

What is the Impact of Domestic and Family Violence?

Domestic and family violence impacts on children and families in many and varied ways.

It is important to highlight:

- Children are not ‘exposed’ or ‘witnesses’ to domestic and family violence. These words do not capture how a man’s violence and control against a mother, female carer or family member permeates the child’s entire being. They experience direct and lasting harm.
- Domestic and family violence can impact every aspect of a child’s life — from how they experience each day, to their self-esteem and their own relationships.
- Domestic and family violence can lead to other forms of abuse and heighten the risk of childhood death.
- Women and children resist violence. Resistance comes in many forms. Sometimes it is easy to see, other times it is in thoughts or small acts which often go unnoticed.
- A mother’s or female carer’s parenting practices, bond and attachment to her children are impacted by domestic and family violence. This effect may continue even once the violence has ended. It can lead to other risks for the child.

Go to the fact sheet [Domestic and Family Violence](#) for more information about what domestic and family violence is, how it is perpetrated and who the victims commonly are.

Why do we talk about ‘men’ and ‘women’ when it comes to domestic and family violence?

‘While domestic and family violence affects both women and men, it is violence perpetrated by men against women and children that makes up the overwhelming majority of domestic and family violence in Australia. Violence against women is a human rights issue.’

About family and domestic violence from the Australian Human Rights Commission

This fact sheet uses the term ‘men’ and ‘women’, not because men are never victims of domestic and family violence, but because the majority of people you work with who use violence will be men. Their victims will be women and children.

Domestic and family violence also happens in same-sex relationships with the same set of consequences for the children of those couples.

All victims of violence deserve our belief, dignity and respect.

The Impact on Children and their Family or Carers

Living with domestic and family violence and control is a distressing experience for children and their family or carers. The effects can be traumatising, ongoing and long-lasting. They can build up over time and impact on every aspect of children's lives.

“Children’s voices are so not heard, we are so not listening to the plight of children who are caught up in family violence.”

Rosie Batty, 2015 Australian of the Year

Children and young people will be impacted by domestic and family violence if they:

- experience the use of violence and control themselves
- witness the use of violence and control or its consequences
- hear about someone’s experience of violence and control
- play the role of carer, protector, or supporter of someone impacted by violence and control
- live in a home or are regularly in an environment where there is violence and control.

How do Children and Young People Experience Domestic and Family Violence?

Watch this video on [children's perspectives of domestic and family violence](#) from the support and advocacy group, Women’s Crisis Services of Waterloo Region

Children or young people’s experiences of domestic and family violence could include:

- witnessing or hearing the man’s use of violence and control against the child’s female parent, carer or family member, or witnessing her fear at other times
- having to physically hide or run from him

- having to constantly watch themselves around him to try to prevent violence and control
- having to comfort, clean up or take extra responsibilities for siblings, a female parent, carer, or others in the home, during or around violence and control
- being victimised by him for supporting their female parent, carer or family member
- being encouraged by him to participate in the pattern of violence and control toward another
- their needs not being met by their female parent or carer
- their needs not being met by him
- experiencing a bonding and attachment issue with either or both parents or carers during infancy
- having violence and control inflicted on them – people who abuse their partners, ex-partners or family members can also inflict violence and control on children.

How are Children Impacted by Domestic and Family Violence?

When children experience trauma like domestic and family violence, it can impact every part of their lives, including their:

- behaviours
- development
- relationships
- emotions
- learning
- cognitions
- physical health

For more information on how these may manifest, see the [Impacts of Trauma](#) factsheet.

Babies living with a man's violence are at particular risk

Babies born into domestic and family violence during pregnancy or after birth may experience:

- harm in the womb due to violence aimed at the mother's abdomen
- exposure in the womb to alcohol and other drugs used by their mother as a response to the violence

- a higher risk of premature birth
- low birth weight
- a lack of attention and care as the mother distances herself from the baby so as not to be seen as favouring the child over the father or partner
- a mother who is vulnerable to post-natal depression
- difficulties with bonding and attachment
- a learned fear response and hypervigilance to loud noises, to the man entering the room, his voice or sudden movements
- negative impacts on brain functioning due to being in a constant state of alert and stress or having their needs neglected
- the negative attention of the man, which can lead to the physical abuse of the child.

Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness

Children who experience domestic and family violence are at an increased risk of experiencing homelessness. A child may cycle in and out of homelessness as their mother leaves and returns to her violent partner. There are many reasons why women leave and return to their violent partner for e.g. not being able to take their children when leave, leaving their pets behind, possessions, financial and co-parenting obligations, among many other considerations.

Women often compartmentalize the violence of only one aspect of their relationship and may decide to return to the family home.

Often women return because their perception is that although the relationship is abusive, the rewards outweigh the costs of separation. For e.g.: leaving without their children and staying in a refuge versus staying in the abusive relationship in her own home and have access to the children.

Other reasons for returning to an abuser include inadequate assistance from formal support systems or law enforcement, child custody and legal issues, as well as human factors such as difficulty breaking the emotional bond with the abuser or disrupting social networks.

Read Wardaugh's [paper on women and homelessness](#).

A child who relocates to a refuge with their mother may find themselves living in a communal situation with other families experiencing trauma. Although refuges can

provide physical safety, many children find the move to a refuge disruptive and chaotic. During this time, a child may also need to keep secrets about where they are living.

The children's domestic abuse wheel below gives further examples about how violence impacts children.



Some examples of what children and young people might say about experiencing domestic and family violence include:

- I need to look after my sister, so she doesn't get hurt.
- I always feel scared about what he will say or do. I can never relax.
- I've seen mum/my carer being hurt, punched, kicked, hit and hair pulled.
- He gets mad if mum/she gives me attention.
- I'm not allowed to speak to anyone about it, so I don't speak very much to anyone.
- We don't have enough money to eat, to buy clothes or to get to a safe place.

- I've been told it's my fault; I feel guilty and ashamed.
- I feel confused; sometimes he's nice and we have fun.
- I'm worried I might be like him when I grow up.
- I don't think I want to have a partner when I grow up. I'm scared they will hurt me.

How are Young People Impacted by Domestic and Family Violence?

Even when they are not experiencing violence directly, exposure to violence puts teenagers at risk. They may engage in risk-taking or self-medicating behaviour; this is often to block out bad memories or numb emotional pain. Trying to stay away from the home may put them in unsafe situations. Having to take on adult responsibilities for themselves or younger family members can create emotional and psychological burdens. When a young person is no longer living in the home, they carry the trauma of domestic and family violence.

A teenager may respond to these impacts of violence by experiencing:

- anger, aggression and lashing out
- trouble sleeping, nightmares, bed wetting and chronic tiredness
- anxiety, depression, and panic
- alcohol or drug misuse
- self-harming behaviour
- difficulties with school and disengaging from school
- avoidance of social situations or avoiding home.

How are Parent or Carer Victims Impacted by Domestic and Family Violence?

The parent or carer may:

- Change the way they parent in front of the violent parent to avoid more violence and anger
- Be distant and not able to engage with a child as much as they would normally be, due to the stress of the abuse
- Be less able to meet a child's needs, because they are experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, and isolation

- use harsh discipline due to the stress of the domestic and family violence, which means not only is a child witnessing the violence, they can also be subject to domestic and family violence.

Research into mothering and domestic violence finds that some children say the relationship with their mothers improves as a consequence of the violence while others blame their mother for the family splitting up or for putting up with the violence for so long. The mother-child relationship can particularly suffer if children imitate the behaviours of violent men.

How the mother or female carer and child respond to the violence will also shape their relationship. Often they may both feel silence is the safest response. This silence may impact on their ability to understand each other's needs and to understand what each other knows about the violence. This lack of mutual knowledge may affect the bond between them. In this way, you can also begin to see how violence can be a secret both within the family itself, as well as to the outside world.

How should I Respond to Domestic and Family Violence?

- Avoid language that mutualises the violence – be clear about violence and who is responsible
- Recognise, value and acknowledge the ways women and children resist violence – to support their dignity and self-esteem, reduce feelings of self-blame, and for you to develop a complete picture about the safety of the children in the home
- Talk to men who use violence – to engage him in the process of becoming accountable for his violence and control
- Give a child the opportunity to feel supported, listened to and seen
- Show women we know they think about the child's safety and are there to help them to keep the child safe.

For more information on these approaches, see [How Should I Respond to Domestic and Family Violence?](#)

References

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