

Responding to Children

As many as 10 million children witness domestic violence each year. Child abuse is 15 times more likely to occur in families where there is domestic violence. Violence in the home affects children whether or not they are abused directly.

Common emotional reactions of children to domestic violence:

- Blaming themselves. A typical statement is: "If I had just been a good boy or girl. . ."
- Being constantly anxious and/or afraid in anticipation of the next abusive incident.
- Feeling guilty, thinking they should have been able to prevent the violence.
- If the victimized parent and children leave the abusive parent, the children may grieve over the "loss" of that parent and even the lifestyle they formerly lived.
- Confusion. Children may not know how they feel or have two opposite emotions at the same time. They may love the abuser but hate what the abuser is doing to their family.
- Believing that violence is an inevitable or acceptable part of a relationship.
- Needing intense adult attention to minimize their fears. Without this attention, they may act out.
- Difficulty trusting or forming relationships.
- Becoming violent at school or in the community, OR becoming overly passive and eager to please any adult.
- Feel overwhelmed by their inability to stop the violence. Children may become depressed or suicidal.

Positive influences can help children overcome the negative effects of living with violence. Here are some ideas for concerned adults:

- Allow children to talk about the violence. Listen to their feelings without judging.
- Make sure children understand that the fighting is not their fault.
- Encourage children to stay out of fights between adults, and make sure they know how to call 911.
- Be a role model. Show by your example that there is a better way to solve problems than by violence.
- Hold violent adults accountable for their behavior and its impact on their children.
- Teach cooperation and respect in children's relationships with other children. Discourage fighting and teasing.
- Try to help establish a predictable daily routine.
- Watch and listen closely for signs that a child is being directly abused. Be prepared to respond.
- Devise a code word so that children can let trusted adults know when they need help, without alerting the abuser.
- Find additional support for children. Most Domestic Violence Programs offer counseling or support groups for children who have witnessed or experienced violence. Teachers, relatives, and others can also be helpful.

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