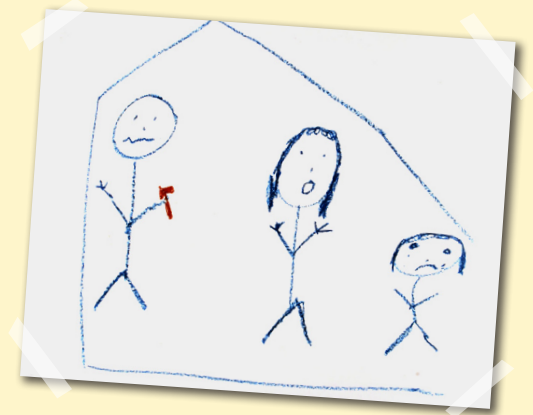


Children and Domestic Violence

Keeping Your Children Safe and Responding to Their Fears

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 **#6** 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 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.

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

- ▶ 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