aggressive behaviour. When desensitization occurs, aggression becomes part of the "norm" and is less likely to signal concern to young people.



## Signs a Child is Having Difficulties

Children may display difficulties when they are living in abusive homes.<sup>18</sup> These problems can occur for other reasons as well (e.g., death of a parent, homelessness, being bullied, traumatic events experienced by a refugee or immigrant, parental alcoholism).

Difficulties often include:

- physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- tiredness
- constant worry about possible danger and/or safety of family members (e.g., going to check on sisters or brothers, phoning home)
- sadness and/or withdrawal from others and activities
- low self-esteem and lack of confidence, especially for trying new things (including academic tasks)
- difficulty paying attention in class, concentrating on work, and learning new information
- outbursts of anger directed toward educators, peers, or self
- bullying and/or aggression directed toward peers in and/or out of the classroom
- stereotyped beliefs about males as aggressors and females as victims

**In addition to the behaviours listed above, older youth may display:**

- inflicted self-injury or mutilation
- suicidal thoughts and actions
- high risk behaviour (including criminal activities and alcohol and substance abuse)
- school truancy or leaving home
- dating violence



# TYPICAL LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF WOMAN ABUSE ON CHILDREN BY AGE

INFANTS	PRESCHOOL CHILDREN	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE 5-12 YEARS	EARLY ADOLESCENCE 12-14 YEARS	LATER ADOLESCENCE 15-18 YEARS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disruption in eating and sleeping routines</li> <li>• Fearful reactions to loud noises</li> <li>• Excessive crying</li> <li>• Physical neglect</li> <li>• Delays in Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Frequent illness</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Eating and sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Post-traumatic stress*</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Separation anxiety</li> <li>• Anger and aggression</li> <li>• Clinging</li> <li>• Withdrawing</li> <li>• Hitting, biting</li> <li>• Inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Cruelty to animals</li> <li>• Destruction of property</li> <li>• Problems in pre-school/day care</li> <li>• Pleasing behaviour</li> <li>• Regressive behaviour (thumb sucking, bed wetting)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Frequent illness</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Eating and sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Post traumatic stress*</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Anxiety and tension</li> <li>• Anger and aggression</li> <li>• Withdrawing</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Alcohol/Drug use</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Self-harm</li> <li>• Perfectionism</li> <li>• Destruction of property</li> <li>• Problems in school</li> <li>• Pleasing behaviour</li> <li>• Peer relationship problems</li> <li>• Disrespect for females</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Frequent illness</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Eating and sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Post traumatic stress*</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Anxiety and tension</li> <li>• Anger and aggression</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Being abused or becoming abusive</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Alcohol/drug use</li> <li>• Self-harm</li> <li>• Suicidal behavior</li> <li>• Inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Perfectionism</li> <li>• Running away from home</li> <li>• Pleasing behaviour</li> <li>• Problems in school</li> <li>• Peer relationship problems</li> <li>• Disrespect for females</li> <li>• Feeling over-responsible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-esteem</li> <li>• Frequent illness</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Eating and sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Post traumatic stress*</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Anxiety and tension</li> <li>• Anger and aggression</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Being abused or becoming abusive</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Alcohol/drug use</li> <li>• Self-harm</li> <li>• Suicidal behavior</li> <li>• Inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Perfectionism</li> <li>• Running away from home</li> <li>• Pleasing behavior</li> <li>• Problems in school</li> <li>• Peer relationship problems</li> <li>• Disrespect for females</li> <li>• Feeling over-responsible</li> </ul>

\*Post Traumatic Stress: Symptoms include nightmares, intrusive thoughts or images, flashbacks, fear, anxiety, tension, hyper-alert, easily startled, irritability, outbursts of anger and aggression.

This chart was adapted from Health Canada: A Handbook for Health and Social Service Providers and Educators on Children Exposed to Woman Abuse/Family Violence, 1999.



## What You May See

The following actual case examples illustrate how living with violence can impact the lives of children.

### Reaction to Police Officer

When a uniformed police officer drops in to say hello to the grade 1 teacher after dropping his son off at school, six-year-old Yazim gets under her desk and covers her face with her hands. Her teacher thinks Yazim's reaction might relate to her emigration experiences from her war-affected home country.

When the teacher bends down to talk with Yazim, large tears are flowing from her tense face. Yazim knows the visitor is a policeman. When asked why she is crying, Yazim asks if the policeman is going to take her away because her Mommy is hurt again. Yazim talks about her parents fighting and her worries. She believes her brothers will be sent back to their home country if her father goes to prison. She also worries there will be no one to look after the children if something happens to her mother.

### Atypical Separation Anxiety

The after-school worker recognizes Katie as needing more reassurance and physical attention than her classmates. Katie works hard every morning trying to get her mother to stay with her at school. In fact, the problem is escalating in frequency and intensity. Once Katie even followed her mother out of the school and ran down the road behind the car. At dismissal time, when Katie's mother comes to pick her up, Katie tries hard to get her mother to stay at school. She shows her mother drawings and other class work, and when her mother finally gets her outside, Katie tries to engage her to play with her on the climbers.

#### Background

Katie and her young mother were held at gun point by her stepfather for over three hours one night during the past summer. He debated aloud whether his partner would be punished more if he killed her or if he killed Katie. A traumatized Katie becomes anxious whenever separated from her mother or when faced with the need to return home. Home reminds Katie of this traumatic event and she overheard that her stepfather will be released from prison next month.



## What You May See

### Secrets Shared with Peers

Scott, age 8, is obviously distressed at swimming lessons. His instructor questions him but he denies anything is wrong. He was with his regular buddy, Alex. In the change room, the instructor overhears Scott and Alex in an emotional conversation. Something bad has happened in Alex's family. The instructor asks Scott about it later, who hesitantly reveals that Alex's parents had a big fight and that Alex saw his father pull his mother down the stairs. Scott implores the instructor not to tell anyone about Alex's family. Scott explains that Alex's father will "kill" Alex for telling Scott, and that Alex will "kill" Scott for telling.

### Fighting

Quyên, age nine, learned English quickly after arriving from his homeland three years ago. However, he is somewhat isolated in this school where there are few other newcomer children. He is shy with the Canadian boys, but tries hard to fit in. Nevertheless, when challenged in any way, Quyên lashes out in anger and usually ends up in the principal's office for fighting.

The principal schedules an appointment with Quyên's mother and arranges for an interpreter, who turns out to be a neighbour of the family. Quyên's mother has few English skills. Quyên's mother repeatedly insists that he is a good boy who is picked on by other students. The principal asks if Quyên's father ever uses physical violence that Quyên might see at home. When the interpreter asks the mother the question, there follows a lengthy exchange between them during which Quyên's mother seems anxious and upset. The interpreter answers the question: "My husband is a good man. He provides well for his family."