

# 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 6

# Parenting a primary schooler who has experienced family violence



## 5 to 12 years

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of someone’s use of family violence on primary school aged children.
- Activities you can try together.
- Stages of development.

Due to someone’s use of family violence, your children 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 primary schoolers think

Children of this age show their feelings in words and actions. They are questioning many things and finding out how their world works. Their feelings about their parents are likely to be complicated.

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

### The impact of family violence on primary schoolers

Children need time and support to recover. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your child can begin to heal from their experience.

## Tips

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviour 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:

- Encourage them during activities, for example, 'you draw really well,' or 'well done'.
- Be curious about your child's feelings and behaviour and show that you understand things are hard, scary or frustrating for them. Let your child cry and be sad if they need to.
- Notice what makes your child feel happy.
- Don't feel you always have to hide your feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together.
- If your child does or says something that is upsetting for you, try to stay calm in your tone and actions, so you can understand what they are trying to share.

If your child has experienced someone's use of violence they could:

- Return to behaviour from when they were younger.

- Be easily upset, have trouble calming down, worry a lot, feel unwell with tummy aches or headaches.
- Wet their bed, have trouble sleeping, nightmares, or want to sleep with you.
- Be withdrawn or aggressive (hurt themselves or others).
- Take on adult worries or roles.
- Find it hard to make friends; they could try to keep their experiences a secret, especially from their school friends.
- Have difficulty concentrating.
- Replay things they have heard or seen.
- Feel guilty or confused about loving someone who has hurt you or who has hurt them.
- Feel responsible for the arguments, violence, or for their parents breaking up.

Ways that you can help your child:

- Give them lots of hugs, cuddles and kisses, care and reassurance.
- Give simple and truthful explanations and responses that suit your child's age.
- Tell your child that the violence is never their fault.
- Ask if they have any worries at school, home or with friends.
- Spend time together doing things you both enjoy.
- Try to keep to your parenting routines – regular play, meal, and sleep times.

**For other ideas, see the tips and also sections 7 and 8.**

## The importance of play for primary schoolers

Children who have experienced violence can have mixed feelings and may still be learning to express these feelings in words. They may be less confident and slower to try new things. Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings. It can help them develop:

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

For some parents who have experienced violence, playing with their child can feel difficult and strange at first. Just being with your child, sitting with them and watching what they do is good. Playing can help your relationship and help you to understand how they see the world.

For you, play can be a great way to relax and to have a good laugh. When you are playing together:

- Follow their lead, but make sure the game is safe.
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing.
- Be patient. Be fair and compete at your child's level.
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes.
- Have fun!

## Activities to try together

You might find the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child. It could take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you. These are some activities that can help:

- Provide a balance between time spent with friends, by themselves and with you.
- Active play, like ball or running games, skipping, dancing or bike riding.
- Quiet games such as puzzles, cards and dominoes. Board games help children to understand rules and consequences.
- At this age children can watch age-appropriate TV shows, preferably for no longer than two hours a day.
- Trying new things or practicing what they love (e.g. cooking or making models and crafts) helps children to feel good about themselves.
- Simple chores like cleaning their room and making their bed help children learn responsibility.
- Encourage your child to have hobbies or special collections.
- Help children explore their world by going into the garden, playing at the park, riding a bike.
- Children often have many questions! Talk with them about how things work and what other people are doing. If you don't know the answer, try to find out together.

## Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. This is a time when children are questioning many things and finding out how their world works. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress. Children often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again.

### 5 to 8 years

- Understands many new words.
- Forms friendships.
- Enjoys challenges.
- Is very physically active and muscle strength increases.
- May be afraid of the dark.

### 8 to 10 years

- Enjoys the company of others and plays well.
- Is increasingly independent.
- Can see parents as humans who make mistakes.
- Rituals, rules and secret codes are common at this stage.
- Body strength and coordination are getting better.

### 10 to 12 years

- Sees the point of view of others more clearly.
- Can understand ideas without direct experience.
- May have growth spurts but generally steady growth.
- Almost as coordinated as an adult by age 12.
- May be entering puberty and experiencing changes.

## Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful, especially in stressful circumstances. Some parents living with family violence 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 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, people from your community, or other parents.

**You could 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.