

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 9

Talking about separating, moving house and seeing the other parent



This section contains tips and information about:

- Helping your child with changes in the family.
- Things you can say or do to help your child adjust to change.
- People who can help.

Parental separation and/or moving house can cause children to feel uncertainty, confusion, anger, fear or grief.

Children may think the violence or separation is their fault. They may worry about who they are allowed to love or feel loyalty towards. They may wonder if you and the person using violence will get back together.

Even children who are relieved about the separation may still feel a bit lost after such a big change to their lives. All children have a right to be protected from all sorts of harm. Children need adults to help them adapt to the changes.

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

Each family's situation is unique, and this information is general. If your child's other parent is the person using violence and they want to see the children, you need to seek advice about risk and safety from a family violence service or the police, and legal advice from a lawyer.

The impact of family violence

Keeping your family safe may mean having a family violence intervention order which can legally ban family violence and prohibit your partner from coming near you and your children.

For some parents experiencing family violence, this may mean remaining at home after the person using violence has moved out. If the violence doesn't stop, some parents may need to call the police or move house, sometimes more than once. These situations can be unsettling for everyone, especially for children. They can start to show their level of distress by:

- Changing their eating patterns.
- Not sleeping well or having nightmares.
- Wanting to sleep in your bed.
- Wetting the bed or having toilet accidents.
- Not wanting to go to school.
- Returning to younger behaviour.

Be gentle and reassuring. Your child will probably adapt to the changes when things settle down and they feel safe. It might also help if you:

- Use simple words to talk about the changes.
- Ask them how they feel and thank them for sharing.
- Notice how they are trying to adapt to changes.
- Help them keep in touch with trusted adults they can share feelings with.
- Try to stick to comforting routines, e.g. healthy meals they like, a story before bed.
- Make sure they have familiar things to comfort them e.g. favourite clothes, books, toys or pillow.
- Give them simple choices that suit their age.
- If you have moved, pin up their drawings or photos.
- Explore your new neighbourhood together by visiting the park or shop.
- Seek safety advice about your family's technology, see section 1 or GenWest's 'My Safety Plan' resource at bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan for more information.

Seeing the other parent after family violence

One major change after separating and/or moving house can be how your child spends time with the parent who has been using violence.

This may be because the police or courts have issued an intervention order, or because you and your partner have decided to end your relationship.

Some people make parenting arrangements between themselves. Others get help from a mediation centre or a family lawyer to negotiate a formal parenting agreement.

If it's the children's other parent who is using violence and he wants to see the children, it's wise to get good legal advice before you make any parenting arrangements. There are services that can help you.

Some things you may want to think and ask about are:

- What is safe, for you and your children?
- What legal orders are in place and what do they mean for your children's time with the other parent e.g. their dad? How long do the orders last?
- What support and advice do you need?
- What orders may you and your children need? Do you need to change your order?
- How can you safely communicate with the person who was using violence?

What could I say?

It can be tricky to answer your children's questions when you are still finding out yourself. Let your children know you are doing what you can, but protect them from stressful details.

Children need to feel they do not have to take sides, 'for' or 'against' either parent.

Don't speak badly to your child about the person using violence.

It's okay not to have an answer right away. Repeating what children have told you makes them feel heard, even if you can't change things to be the way they want. Don't ask your child lots of questions about their other parent. You could ask something like 'How was your weekend?' but if your child doesn't want to talk, don't push them.

Things you can say are:

'Mum and dad still love you even though we don't live together.'

'Thanks for telling me what you feel. Can I think about what you've said and we'll talk more later?'

'The grown-ups are getting help to work out how we all see each other.'

'Do you want to call aunty, granddad, (another adult you trust)?'

If your child doesn't want to see their other parent

Your child might not want to see their other parent for different reasons. They might feel unsafe or worried. They may resent you for not being able to stop them seeing their other parent.

What could I do?

If there is no court order that says the children must spend time with the person using violence, then you don't have to make them go. You may want to get legal advice before making a decision.

Your child must spend time with their other parent if there is a written parenting plan registered with the court. If you don't send your child to spend time with their other parent, you could be taken to court for breaching the court order. If you want to change the court order you need to go back to court.

Help your child feel more comfortable when they're with their other parent. Try to stay calm and positive at handover time.

Pack their favourite toy or game, make sure they have a mobile phone and can call you if they need or want to. Observe and keep notes about your child's behaviour before and after time with their other parent. If your child is very distressed, seek legal advice. Consider whether counselling could help your child.

What could I say?

Some things you can say are:

'The people who help make the rules (the courts) have said that [name of the person using violence, for example dad] gets to have a turn to see you, so you'll be at their house after school on Tuesdays...'

'Some children worry that if they stay with their dad, their mum might be sad or lonely. Of course I miss you, but I'll be okay.'

If your child wants to see their other parent, but can't

Your children may not be allowed to see their other parent when they want to, due to safety concerns. However, it is important to remember your child has strong and complex feelings for both parents.

Try to support your child's feelings, including that they might miss or worry about their other parent, even if they were using violence. Each child may feel very differently.

What could I do?

Explain the reasons for the rules. Reassure your children that it's okay to love both parents and they can spend time with their other parent when the grown-ups have worked out how.

Be careful not to put your child in a position where they feel like they need to take sides.



What could I say?

Some other things you can say are:

'It's kind of you to worry about your dad, but remember he is a grown up and he knows how to get help, just like we are.'

'Is there anything that helps you when you miss spending time with [other parent]?''

'Would you like to draw a picture or write a letter about how you feel or things you can't say?'

'I love spending time with you.'

If your child's other parent does not attend a contact visit

If the other parent fails to come for a contact visit, your child might feel disappointed, hurt, angry and sad or rejected.

What could I say?

'Sometimes dad can't make it. It's not your fault if he can't come'

Offer another activity, but acknowledge their feelings and don't ignore their distress.

If your child is unsafe

If you are concerned that your child is unsafe or being harmed in any way; for example, if you are worried that your child is being abused or neglected or exposed to dangerous situations, help is available. See the '[services and support](#)' section at the back of this resource.

If you think this is happening:

- Observe your child's behaviour before and after contact visits, and make notes if necessary.
- Speak with your lawyer or call the Women's Legal Service (womenslegal.org.au)
- Contact a family violence support worker or child protection who can work to protect your child. Visit the Orange Door to find a service near you: bit.ly/genwest-TOD
- Call the police on **000** if you think your child is in immediate danger.
- Make sure your child knows how to contact you or a trusted adult when they're not with you.

See [section 1](#) for more safety ideas.

Who can help

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a parent, it may help to talk things through with trusted family, friends, community members and/or other parents.

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

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

For more information on legal options:

Women's Legal Service Victoria
womenslegal.org.au

Victorian legal aid
legalaid.vic.gov.au

Family law court
familycourt.gov.au



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.

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