

# 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 men<sup>1</sup>. 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.



<sup>1</sup>Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics - [bit.ly/abs-personal-safety](https://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 4

# Parenting a toddler who has experienced violence



## 18 months to 3 years

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of someone’s use of family violence on toddlers.
- Activities you could try together.
- Stages of development.

During or after an experience of someone’s use of family violence, your toddler will be feeling a huge mix of emotions. It is common for children to feel:

- Confusion about what is happening and why.
- Fear of being hurt or of you being hurt.
- Sadness about the violence, changes to the family and their losses.
- Anger about what is happening.

### How toddlers think

Toddlers usually show their feelings through their behaviour. Some use toys or play to act out things they have experienced. Some talk about what they have seen or experienced and others will refuse to.

Toddlers are fully dependent on their carer. They usually don’t understand why someone is using violence or why their whole family is not together any more. Toddlers think the whole world revolves around them; they often believe that the problems and the violence are their fault.

The way children see the world can be very different to the way adults see things, so it’s important to notice how your child is feeling. Toddlers are ‘tuned in’ to their carers and can pick up on their mood. If you can appear to be relaxed and calm for your toddler in your words, tone and actions, your child is more likely to be relaxed. They can learn from you how to calm down when they’re upset.

## The impact of family violence on toddlers

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

If your child has experienced violence they could:

- Be afraid of the person who has hurt them, you or others.
- Be clingy or afraid of new people and situations.
- Find it hard to share or play with other children.
- Have trouble with speech, movement or memory.
- Find it hard to listen, ask for help or show you what they need.
- Have problems in their social relationships.
- Be a restless sleeper or picky eater.
- Return to old behaviour like night-time waking.

Ways you can help your child:

- Give them lots of affection, care and reassurance (hugs, playing, positive words).
- Give them simple, truthful explanations and responses.
- Tell them the violence is never their fault.
- Try to stick to parenting routines - regular play, meal, bath and sleep times.
- Be patient; listen to them and watch what they're showing you.

## Tips

### Behaviour and feelings

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviours they have seen the person choosing violence use. Sometimes children worry about this too. All children need to learn to express their feelings and understand which behaviour is okay and which is not. Reassure your child that it is okay to be angry; it's just not okay to hurt anyone.

If your toddler has emotional or angry outbursts (tantrums), sometimes it can help to sit next to them while this is happening and use a calm and soothing voice to tell them you're there for them. Children at this age are still learning how to manage their big feelings and need the help of others to calm.

If your child is hurting themselves, you or other children you can calmly let them know that behaviour isn't OK. You might say, "we don't hurt other people" or "let's not throw the blocks, let's stack them up together". Short and simple statements are all little children need.

You can help your child learn different ways of expressing their emotions. Notice and name their feelings, offer alternative suggestions (like talking, deep breaths or stomping their feet) and/or be clear about accepted behaviours or your boundaries. This might sound like, "I can see you're angry with mummy but it's time to pack up now".

If your toddler is hitting, hurting or biting you or other children, calmly and firmly tell them not to do this. Offer an alternative way of releasing their emotions, for example 'yell into this cushion' or 'stomp your feet and take a big deep breath'. If they are hitting or biting, gently and firmly move them away from other children or hold their arms to stop them hitting. This means they might cry and scream at you but try not to be afraid of their noisy behaviour - hold your boundaries with calmness and kindness.

Listen to your child and show that you understand things are hard, scary or frustrating for them and notice what makes your child feel happy.

You don't have to hide your feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together. The best way for your child to learn about expressing their feelings and worries is to be surrounded by adults who provide safety, stability and love. See more tips in [section 8](#).

Note that the behaviours described above are all very common in toddlers, even if they have not experienced family violence. If you are worried, seek advice.

## The importance of play for toddlers

Children who have experienced someone's use of family violence usually have mixed feelings that they can't express in words. They may be less confident and slower to try new things. Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings and develop:

- Physical skills such as catching, throwing, holding and drawing.
- Confidence and the ability to work through their worries.
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills.
- The ability to communicate and share with others.
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions.

Some parents can find it difficult and strange to play with their child at times, this is true of anyone, but can feel worse if you are experiencing family violence.

Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together. It can be useful to:

- Follow their lead, let them make the rules where possible, but make sure the game is safe.
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing.
- Allow them to try different things and make mistakes.
- Give them praise and encouragement.
- Have fun!

## Activities to try together

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

- Encourage language development by talking naturally to your toddler about what you are doing.
- Point and name objects when you are out walking, on the bus or in the car.
- Give your child choices when you ask questions, for example:  
'Do you want to wear yellow or red pants today?'  
'Would you like to play with your toys or read a story?'
- Sing and play with pots and spoons or simple instruments.
- Play with dough, crayons or cardboard boxes.
- Finger paint with non-toxic paints.
- Read to your toddler or tell simple stories. Bedtime stories can encourage them to settle and start a good routine.
- Spend quiet time together.
- Encourage your toddler to do simple tasks like packing up toys and putting dishes away. Thank them for helping.
- Teach your toddler how to brush their teeth.

## Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Some children at this stage may have difficulty separating from their primary carer. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress, children often catch up once the violent behaviour has stopped and they feel safe again.

## Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful. Some parents experiencing someone's use of family violence can find it hard to cope because they feel like they can't protect their child.

You are one of the people who know what is good for your child. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and 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, it can help to talk things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other parents. You could also talk to doctors, child care workers, family violence support workers or counsellors.**

You can find these people and support groups for parents and children at your local community health centre, council or call the Maternal and Child Health Line on 13 22 29, Parentline on 13 22 89 or Tweddle Child and Family Health Service on 9689 1577.

If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair, hitting themselves or biting themselves), call the Royal Children's Hospital on 1800 445 511. If you are worried that your child is being sexually abused, call the Gatehouse Centre on 9345 6391.

**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](http://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](http://berrystreet.org.au)

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

## Safe Steps

1800 015 188

[safesteps.org.au](http://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](http://bit.ly/genwest-TOD)

## InTouch

1800 755 988

[intouch.org.au](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://djirra.org.au)

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

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