

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

Choose activities you can do together

Listen to your kids and let them know you are listening

Praise them for their activities

Let them know you see and like what they're doing by describing it

Examples

Play with blocks, read a book, assemble puzzles, color or do other art activities, dance to music

Repeat their noises ("vroom vroom") or comments (say "You like orange" after your child tells you orange is her favorite color)

Say "You are doing a great job of stacking the little blocks on the big blocks," or "You picked beautiful colors for your picture"

Say "You are drawing a dog" or "You've put your doll to bed" or "You shared your toys with me"

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

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!

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.