

Introduction

About this resource

This resource can help you understand the impact of family violence on your children. It provides practical tips to help you support your children to heal and recover from their experiences.

This resource is for parents/carers who have been targeted by someone choosing to use family violence. It is also for professionals working to support victim survivors and their children.

This resource aims to be inclusive of all parents experiencing family violence.

The language used throughout this document ('you') refers to any parent or carer of children who have experienced family violence. 'Person using violence' refers to the child's other parent or carer.

The phrase 'your child' means a child in your care. The information here will also be helpful for other primary carers – step-parents, grandparents, extended family, friends or foster carers.

We also acknowledge that family violence is a gendered issue. Women are nearly three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner, and this violence is most often perpetrated by men¹. As a result, the language used will at times reflect this.

The resource makes the assumption that parents and carers who have experienced family violence have contacted a support service and are receiving help from a case manager or equivalent.



¹Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics - bit.ly/abs-personal-safety

What is family violence?

Family violence is a pattern of behaviour where a partner or family member hurts you or tries to control what you do.

Family violence includes physical things like hitting, pushing, smashing things or locking you in.

Family violence isn't just physical assault. It can also be:

- Stopping you seeing family or friends.
- Pressuring, tricking or forcing you to do sexual things.
- Threatening to hurt you, your kids, family members or a pet.
- Calling you names or deliberately making you feel bad.
- Stopping you having any money.
- Constantly checking where you are, what you're doing and who you're talking to.

These things can hurt you just as much as physical violence.

Many forms of family violence are against the law.

Family violence and your children

For children, experiencing family violence means knowing about, seeing or hearing a family member's use of family violence.

It also means the child themselves can be hurt, abused or controlled.

You might be really worried about how the person using family violence has affected your kids and what impact it will have on them as they grow up.

All forms of violence in the family will affect children. A child's ability to cope and the impacts of family violence will depend on many things. It is not your fault that someone is choosing to use these family violence tactics to cause harm to you and your children.

Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common.

According to Australian statistics (2023), one in every three women experience family violence.

In Australia, it is estimated that around 2.3 million adults witnessed violence towards a parent by a partner before the age of 15.

Section 3

Parenting a baby who has experienced violence



Birth to 18 months

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on babies.
- The importance of play for babies.
- Who can help.

During or after an experience of family violence, your baby will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. Some people think babies are not affected by what’s going on around them. This is not true. Babies are fully dependent on their carer and pick up on the emotions and stresses of people around them.

How babies think

Your child can’t talk yet, so they show how they feel by the way they act. You may notice that your baby is:

- More difficult to settle.
- Crying more.
- More clingy.
- Shutting down.
- Easily startled.

Your baby’s body language can give you clues to how they are feeling, for example they might tense up when they are scared or smile when they’re happy.

Babies are sensitive to the mood of their parents and carers. If you can appear relaxed and are calm in your voice, tone and actions with your baby, your baby is more likely to be soothed and calm.

The impact of family violence on babies

For any parent experiencing someone’s use of family violence, their baby or infant is particularly vulnerable.

Babies rely on the adults who care for them, to be safe and soothed. They can be seriously hurt if dropped or shaken and can be frightened by what is happening around them. Repetition and routine is important for babies’ learning and development, including their brain. If someone is using noise, violence and fear around them, over and over again, it can affect their development.

Many parents worry that the experience of family violence will affect their child forever. Babies need time and support to recover from traumatic situations. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your baby will begin to heal.

If your baby has experienced violence they may:

- Be frightened of new people, voices, or loud noises.
- Be slower to roll over, pull themselves up, crawl, walk, talk and other physical signs of development like holding small objects.
- Be less responsive or interested in the world compared to other babies.
- Be very distressed.
- Return to newborn behaviour.

In the short term, these kinds of difficulties can be tiring and stressful for you and your child. It's important to look after yourself and to find support.

Tips

Feeding and sleeping

Babies who have experienced someone's use of family violence might not seem interested in food or might refuse to eat. Some babies do not put on enough weight for their age. Other babies may feed more and be difficult to wean. Sleep can be a problem. If your baby is unsettled or not sleeping well, it can help to try to stick to a regular routine of playing, feeding, sleeping or bathing in the same order.

Babies who have experienced someone's use of violence can get sick more often. This could be related to sleeping or eating difficulties, or because they are stressed.

Ways you can help your baby:

- Give them lots of affection – hugs, cuddles, rocking.
- Respond with eye contact and calm words.
- Talk to them (your baby learns language from before they are even born and the early months are very important).
- Try and focus on your baby's routine, e.g. regular sleep, bathing and feeding times.

For other ideas, see the tips below and [section 8](#).

Crying and settling

One of the most difficult effects of someone's use of violence can be that your baby screams and cries more than usual, or becomes too quiet. It is important to check with your doctor or maternal and child health nurse that there are no physical reasons for this behaviour. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your baby crying, it's okay to put your baby in a safe place like the cot for a short time. Check regularly that your baby is safe but take some time to:

- Do something calming (for example, take ten deep breaths, listen to a favourite song or step outside for a few minutes).
- Call a friend, family member or service you trust.

If your baby is being too quiet, encourage them to interact with you by making eye contact, smiling or talking to them calmly. If you are worried, seek help.

All of this behaviour can be common for babies who have not experienced violence. If you are worried about your baby's sleeping or feeding, or your baby is unwell, talk to a doctor or maternal and child health nurse.

The importance of play for babies

Babies who have experienced someone's use of violence usually have mixed feelings that they aren't yet able to talk about. Play can help them to develop their confidence and work through their feelings. Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. It can also help you develop your relationship with your child.

Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for babies to express their feelings and develop:

- Physical skills e.g. holding a toy.
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills.
- The ability to communicate, play and share with others.
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions.

You might find it difficult and strange to play with your child at first. This is true of all parents. You could start by just sitting with them and watching what they do. Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together. It can be useful to:

- Be patient.
- Be curious about what they are trying to tell you.
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes.
- Give them praise and encouragement.
- Have fun!

Activities to try together

You might feel the experiences of someone's violence has affected your relationship with your child. It might take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you.

These are some activities you can try:

- Talk and sing with your child.
- Make lots of eye contact, make faces, smile.
- Cuddle your baby often.
- Read stories with your baby.
- Clap and sing with your baby in front of a mirror.
- Play hide and seek (for young babies use an object for them to find).
- Play imitation games (babies love to copy you laughing, coughing, poking out your tongue, blinking your eyes and moving your hands, arms and feet).
- Encourage your baby to do the things they enjoy (rolling, crawling, sitting).
- Play pretend chasing games when your child starts crawling and walking.
- Add a massage to their bath routine.

Ages and stages

The early stages of a child's life are very important, this is when verbal language is forming and when a child learns to relate to other people.

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Stress or trauma can affect your baby's development. Some children at this stage may have difficulty separating from their primary carer.

Children will often catch up once the violence has stopped, and they feel safe again.

Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful. Some parents who have experienced someone's use of family violence have said they felt like they couldn't protect their child and found it hard to cope. You are one of the people who know what's good for your baby. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and listen to your child. It's also important to listen to and learn from people whose wisdom and experience you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a parent, talking things through with trusted family, friends, community members and/or other parents may help. You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, family violence support service workers, or counsellors.

You can find these people and support groups for parents and children at your local community health centre or local council. You can also call WIRE's Support Line on 1300 134 130 or visit wire.org.au. You can also call Parentline 13 22 89 (7 days/8am-midnight). Parentline is a phone service for parents and carers of children from birth to 18 years old. It offers confidential and anonymous counselling and support on parenting issues.

See also the information in the '[services and support](#)' information on the back cover of this book.



Services and support

If you are in immediate danger, call 000 for police or ambulance help.

GenWest

1800 436 937

genwest.org.au

Family violence support service for Melbourne's western metro region.

Berry Street

Northern suburbs – 03 9450 4700

Central Highlands (Western Victoria/Grampians)

03 5331 3558

berrystreet.org.au

Family violence support for Melbourne's north and Western Victoria.

Safe Steps

1800 015 188

safesteps.org.au

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Family violence crisis response line.

The Orange Door

Family violence support services under one roof.

Visit bit.ly/genwest-TOD

InTouch

1800 755 988

intouch.org.au

Free and confidential support services or migrant and refugee women.

Rainbow Door

1800 729 367 or text 0480 017 246

10am to 5pm, 7 days a week

For LGBTIQ+ people and their friends and families.

Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491

ntv.org.au

24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Family violence support line for men.

Women's Legal Service Victoria

1800 133 302

womenslegal.org.au

Kids Helpline

1800 551 800

24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Free, private, and confidential counselling for young people aged 5 to 25.

WIRE

1300 134 130

wire.org.au

Free support, referrals & information on any issue for women, non-binary & gender diverse people in Victoria.

Djirra

1800 105 303

djirra.org.au

Culturally informed family violence legal and support services, predominantly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Read this publication online:

