

Talking to Children about domestic violence and abuse

A guide for parents
and practitioners

Compiled by Dinah Mears for
the ADVA partnership.
Reproduced by Bristol PCT
courtesy of ADVA partnership

Children and Domestic Abuse

If you have experienced domestic abuse, you will probably have tried to protect your children as much as possible - perhaps you hope that they do not know it is happening. However, in most families where there are children and where domestic abuse is happening, the children will be aware of this even if they do not talk to you about it.

Children can witness violence in many different ways, for example they may be in the same room and get caught up in the violence trying to make it stop, they may be in a different room but be able to hear, or see injuries following an incident of violence. They may even be made to be physically or verbally abusive toward the victim of the domestic abuse themselves.

Children are entirely dependent upon the adults around them and if they do not feel safe in their own homes, this can have many negative physical and emotional effects upon them.

This leaflet will help you to be able to talk to children about domestic abuse, and be able to help and support them.

For Parents

These ideas are to help you support your children. Children who live with domestic violence feel:

Powerless:

Because they can't stop the violence

Confused:

Because it doesn't make sense

Angry:

Because it shouldn't be happening

Guilty:

Because they think they've done something wrong

Sad:

Because it's a loss

Afraid:

Because they may be hurt, they may lose someone they love, others may find out

Alone:

Because they think it's happening only to them

What children need to hear about domestic violence

It's not okay • It's not your fault • It must be scary for you • I will listen to you • You can tell me how you feel; it is important • I'm sorry you had to see/hear it • You do not deserve to have this in your family • I will help you to stay safe • There is nothing you could have done to prevent/change it • We can talk about what to do to keep you safe if it happens again. (For example, staying in your room, going to neighbours, etc.) • You are an individual and can choose not to fight or hurt people.

How to talk about your ex-partner

Speak about your "ex" in a general way • Try to avoid "name calling" , challenge behaviour not the person • Your child may still love the abusive parent and may be confused by feeling this way. This could be hard for you too! But it will really help your child if she/he is able to express these feelings.

Ideas for helping children when they've witnessed domestic violence

Talk about it with them when they are ready • Listen to them • Talk about their feelings • Show understanding • Let them know it's not their fault • Let them talk, if they want to • Let them know you will try to keep them safe/act in a way that is safe • Let them know the violence is not okay • Acknowledge it's hard/scary for them • Accept that they may not be willing or able to talk about it right away • Always act in a way that is non-threatening and non-violent with your kids • Take them to counselling if they need it • Let them be children and try to share your own worries with another adult.

Set limits respectfully if your child behaves in a violent or abusive way.

How Denial affects Children

Child learns that the violence is normal • Child is afraid to talk about the violence • Child is confused, doesn't understand • Blames her/himself • Learns to deny and not to talk about their own feelings • Makes them feel like they are crazy • Makes them feel lonely, isolated from their friends • Learns that it's not okay to ask about the violence or discuss it • Gives the child unrealistic beliefs about the causes of violence.

It's a lot scarier for children when no one ever talks to them about the violence

Examples of Ways of Overcoming Obstacles

Be patient. Don't push it. Try another time. They usually hear you anyway • Acknowledge that it may be uncomfortable for you to talk about the violence. Try to get more comfortable by talking to someone you trust • Acknowledge that it may be scary for you to remember the violence. It's scary for your kids too. Once you start talking, it may feel less scary • Acknowledge that saying that you don't have time is probably because it's difficult, or you don't feel capable of talking to your child about it.

Acknowledge that it may be uncomfortable for you to talk about the violence

For Practitioners:

Benefits of Talking to Children about the Violence

Children feel safer • They learn that violence isn't their fault
• They learn that violence isn't an okay way to solve problems
• It helps them to feel cared for, and understood • Children learn that it's OK to talk about feelings

Emotional Needs of Children Who Have Witnessed Domestic Violence

	Child's emotion	Child needs to:
Fear	Fear of those they love in their own home, where they should feel most safe	Be able to talk to someone they trust about their feelings; learn ways to keep themselves safe and to know they have a plan for what to do when there is violence; have a feeling of control in the situation (I will go over to my neighbours when it happens)
Anger	Anger at the abuser, or at the survivor for not leaving the situation	Learn that it's okay to feel both anger and love towards someone; know that it is okay to love their parent even when they hate the behaviour they see; know they are not bad if they love the abuser
Confusion	Feeling they need to take sides (e.g. if I love Mum, I can't love Dad and vice versa)	Know that it is okay to love both parents at the same time

	Child's emotion	Child needs to:
Loss	Loss of a healthy, safe family, loss of one parent if they leave (or the constant threat of this); loss of comfort in the home	Talk about feelings with someone they trust; develop a support system of extended family or friends outside the home
Guilt/ty Responsibility	Guilt for causing the violence, or not stopping it; feeling responsible for preventing the violence and taking care of Mum/Dad or other family members	Understand that the violence is not their fault; and that it is an adult problem for the adults to work out
Feeling life is unpredictable	Feeling vulnerable on a daily basis, with no power to control what will happen	Find areas in their lives where they can have control and make plans and decisions; create a safety plan with someone they trust; create some structure and stability whenever possible creating daily routines that provide a sense of control.

Talking to children about Domestic Violence is very difficult for most people and takes a lot of work, patience and commitment.

Other Titles

There is an accompanying leaflet to this one titled "Parenting during and after domestic violence and abuse" which may be of use.

Useful Contacts

National Domestic Abuse Helpline

Free confidential 24 hr advice line 0808 200 0247

Berkshire Women's Aid

0118 950 4003

Parentline - National helpline for carers of children

0808 800 2222

Men's advice line

0808 801 0327

Childline Free national 24hr helpline

0800 11 11

NSPCC

0808 800 5000

The Hideout

www.thehideout.org.uk

Berkshire East & South Bucks Women's Aid

Support to male and female victims of domestic abuse

01753 549865 or 0800 085 2654

Kinara Asian Women's Service

01753 592988

Victim Support

01344 411411

Reading Borough Council

01189 390 900

West Berkshire Council

01635 42400

Wokingham Borough Council

0118 974 6000

Bracknell Forest Council

01344 352000

www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/domesticabuse

Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead

01628 683800

www.rbwmdvf.org.uk

Slough Borough Council

01753 475111

www.slough.gov.uk/services/13358.aspx

Printed originally in June 2007, permission granted to Bristol Primary Care Trust and South Gloucestershire Primary Care Trust for reproduction August 2009.



To request copies of this leaflet or more information, health promoters please contact Berkshire Health Promotion Resources on 01753 638 678 - www.bhps.org.uk/resources