# Children and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can impact on children, from the time they are conceived and through their developing years. We know that domestic violence can start during pregnancy, especially the first pregnancy. There can also be the increased risk of miscarriage, premature birth, foetal injury and even death.

When referring to children, this also refers to young people.

Domestic violence can be experienced directly or indirectly by children, and it can be very confusing for them. Children who witness or experience violence can also feel fear, isolation, and intimidation – all similar feelings as the others in the family who are being abused.

For the mother who is being abused, her confidence in parenting and connecting with her children in the way she wants may not be possible because of the violence. Her days may be filled with trying to keep her children and herself safe and protected.

The person using the violence may prevent the baby or child being cared for when they need help or comfort. They might harm the children, blame the mother for bad things happening, or even get the children to hurt their mother. They may make comments to the children about their mother like “It doesn’t matter what mummy said, I am the boss in this house, you do as I say!”.

To take a closer look at how violence can impact children, let’s look at some examples. Be mindful there are a lot more that are not included, and children can be impacted in lots of different ways.

**Emotional abuse** can be very confusing and may cause the child to fear doing or saying the wrong thing or expressing feelings. They may struggle with friendships, be unable to learn at school and have low self-esteem. Similarly, when children experience **isolation** due to the violence, they can feel alone and different, have trouble developing social skills, or want to hide the violence from friends.

What could this mean for the child? They may end up feeling guilt and shame, thinking everything is their fault and this can lead them on a path to try and make everything ‘right’ for everyone around them, all the time. An impossible path.

**Sexual abuse** can be experienced in many ways and impact children in many ways. For some, it can leave them feeling shame about their body and how they relate to others. They might feel confused, threatened, and fearful and they may use self-destructive type behaviours to try and cope with their experiences.

**Use of children** by the person using violence is not uncommon and places children in uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous situations, such as in the middle of their caregivers when violence is being used. The child may be asked to take sides, or they may feel they have to take care of one or both caregivers, taking on all the responsibilities, preventing them from being able to be themselves as children.

When they experience **threats** in a relationship, children can be left incredibly fearful, and may have to learn ways to try and get their needs met. Out of fear and need, children may need to use manipulation, anger in a way that is violent or abusive, or even shut down from the world around them.

Children may learn to copycat the person who is being violent or abusive and demonstrate **sexual stereotyping** behaviours with beliefs and attitudes that align with the stereotyping.

The abuser who uses **intimidation** can leave children scared due to the person putting them down, giving them ‘the look’, being loud and aggressive in their actions, gestures, or voice, and smashing things or destroying property, including the child’s special things.

Here are some ways that can be helpful in the relationship with children who have been impacted by domestic violence. Again, be mindful there are lots of ways and these are only a few:

* Keep the channels of communication open by being present and listening to the child’s concerns
* Reassure the child that they are loved, and the violence is never their fault
* Let them know that you believe them
* Take time to do fun things so the child can enjoy being a child
* Try to include the child in safe and non-violent situations
* Reinforce and normalise safe and non-violent behaviours
* Encourage and support the child to speak to someone about the impact for them if it is safe
to do so
* Include the child in safety planning if appropriate to do so

As children move through to adulthood, they will show anger, conflict, and frustration as part of their normal development, however anger can never be confused with violence. Violence is about behaviour and the intention to have power and control over another or others. Healthy anger will always try and find a resolve to the situation for everyone involved.

Children who have experienced violence directly or indirectly may go on to use violence in their relationships, however this is not a given as some children do not. If a young person or adult child does use violence against a parent, it may be very difficult and confronting for the non-violent parent to seek support due to feelings of shame and guilt, along with love for their child and the hope that they will change. It can be very helpful to discuss what is happening for them with someone who understands and who can discuss options together, so they are not feeling alone in the situation.

If you or someone you know needs help and lives in the Gold Coast or Beenleigh region, contact the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre on (07) 5532 9000 or visit domesticviolence.com.au.

For all other areas, call 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) or visit 1800respect.org.au to chat online or find services in your area.

*Transcript from video: Children and Domestic Violence
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