

# 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.

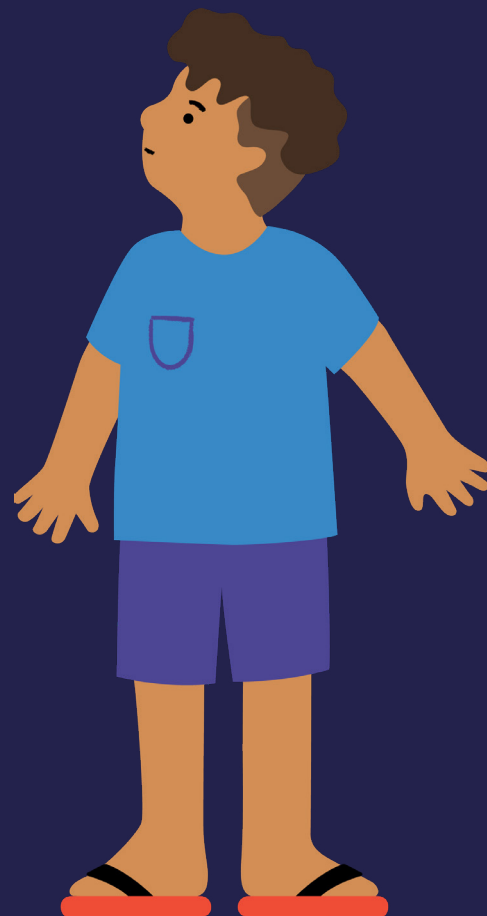
Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common.

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 5

# Parenting a pre-schooler who has experienced violence



## 3 to 5 years old

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on pre-schoolers.
- The importance of playing together.
- Stages of development.

During or after an experience of family violence, your pre-schooler will probably 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, any changes to the family and their own losses.
- Anger about what is happening.

### How pre-schoolers think

Pre-schoolers usually show their feelings through their behaviour and are learning to express themselves with words. They could be teary or irritable if they feel unsafe or insecure. They are more likely to be confident and happy if they feel safe.

Pre-schoolers are beginning to test their independence and their parents' boundaries, they often think the whole world revolves around them. They may believe that the problems or the person's use of family violence is their fault.

The way children see the world can be different to the way adults see things, so it's important to notice and talk to your child about how they are feeling. Children can sense how their parents or carers are feeling. If you can appear relaxed and calm for your children, your child is more likely to be relaxed and calm.

## The impact of family violence on pre-schoolers

If your child has experienced violence they could:

- Feel responsible for arguments they hear.
- Be very clingy or unwilling to try new things.
- Be difficult to understand or use baby talk.
- Find it hard to share.
- Withdraw, become quiet, not play much.
- Behave in difficult ways (e.g. doing the opposite of what you ask) and be aggressive towards you and others (e.g. bite, kick).
- Replay what they have seen or heard as a way to try and understand.
- Wet their bed, have bad dreams or trouble sleeping.
- Be picky or uninterested in food.
- Return to behaviour from when they were younger.

Ways you can help your child:

- Give them lots of affection, care and reassurance (using hugs, play and 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.

For other ideas, see sections 7 and 8.

## Tips

### Behaviour and feelings

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviours they have seen. Sometimes children worry about this too. It's important to discuss these worries with your child. All children need to learn which behaviour is okay and which is not. For example, it is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit or hurt anyone. Talk with your child about ways of showing feelings, especially safe ways of showing anger. 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.

Things you can do:

- Talk with staff at childcare or kindergarten about ways to help your child.
- Tell your child what they are good at.
- Listen and show that you understand that things are hard, scary, or frustrating for your child.
- Let them know it's okay to talk about their other parent or carer.
- Let them cry and be sad if they need to.
- Don't feel you always have to hide your own feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together. Let your child know that whatever you are feeling, you will be okay.

**The behaviours described here can be common in all pre-schoolers, even if they have not experienced family violence. If you are worried, seek advice.**

## The importance of

## play for pre-schoolers

Children who have experienced someone's use of 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.

It helps pre-schoolers 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 to play and share with others.
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions.

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

- Follow their lead, let them decide on the rules where possible, but make sure the game is safe.
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing.
- Be patient.
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes.
- Give them praise and encouragement, e.g. 'That's great colouring in!'
- Have fun!

## Activities to try together

- Use old clothes, shoes and jewellery to dress up.
- Pre-schoolers love to be creative. Use old boxes, paper and scraps to make things.
- Encourage your child to draw and ask them about their drawing. It can be easier for a child to draw how they are feeling than to talk about it.
- Praise and display your child's drawings so they can feel good about themselves.
- Take your child to your community or cultural group's celebrations or events.
- Make some food together in the kitchen.
- Go to the park and explore what they see in nature.
- Read or tell stories and encourage your child to share their feelings about the story.
- Discuss feelings including happiness, sadness and anger.
- Ask questions about your child's day.
- Teach your child how to use buttons and zips, tie shoelaces and put shoes on the right feet. They will need help, but let them try first.
- Playgroups and kindergarten are important opportunities for preschoolers to learn and play with other children their age. If your child doesn't go to childcare or kindergarten, ask your local Neighbourhood House or Community Centre about free playgroups as they often run them.

## Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Pre-schoolers will test their independence and their parents' boundaries. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress, but children often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again.

### 3 to 3½ years

- Becomes more comfortable being separated from familiar adults for a short time.
- Walks up stairs one step at a time.
- Jumps with two feet.
- Talks more and uses new words.
- Sometimes fights with other children over play things.
- Recognises people and things in pictures.
- Says 'no' more often.

### 3½ to 4 years

- Walks up and down stairs easily.
- Can throw and kick a ball, as well as hop, skip and jump.
- Draws recognisable things and can write some letters.
- Concentrates for longer.
- Can understand why and why not.
- Talks a lot, mostly asking when, how and why.
- Begins to understand that it's good to take turns and to wait for their turn.

### 4 to 5 years

- Likes to be creative, adventurous and play make believe.
- Starts to learn to share and take turns.
- Shows a wide range of feelings.
- Uses parents and familiar adults as role models.
- Cooperates, wants to please adults.
- Begins to act responsibly and independently.
- Explores their body and what being a girl or boy is all about.

## Who can help

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

You are one of the people who knows what's best 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 you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you with parenting a child when you have experienced someone's use of family violence, it can help to talk things through with trusted family members, friends, and/or other parents.

**You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, childcare 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 or local council.**

You can call WIRE Women's Support Line on 1300 134 130 or visit [wire.org.au](http://wire.org.au). You can call Parentline on 13 22 89 (7 days a week, 8am-midnight).

If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair out or biting themselves), call the Royal Children's Hospital on 1800 445 511 for advice. 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.

Read this publication online:

