

Part IV:

What You Can Do To Help



Did you know?



Parents and children experiencing domestic violence have much better outcomes and are safer when they have the right social supports like access to education, help with safety planning, choice-making and problem-solving, referrals to community resources and help with accessing these resources?²⁷

Early years providers can be excellent supporters and advocates for children and their victimized parent. It can be difficult for some people to accept help from others. Be patient and supportive.

SIGNS A CHILD MAY HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Included are some common warning signs, adapted from other toolkits, which show a child may be exposed to domestic violence.^{28 29}

However, it is important to remember there are other reasons that young children may show these problems, and children displaying them may not necessarily have been exposed to domestic violence.³⁰

The Toddler

- A toddler may copy violence that they have witnessed by hitting, biting, hurting animals, screaming, yelling or breaking toys. Hurting themselves or someone else is also common.
- The toddler may react to the tension in the home by whining, clinging, crying, having eating or sleeping problems, or withdrawing.
- To comfort themselves, some toddlers excessively soothe themselves by rocking, sucking their thumbs or touching themselves.



The Pre-Schooler

- Some preschoolers may be excessively obedient and try hard to please those around them.
- Others might copy abuse by hitting, being cruel to animals, destroying toys or property, fighting with others, being rebellious, swearing, name calling and yelling.
- Sometimes pre-schoolers may lose skills they have previously learned, like naming colours, toilet training, or eating with their fingers.
- Some complain of headaches, stomach aches, and have difficulty sleeping.
- Some may have extreme separation anxiety, which can look like wanting to be with their siblings all the time. Some children may be easily startled.





The School Aged Child

As school-aged children (ages 5 and up) sometimes accompany their parents or younger siblings to early years settings, it is important to provide some warning signs for this age group. For example:



- The child may copy abusive behaviours seen at home by bullying/fighting with other children, displaying aggression, destroying property, swearing/name calling, being defiant, and showing disrespect for females.
- Children who experience anxiety or fear often have difficulties with school work.
- Some children escape the difficulties of their home life by running away, getting in trouble at school or with the law, or by experimenting with alcohol and other drugs.

- Some children display anxiety, withdrawal, lack of confidence, depression, eating and/or sleeping problems. They may complain of frequent sickness.
- Some children may be loyal to their victimized parent and afraid of the abuser. This might look like being overly obedient and cautious, or trying to help out their victimized parent and younger siblings beyond what is typically expected of a school-aged child.

HOW TO SUPPORT A CHILD WHO MAY HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Young children benefit from supportive caregivers and safe places. Below are some common tips for supporting children who are or have been exposed to domestic violence.

BEHAVIOUR	TIPS
SEVERE SEPARATION ANXIETY AT DROP OFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for future separation anxiety by making a plan or routine with the child (i.e. arrive, hang up coat, go to classroom, find teacher, give parent hugs, kisses, wave goodbye and reassure child that mommy or daddy will come back later)
WANDERING AND AIMLESS BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the child find an activity to master because this helps give the child a sense of control over his/her environment
RE-OCCURRING VIOLENT PLAY THEMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not judge or try to shut down the child. Listen, watch and comment on how they might feel. In some situations you will have to intervene to ensure safety of child and others
NEEDING TO SEE SIBLINGS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set times for siblings to be together (i.e. after nap) and follow through on this as it builds trust with the child
INATTENTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep activities short • Sit the child close to an adult • Praise all attempts to participate • Follow the lead of the child (i.e. discuss topics of interest to the child)
ANXIOUS BEHAVIOUR DURING NAP TIME <i>(i.e. fidgeting, excess movement)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have child join naptime after most of the others are asleep • Do not demand sleep but use this time as a chance to nurture and reassure the child that they are loved, valued and safe • Encourage the use of transition objects (i.e. blankets, stuffed toys)
A LACK OF FOCUS DURING CHANGES IN ACTIVITIES <i>(i.e. running around, poking others, increased movement)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind children about upcoming changes in activities both individually as well as in groups • Make a chart of pictures outlining the daily schedule and refer to it often • Draw a clock and have the child tell you when it is time to let the group know about the new activity

HOW TO SUPPORT A CHILD WHO DISCLOSES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Early years providers are in a position of trust and children may tell them about domestic violence and/or child abuse and neglect. The following are helpful responses you can use if a child tells you about domestic violence:

- **Allow the child to tell their story without pressuring them to speak or asking them leading questions. Remember your role is to support the child, and not to gather evidence or investigate the situation.**
- **Actively listen to the child's story.**
- **Reassure the child by acknowledging their feelings and letting them know that the violence is not their fault.**
- **Do not criticize or speak negatively about the offender. Children often have confused or mixed feelings about either parent in these situations and can feel angry and loyal to a parent at the same time.**
- **Do not make promises or commitments to the child that cannot be kept. For example, keeping the violence a secret if the child asks you to, or promising the child that you will keep the child and their victimized parent safe from further violence or threats of violence. It is more helpful to tell a child you will do everything you can to help them stay safe.**
- **Take the child's lead and support them to move on to another activity when they have finished speaking.**
- **Keep in mind that the child may have chosen this time to tell you because the situation at home may have changed or gotten worse and the child's normal copings strategies have been overwhelmed. Responding supportively to a child's story will increase their sense of security and their willingness to share concerns in the future.**^{31 32}

Keep in mind, that some children do not talk about domestic violence directly, but communicate about what they have experienced indirectly. For example, through their behaviours, emotions, art, writing, appearance or the fears that they express.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH

Did you know?

Three things you can always let a child know:

- ✓ 1. It is **not your fault**.
- ✓ 2. Never try to get in the middle or stop a fight - your only job is to **stay safe**.
- ✓ 3. You are **not alone**.

The experience of witnessing domestic violence may be traumatic. Building strong and positive relationships with parents of children in your care will help you to create a safe and supportive place for children who suffer from this kind of trauma.

Trauma is defined as experiences that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope. Experiences such as child abuse, witnessing violence or other events that are outside of one's control certainly create stress and can induce trauma.

CAUTION!

Before getting involved in any domestic violence situation, ask yourself "is it safe?" If anyone is in immediate danger, call the police. If you become aware that a child is being exposed to domestic violence, **do not attempt to speak to the offender about the violence. Not only would you be endangering yourself, but the offender may later become more violent with their partner or their child.**

