

THE IMPACT OF FAMILY VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN & YOUTH



Adapted By:

Family violence harms children in many ways. It can be in the form of one harmful incident, or many. It impacts a child's development, affecting how they feel about themselves, their safety, and their family. By understanding how children experience family violence, we can better support their healing and encourage healthy self-esteem, communication, and personal relationships.



Contents

Glossary of terms	2
Types of abuse towards adults and children	3
Family violence and parenting	4
How children can be affected by family violence	7
Impacts of family violence on victims who are parents	8
Myths about family violence and children	11
How children of different ages experience family violence	
Infants and Toddlers	12
Pre-Schoolers	14
School-Aged Children	15
Teenagers	16
How might violence shape normal development	18
Facts and figures	19
Coping and survival strategies of young people	20
Roles children may assume in a family with violence	22
Support Services	24

Glossary of terms

Coercive control

- An on-going pattern of domination.
- Can include demands, surveillance, isolation, and threats, such as physical harm. It can be used as a guise for child “discipline.”

Domestic violence/Family violence

- The abuse, assault or control of someone within family relationships. It is often, though not only, between intimate partners.
- Violence is gendered as it is often perpetrated by men against women and gender minorities.
- The Power & Control Wheel from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project [www.duluth-model.org] shows the spectrum of tactics used against women such as threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimization, and denial of harm.

Child exposure to family violence

- Can include seeing, hearing, or being aware of an incident of family violence.

Child maltreatment

- Also called “child abuse,” a term that can mean physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and/or physical or emotional neglect and/or denial of medical care.

Intimate partner violence

- Often refers to the harmful treatment of someone by their intimate partner.

Note: While many types of violence are gendered, and predominantly perpetrated by men against women and gender minorities, anyone can be a victim of abuse. All abuse is harmful. We know men can be harmed by abuse and often have fewer options for support. Similar rates of violence are also found in same-sex relationships.



Types of abuse towards adults and children

Abuse is often misunderstood as only referring to physical forms of assault, however there are many types of abuse.

- Abuse can be motivated by a need to control, demean, intimidate, and take power away from the victim. Abuse can be directed at anyone of any age. Several types of abuse can be present in the same family.

Child sexual abuse

- Any sexual contact with a child or any activity with a child that has a sexual purpose.
- It can include exposing a child to pornography, genital fondling, digital penetration, or an invitation to sexually touch the abuser.

Emotional/Psychological abuse

- Behaviours that can cause emotional or psychological harm.
- Can include demeaning comments, insults, taunts, dictating how one dresses, threats of suicide, threats of taking their children, surveillance, jealousy, isolating someone, abusing pets, or destroying sentimental or valued possessions.
- Children can also be emotionally abused.

Financial abuse

- Control over someone else's finances, creating dependency.
- Can include withholding money, taking someone's money, making all major purchases, denying access to bank accounts, or preventing someone from taking or keeping a job.

Neglect

- Failure to meet the needs of someone in your care.
- Can include neglecting to provide food, clothing, supervision, medical care, or other basic needs.
- Not meeting needs for proper intellectual and emotional development.

Sexual abuse

- Abusive sexual behaviour.
- Can include any unwanted sexual activity, painful sexual activity, purposeful exposure to sexually-transmitted infections, or refusal to permit the use of birth control.

Spiritual abuse

- The denial or enforcement of spiritual practices as a use of control.
- Can include ridicule or punishment for holding a religious or cultural belief, forbidding the practice of a person's religion or forcing someone to follow unwanted spiritual practices.

Physical abuse

- An intentional act of injury or trauma to a person or animal.
- Can include slapping, punching, kicking, shoving, strangulation, burning, biting, pushing down stairs, injuring with a weapon, or hitting with an object.

Family violence and parenting

Abusers are not simply poor role models for their children, they are also harmful parents. Children are at risk psychologically, emotionally, and physically, from both experiencing and witnessing family violence. Every child is unique and can be affected differently.

How children are exposed to family violence:

- Seeing a parent assaulted or put down
- Hearing fights or incidents of violence
- Seeing the aftermath (such as injuries)
- Hearing about the incident
- Being used as a tool to manipulate the abused/or the abuser

How children may be used by the abusive perpetrator:

- Suggesting the child is to blame for the abuse
- Encouraging the child to take part in the abuse
- Threatening violence against the child (or pets)
- Talking inappropriately to the child about the abuse survivor
- Withholding or abducting the child from the abuse survivor

Children are not just “witnesses”:

- Children are often referred to as “witnesses” to family violence happening in their home.
- This implies a passive role. Children do not “witness” family violence, they fully experience it.
- Children living with family violence actively interpret, predict, and assess their responsibility in “causing” a conflict. They worry about consequences, engage in problem-solving, and take measures to protect themselves, siblings (physically and emotionally), and sometimes their parent.

During Violence:

- Children may referee, try to rescue the victim, try to distract the abuser, take care of siblings, or seek outside help (such as calling the police or running to a neighbour’s house).
- Children often feel fear, distress, anxiety, self-blame, guilt, anger, grief, confusion, worry, embarrassment, and hope for rescue.
- Younger children sometimes hide, pray, pretend they are somewhere else, or try not to hear the conflict.
- Older children sometimes try to protect the victim/themselves/their siblings and this can sometimes result in harm to the child.
- Teenagers sometimes try to intervene, referee, or act as a peacemaker.

Between Incidents:

- Children may try to predict the next incident or believe that changing their behaviour might prevent another incident. This can lead to them feeling responsible for the violence when it continues.

After Incidents:

- Children will continue to think and worry about incidents.
- Children will also try to spot “triggers” of future incidents (such as liquor bottles). For example, alcohol does not cause violence, but children often assume it does if they see them go hand-in-hand.
- When family violence has been a common occurrence for children, they become hyper-sensitive to the cues of possible incidents.

Unhealthy lessons children may learn from family violence:

- Violence and threats can get you what you want

- You either have to be an aggressor or a victim
- Victims are to blame for violence
- It's okay or expected for loved ones to hurt you
- Anger and/or drinking causes violence
- Anger can get out of control if it isn't suppressed
- Toxic relationships are normal and to be expected

Gender-based violence sends messages such as:

- Men should be in control and in charge
- Women need to be corrected and disciplined by men
- Women are weak, helpless, incompetent, or stupid

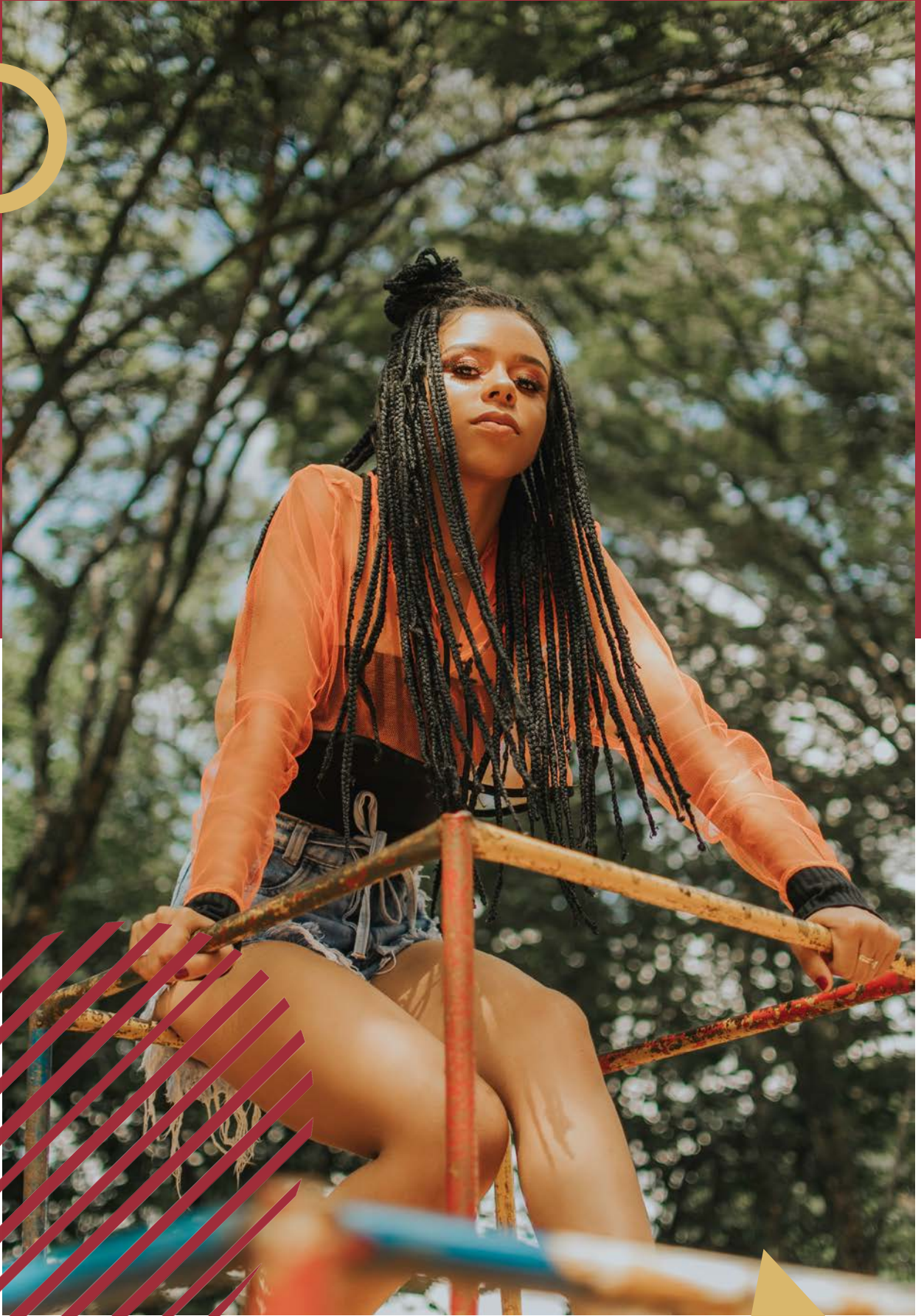
Children are good observers but poor interpreters:

- They don't interpret the things they see and hear the way an adult would.
- Common misunderstandings of children can include:
 - The perpetrator and victim are equally matched (it's a "fair fight")
 - "It's my fault they're fighting"
 - If there are no visible signs of injury (such as bruises or blood) then nobody is hurt
 - If nobody is crying, no one is hurt or upset
 - "If I try really hard to be good, the fighting will stop"

Teenagers observing family violence often wonder:

- Why the victim doesn't kick the perpetrator out
- If they could have done something to prevent it
- If the perpetrator will turn on them next
- Why the perpetrator is allowed to do this
- How the family would survive financially if the perpetrator left





How children can be affected by family violence

Abuse can harm the bond between the child and the victim.

- The child's view of the victim can be hurt by the perpetrator (such as hearing that they're a bad parent, lazy, etc.)
- The child may not trust the victim to keep them safe.

Children can develop poor self-esteem.

- How you see yourself is formed in childhood.

They can be isolated from others who can help.

- In order to hide family secrets, children who live with family violence are often cut off from people who could listen and help, or people who could see there is a problem.

Unhealthy family roles.

- Roles in abusive families reflect how each person adapts and copes with the secret, confusing, and sometimes dangerous situation they live in.

They begin to see the world as unsafe and unpredictable.

- They could also learn that you have to deal with your problems by yourself, adults don't keep you safe, and bad things happen no matter how hard they try to be good.
- In contrast, children who grow up with encouragement, fairness, and safety can approach life happily and enjoy new opportunities.

Domestic violence is almost never the only problem or stress in a family.

- Substance abuse, poverty, criminal behaviour, incarceration, mental illness, housing instability, or unemployment can be present. These factors do not cause abuse.

Children can develop harmful coping and survival techniques.

- Children's ability to adapt helps them when trapped with abuse, conflict, and violence.
- Strategies can involve ideas (such as fantasizing about a different life), actions (such as running away), or feelings (such as anger or guilt).
- Their actions and choices are survival skills: resourceful adaptations to an unhealthy situation. But some, such as running away, create new problems.

Children can adopt rationalizations about family violence.

- Children can begin to see the victim as weak or inferior, excuse the abuser's behaviour, or even try to emulate the behaviour.
- This can lead to justification or acceptance of abuse in future intimate relationships, workplace settings, or with friends.

Children can believe that victimization is inevitable or normal.

- When violence and chaos become normalized, it can make one tolerant of abuse and discourage one from seeking help.

Long term effects of domestic violence on children:

- Greater risk for repeating the cycle as adults, either as abuser or victim.
- Greater risk for health problems as adults such as diabetes and heart disease.
- Greater risk for mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.
- They are denied a positive role model by the perpetrator.

Impacts of family violence on victims who are parents

Victims can begin to believe that they are incompetent parents.

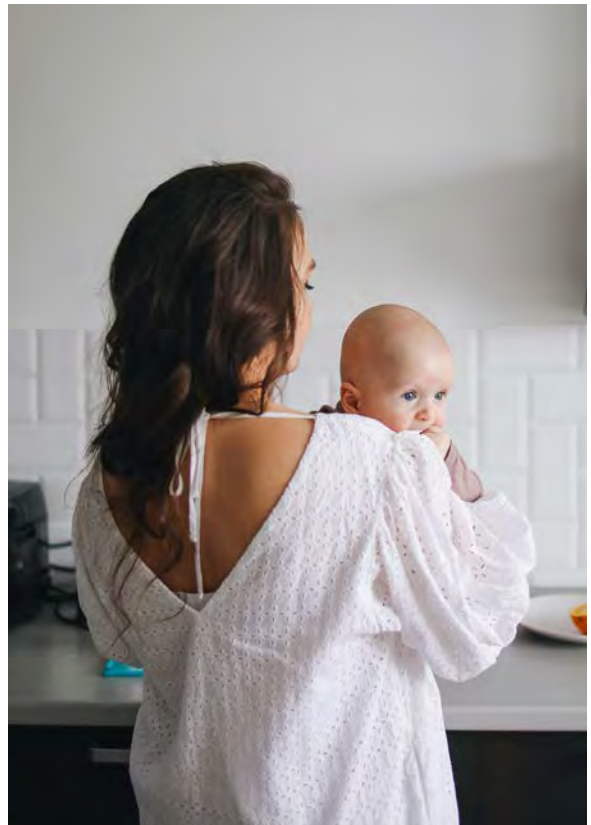
- Perpetrators of abuse may portray their victims as unfit parents.
- Victims may fear their children being taken by protection services.
- Victims may be frustrated in attempts to create structure and consistency.

The victim may lose the respect of their children.

- Their children may not respect their authority.
- Their children may blame them for the family violence.

The victim may reinforce the perpetrator's excuses for abuse.

- The victim may tell the children that they are at fault for the abuse or deserve it.
- The victim may feel responsible for the abuse and feel guilty for its impact on the children.
- The victim may excuse the perpetrator's actions and blame it on something else (such as alcohol, culture, etc.)
- The victim may believe that the abuse is religiously or culturally appropriate (such as men are more deserving of power and control) and teach this to their children.



The victim may change their parenting style in response to the perpetrator's parenting style.

- If the perpetrator is very strict, the victim may be too permissive.
- The victim may be stricter to try to keep the children from irritating the perpetrator.
- The victim may make age-inappropriate or unreasonable demands on the children to placate the perpetrator.
- The victim may avoid disciplining children because they've already been through so much.
- The victim may be responsible for all of the demanding responsibilities of parenting while the perpetrator enjoys the easy or fun parts.

The victim may have difficulty managing emotionally.

- Depression, anxiety, poor sleeping, etc., can make it hard to care for children and provide for their daily needs.
- If denied the use of birth control, the victim may be forced to have more children than they're capable of caring for.
- If denied enough money, the victim may be unable to meet their children's basic needs (such as for food and reliable housing).
- The victim may become prone to reactive rather than pro-active parenting, responding to crisis instead of preventing it.

The bond between the victim and their children may be compromised.

- Children may be angry at the victim for failing to protect them or get rid of the perpetrator.
- The victim may be prevented by the perpetrator from comforting their distressed child.
- One child may assume the care-taking role for the victim.
- The children may blame the victim for absence of the perpetrator from the home and other disruptions (such as moving or changing schools).

The victim may feel they're competing for their children's loyalty.

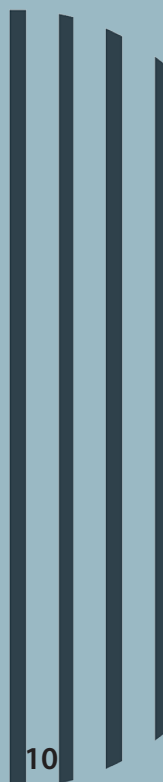
- Perpetrators may try to shape their children's opinion of them as good and the victim as bad.
- After separation, perpetrators may entice the children to support them getting custody with promises of a great life at their house.
- During access visits, perpetrators may play the role as the fun parent who has no rules.
- The perpetrator may have more money and can offer material goods and a nicer home.

Note: Being abused can impact one's ability to parent effectively. Sometimes coping/survival strategies can be harmful to their children. Examples include:

- Leaving children with inadequate caregivers in order to get a break.
- Avoiding being home.
- Using drugs or alcohol to cope.

REMEMBER: When children and teenagers witness their parent being abused, over time they may see the perpetrator as frightening or unpredictable. However, some will also view the perpetrator as powerful and the only legitimate parental authority. They may come to believe the perpetrator's rationalizations of abuse or accept their excuses (such as alcohol or stress being to blame for the violence). Each sibling may have their own differing opinions of the perpetrator, depending on their own age, gender, emotional closeness to them, whether they abused them directly, and their perception of the frequency and severity of the violence against the victim.





Myths about family violence and children

At first glance, the choices and reactions of those who experience family violence may not seem logical, until you consider them as survival strategies.

MYTH: Someone who loves their children would leave an abusive relationship in order to protect their children from harm.

REALITY: Some stay in abusive relationships in order to protect their children.

- Especially when the violence is severe, the period around and following a relationship separation can be dangerous. The probability of being murdered increases when the relationship ends.
- The victim may fear losing custody to the abuser, the abuser abducting the children, or the safety of the children during visitation with an abuser.
- Some victims feel their children are safer when they can be there to intervene and protect them from being the subjects of the abuse.

MYTH: Children will always recognize the perpetrator of violence as the cause of the problems and abuse.

REALITY: Children can blame the victim as much or more as the perpetrator.

- Young children don't recognize the power imbalances when parents "fight." Both adults can seem equally powerful to them.
- Toddlers or pre-schoolers live predominately in the present, so an abusive person who gives gifts will be quickly forgiven for a recent upsetting incident.
- Most children don't develop a more mature understanding of the violence and abuse until they approach adolescence. Still, older children may be angry at and blame the victim for bringing an abusive person into the home, not protecting themselves or the children from the abuse, staying with them after it was evident that the perpetrator was abusive, or reconciling with perpetrator after leaving.

MYTH: All children will hate a parent who is abusive.

REALITY: Children can love a parent who is abusive to them or their other parent.

- A perpetrator of abuse who is seen as an unfit parent by most adults can still be adored and respected by their children.
- Over time, some children may grow closer to the perpetrator than the victim, and may believe things said by the abuser about the abuse being the victim's fault.
- Once gone from the family, children may grieve the perpetrator's absence as they would any parental separation. For children too young to comprehend cause and effect, the separation may seem to be caused by the victim who leaves the relationship rather than the perpetrator whose behaviour made the relationship unsafe.

MYTH: When the perpetrator is out of the picture, any issues the children have will disappear.

REALITY: Ending a child's exposure to violence at home is the single best intervention, but if that exposure has been lengthy, the problems do not quickly evaporate. Strained family dynamics and behavioural difficulties are linked to many factors including:

- On the surface, strict parenting seems effective by keeping the children "in line." However, when a strict parent leaves, the children can misbehave because they never developed internal controls and cannot regulate their behaviour.
- The victim may struggle to establish their parental authority. If the perpetrator often undermined the victim's parenting, the children may resist their authority.
- Leaving an abusive partner is often associated with decline in standard of living, residential moves, changing schools, disruption in a child's peer relations, and perhaps one or more stay in a shelter. Such disruption can have an impact on children's behaviour and some children will blame the victim for the unwelcome changes.

Infants and Toddlers

Babies can't understand what is happening between adults... but they hear the noise and feel the tension. Babies may be distressed or scared, upset if they aren't getting their needs met promptly, too frightened to explore or play, and/or sense the distress of the victim. Babies cannot protect themselves or remove themselves from stressful situations and depend entirely on adults to keep them out of harm's way

What features of family violence may be the most upsetting for infants and toddlers?

- Loud noise such as banging and yelling
- Sudden and unpredictable eruption of loud noise
- A distracted, tense, unhappy, socially isolated parent
- An angry, unpredictable, inconsistent parent
- Chance of being injured physically accidentally or due to maltreatment
- Compromised nutrition and health if financial abuse restricts money to buy formula, vitamins, diapers, home safety devices, etc.

Note: Some stress is okay, even beneficial, because it's how we all learn to cope with life. For example, baths are stressful for babies at first but quickly become normal and expected. When yelling and tension become normal, even babies learn to adapt: they stay in a heightened state of arousal or they numb themselves and turn inward. Neither is a healthy response, but it's how they adapt.

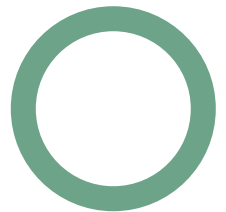
Points to keep in mind:

- Babies are highly vulnerable to maltreatment including shaken baby injuries.
 - Between 2005 and 2015 in Canada, 26 deaths of children aged 0-3 were classified as "shaken baby syndrome".

Parents of babies require and deserve extra support with basic needs.

What parents with babies may need or want:

- Safe, affordable housing
- Assistance finding childcare, accessing childcare subsidies or similar services
- Connections with other parents
- Guidance on parenting issues
- To recognize the difference between typical infant behaviour and the effects of family violence
- Breaks and respite from the responsibilities of childcare
- Legal advice and advocacy on issues such as:
 - Child custody
 - Child maintenance
 - Protective options available through the legal system (such as a restraining order)



How might violence at home shape normal development?

<i>KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IN INFANTS</i>	<i>POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE</i>
Take in information from the world around them through five senses	Loud noises, vivid visual images associated with violence can be distressing
Form secure attachments	Parents may not consistently respond to infant's needs, negatively affecting the parent-child bond
Become more active explorers of their world through play	Fear and instability may inhibit exploration and play; imitation in play may be related to aggression they saw or heard
Learn about social interaction and relationships from what they hear and observe in their families	Learn about aggression in observed interactions



Pre-Schoolers

At this age, what they experience is more real to them than anything you could tell them.

A child between 3-5 years old who witnesses loud conflict or violence may:

- Worry about being hurt and may have nightmares about being hurt
- Believe they caused the “fight” by something they did
- Hope that a TV character or super hero will come and save them
- Try and stop the “fight”
- Try to tune out the noise by focusing on something else (such as toys or television)
- Be distressed when their parent is upset but feel better when they seem okay again
- Be confused if a parent is gone and worry that the other parent may leave, too
- Experience sleep difficulties and/or separation anxiety
- Show signs of terror such as stuttering or hiding

Children at this age are egocentric: they truly believe they are the center of the world. Due to this, they often blame themselves for bad events, including conflict or violence in their home.

- Pre-schoolers are easily upset by changes to their routine, as well as separation from cherished items like blankets or pets.
 - Maintaining or re-establishing comforting routines (such as bedtime schedules) can be helpful.
 - The present is more important to pre-schoolers than the past.

Remember: children of this age need to hear that what happened was not their fault, they are still loved, and that important features of daily life will go on even if their families have changed or moved.

How might family violence impact typical development?

- Learning destructive ways to express anger
- Experiencing confusion over mixed messages
- Blaming themselves for the violence
- Learning unhealthy lessons about gender roles
- Instability may affect independence and cause regressive behaviours
- Immature behaviour such as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, increased crying and whining
- Young children thrive on secure attachment with caregivers and insecure attachment harms their development

What features of family violence may be the most distressing for pre-schoolers?

- Seeing a parent upset or hurt
- Seeing/hearing a parent angry or yelling
- Sounds/sights of first responders or law enforcement officers
- Chaotic changes and disruptions to their routine
- Fear that they might be injured

Spanking is not a good discipline strategy for any child. For children who lived with family violence, spanking is especially harmful. The unspoken messages of spanking are the same as some rationalizations for intimate partner violence and gendered violence. Spanking teaches children that:

- Bigger people are more powerful than smaller people
- Some people have the right to hit others
- People who love you are allowed to hurt you
- Being angry is valid reason to hurt someone
- Those who get hit are the ones to blame
- Those who hit others will always have a valid reason
- Apologizing for “losing control” makes what happened acceptable

School-Aged Children

Children at this developmental stage are beginning to have a better understanding of family violence. They can now make connections between actions and consequences. They often believe the conflict is caused by stress, finances, alcohol, or whatever else their parents may argue about. Believing this explanation is more emotionally manageable than believing their beloved parent is violent or cruel. They are also not able to comprehend the power imbalance that there is with family violence. School-aged children judge a “fight” by its fairness: who started it, who is bigger, and if any consequence is deserved.

How might family violence impact typical development?

- Believing and accepting the rationalizations/excuses made for family violence
- Feelings of guilt and/or self blame
- Difficulty at school and learning can be compromised
- Use of hostile aggression in a competitive manner
- Increased risk for bullying and/or being bullied
- May have fewer friends
- Could experience headaches/stomachaches
- Believing harmful messages about gender roles

What features of family violence may be the most distressing for school-aged children?

- Realizing that their parent may be unable to keep them safe
- Understanding that their parent is sad or upset between incidents
- Worry that their parent may be hurt or injured
- Worry what will happen to them if their parent is seriously injured or dies
- Worry about what might happen to their abusive parent
- Worry that they themselves may be injured in the next incident
- Noise that keeps them awake at night can affect their school performance
- Anxiety about the next incident
- Worry about people outside the home finding out
- Worry about changing schools and losing touch with friends if the family has to move

Remember: Children may be desperate to see their parents as “good” and kind, even if they are perpetrators of abuse. Due to this, some children may become defensive when others are critical of their parent’s behaviour.

What you can do to help:

- **Support their school success**
- **Encourage fun, pro-social activities with their peers**



Teenagers

Adolescence is a challenging stage for both parents and teens. There are many developments that take place, including physical and intellectual changes. Teens are drawn closer to their peer group and how they are perceived by others is very important. While gaining more independence, they still need guidance and supervision.

Teens who experience family violence can be more likely to intervene now that they are physically larger. This can put them at risk of injuries. Intervening can also put teens at risk of being arrested for assault. They may:

- Have difficulties at school
- Engage in risky behaviours, such as unprotected sex, substance use
- Fight, bully others
- Have conflicts with law, or become depressed or withdrawn

Teens who experience family violence may feel:

- Embarrassment, a need for privacy, and a need for others to view their family as typical or “normal”
- Responsibility for taking care of their parent and/or siblings
- Angry at either or both of their parents
- Concern for their parent’s wellbeing
- Vengeful towards their abusive parent or relief if they are no longer in the home
- Worry that their parent may allow the perpetrator back into the home or that they will begin dating someone equally abusive

Teens have access to a wider range of coping strategies than younger children. However, some coping/survival strategies, while effective at resolving immediate concerns, have destructive eventual outcomes.

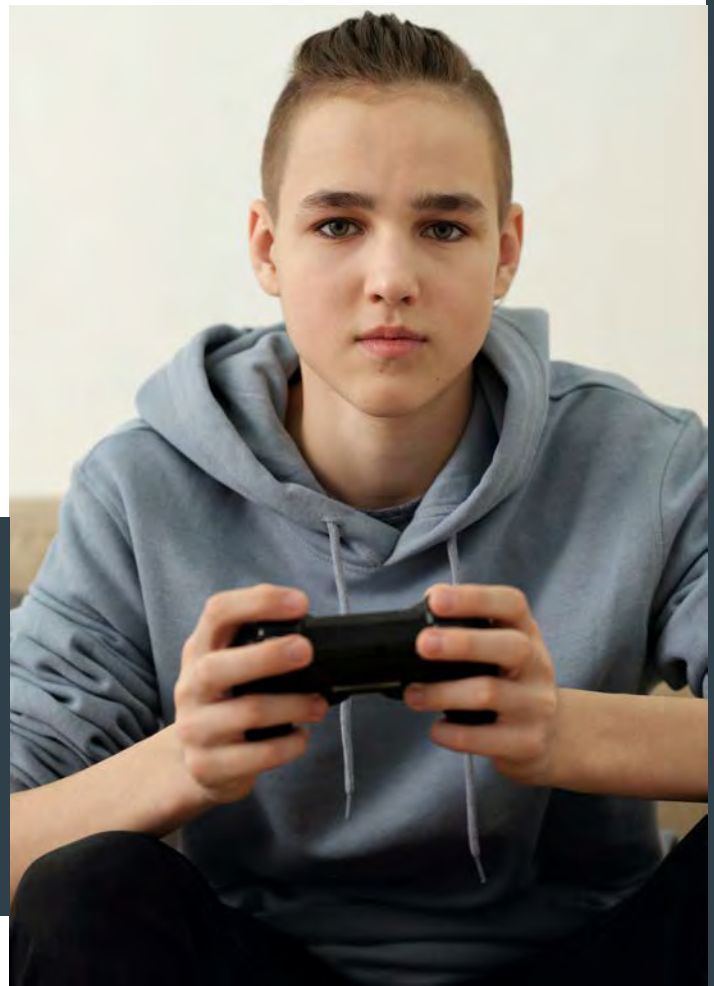
Such as:

- Running away
- Using substances such as drugs or alcohol
- Harming oneself

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP:

- Ensure your teen has access to support resources (such as the KID’S HELP PHONE: 1-800-668-6868 or text: 686868)

Remember: You may meet teenagers who are victims of child abuse, witnesses to domestic violence, perpetrators of abuse in the home, or who are in abusive dating relationships. Some are all four. All deserve support, advocacy, and access to resources.



How might family violence impact typical development?

- Being put in a caretaking role in their family
- Premature independence
- Skills for respectful communication may be poor
- Transition to adolescence may be more difficult and complicated
- Education may be affected
- May leave family home earlier
- May use increased size to impose will with physical intimidation or aggression
- May experience shame about their family's experiences and due to stigma about family violence
- May use high-risk behaviours to impress peers and/or as coping strategies
- May increase time away from home
- View of self may be distorted
- May experience an eating disorder
- May fear being abused or being abusive in intimate relationships, especially during conflicts
- May avoid intimacy
- May seek out intimacy and/or parenthood at a young age as an escape and to create their own support system
- May begin to see everyone as either victim or perpetrator

Examples of What Teenagers May Think or Feel

SADNESS	Why is this happening again?
CONFUSION	Why doesn't [parent] just kick them out?
CONCERN	[Parent] is going to get really hurt someday
FRUSTRATION	I have some problems too, but no one seems to care
ISOLATION	I can't talk to anyone about this
GUILT	I could have done something to prevent this
FEAR	They might turn on me or hurt me next
ANXIETY	Is this what my future relationships will be like?
EMBARRASSMENT	Other families don't do this/the neighbours will hear
RESIGNATION	This is never going to stop
VENGEFUL	I wish they would die or get hit by a bus
WORTHLESSNESS	If they really cared about me, they would stop this
HELPLESSNESS	There is nothing I can do to help my [parent]
RESPONSIBILITY	I have to protect my younger siblings from this situation
DISAPPOINTMENT	Why does [parent] let them treat us so badly?
PANIC	How will we afford to eat if [parent] leaves them?

How might violence shape normal development?

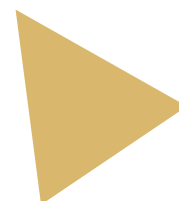
KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT	POTENTIAL IMPACT OF FAMILY VIOLENCE
Sense of self and independence	Children may grow up quickly or act in care-taking roles. Developing respectful communication or negotiation may be difficult in families with conflict. Higher rates of school drop-out, or leaving home at a younger age
Physical changes brought on by puberty	May try to stop violence; may use increased size to impose will with physical intimidation or aggression
Increased peer group influence and desire for acceptance	Possibly more embarrassed by family resulting in shame, secrecy, insecurity; might use high risk behaviours to impress peers (e.g., theft, drugs); may increase time away from the home; may engage in negative strategies to avoid or cope with violence and its stigma, for example drug use or aggressive behaviour
Self-worth more strongly linked to view of physical attractiveness	Self-esteem may be distorted by abuser's degradation of other parent and/or child maltreatment; may experience eating disorders or other difficulties with body acceptance
Dating raises issues of sexuality, intimacy, relationship skills	May have difficulty establishing healthy relationships; may fear being abused or being abusive in intimate relationships, especially when conflict arises; may avoid intimacy or prematurely seek intimacy and child bearing to escape and create own support system
Impacts on reasoning and world view	"All or nothing" interpretations of experiences may be learned and compete with greater capacity to see "shades of grey" (e.g., everyone is a victim or a perpetrator); this style of processing information may be intensified by experiences of child maltreatment; may be predisposed towards attitudes and values associated with violence and/or victimization
Increased influence by media	Possibly more influenced by negative media messages that depict violent behaviour, or gender role stereotypes



Facts and figures

Abuse often occurs privately in the home. This can make it difficult to obtain accurate statistics.

- In 2019, there were 183 reports of violence in relationships in PEI.
 - 50% of reports resulted in charges being laid.
- In 2018, 92 children and adolescents (0-17 years old) were victims of family violence reported to the police in PEI.
- Approximately 60% of callers to PEI's Rape/Sexual Assault Crisis Centre are adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.
- How do we learn about family violence?
 - Anonymous telephone surveys
 - Case reviews of those reported or discovered by police
 - Case reviews of family violence resulting in homicide
 - Speaking with survivors of family violence



Coping and survival strategies of young people

When faced with a stressful or traumatic situation, young people find ways to cope. Strategies can be ways of thinking, feeling, or acting. Some strategies may be helpful in the moment but destructive in the long run. Some examples of coping strategies:

Mental blocking or disconnecting emotionally can include:

- Numbing emotions or rejecting thoughts
- Disassociating or “tuning out” from a thought or memory
- Using substances such as drugs or alcohol to numb their feelings

Fantasizing can include:

- Thinking about revenge on an abuser
- Imagining the abuser being harmed
- Imagining a different, happier life
- Hoping to be rescued by a real person or super hero
- Suicidal thoughts

Physical avoidance can include:

- Leaving the location of violence
- Avoiding going back to the home
- Running away from home

Seeking intimacy or acceptance can include:

- Associating with peers who also engage in destructive behaviour
- Becoming intimate at a younger age out of a need for affection
- Trying to become a parent at a younger age to create their own family/to have someone to love them unconditionally

Caretaking can include:

- Protecting siblings or parent from danger
- Nurturing siblings or parent through a role-reversal

Reaching out for help can include:

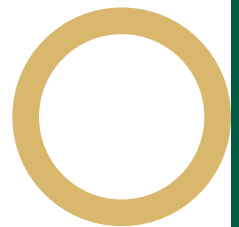
- Telling someone outside the home about their experiences
- Calling the police

Self-harm is often a desperate cry for help. It can include:

- Suicidal thoughts
- Harming oneself physically
- Lashing out aggressively, getting into fights

Re-directing emotions into beneficial activities:

- Excelling academically
- Playing sports
- Engaging creatively: journaling, writing, drawing, etc.



Trying to predict, explain, prevent, or control the behaviour of an abuser

- Thinking “Mommy/Daddy has been bad” or “I have been bad” or “Mommy/Daddy is stressed out about work”
- Thinking “I can stop the violence by changing my behaviour” or “I can predict it”
- Trying to be a perfect child
- Lying to cover up negative things (such as a bad grade) to avoid receiving criticism or abuse, and/or to avoid causing family stress





Roles children may assume in a family with violence

In every family, we adopt or are given “roles” we actively or unconsciously play. Family violence can be a secretive, confusing, dangerous situation in which to live; roles that are assigned in families with violence reflect the ways each person adapts or copes with this. Examples of family roles can include: the “baby” of the family, the prized child who can do no wrong, the responsible one everyone relies on, or the “black sheep” who does not fit in and is expected to dissappoint others.

Key points about roles:

- A role may be imposed or it can be assumed
- Children can play more than one role in their family
- Children may use their roles as a way to cope with family violence
- Even when the family becomes safe, children may keep playing their roles out of habit
- Roles assigned by perpetrators of abuse can lead to guilt and grief, especially after they leave the home

Examining family roles helps us understand:

- How a child interprets/cope with violence so we can intervene effectively
- That each child in the same family can experience the violence differently
- How a child might think/feel when the abuser is no longer in the home
- How tension can occur between siblings or between the parent and child

Children who adopt a caretaker role may have difficulty assuming a typical child role when expected. The “abuser’s ally” may take up the role of the now-absent abuser. The “scapegoat” child may feel responsibility for the marital break-up. The “perfect child” may be impatient with siblings who misbehaved or otherwise “triggered” abuse by the abuser. Assessing the role of each child can be helpful when families continue to struggle with conflict even after the abuser has left the home. Role identities formed in childhood can continue into adulthood.

Examples of roles played by children who have experienced family violence:

- Caretaker
 - Acts as a parent/caregiver to siblings and/or parent
 - May oversee household responsibilities
 - May help keep siblings safe during incidents of violence and comfort them afterwards
- Victim’s Confidant
 - Privy to the victim’s feelings, concerns, and plans
 - Their recollections may serve as a “reality check” for the victim if the abuser minimizes or lies about the incident
- Abuser’s Confidant
 - Treated better by abuser
 - May hear about the abuser’s justifications for abuse
 - May be asked to report back about the victim’s behaviour and be rewarded for doing so
- Abuser’s Ally
 - Co-opted to assist in perpetrating abuse
- “Perfect” Child
 - Tries to prevent incidents by actively addressing the issues that they perceive to be causing them (such as never arguing or rebelling, getting good grades, etc.)
- Referee
 - Mediates and tries to keep the peace
- Scapegoat
 - Identified as the cause of the family’s issues
 - Blamed for tension between parents
 - Their behaviour is used to justify the family violence
 - *Often, the child assigned this role is vulnerable or perceived as different (may have special needs, be a step-child to the abuser, etc.)

Support Services

Support services may vary depending on your location, but listed below are common types of services that could be available to you.

ADVOCATES

- Advocacy agencies can provide confidential counselling, support, and assistance in accessing the legal system.

CRISIS LINES

- Your local crisis line can be found in the telephone directory.
- Some areas have crisis lines specifically for victims of family violence.

SHELTERS

- Emergency shelters, transition houses, safe houses, and second-stage housing facilities are located throughout Canada.
- Visit sheltersafe.ca to find one near you.
- Visit nacafv.ca for culturally relevant Indigenous shelter support.

CHILD PROTECTION AGENCIES

- These organizations investigate and intervene when a child is experiencing neglect or abuse.
- Interventions vary depending on the specific situation, but can be a source of guidance and support when appropriate.

FAMILY-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

- These organizations can provide services such as play therapy, parenting guidance/support, and family counselling.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Law enforcement can lay charges for crimes such as assault or criminal harassment.
- They can also assist in establishing protection orders, keeping the peace during retrieval of essential items from the home, and connecting victims with a shelter or other services.

VICTIM SERVICES

- These services assist victims of crime navigate the legal system.

PROGRAMS FOR PERPETRATORS OF ABUSE

- These programs can assist self-referred or court-ordered participants.



**This resource guide is made possible through
funding from The Canadian Women's Foundation**