

Talking to  
**Children**  
about  
domestic  
violence and  
abuse

A guide for parents  
and practitioners

*Compiled by Dinah Mears for  
the ADVA partnership*



# 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 DV:**

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 children 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
<b>Fear</b>	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)
<b>Anger</b>	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
<b>Confusion</b>	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

# Useful Contacts

	Child's emotion	Child needs to
<b>Loss</b>	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
<b>Guilt/ Responsibility</b>	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
<b>Feeling life is unpredictable</b>	Feeling vulnerable on a daily basis, with no power to control about 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.*

## [www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk)

Women's Aid website providing useful information and signposting specifically for children and young people living with domestic violence.

## [www.exeterwomensaid.org.uk](http://www.exeterwomensaid.org.uk)

The Safe Project 01392 667 147 PO Box 219 Exeter EX4 3XQ

This is an Outreach project for girls and young women (*aged 14-25*) who are affected by domestic violence. It covers Exeter, Mid-Devon and East Devon. The Safe Project offers confidential one-to-one support, telephone support, signposting, information and training for agencies and information sessions in schools and youth clubs.

## [www.home-start.org.uk](http://www.home-start.org.uk)

0800 068 6368

## [www.e-parents.org](http://www.e-parents.org)

National Family & Parenting Institute  
430 Highgate Studios, 53-70 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL

## [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk)

One parent Families 0800 0185 026

## [www.raisingkids.co.uk](http://www.raisingkids.co.uk)

## [www.parentingplus.org.uk](http://www.parentingplus.org.uk)

Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222

## [www.urnotalone.com](http://www.urnotalone.com)

Interactive web site for children

## [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

0800 1111 (24 hours a day)

This web site provides information for both children and adults on issues of concern to children. Includes factsheets about different kinds of abuse, bullying, bereavement, and peer pressure. All children and young people in trouble or danger can call for free and confidential advice or just someone to talk to. No problem too big or too small. You don't have to give you name. If you prefer, you can write to them at: *Childline, Free Post 1111, London N1 0BR (no stamp needed)*



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