

# 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 8

# The effects of violence on children's behaviour



**This section contains tips and information about:**

- **How you can manage the effects of family violence.**
- **How to talk to your child about family violence.**
- **Tips for what to do if your child acts aggressively.**

You and your children might find it hard to talk to each other about the family violence that has happened. You might worry that talking about it will make it worse for your children. It can help your children to know you are trying to understand how they're feeling.

This can help them to make sense of their experiences and their own feelings. It's also OK if your child doesn't want to or isn't ready to talk about the family violence or changes that have happened in the family.

Family violence affects all children differently. You might find that your child's behaviour becomes more difficult. Or your child might take on adult concerns and responsibilities that can leave them feeling stressed or anxious.

Their concentration may suffer because they are worried and tired. They might lose interest in hobbies, school work or find it hard to wait their turn or play easily. Making or keeping friends can also be difficult because they are trying to keep their home life a secret.

This section offers some ideas about what you can do or say to help you and your child.

## If your child knows you were hurt

Children often know about family violence even if you think they haven't seen or heard anything.

Your child will experience a range of emotions including fear, sadness, confusion, anger, betrayal and hurt. Their feelings might impact their behaviour in many different ways and over a long period of time. See the age specific sections for more information about how your child might react.

## If your child was hurt

Sometimes children don't talk about their experiences until they feel safe. It can be upsetting for parents or carers to realise the extent of someone's use of family violence that their children have had to experience. If you have more than one child, don't assume that each child's experiences were the same.

There are people who can help you and your child to deal with their experience.

**Contact the Orange Door:**  
 Visit [orangedoor.vic.gov.au](http://orangedoor.vic.gov.au) to find a service near you. You can also contact GenWest to enquire about our Children's and Youth Counselling Service. Call us on 1800 436 937.

**If you think your child has been sexually abused, contact the Gatehouse Centre.** Information on opening hours and contact details can be found at [bit.ly/rch-gatehouse](http://bit.ly/rch-gatehouse).

## What can I do?

- Show your children lots of love by spending quality time with them.
- Encourage your child to be a child; remind them they don't need to be the parent.
- Remind them the violence is never their fault. For example, you could say, 'it's never okay for someone to hurt you, including grown ups'.
- Be aware that your children may fight with each other more than usual. Be aware of their safety and help them understand hurting is never okay.
- Be curious about how your child plays. Children can act out the violence they have experienced and may play roughly with toys. Use play to help them talk about what has happened.
- Teach your child about safe and unsafe touching.
- If the person who used violence is no longer living with you, it will help to say, 'We are safe now and people are helping us' If you and your child are still in danger, you need to plan for your safety.

See [section 1](#) for ideas, or download GenWest's 'My Safety Plan' at [bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan](http://bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan).

## Connecting

### Things you can do

- Give them lots of care, affection and comfort.
- Discuss the situation using words and ideas that suit their age.
- Tell them that the violence or separation is not their fault.
- Notice when they are trying to behave well, describe what you see in a positive voice, 'It's nice of you to share'.
- Show that you are listening to what your child is saying and allow them to show their feelings; tell them it's okay to feel the way they do.
- Tell them what behaviour is okay and not okay.
- Make plans with the people helping to keep you and your children safe, e.g. family violence workers, police, family, friends.
- Teach your child what to do if anyone hurts them or they feel unsafe, for example, 'Tell mummy or a teacher'.
- Teach your child how to be safe. For example, how to call 000 or a trusted adult in an emergency.

### Things you could say

'I can see you're feeling really sad right now.'

'It's okay to feel scared when somebody yells.'

'Feeling upset or angry at me or your dad is understandable.'

'It's important to share what you're feeling. Thanks'

'I love you!'

'You're so clever/kind/smart!'

## If your child is acting aggressively (e.g. biting or hitting)

Due to someone's use of family violence children can behave in very different ways at different times. They might withdraw or show controlling and aggressive behaviours to you, other adults or other children. They might seem to copy violent acts they have witnessed.

### What can I do?

- Talk with them in an age-appropriate way about how to safely show strong feelings, especially safe ways of showing anger, e.g. jump ten times and then talk about it or blow all the anger into a balloon and let it out.
- They need a clear message that all feelings are okay but some behaviour is not okay. It's never okay to hurt someone emotionally or physically.
- Be clear about what behaviour is okay and not okay. For example, you could say, 'It's okay to feel disappointed when you lose the game' but 'It's not okay to scream and kick your friends'.
- Consider whether counselling could help you and your child.

## If your child has low confidence or self-esteem or lacks social skills

Due to someone's use of violence children may feel alone and that no one can relate to their experiences. They may find it hard to share or play and find it hard to make friends. Being tired or worried about their home life can affect their school performance. Being hurt by a family member can mean they believe they are a bad person, when they're not.

### What can I do?

- Do fun things together.
- Notice what your child enjoys and praise them.
- Focus on the positives, preferably straight away. For example, you could say, 'it was great that you included your sister in the game'.
- Encourage them to talk about what happens at school and when they're playing with their friends.
- Help your child to participate in activities that they enjoy and are good at, such as football, gym or music.

## Activities to try together

You might find that the behaviour of the person who has used violence has affected your relationship with your child. It can take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you. Creative activities can help your child express their feelings or experiences. You don't have to be an expert to try them.

Here are some drawing activities you could do with your child. Children sometimes draw strange things! If your child draws or says something that worries you, be curious and calmly ask about it. Seek advice if you notice a pattern of concerning behaviour or images.

### Dream drawings – age 4–12

Draw a person asleep. Show that they're dreaming by drawing a large thought-bubble. Ask your child to draw a good dream and bad dream in the bubble. You could ask if they have ever had those types of dreams. This is a gentle way of talking about things, especially if your child is having nightmares.

### Paper plate faces – age 4–9

Ask your child to draw faces showing different feelings on paper plates or paper (happy, angry, sad, scared, funny, surprised, excited). Do your own to make it a game. Use the masks to talk about how you feel about things that happen.

Ask questions like, which face do you use when you go to school? At bedtime? When you see grandma/dad/your friend? Let them ask you questions too. Ask about the faces they chose, e.g. 'I wonder why you used that face at school/during class/at play time/at after care?'

### Tips for these activities

- Listen and show you care about how your child feels.
- Let them cry and be sad if they need to.
- Reassure them (and yourself) that it is okay to have feelings, including anger and sadness.
- Invite your child to tell you about their picture but don't push them to talk. These activities should be fun.

See sections [2–7](#) for more ideas.

## Who can help

If you are worried about the impact of family violence on your child's behaviour or would like new parenting ideas, talking with somebody whose knowledge you value may help. You could talk to doctors, family violence support workers, youth workers and counsellors.

Specific Victorian services for children include:

- The Gatehouse Centre at the Royal Children's Hospital. This is a service for children up to 16 years who have been sexually abused, call **9345 6391** or visit [bit.ly/rch-gatehouse](http://bit.ly/rch-gatehouse)
- The Royal Children's Hospital Mental Health Service for children 0–15 years with significant mental health problems. Call **1800 44 55 11**.
- ORYGEN Youth Mental Health Programs on **1800 888 320**.
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service at Austin Health on **1300 859 789**.

See also 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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