

Children and Domestic Violence

Children, regardless of whether they have experienced abuse directly, are effected by violence in the home. Children who witness abuse display the same emotional responses as children who have been physically and emotionally abused.

Effects of Abuse on Different Age Groups

Age 0-2 Victims of domestic violence may be unable to nurture and care for their infants as they would wish. In response infants may become:

- Detached and unresponsive to adult attention
- Or conversely, inconsolable, crying and fussing incessantly in response to the stress
- Sleep disturbances and eating disorders are also common

Age 2-6 Toddlers may experience:

- Sleeping and eating disorders
- Somatic Complaints such as stomach aches and headaches
- Separation anxiety
- Nightmares about violence
- Difficulty expressing emotions other than anger

Age 6-12:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Guilt
- Sadness & Depression
- Feelings of Powerlessness

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Any of the following can effect a child in a negative way:

- Sensing an abused parents' or adults' fear
- Hearing the violence
- Being interrogated or asked to help spy on the victim
- Having the abuser attempt to break down the bond between the child and his/her parent
- Being encouraged by the abuser to view the victim in a negative way, their ability, appearance, decisions, etc.
- Being blamed for the violence, (i.e. "If you were better behaved I wouldn't get so angry")
- Being called names and insulted by the abuser
- Being used as a hostage by the abuser to ensure the victim's return home
- Being threatened by the abuser
- Being forced to watch, or participate in assaults
- Having familiar belongings or pets destroyed or harmed
- Being in the middle of the assault, either by accident or in an attempt to protect the victim
- Being a direct victim of physical abuse

Talking to Your Kids About Domestic Violence

Most parents attempt to protect children in the household from witnessing domestic violence. However, it is unlikely that they have been completely sheltered from it. It is best to begin by assuming that your children are aware of the majority of the abuse that is taking place. If they are not talking about it they may believe that it is not allowed. They are also aware of the victim's distress and may keep the silence to avoid adding to their burdens. Assume that the children are scared and need your help. It is up to you to start the conversation.

- Listen carefully and validate the feelings that the children express.
- Accept the range of feelings the child has toward the abuser. Do not defend the abuser when the child is angry and do not get upset with their idealized feelings toward him/her.
- Do not speak negatively about the abuser, only about the abuser's actions.
- Assure the children that the fight was not their fault and that they could not have stopped the abuse. Let them know that the abuser is responsible for his/her own actions and that abuse is a problem for the adults to fix.
- Offer what reassurances you can. Let the children know that you are doing what you can to keep them safe.
- Do not make promises you cannot keep. If you promise that the abuser would never hurt them and you are wrong they will have more difficulty trusting you later.
- Be patient, children may ask the same question multiple times. They are just letting you know that they need reassurance.

**FACTS ABOUT DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN**

- Children under the age of 4 accounted for 76% of child abuse and neglect fatalities in 1997 (Wilson, John J. Safe from the start. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*. Nov. 2000)
- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53% (Wilson, John J.)
- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest for a violent crime as an adult by 38% (Wilson, John J.)
- Approximately 2 million adolescents (12-17) suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder every year due to violent experiences in their past (Wilson, John J.)
- Although many adults believe that they have protected their children from exposure to domestic violence, 80-90% of those children can give detailed descriptions of the violence that took place in their homes (Custody disputes involving domestic violence. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*. 1999).
- Children exposed to abuse are more likely to become abusers themselves.

ATVP
Celebrating 25 Years
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PO BOX 37
1125 NW NYE, SUITE A
PULLMAN, WA 99163
TEL: (509)332-0552
FAX: (509)332-3314



A UNITED WAY AGENCY

PO BOX 8517
627 N. VAN BUREN
MOSCOW, ID 83843
TEL: (208) 882-2490
FAX: (208) 883-1041

Web Address
www.atvp.org

E-Mail Address
home@atvp.org

24-Hour Hotline
Collect Crisis Calls Accepted

This project is supported in-part by the Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration. Distribution supported by the following: (1) Grant No. 2005-WF-AX-0024 awarded by the Office of Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice; grant funds are administered by the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy, Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development, (2) Victim's of Crime Act Sub-grant #KC204400 awarded by the Idaho Council on Domestic Violence and Victim assistance, under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime/Family Violence Prevention and Services Act/ State Domestic Violence Project Account, (3) Winifred L. Stevens Foundation, (4) Moscow/Latah County United Way, (5) Pullman United Way and other governmental and non-governmental sources. The opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the grantor agencies.

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&
Domestic Violence**



Help for victims and
survivors of domestic
violence and
sexual assault

24 hour Crisis Hotline
(509) 332-HELP
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