FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Children and Domestic Violence

How Does Domestic Violence Affect Children?

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#1** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Children experience domestic violence in many ways. They may hear one parent threaten or demean the other, or see a parent who is angry or afraid. They may see or hear one parent physically hurt the other and cause injuries or destroy property. Children may live with the fear that something will happen again. They may even be the targets of abuse.

Most children who live with domestic violence can recover and heal from their experiences. One of the most important factors that helps children do well after experiencing domestic violence is a strong relationship with a caring, nonviolent parent. As a caring parent, you can promote your children's recovery by taking steps to increase safety in the family, helping your kids develop relationships with other supportive adults, and encouraging them in school or other activities that make them feel happy and proud.

HOW CHILDREN RESPOND TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Children and parents living with domestic violence seek support in different ways. They may turn to their extended families or friends, their faith communities, or their cultural traditions to find connection, stability and hope. Children may find their own coping strategies and some do not show obvious signs of stress. Others struggle with problems at home, at school, and in the community. You may notice changes in your child's emotions (such as increased fear or anger) and behavior (such as clinging, difficulty going to sleep, or tantrums) after an incident of domestic violence. Children may also experience longer-term problems with health, behavior, school, and emotions, especially when domestic violence goes on for a long time. For example, children may become depressed or anxious, skip school, or get involved in drugs.

The Co-chairs of the NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group Betsy Groves, Miriam Berkman, Rebecca Brown, and Edwina Reyes along with members of the committee and Futures Without Violence developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women's advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

The following factors affect how an individual child will respond to living with domestic violence:

- How serious and how frequent is the violence or threat?
- Was the child physically hurt or put in danger?
- What is the child's relationship with the victim and abuser?
- How old is the child?
- What other stress is going on in the child's life?
- What positive activities and relationships are in the child's life?
- How does the child usually cope with problems?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CHANGES FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Children may try to protect an abused parent by refusing to leave the parent alone, getting in the middle of an abusive event, calling for help, or drawing attention to themselves by bad behavior. They may want to be responsible for "fixing" their family by trying to be perfect or always tending to younger siblings. Some children take sides with the abusive adult and become disrespectful, aggressive, or threatening to their nonviolent parent.

Children who live with domestic violence may learn the wrong lessons about relationships. While some children may respond by avoiding abuse in their own relationships as they grow older, others may repeat what they have seen in abusive relationships with their own peers or partners. They may learn that it is OK to try to control another person's behavior or feelings, or to use violence to get what they want. They may learn that hurtful behavior is somehow part of being close or being loved.

REMEMBER...

A strong relationship with a caring, nonviolent parent is one of the most important factors in helping children grow in a positive way despite their experiences. Your support can make the difference between fear and security, and can provide a foundation for a healthy future.

IMPORTANT!

If you feel unsafe now and need help for yourself, your family, or someone else in a domestic crisis, contact

- 911 for emergency police assistance
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline. Advocates are available to intervene in a crisis, help with safety planning, and provide referrals to agencies in all 50 states. Call the confidential hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or go to www.thehotline.org
- Your local child protective services have resources for you if your children are in danger.

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#2 – Celebrating Your Child's Strengths
#3 – Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter
#4 – Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence
#5 – The Importance of Playing with Your Children
#6 – Keeping Your Children Safe and Responding to Their Fears
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Children and Domestic Violence

Celebrating Your Child's Strengths

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#2** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Living with domestic violence and its aftermath is stressful for all members of a family. As a caring parent you may worry that your child will not be able to move forward or succeed in life given what's happened. It is important for you to know that children, like adults, can overcome hard times, and that you have a pivotal role in helping them build the strengths they need to move forward.

Studies show that many children who have experienced domestic violence are able to cope and stay on track. They remain well adjusted and can succeed in school and make friends. We call these children resilient because of their ability to weather stress and bounce back. One of the most essential ingredients for resilience is a secure relationship between the child and a person who loves him, believes in him, sees him as special, and celebrates his accomplishments. That person can be you, the parent.

WAYS TO SUPPORT AND CELEBRATE YOUR CHILD

Identify your child's strengths. Before you can nurture your child's strengths you must identify them. Think about what your child does well or really enjoys, and make a list. Or think about the things you like most about your child. This could be as simple as "My son has a great smile" or "My girl is sensitive and cares about other people." Take a moment to feel proud about your children's strengths and share your pride with them.

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Make time for your child. If you are being abused, it may be difficult, but spending time with your child is valuable in many ways. As a caring parent, you are the most important person in your child's life. The time you devote to him, just doing simple activities that he is good at or enjoys, can go a long way in supporting his resilience. You teach him that no matter how stressful things may be, he is special and loved. You help him feel good about himself and see the possibility of having fun even when times are tough.

Your support teaches him that no matter how stressful things may be, he is special and loved.

Praise your child. Children thrive from hearing about what they do well and what their parents love about them. Remember to praise the small things your child does, such as being helpful or kind. Tell her that you notice, and that you are proud of her. Praise from someone as important as you can make a big difference in how children feel about themselves.

Nurture your child's strengths. Help your child build on her strengths by involving her in activities such as sports teams, art and music programs, faith-based activities, or community programs. There she can find children with similar interests, positive adults, and opportunities to be the best she can be at what she enjoys.

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REMEMBER...

Children can be resilient and move forward from stressful events in their lives. One way they heal is by having the adults who care about them provide the guidance, attention, and support they need to explore and build upon their strengths.

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Children and Domestic Violence

Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter

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Parents often worry about what to say to their children about domestic violence. It can be hard to explain what has happened and why it happened. Before you speak, take time to reflect on your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions to stressful events, because they will affect the way your children react. Even very young children are tuned in to your emotions. They can sense how you feel even before you talk to them. Your thoughts and feelings give your children important information about how they themselves should react to their circumstances.

SAFETY FIRST

If you are still in an abusive situation, talking privately with your children may be difficult or impossible. Think first about your safety and support system. Talk to a domestic violence advocate, a counselor, or a trusted friend or family member about your situation and how you can keep yourself and your children safe. Then you can think about what you want to say to your children.

EXPLORING YOUR FEELINGS

Children ask questions at surprising times. Not every conversation can be planned. However, thinking ahead will allow you to consider what you want your children to learn from their experiences. Ask yourself how domestic violence has affected you. What feelings are you carrying with you? Are you angry? Exhausted? Depressed? Fearful? Overwhelmed? All of these feelings are normal for someone who has dealt with partner

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conflict, abuse, and changes in family situations. Recognizing feelings in yourself is a key step in understanding how your children may be affected by domestic violence.

Tips for Getting Ready to Talk to Your Children

- Consider your own and your children's safety first.
- Recognize how your experiences have affected you.
- Think about how domestic violence may be affecting your children.
- Consider what messages you want to give your children.
- Recognize your strengths as a person and a parent.
- You should know that what your child may share can be difficult and painful for you to hear.

For information about what to say to your children about domestic violence, see fact sheet #4 in this series, Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence. When you are ready to talk, no matter what words you use, the most important message for your kids is that you are there for them, that you love them, and that you will look out for them. Sometimes these messages are communicated without words: in a hug or a kiss, or just by staying close.

IMPORTANT!

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Children and Domestic Violence

Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence

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When children see, hear, or know about abuse by one parent against the other, they may have many feelings, thoughts, and questions. As a caring parent, you are the most important person to your children as they try to sort things out. It may not be easy for you to talk about what's happened. In some families' culture and religion it is not the custom to talk to children about adult problems. However, your communication and support can help your kids do better in the aftermath of their experiences.

If you still feel unsafe at home, you may worry that talking with the children will put the family at greater risk. If this is the case, talk to a domestic violence advocate or someone else you trust to help you increase the family's safety. Let your kids know that you are taking steps to make them safer. And remember, if you are in immediate danger, call 911 for emergency assistance.

HOW TO TALK, WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Conversations with children can't always be planned—sometimes they just happen. The following tips will help you make the most of the conversation whether it's planned or spontaneous:

- Take the lead: when you open the conversation, you're telling your child it is safe to talk and that she doesn't have to be alone with her thoughts and worries.
- Open with messages of support, like "I care about you and I will listen to you."

Helpful Messages for Kids About Domestic Violence

- Violence isn't OK.
- It isn't your fault.
- I will do everything I can to help you be safe.
- It's not your job to fix what is wrong in the family.
- I want you to tell me how you feel. It's important, and I can handle it.
- It's OK to have mixed feelings about either or both of your parents.

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Jonathan's mother and stepfather were quarreling, and the stepfather started shoving. Jonathan, who is 12, stepped in to stop it. When things calmed down his mother said to him, "I understand and appreciate your concerns about my safety, but it isn't your job to stop the fighting. I want you to stay safe."

- Ask what your child saw or heard or already knows about the troubling events in the home.
- Support and acknowledge your children's feelings, experiences, and their version of the story.
- Expect that your children will know more than you think, no matter how young they are. Sometimes when adults assume children are asleep or not paying any attention, they are actually listening to everything. If they are too young to get what's going on, they may fill in the gaps with their imaginations and end up worrying about something that's worse than reality.

- Let your child know it is always OK to ask you questions. Often the ideas or questions that trouble children are different from the ones that adults think about. Listening to your child's questions helps you know what is really on his mind.
- Talk to your children in a way that's right for their ages. Use words that you know they understand. Be careful not to talk about adult concerns or at an adult's level of understanding.
- If your child asks a question you're not ready to answer, you can say, "That's a really important question. I need some time to think about it and then we can talk again."

Seven-year-old Janet was at home when her parents began shouting. Her father threatened to take Janet away from her mother. Afterward, Janet's mother told her, "I will always be there for you. What Daddy said wasn't true. Even when you are angry, it isn't OK to scare other people."

- Monitor your own feelings. If you are able to talk calmly and confidently, you convey a sense of security. A calm tone sends the message that you are in charge and capable.
- Be alert to signs that your child is ready to end the conversation. Children who have heard enough may get restless or silly, stop listening, or stop asking questions.
- Have other adults for your own support so your children are not your only support system. You don't want to put undo worry or stress on your children.
- Be mindful of the age of your child. For younger children, sharing too much of your worries or fears may make them more worried or upset.

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Children and Domestic Violence

The Importance of Playing with Your Children

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#5** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Children who have lived with domestic violence react in many different ways. If you notice changes in your children's emotions or behavior, they may be telling you that they need some special attention from you, the caring parent. Playing with them is one of the best things you can do to help them feel more secure and connected to you.

Playing is an essential part of childhood and a key to healthy development. Sometimes we think of "playing" only with younger children, but even teenagers "play" in the form of activities like sports, watching TV, a game, or just hanging out with you. Children and teenagers learn to build relationships through play. A parent's attention through play can be especially helpful for kids of all ages who have experienced domestic violence.

MAKING THE MOST OF PLAYING

Try to spend some time every day playing with your child, without distractions like phone calls. As you play, pay attention not only to the activity at hand but to watching, listening to, and supporting your child's participation. Here are some suggestions for making the most of this special time with kids of different ages. You can do these things whether you are at home, in a shelter, or in transition.

For Younger Children

What You Can Do	Examples
Choose activities you can do together	Play with blocks, read a book, assemble puzzles, color or do other art activities, dance to music
Listen to your kids and let them know you are listening	Repeat their noises ("vroom vroom") or comments (say "You like orange" after your child tells you orange is her favorite color)
Praise them for their activities	Say "You are doing a great job of stacking the little blocks on the big blocks," or "You picked beautiful colors for your picture"
Let them know you see and like what they're doing by describing it	Say "You are drawing a dog" or "You've put your doll to bed" or "You shared your toys with me"

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For Elementary School-Age Children

Let your child choose activities you can do together	Play board games, cards, or interactive computer games; read a book; cook a meal
Do a physical activity together	Throw a ball, go for a walk, or bike ride
Do a project together	Draw, write stories, build with Legos or Tinkertoys

For Preteens and Teenagers

Stay connected by showing interest in what's going on in their lives	Explore their unique interests; ask about school, friends, activities, sports, music
Do a project or physical activities together	Walk or run, go biking, hike, care for a pet
Watch television together	Talk about what you are seeing and hearing, and show interest in their opinions

Playing won't make children forget their upsetting experiences or relieve all their insecurities. But it can help you stay connected to them when life is unstable and unpredictable. Attention and praise during play or together-time will help each child feel important and special—feelings that will increase their sense of security. Because children get so much pleasure from play, when you spend time playing with them you are telling them you love them.

IMPORTANT!

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Children and Domestic Violence

Keeping Your Children Safe and Responding to Their Fears

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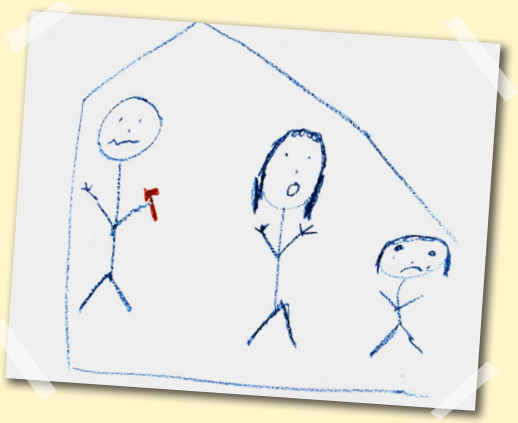

Children who have experienced domestic violence may still feel afraid even after the real danger is past. They may worry that you or they are unsafe even if the abusive person is no longer in the home or no longer in touch with the family. No matter how old they are, your children need your help to feel safe and secure again. The suggestions below will help you in restoring their sense of peace and security.

It will be hard for your kids to feel safe if the family is still in crisis. If you feel unsafe now, contact a domestic violence advocate, a lawyer, or another trusted person who can advise you about plans for safety. If you believe your child has been injured or abused by the other parent, get medical help if needed and contact your local police or child protective services. Try to find time alone with your children to discuss safety plans and listen to their concerns.

COMFORTING INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND PRESCHOOLERS

Young children who have lived with domestic violence usually don't fully understand the events and tension around them. But they will respond to strong emotions and a sense of danger in the home. Younger children who can't express their upset feelings in words may show them in their behavior.

What you can do:

- Bond physically with your children—simple things like eye contact, kisses, and hugging will help them feel safe and secure.
- Take care of your kids' everyday needs—make sure they are getting their sleep, meals, snacks, baths, and playtime.

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- Keep up the routines of daily life, such as bedtime reading and regular mealtimes. Routines and structure make the world seem more predictable and secure.
- Talk with your children in a soothing voice—they may not understand everything you are saying, but your calm voice will help them be calm, too.
- Reassure toddlers and preschoolers that you and other adults in their lives will keep them safe.
- Tell them when the home is safe and the scary events are in the past.

TALKING WITH SCHOOL-AGE KIDS AND TEENAGERS

Children who are mature enough to understand should know your plans for safety and what their roles are in the plans. They will feel less afraid if they can take active roles. This is particularly true for teenagers, who may want to be actively involved in safety planning. School-age children and teens will also benefit from talking with you about domestic violence—what it is and who was responsible for the events in your home. They may have mixed emotions about this information and should be encouraged to talk about them. If they are reluctant to speak up, they might want to draw or write about their feelings. A safe location is always essential for these times with your children.

What you can do:

- Encourage your kids to ask questions—they may need help sorting out misunderstandings, like the belief that they are at fault for domestic violence, or responsible for fixing the family.
- If the threat of violence is still present, talk with your children about a plan for your safety and theirs, including practicing using the plan.
- Teach them not to get in the middle of an adult fight or place themselves in danger.
- If the danger is in the past, reassure your children that they are now safe. Help them understand that their fears are connected to scary events from the past.
- Help them not to dwell on their worries and upset feelings. Instead help them focus on positive thoughts—a happy memory, a cuddly pet, or an activity they are good at.
- Encourage them to turn to a trusted adult—a teacher, a school counselor, a coach, a church leader—if they need someone else to talk to.

STEPS TO PLAN FOR SAFETY: WHAT CHILDREN AND TEENS SHOULD KNOW

- How to call 911 in an emergency
- Names and phone numbers of trusted relatives, neighbors, or friends they can call or go to for help, day or night
- Hiding places and exits in the home
- To stay out of the middle of their parents' fights or arguments
- An agreed upon safety word, phrase, or gesture that can be used in times of danger to signal the use of your safety steps

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Managing Challenging Behavior of Children Living with Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#7** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Children who live with domestic violence often react to it with changes in how they behave. They may have trouble controlling their feelings, and will act in ways that make life even harder for the family. Some common changes are tantrums, aggressive behavior, and sleep problems. Children might also stop following directions or play in ways that mimic scenes of violence in the home. If your children react in ways like these, you can take steps to help them feel more secure and in control of their emotions and actions.

It might be difficult or impossible for you to follow some of the suggestions listed here. Perhaps you are still living with a partner who is abusive and interferes with your parenting. Or maybe you are living in a public shelter or other temporary home. If you have left an abusive situation and you are now in charge of your home, be patient with your children and yourself as you all adjust to new roles and new rules.

TANTRUMS AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Children have tantrums because they are overwhelmed by their feelings and don't know any other way to "let go." This is especially true for young children who can't easily use words yet. Children and teenagers may be aggressive as they struggle to feel in control of things instead of helpless. When they live with domestic violence, they may try to resist your authority as a parent and test the limits of your rules in order to feel independent and strong. They may try to imitate the parent who has been abusive, or act out violent scenes during their play.

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What you can do:

- Set clear and regular routines at home. They make daily life more predictable, especially for younger children.
- Think carefully about which behaviors you might safely ignore and which are unacceptable. The ones you ignore will usually decrease over time.
- Praise your child for the positive things she does.
- Do not try to reason with your child when you are in the middle of a struggle with her.
- Offer your child choices. Say that she may do what you ask, talk about why she is upset, or go to her room to calm down.
- Explain that it is your job to set limits and make decisions.
- Make the consequences of behavior clear and always follow through.
- If you see your child mimicking abuse during play, use the moment to talk about his feelings and worries. For example, say "It seems like you're thinking about what happened between Mommy and Daddy."

When to Seek Advice

Children's reactions to domestic violence usually start to go away once the stress in the home has gone down and the child feels safe again. Consider reaching out for professional advice if

- Your child's behavior changes don't go away, or they get worse.
- Your child is unusually sad, angry, or withdrawn.
- You are concerned that your child may harm himself or others.
- You are overwhelmed by your child's behavior.
- The violence in the home has been extreme.

SLEEP TROUBLES

Sometimes children have trouble going to sleep or sleeping alone, especially if they are under stress. They may be afraid of having nightmares or scary thoughts. They may be worried that something terrible will happen while they are sleeping.

What you can do:

- End each day with bedtime routines. Read or play a quiet game with your child, or have him take a warm bath or shower to wind down for sleep.
- Calm your child if she is upset. Hold her, rub her back, or breathe slowly with her.
- Encourage your child to talk about his fears. If you are now living in a safe place, reassure him that he is safe in his own bed. If he has reason to be afraid, for himself or for you, take steps to increase safety in the home and tell him you are doing so.
- Stay calm. Your own sense of calm is the best reassurance for your children.

As a caring parent, you are the most important person in your children's lives, especially in times of stress and conflict at home. You can help them regain a sense of safety, security, and trust by offering your love and support, setting clear limits, and seeking help when needed from knowledgeable professionals. You and your children are not alone. For information about getting advice and help with your child's behavior, see fact sheet #8 in this series, Where to Turn if You Are Worried About Your Child.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).
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FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Children and Domestic Violence

Where to Turn if You Are Worried About Your Child

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#8** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Children may react to domestic violence with behaviors and mood changes that are normal after an upsetting event. Usually these changes start to go away once the stress in the home has gone down and the child feels safe again. If the changes persist or otherwise worry you, be aware that there are people and places you can turn to for advice and help. Seek out guidance if:

- Your child's behavior changes don't go away, or they get worse.
- Your child is unusually sad, angry, or withdrawn.
- You are concerned that your child may harm himself or others.
- You are overwhelmed by your child's behavior.
- The violence in the home has been extreme.

You may be unsure about where to look for guidance, or even whether it's OK to tell anyone about your family's tough times. Perhaps you are embarrassed or worried that people will judge or blame you. You might be surprised at the support you receive when you reach out to trusted sources! You will realize that you are not alone with your worries, and that you can get the information you need to benefit your child and yourself going forward.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A good place to start is to contact a **domestic violence agency** in your area. These agencies can put you in touch with local **programs and experts**, including **lawyers**, with experience helping children affected by domestic violence. They may recommend a **counselor** or other supportive services such as a **group** for children dealing with stress at home. Your child's **pediatrician** may be a good source for advice or recommendations. You might also turn to a **family member** or a trusted **friend** or **neighbor** who is knowledgeable about domestic violence.

The Co-chairs of the NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group Betsy Groves, Miriam Berkman, Rebecca Brown, and Edwina Reyes along with members of the committee and Futures Without Violence developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women's advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Many people turn to the **Internet** for information and guidance. If you need a computer, most public **libraries** offer free access. If you use a home computer and you are still living in an abusive situation, be careful about privacy and be sure to delete your browsing history.

Try to look only at **Web sites** that are trusted and reliable. Here are some well-known sites you can count on for solid information:

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers fact sheets and other information about domestic violence and its impact on children. Visit www.nctsn.org or e-mail the Network at info@nctsn.org
- The Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse has a Web page that features the perspectives of children. Visit Honor our Voices at www.honorourvoices.org
- The Safe Start Center offers information about the impact of domestic violence on children, including a guide for families entitled *Healing the Invisible Wounds: Children's Exposure to Violence*. Visit www.safestartcenter.org
- The Child Witness to Violence Project offers information for parents and caregivers on its Web site. Visit www.childwitnesstoviolence.org or call the project at 1-617-414-4244.
- The Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System offers a variety of resources for families and children coping with domestic violence. Visit www.lfcc.on.ca or call the center at 1-519-679-7250.

IMPORTANT!

If you feel unsafe now and need help for yourself, your family, or someone else in a domestic crisis, contact

- 911 for emergency police assistance
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline. Advocates are available to intervene in a crisis, help with safety planning, and provide referrals to agencies in all 50 states. Call the confidential hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or go to www.thehotline.org
- Your local child protective services have resources for you if your children are in danger.

REMEMBER...

There are people and resources that can help you and your children cope with the experience of domestic violence. Reaching out to them may be the most important step you take in helping your children grow and thrive despite difficult times at home.

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FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Children and Domestic Violence

Helping Your Child Navigate a Relationship with the Abusive Parent

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is #9 in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

A child who has lived with domestic violence is likely to have confusing thoughts and feelings about the parent who has harmed the other parent. Whether the abusive parent still lives at home, sees the child sometimes, or has no contact, the child and parent have a relationship. Maintaining contact with both parents can be of benefit for some children, as long as everyone is safe. One of the biggest and most challenging jobs for you, the caring parent, is to help your child navigate his or her relationship with the abusive parent.

SAFETY FIRST

The first thing to think about is your own safety and your children's safety with the abusive partner. If you have concerns, contact a domestic violence advocate, a lawyer, or another trusted individual who is knowledgeable about domestic violence and can help you make plans for safety. If you believe your child has been injured or abused by the other parent, get medical help if needed and contact your local police or child protective services. Try to find time alone with your children to discuss plans for safety and respond to any worries they may have.

YOUR CHILD'S MIXED EMOTIONS

Most children have complicated feelings about the abusive parent.They may feel afraid, angry, or sad about what's happened in the home. They may also feel confused because the person who was hurtful was also loving and fun at other times. Many children feel that the abuse was their fault, not the parent's. They may think they have to choose between loving one parent or the other. Don't expect your kids to have the same feelings that you do about your partner. Instead, listen to and accept their feelings. Let them know that it's OK to talk to you, and that you won't be angry to hear that they love and miss their other parent. If your children trust you with their thoughts, over time you can help them to understand and accept the realities about the person who hurt you.

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KEEPING YOUR CHILD OUT OF THE MIDDLE

Keeping children out of the middle of domestic violence means helping them to 1) avoid trying to break up an argument between the parents, and 2) avoid feeling like they have to take sides. If you and your partner have separated, your children should not be asked to "tell" on the other parent after visits (for example, if the parent is dating someone else) or relay messages for you. If your partner tells your children that you are a bad parent or that it's your fault the family is not living together, remind your children that violence and abuse are the responsibility of the person who is abusive. Do not accept blame—but do not respond by criticizing the other parent.

If you think the other parent is pressuring your children for information that puts you or them in danger, contact a domestic violence advocate or lawyer for help.

Joey, age 9, returned from a visit with his father and said, "I miss Dad. I want us to all live together." His mother responded, "I know you miss him. But we can't live together. He can't control his temper, and we left because it wasn't safe."

Managing Pick-ups and Drop-offs

If your child visits a parent who has been abusive to you, try not to fight or argue in front of the child even if the other parent starts it. If arguments keep happening, consider these steps:

- Contact your lawyer if you have one. If you are in need of one, please contact your local Legal Aid Office.
- Contact your local domestic violence agency to find out about visitation resources.
- Have another person present with you for your child's pick-ups and drop-offs.
- Arrange the exchange at a neutral place.
- Ask a family member trusted by both parents to handle the pick-ups and drop-offs.

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FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

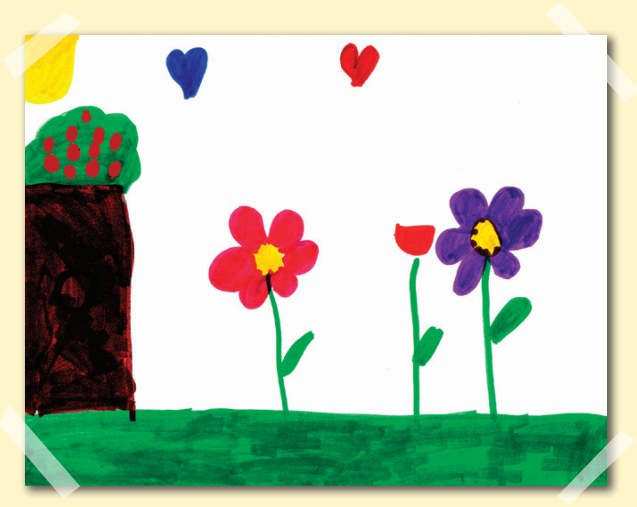
Children and Domestic Violence

A Parent's Self-Care and Self-Reflection

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#10** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence,and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

It can be hard to think about yourself when you're dealing with domestic violence and doing your best as a parent. It helps if you remember that you are the most important person in your children's lives and the biggest influence on how they respond to stress. If you don't take care of yourself, both your body and mind, you will have less to give your kids in the way of guidance and support. Being able to cope with your own stress is good for you and your children.

SIZING UP STRESS IN YOUR LIFE



All of us face stresses in our lives. Some stresses are temporary and some actually help us perform better. But stress that you feel over and over again—chronic stress—can take a toll on your health and well-being. Your body has a harder time calming down. You may find yourself with sleep problems, irritability, or poor memory. Over time, chronic stress may lead to heart disease, weight gain, weakened immunity, and unhealthy behaviors like smoking or heavy drinking.

Self-care during stressful times means different things for different people. But whatever your plan, your self-care time should always take place where you feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Consider contacting a domestic violence program to help reduce the risk of harm if you are still in an abusive relationship. When you feel safe, set aside time to ask yourself some questions about stress in your life.

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My Stress Audit

How is my body feeling today?

Do I have a problem that could be stress-related?

Have I become more short-tempered or irritable than I used to be?

Am I often tired or exhausted?

Am I having trouble concentrating?

Am I overeating or not eating healthy food?

Am I smoking, or drinking too much?

Did you answer "yes" to any of the questions? Becoming aware of how stress affects you is often the first step toward taking better care of yourself. Use your answers to begin to make a plan.

A PLAN THAT WORKS FOR YOU

There are many effective methods for stress relief and self-care. Think about how you have coped with stress in the past, recalling what helped you and what didn't. Breathing exercises, meditation, visualization (imagining and focusing on a soothing image), listening to music, exercising, praying—each of these activities has been shown to lower blood pressure and stimulate hormones that help us relax. By practicing them you are taking care of your physical health as well as your emotional health.

Twelve Things I Can Do to Relieve Stress

Connect with others

Listen to music

Say a prayer

Exercise

Enjoy a cup of tea or coffee

Create artwork

Take a walk

Meditate

Take a hot bath or shower

Watch a good movie

Breathe deeply

Join a support group

Remember that each of us is different. What will work for one person may not work for another. If you are in the midst of domestic violence, it may be especially hard for you to self-reflect or make a self-care plan. Ask yourself which activities would help you feel stronger and more centered even if you have only a few minutes to devote to them. Then make a pledge that you will do one or two of these activities regularly. No matter what your situation is, try to do something for yourself every day.

Two Things I Can Do to Take Better Care of Myself

1._____

2._____

Check your pledge in two weeks to see how you are doing. Do you want to try a new activity? Replace one? Pay attention to how you are feeling, and take care not to become overwhelmed with your activities. Try a variety of ways to find the ones that work best for you.

And don't forget to take a moment to focus on the positive aspects of your day and your life, beginning with an acknowledgement of what you have done so far to increase safety for yourself and your children.

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