

PROWEST

# Choosing Positive Paths

Parenting children  
who have experienced  
family violence



## Acknowledgements

GenWest recognises that the land on which we work and provide our services always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We proudly acknowledge the First Nations communities across Naarm / Melbourne’s west – the Wurundjeri and Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their rich diversity, cultures, histories and knowledges, and the deep contribution they make to the life of this region.

We acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation, as well as the strength and resilience of First Nations people, and express solidarity with the ongoing struggle for land rights, self-determination, sovereignty, and recognition of past injustices.

GenWest acknowledge in gratitude, the past advocacy and resilience of movements for equity by the LGBTQIA+ community that continue to be fought for today.

We express sorrow for the past prejudices, which continue to be experienced, recognising that historically gender-based violence has been diminished and rendered invisible, leading to greater risk, barriers to safety, supports and recovery.

We are committed to shifting our approach, to be guided collectively by the unique and different ways in which the LGBTQIA+ community experience gender and identity discrimination and oppression.



## Publication information

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# 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 1

# Parenting, violence and your safety



## Make a safety plan

**You and your children are not responsible for the violence or abuse you experience.**

We know you are already doing things to promote your children's safety and wellbeing and that your plan is specific to the person using violence's behaviour pattern. There might be other things you can try to promote your safety and wellbeing, but if the violence continues it is not your fault.

There are many steps to becoming safe and happy again, and it can help to take it slowly, but some things can't wait. Plan for your safety today.

1. Call **000** if you or your children are in danger and ask for **police** or **ambulance help**.
2. Tell the emergency services if your children are present during a family violence incident or are at risk. Police can take out an intervention order for you if one is needed, or you can apply for one. An intervention order is a court order that can help to keep you and your family safe from anyone who is using violence. Read more about what an intervention order is at [bit.ly/ivofactsheet](http://bit.ly/ivofactsheet).
3. Keep copies of intervention orders with you and give copies to people you trust, like a family friend or relative.
4. Plan the steps you can take to get out of an unsafe situation. Regularly review your plan.
5. Get support from people you trust. Talk to them about how you would make contact if you were in trouble.
6. Choose trusted people for your child to call in an emergency. Tell them what you want them to do if your child calls.
7. Keep emergency phone numbers close, e.g. in a notebook or in a note in your phone.
8. Hide an emergency pack of clothes, your driver's licence, identification, healthcare card, medication, phone numbers and money, or leave these things with a friend. Include a familiar object for your child, e.g. a soft toy.
9. Think about your child's safety when they're not with you.
10. Tell teachers or other carers about your intervention order if it protects your children and give them a copy.
11. Think about your safety outside the home. Separation and divorce do not guarantee your safety. For some people the violence can continue, change, or become worse after separating.
12. Think about whether it is safe to keep information about family violence and your safety (like this book) at home.
13. Contact the family violence service in your region for ongoing support. This book is not a substitute for legal advice from a lawyer. If you or your children have experienced violence, it is important to get legal advice. See section [9](#) and [10](#) for more information.

**Download the resource  
'My Safety Plan'**

from the GenWest website at  
[bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan](http://bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan)

## Safety planning with your child

Children have a right to be protected from harm. A safety plan can help children know what to do in unsafe situations as well as who they can turn to for support.

You understand your child best, but it might help to get advice from a family violence service about the best ways to talk about safety with your children.

Safety planning with children needs to consider the age of your child. A safety plan for a young child will be different to a plan with an older child or teenager. It is important for all children to know that violence and abuse is never OK and what is happening is not their fault.

Safety planning should consider the pattern of behaviour of the person choosing violence. You might like to consider:

- Helping your child to understand when a situation or a person's behaviour isn't safe and how that might make them feel. Talk about what is and isn't an emergency and make sure they know safe places or people to go to for help.
- Practicing your safety plan can be helpful.
- Teach your children your phone number and address.

- Give them phone numbers to call when they feel unsafe like an aunty or grandparent or Kids Helpline.
- Make a safety drawing. Draw around your child's hand and write the name of a trusted adult on each finger. Decorate and stick it on the fridge so they remember who to go to if they need help.
- Show your child how to call **000** (triple zero) and remind them to ask for the police and ambulance. Remind them not to hang up / end the call.

### **If your child is protected by court orders that limit their time with the person using violence:**

- Talk to them and the school or childcare about what to do if they see the person using violence at school or childcare.
- Discuss who should answer the phone or the front door.

## Staying or leaving your home

**You will be best placed to make an assessment about if it is safer to stay or leave the family home.**

**You have a right to feel safe and stay in your home.**

While some people stay at home with a court order that says the person who used violence can't come near them, others need to leave for a few days or go to a refuge.

Leaving home can be difficult but might be the best option for your family's safety.

You might have time to plan what to do or you might need to leave immediately. Think about:

- Where you and your children would feel safest (e.g. your parents' house).
- Who could stay with you so you feel safer at home.
- Your child's needs and what might comfort them when changes happen or if they're away from home.

Family violence services can:

- Explain how to apply for an intervention order.
- Discuss housing options with you, including emergency accommodation like a refuge.
- Offer emotional and practical support, link you to legal services and help you to talk to police, courts or other agencies.

## Safe contact with the person using violence

You might worry about how your children can have safe contact with the person using violence. If you think your children could be at risk:

- You may not have to arrange for them to spend time with the person using violence. Talk to police, a family violence service or a legal service.
- If you don't have a court order that states how much time your children must spend with the person using violence, they do not have to spend time with them.
- If there is a court order telling you how much time the children are to spend with the person using violence, consider applying to change this because you could be in breach of the order if you do not send them. It is important to get legal advice if you want to go back to court to change the order. Free support to do this is available, see the 'services and support' section at the back of this resource.

If you think seeing the person using violence is safe, consider:

- Do you feel safe?
- How could handover be easier for you and your child?
- Think of a safe, neutral and comfortable place for your children, e.g. a busy playground or a shopping centre.

## Talking to your child about what's happening

Children can be confused about what is going on. Some children might find it hard to talk about this or not want to. It is important that your child knows they can turn to you for support or comfort. You might start with some of these ideas.

- Reassure your child that you are working out how they can spend time with both parents (if applicable).
- Let them know you understand the changes are hard for them and it's normal to have lots of different feelings.
- Ask how they have been feeling about what's happening.
- Ask your child what could make it easier for them.
- Spend time with your children: at bedtime, reading books or playing a game together.

## Staying safe online

It is important to stay safe when using the internet via your phone or another device. Things that you do on the internet can be monitored by the person using violence, and people experiencing violence are often harassed or abused by phone or message. Some things you can do to stay safe:

- Use a safe device, like a computer at a library, to plan for your safety.
- Set up a new email address and use it for things like correspondence with family violence workers or setting up a new bank account.
- Change your passwords and use a secure password storage site to generate and keep track of strong passwords.
- Be careful about what you share on social media. Update your privacy settings.
- Add passcodes or passwords to all of your devices.
- Use multi-factor authentication, where you receive a code to your mobile before you can log into any accounts.
- A family violence support worker can get a new phone and number for you, if you need one.

## Who can help

Talking things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other parents may help.

You can also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, social workers or counsellors.

You can find these people and support groups at your local community health centre, local council or call WIRE Women's Support Line on 1300 134 130 or Parentline 13 22 89 (7 days/8am-12pm).

Some questions that you might like to ask any service include:

- How much does this service cost?  
Can I get help to pay?
- Do you have an after-hours service?
- Who will you share my information with? (Many services are legally required to inform Child Protection Services if they believe your child is being hurt or is in danger of being hurt).
- Can I have an interpreter?
- Do you involve the person using violence at any point?

**See also the information in the '[services and support](#)' information on the back cover of this book.**

Section 2

# Pregnancy and violence



This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on you and your unborn baby.
- Planning for your safety.
- Looking after yourself.
- Services that can help.
- Activities you can try.

**Pregnancy can be a difficult time when you can feel very up and down emotionally. In addition to the strong feelings you may have about being pregnant, you might also be feeling sick or having to manage new health problems.**

## The impact of family violence in pregnancy

**People using violence may escalate their behaviour when you are pregnant. Some people experience family violence for the first time while pregnant.**

Family violence that happens during pregnancy impacts both you and your unborn baby. When parents are unsafe and stressed during pregnancy this can lead to the baby also feeling stressed.

People who are pregnant and experiencing family violence are 10 times more likely to experience depression and anxiety.

Experiencing someone's use of family violence means that pregnancy can be a more difficult time than you were expecting. Combined with everything else going in your life, it can feel overwhelming.

You might worry that your baby will be hurt physically or psychologically. The violence you experience can increase the risk of miscarriage, pre-term delivery or low birth weight. When a person uses physical violence towards you while you are pregnant, this is a significant indicator of future harm towards you and your baby.

You might worry about money and having a baby and what that means for your relationship with your partner.

Family violence can also include being controlled, so you can't access the medical care, nutrition, rest or support that you need.

Experiencing someone's use of family violence may also impact on how you are able to bond with your new baby and that can increase your risk of post-natal depression.

## Making a safety plan when you're pregnant

Alongside [the information in section 1](#) about making a safety plan, there are a few extra things to consider when you're pregnant.

- If you are in danger, **call 000 for police or ambulance help.**
- If you call 000, tell them you are pregnant.
- If you have other children, ask that they are included on an intervention order if you or the police apply for one (see sections [9](#) and [10](#)).
- Plan the steps you can take to promote your safety.
- Regularly review your plan.
- Ask for support from your doctor or midwife if you need it. Talk to them about how you would contact them if you were in trouble.
- You can mark people as emergency medical contacts in your phone. You can search the internet for information about how to do this.
- Keep copies of intervention orders with you at all times and give copies to your support people.
- If possible, hide or leave an emergency pack with a friend. It should include clothes, copies of identification, licence, healthcare card, medication, phone numbers and money.
- If you are separated or divorced, think about your safety outside the home, especially where your ex-partner could find you. Separation and divorce do not guarantee your safety; the person's danger can continue, change or become worse.
- Contact the family violence service in your region for ongoing support about how to increase safety.

## Looking after yourself

### It is important to look after yourself when you are pregnant.

The best solution is for the violence to stop, but this is up to the person who is using violence. Leaving the relationship can also be difficult and stressful.

Stress is a normal response to family violence. There may be some things that you can do to minimise the effects of stress on you and your unborn baby.

The most important thing is to make time for yourself and your unborn baby. Try to get enough sleep, eat a nourishing diet, do some gentle exercise, and keep your medical appointments.

If you are feeling overwhelmed right now, you could ask yourself:

- What is worrying me most?
- What is most important? How would I like it to be?
- What could I do to get there?
- Who could help me along the way?

### Things you might like to try

- Talk to a trusted friend, someone in your family or community, a counsellor or someone at your place of worship.
- Ask someone to look after your other children or help out with chores for a little while.
- Exercise (e.g. going for a walk) is one of the quickest ways to relax. Moving around also helps you focus on your body and clear your mind.
- Give yourself a hand or foot massage to relieve aches and pains.
- Eat healthy food.
- Write in a diary.
- Listen to music or sing and dance.
- Draw or make something.
- Join a social group. Look up your local library or Neighbourhood House who will run social groups and low cost evening classes.
- Have a rest when you can.
- Take a walk with your child or a friend.
- Listen to relaxing music, a podcast or a meditation App before you go to sleep or when your child is playing or resting.



## Activities you can try

### Breathing exercise

To relieve tension and increase oxygen in your blood, count backwards from 27 in your head while focusing on long slow breaths:

- I am breathing in 27 I am breathing out 27
- I am breathing in 26 I am breathing out 26
- I am breathing in 25 I am breathing out 25...
- If you forget the number you're up to, go back to 27.

### Feeling good about yourself

If your confidence in yourself has been affected by a person's use of family violence, you could try some of these positive statements. Say them or write them down:

- My baby and I have a right to be safe.
- I deserve to be treated with respect.
- I am doing the best I can.
- I have a right to aim for my dreams.
- This is going to be hard but I know I can handle it.
- I have made important and hard decisions, I can get through this.
- I can do this one step at a time.
- I know I am a capable person.
- I can ask for help.
- What is happening is not my fault.

## Where to get help

See the back of this book for family violence support services you can contact. There are also specific services you can contact for help if you are pregnant and experiencing family violence.

Talk to your:

- Doctor or a midwife at the hospital.
- Maternal and child health nurse.
- Family and friends you trust.
- Counsellor or a family violence service support worker.

These services are also helpful for pregnant people and new parents:

### Maternal and Child Health Nurse Health Line

- Ph 13 22 29 (24 hrs/7 days)

### Tweddle Child and Family Health Service

- Ph 03 9689 1577
- [tweddle.org.au](http://tweddle.org.au)

### PANDA (Post and Antenatal Depression Association)

- Ph 1300 726 306
- [panda.org.au](http://panda.org.au)

### Caroline Chisholm Society

- Ph 1800 134 863
- [caroline.org.au](http://caroline.org.au)

### Parentline

- 13 22 89 (8am to midnight)

## Services for new fathers

Becoming a parent is a major life change. There are special parenting programs for new families, and also counselling for men to assist their transition to fatherhood.

Men can seek help from family or friends that they trust, or from their doctor. Relationships Australia also has the Support for Fathers website which includes a lot of information to support you. Visit [supportforfathers.com.au](http://supportforfathers.com.au)

See also the information in the **'services and support'** information on the back cover of this book.



Section 3

# Parenting a baby who has experienced violence



## Birth to 18 months

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on babies.
- The importance of play for babies.
- Who can help.

During or after an experience of family violence, your baby will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. Some people think babies are not affected by what’s going on around them. This is not true. Babies are fully dependent on their carer and pick up on the emotions and stresses of people around them.

### How babies think

Your child can’t talk yet, so they show how they feel by the way they act. You may notice that your baby is:

- More difficult to settle.
- Crying more.
- More clingy.
- Shutting down.
- Easily startled.

Your baby’s body language can give you clues to how they are feeling, for example they might tense up when they are scared or smile when they’re happy.

Babies are sensitive to the mood of their parents and carers. If you can appear relaxed and are calm in your voice, tone and actions with your baby, your baby is more likely to be soothed and calm.

### The impact of family violence on babies

For any parent experiencing someone’s use of family violence, their baby or infant is particularly vulnerable.

Babies rely on the adults who care for them, to be safe and soothed. They can be seriously hurt if dropped or shaken and can be frightened by what is happening around them. Repetition and routine is important for babies’ learning and development, including their brain. If someone is using noise, violence and fear around them, over and over again, it can affect their development.

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

If your baby has experienced violence they may:

- Be frightened of new people, voices, or loud noises.
- Be slower to roll over, pull themselves up, crawl, walk, talk and other physical signs of development like holding small objects.
- Be less responsive or interested in the world compared to other babies.
- Be very distressed.
- Return to newborn behaviour.

In the short term, these kinds of difficulties can be tiring and stressful for you and your child. It's important to look after yourself and to find support.

## Tips

### Feeding and sleeping

Babies who have experienced someone's use of family violence might not seem interested in food or might refuse to eat. Some babies do not put on enough weight for their age. Other babies may feed more and be difficult to wean. Sleep can be a problem. If your baby is unsettled or not sleeping well, it can help to try to stick to a regular routine of playing, feeding, sleeping or bathing in the same order.

Babies who have experienced someone's use of violence can get sick more often. This could be related to sleeping or eating difficulties, or because they are stressed.

Ways you can help your baby:

- Give them lots of affection – hugs, cuddles, rocking.
- Respond with eye contact and calm words.
- Talk to them (your baby learns language from before they are even born and the early months are very important).
- Try and focus on your baby's routine, e.g. regular sleep, bathing and feeding times.

**For other ideas, see the tips below and [section 8](#).**

### Crying and settling

One of the most difficult effects of someone's use of violence can be that your baby screams and cries more than usual, or becomes too quiet. It is important to check with your doctor or maternal and child health nurse that there are no physical reasons for this behaviour. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your baby crying, it's okay to put your baby in a safe place like the cot for a short time. Check regularly that your baby is safe but take some time to:

- Do something calming (for example, take ten deep breaths, listen to a favourite song or step outside for a few minutes).
- Call a friend, family member or service you trust.

If your baby is being too quiet, encourage them to interact with you by making eye contact, smiling or talking to them calmly. If you are worried, seek help.

All of this behaviour can be common for babies who have not experienced violence. If you are worried about your baby's sleeping or feeding, or your baby is unwell, talk to a doctor or maternal and child health nurse.

## The importance of play for babies

Babies who have experienced someone's use of violence usually have mixed feelings that they aren't yet able to talk about. Play can help them to develop their confidence and work through their feelings. Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. It can also help you develop your relationship with your child.

Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for babies to express their feelings and develop:

- Physical skills e.g. holding a toy.
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills.
- The ability to communicate, play and share with others.
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions.

You might find it difficult and strange to play with your child at first. This is true of all parents. You could start by just sitting with them and watching what they do. Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together. It can be useful to:

- Be patient.
- Be curious about what they are trying to tell you.
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes.
- Give them praise and encouragement.
- Have fun!

## Activities to try together

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

These are some activities you can try:

- Talk and sing with your child.
- Make lots of eye contact, make faces, smile.
- Cuddle your baby often.
- Read stories with your baby.
- Clap and sing with your baby in front of a mirror.
- Play hide and seek (for young babies use an object for them to find).
- Play imitation games (babies love to copy you laughing, coughing, poking out your tongue, blinking your eyes and moving your hands, arms and feet).
- Encourage your baby to do the things they enjoy (rolling, crawling, sitting).
- Play pretend chasing games when your child starts crawling and walking.
- Add a massage to their bath routine.

## Ages and stages

The early stages of a child's life are very important, this is when verbal language is forming and when a child learns to relate to other people.

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Stress or trauma can affect your baby's development. Some children at this stage may have difficulty separating from their primary carer.

**Children will often catch up once the violence has stopped, and they feel safe again.**

## Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful. Some parents who have experienced someone's use of family violence have said they felt like they couldn't protect their child and found it hard to cope. You are one of the people who know what's good for your baby. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and listen 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, talking things through with trusted family, friends, community members and/or other parents may help. You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, family violence support service 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 also call WIRE's Support Line on 1300 134 130 or visit [wire.org.au](http://wire.org.au). You can also call Parentline 13 22 89 (7 days/8am-midnight). Parentline is a phone service for parents and carers of children from birth to 18 years old. It offers confidential and anonymous counselling and support on parenting issues.

See also the information in the '[services and support](#)' information on the back cover of this book.



## 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.

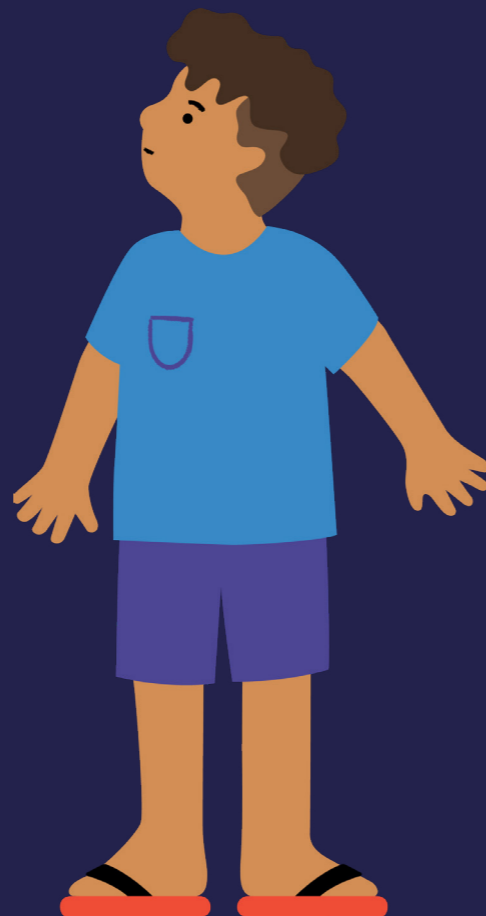
If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair, hitting themselves or biting themselves), call the Royal Children's Hospital on 1800 445 511. If you are worried that your child is being sexually abused, call the Gatehouse Centre on 9345 6391.

**See also the information in the 'services and support' information on the back cover of this book.**



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.**



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.

## Section 7

# Parenting a teenager who has experienced violence



## 5 to 12 years

This section contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence
- How to talk about respectful relationships.
- Staying safe online.
- Stages of development.

Due to someone's use of family violence, your teenager will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. It is common for teenagers to feel:

- Anger towards the parent who has used violence, or towards the parent who has experienced the violence (often because they couldn't stop it).
- 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 how someone's use of violence has impacted other parts of the teenager's life.

### How teens think

The teenage years are a time for exploring who you are and who you'd like to be. Teenagers who have experienced someone's use of violence can be confused about their family member's use of violence and may blame one or both parents for what has happened, or themselves.

Teenagers are more aware than younger children of how complex relationships can be. Teenagers might keep their feelings about the violence to themselves. It is important to find ways to help teenagers to safely express their thoughts and worries. They are more likely to share their feelings if you stay calm, open and non-judgemental in your tone and words.

## The impact of family violence on teenagers

You might worry that the experience of family violence will affect your child forever. Teenagers need time and support to recover from traumatic situations. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your teenager can begin to heal. If your teenager has experienced violence, they might:

- Have difficulty showing feelings, trusting others, making or keeping friends or relationships.
- Experience bullying or be bullies (including online bullying).
- Rebel against authority.
- Take on adult roles e.g. protecting parents or siblings.
- Be withdrawn or anti-social.
- Have difficulty coping with everyday stress.
- Be nervous about speaking to new people or jump into new relationships.
- Experience depression, anxiety, develop eating disorders or be at risk of suicide or self-harm.
- Believe that women and girls are less important.
- Be at higher risk of drug or alcohol abuse.
- Be at risk of homelessness and/or dropping out of school.
- Return to younger behaviour.

Your teen could be acting like a typical teenager, or their experience of violence could be a factor. It's important to be curious and find ways to build relationships with your teenager and seek professional help if needed.

## Ways you can help your teenager

Talking about things like family violence can be embarrassing, hurtful or confusing for both parents and teenagers, but it's important to:

- Listen.
- Tell your teenager the violence is never their fault.
- Give truthful explanations and responses
- Ask if they have any worries, e.g. at school, at home, with friends.
- Use examples from TV or other situations to help discuss relationships or values.
- Show that you understand if things are hard, scary or frustrating for them.
- Explain that everyone has a choice about how we act. Help them to identify different feelings, so they can reflect and choose what to do next.
- Encourage your teenager to contact a counsellor or youth service.

## Tips

### Behaviour and feelings

All young people need to learn to express their feelings and to know which behaviour is okay and which is not.

For example, yelling, threatening or saying things that make someone scared are not okay; being honest and respectful, like saying, 'I feel like this... When you do that' is okay. It is important that you try to do this too as an example.

- Talk about ways of showing feelings, especially anger and or disappointment without hurting others or themselves.
- Allow them to cry and grieve if they need to, and notice what makes them feel happy.
- Come up with simple rules to make talking about feelings safe.
- Name and praise positive behaviour and values.
- Give your teenager lots of affection, care and reassurance.
- Let them know that they can talk to other people who care and would like to listen, e.g. trusted family members, family friends, social workers.
- Be aware that you don't always have to hide your feelings.

The 1800 RESPECT website has lots of information about how to talk to teenagers about your experience of family violence, including what you can do if they don't want to talk. Visit [bit.ly/talking-to-teens](http://bit.ly/talking-to-teens).

### Relationships

In the teen years, relationships with parents often come second to those with friends and romantic partners. The best way for your teenager to discover who they are and how to connect with others, is to be surrounded by adults who provide safety, stability and love.

It's important to encourage young people to participate in activities that safely build their independence and support your parenting.

- Encourage involvement in sport or arts groups to help develop social networks.
- Encourage them to invite friends over or go to agreed places with friends.
- Make time to discuss their concerns, this could be over dinner or in the car.
- Take an interest in their likes and dislikes to show that you care about them.
- Let them decorate their room.
- Respect their privacy. Knock on their door. Don't look at their things without asking.

Your teenage children will be experiencing a lot of changes in their lives. This includes changes to their body and hormones, as well as developing new relationships and understanding their sexuality.

**What your teenager learns about relationships now will be important for forming respectful, non-violent relationships later in life.**

There are more tips in [section 8](#).

It can help to talk openly with your teenage children about feelings, friendships and family relationships. Be honest about your experiences of someone's use of family violence, and encourage them to think about what a respectful, and positive relationship looks like.

You could talk to your teen about other relationships in your life and what makes them respectful – for example, with your friends or family members. You could talk about what is and isn't a respectful relationship.

In respectful relationships:

- You feel confident to share your opinions.
- You can say no if you feel uncomfortable.
- You can both compromise, say sorry and talk about disagreements together.
- You can both spend time with other people.

In disrespectful relationships:

- You are often criticised or humiliated by the other person.
- You feel pressured to do things just to please them.
- The other person might say they will kill themselves or hurt themselves if you break up with them.

**For more information about talking to teenagers about respectful relationships, consent and sexuality, visit the ReachOut website: [bit.ly/reachout-respect](https://bit.ly/reachout-respect).**

**See also GenWest's 'Consent, Empowerment and Respect' resources at [bit.ly/CEandR](https://bit.ly/CEandR), and visit [minus18.org.au](https://minus18.org.au) for information and resources for LGBTIQ+ (or same sex attracted or gender diverse) young people.**

## Staying safe online

You can help your teenage children to stay connected online while also promoting their, and your own, safety. You might like to speak to a family violence support service before making changes to your online accounts, to talk through what options might be the safest, in consideration of the person's use of violence.

Talk with your teenage children about what rules you can all follow to stay safe online (for younger children, you can set the rules).

Online safety rules should consider the behaviour used by the person choosing violence. Some online safety rules you could consider:

- Turn off location services on your phones. This might mean some apps or games don't work. Keeping safe is the most important thing, and you can turn them back on when things are safer.
- Don't post about your location online, or share your location with anyone. That includes your address, suburb, school, and the location of friends and family you visit.
- Don't post photos online for now. Photos often contain lots of information that can tell people where you are.
- Don't tag or '@' family members in posts until things are safer.
- Check your privacy settings on all your accounts and make sure your accounts aren't public.

The eSafety Commissioner has an online safety checklist you can do with your teen: [bit.ly/esafety-check-2023](https://bit.ly/esafety-check-2023).

GenWest's 'My Safety Plan' also has tips about staying safe online: [bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan](https://bit.ly/genwest-mysafetyplan).

## Ages and stages

Every teenager is different and develops at their own rate. However, trauma or stress can mean that a teenager's development might be slower than average. Teenagers often catch up when the violence or abuse has stopped and they feel safe again.

Teenagers:

- Start to develop their own identity and values.
- Prepare to separate themselves from their family.
- Challenge authority, rules and values to creating their sense of themselves.
- Experience a variety of bodily and hormonal changes.
- Have mood swings marked by tearfulness, increased sensitivity and sudden outbursts.
- May need more physical activity to deal with body changes.
- Begin to work out relationships with peers to find out how they fit in.
- Start to explore romantic and sexual relationships.
- Independence and privacy become increasingly important.

## Who can help

Some people living with family violence find it hard to cope because they feel like they can't protect their child. The violence can affect your relationship and it can take time and patience to strengthen it again.

You are one of the people who know what is good for your teenager. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and to your teen. It's also important to listen to and learn from people whose wisdom and experience you respect.

If you are worried about your teenager or would like some new ideas to help them, talk things through with trusted family, friends, people in your community and/or other parents.

You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, family violence support workers or counsellors.

**Services for teenagers include Kids Helpline, for children and young people. They can be contacted on 1800 55 1800. They also have a live webchat counselling service which can be accessed at [kidshelp.com.au/teens/get-help/web-counselling](https://kidshelp.com.au/teens/get-help/web-counselling).**

The 'What's OK at Home' website ([woah.org.au/](https://woah.org.au/)) contains information for young people about what family violence is, why it happens, where to get help and how to help others.

**See also the 'services and support' information on the back cover of this book.**



## 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.

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](https://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://womenslegal.org.au)

**Victorian legal aid**  
[legalaid.vic.gov.au](http://legalaid.vic.gov.au)

**Family law court**  
[familycourt.gov.au](http://familycourt.gov.au)



Section 10

# Parenting, violence and the legal system



This section contains tips and information about:

- Intervention orders.
- Going to court.
- Talking to your children about what’s happening.
- Where you can get advice and support.

**Violence is against the law. If you and your child have experienced violence it is possible that you will have contact with police, lawyers and the courts.**

Going through the legal process is an important step to protect you and your children from violence. However, these experiences can be confusing and stressful for you and your children.

It is important to balance protecting your child from stressful details, while giving them opportunities to talk about their experiences and ask any questions.

Each family’s situation is unique, and this information is general. If your children’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 police, and legal advice from a lawyer.

## Tips for talking to legal services

- Write down your concerns before contacting the service.
- Take someone you trust to your appointments. They can support you and help you remember what was said.
- Set aside plenty of time.
- Ask if there is a cost, what the cost is, and how to get help to pay for the service.
- Ask about your rights when it comes to protecting your children.
- If you do not speak English easily, ask if there is a worker who speaks your language, or if they have an interpreter.
- Take notes. In particular, write the name and role of each person that you speak to. This will help if you need to follow anything up later.
- Bring any legal papers you have.



## Tips for helping your child through the legal process

- Children who have experienced family violence often have mixed feelings for both parents. It is important for them to feel that they do not have to take sides.
- Try to avoid your child hearing about your experience of family violence perpetrated by the other parent, or details of the legal process. Think about what they might overhear if you are talking on the phone, or with friends or professionals.
- Appointments may not go ahead if you bring your children.
- Tell your family violence worker, police or lawyer if your children saw or heard the violence or if they were hurt so they can be protected.

## Going to court

- If you have any legal orders about you and your children take them to court.
- Going to court may involve multiple visits. If you are worried about being at the court at the same time as the person who used violence, ask the court, a family violence service or police for information on safety options.
- Courts do not have child minding facilities and it might take all day, so you will need to organise child care for the day, or bring someone with you who can look after your children.

## Some things that might help your child are:

- Tell your child's school or childcare that you're attending court that day, so they can support your child emotionally and be particularly aware of their safety.
- It can help to give the school copies of any intervention orders that protect you or your child.
- Going to court is a long day, bring snacks and activities.

## Talking about intervention orders

In Victoria, you and your children can be legally protected from family violence by intervention orders. You can apply for an order, or the police can apply for you. The court that hears these matters is the Magistrates Court.

Your children may know the police have visited or that you are going to court to help make your family safe. Knowing about this can feel overwhelming and stressful for children, and can lead to strong feelings and confusion. Some children worry about what police and courts mean for their family.

## Things you can say are:

'How do you feel about what's happening at the moment?'

'You know you can talk to me or someone you trust about any of your feelings.'

'The police and courts try to help grown-ups stop hurting others. They have made some rules (called an intervention order) to help keep everyone safe.'

If your intervention order means that your child can't see their other parent, you could say:

'How do you feel about not seeing or talking to dad [or the person using violence] at the moment?'

'The rules say that for now dad [or the person using violence] can't visit us or pick you up from school/childcare. If you see dad [or the person using violence] at school or childcare, tell me or your teacher so we can keep you safe.'

'The grown-ups are working out how, when and where you can safely talk to or see dad [or the person using violence].'

'I wish it was different too.'

See sections 1 or 9 and the 'services and support' section for links to legal advice services, and more ideas on what to say.

## Parenting and the family court

The Family Law Act covers divorce, parenting after separation and property settlement. The law states that children have the right to a safe and meaningful relationship with both parents.

Both parents are responsible for making decisions and financially supporting their children. Children also have the right to be protected from seeing or hearing family violence or being hurt.

The court needs to know if children are at risk because of unsafe adult behaviour. The time children spend with each parent after separation can be negotiated between you and the person using violence with the help of a family dispute resolution practitioner, family relationship centre (mediation centres) or family law courts.

## Things you can say are:

'The family court is a place that helps us work out how much time you will spend with mum and dad [or the person using violence].'

'You will meet a person called a family consultant who will play with you and talk about how what you think and feel about what's happening.'

'The judge listens to the family consultant and other grown-ups and thinks about what everyone said to try to make a fair decision.'

## Talking about the family consultant

Depending on your child's age and level of maturity, the court could consider their wishes when making decisions.

Once proceedings have begun your child may be asked to see a family consultant who will write a report making recommendations about parenting arrangements. Children pick up on your mood and may worry about what going to court means for them and the family. This may also be the first time your child has seen the person using violence for a while.

## Things you can do

- Prepare them by talking about what to expect, but not what to say. Think about their age and give them as much notice as they need to ease their stress.
- Going to court can be a long day; if you need to bring your children with you, bring snacks and activities to keep your child occupied. Plan a fun child-focussed activity for after your day at court, e.g. go for a picnic or get an ice cream.

For more information on talking to your child about the family consultant, visit the Federal Circuit and Family Law Court of Australia website: [bit.ly/family-consultant-fcfcoa](http://bit.ly/family-consultant-fcfcoa).

## Who can give you advice

Each situation is different, so it is important to get the right advice. Contact these services for more information about your rights, the courts or other legal options:

### Women's Legal Service

Ph: 03 8622 0600

Toll Free: 1800 133 302

[womenslegal.org.au](http://womenslegal.org.au)

Provides legal advice on family violence law, family law and victims of crime applications. See their website for fact sheets.

### Victorian Legal Aid

Ph: 1300 792 387

[legaid.vic.gov.au](http://legaid.vic.gov.au)

Offers legal advice and has language services. They can refer you to your local community legal service.

### Djirra

Ph: 1800 105 303

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

The Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria.

### Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre

Ph: 9413 0100

[refugeelegal.org.au](http://refugeelegal.org.au)

Offers support for migration law matters.

### Police

In a crisis always call 000.

If you need to speak to the police who came to your house, or you want to find out what is happening with your orders see the website [police.vic.gov.au](http://police.vic.gov.au).

### Magistrates court

[mcv.vic.gov.au](http://mcv.vic.gov.au)

This court is where you will go if the police apply for an intervention order or if you want to apply. Ask the police or see the website for your local Magistrates court.

### Family court

Ph: 1300 352 000

[fcfcoa.gov.au/fl](http://fcfcoa.gov.au/fl)

This court covers divorce, parenting after separation and property settlement. Recovery orders and passport watch applications are heard here.

### Family Relationships

Ph: 1800 050 321

[familyrelationships.gov.au](http://familyrelationships.gov.au)

Mediation or dispute resolution services help parents negotiate parenting plans. Tell them if you have experienced family violence so they can assess you for their service. The Family Relationships Advice Line can refer you to these services.

### Victims of Crime

Ph: 1800 819 817

[victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au](http://victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au)

If you or your children are victims of criminal family violence, you can apply for assistance. If your ex-partner is convicted and jailed, you can apply to be on the Victim Register, so the parole board considers your family's safety when granting bail.

### Tenancy rights

Ph: 03 9628 9755

Visit the VCAT website at [bit.ly/VCAT-familyviolence](http://bit.ly/VCAT-familyviolence)

If you have an intervention order with an exclusion clause, your ex-partner can be removed from your rental property lease. You can get support at the Victorian Administrative Appeals Tribunal or legal service.

# 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:

