

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE HURTS CHILDREN



When people think of domestic and family violence, they often think of how much it hurts the adult victim. It's true that domestic and family violence is most often characterised by violent, abusive or intimidating behavior by a man towards a woman. But what you may not realise is that exposing children to domestic violence affects their physical and emotional health and wellbeing too.

Domestic and family violence was the **most commonly** reported issue to Community Services for children at risk of significant harm in 2010, with over 20,000 reports received.

The impact of domestic and family violence on children is immense and can often affect them for the rest of their lives.

Studies show that exposure to domestic and family violence can affect children in the following ways:

- ongoing anxiety and depression
- eating and sleeping disturbances
- physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches
- difficulties in managing stress
- trouble forming positive relationships
- aggressive behaviour with peers
- difficulties with school attendance and performance
- difficulties in concentration and attention.

Adolescents exposed to domestic and family violence are more likely to suffer from depression, to be homeless, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to engage in risk-taking behaviours. Studies have shown that young men who witness domestic and family violence are also more likely to use controlling and manipulative behaviour in other relationships.

Sometimes being exposed to domestic and family violence isn't just a matter of witnessing it. Children and adolescents are often physically hurt during violent episodes, either accidentally or deliberately.

The message is – domestic and family violence hurts children too

To get the help you and your children need, contact:

- The Domestic Violence Line for help with what to do when you are being abused. It is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1800 656 463

- LifeCare for services for women, men and children, including perpetrator groups: 1300 130 225
- Kids HelpLine for a free 24-hour counseling service for young people aged 5-25 years: 1800 551 800

Possible affects of domestic and family violence on children by age:

- An **unborn child** may be injured in the womb due to violence aimed at the mother's abdomen or suffer from exposure to drugs or alcohol that a mother may use to cope with stress.
- An **infant** exposed to violence may have difficulty developing attachments with their caregivers and in extreme cases suffer from failure to thrive.

Domestic and family violence hurts children

- A **preschooler's** development may be affected and they can suffer from eating and sleep disturbances.
- A **school-aged child** may struggle with peer relationships, academic performance, and emotional stability.
- An **adolescent** may be at higher risk of substance misuse or of either perpetrating or becoming a victim of dating violence.

Family roles of children and young people living with domestic and family violence

Children and young people living with domestic and family violence can develop different roles within the family.

The caretaker: The child or young person acts as a parent to younger brothers and sisters and even looks after the mother. They might help to keep the victims safe when the violence happens and comfort them afterwards.

The victim's confidant: The child or young person knows the adult victim's feelings, concerns, and plans.

The perpetrator's confidant: The child or young person might be treated better by the perpetrator and might be told that the victim deserves the abuse. The child or young person might be asked to report back on the victim's behavior and be rewarded for doing so.

Abuser's assistant: The child or young person may be forced to take part in abusing the victim verbally or to participate in physical abuse.

The perfect child: The child or young person thinks that their behaviour is causing the violence. The child/young person tries to be good, believing that this will stop the violence from happening.

The referee: The child or young person tries to keep the peace. They may try to physically intervene when the violence is happening.

The scapegoat: The child or young person is told that they are the cause of the problems. They might be told that they are to blame for the poor relationship between their parents or that if they behaved better there would be no violence.

(Baker and Cunningham, 2004).

