

# Family Violence Hurts Kids Too



*Information for mothers and other  
people concerned about children  
who witness family violence*



**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & INCEST  
RESOURCE CENTRE**

# Family violence and children

Many women are subjected to violence and abuse from their husbands or partners.

Family violence is much more than physical abuse. It includes:

- ❖ emotional abuse (such as manipulation, isolation, put-downs, mind games)
- ❖ keeping control of the finances
- ❖ sexual abuse
- ❖ threats of violence and revenge
- ❖ property damage, smashing belongings
- ❖ harming pets.

Family violence is an abuse of the intimate, trusting and safe relationship that a family should provide.

*Victoria Police attend over 20,000 "family incidents" each year. Children are present at more than half of those incidents. (Victoria Police Crime Statistics)*

Many children and young people in Australia live in a family where a parent is being abused. These children grow up in a "climate of fear". In most cases they will be in the same room or the next room when the violence occurs.

Until recently the effects on children who witness violence have not been fully acknowledged by the community, because the violence has not been seen as direct abuse of the children. In this way the effects on children have been easy to minimise or attribute to other causes.

*There is also increasing evidence that physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children is more likely to occur in a home where one adult is violent towards the other than in non-violent homes.*

## Family violence hurts kids too

*"When the yelling starts, I have to take my little sister upstairs and shut the door."*

Many children who witness family violence have higher levels of behavioural and emotional problems than other children. The impact can vary according to their age, sex, and role in the family. Some children feel responsible for the violence. They may think they are making things easier for their mother by:

- ❖ appearing to cope with the situation
- ❖ trying to be quieter
- ❖ not saying how they feel.

While many children may escape without physical injury, they may bear emotional scars which can last a lifetime.

*"I can't bring my friends home after school any more, in case dad's in a bad mood."*

## What can we do for children?

*"My tummy was always in a knot but now it isn't."*

- ❖ Accept that an abusive family environment harms children.
- ❖ Place the responsibility for the violence with the offending parent.
- ❖ Support the abused parent, which can improve her capacity to protect her children.
- ❖ **Most importantly, children who witness family violence need to know they are not forgotten.**



## The effects on children who witness family violence may include:

- ❖ feelings of fear, anger, depression, grief, shame, despair and distrust
- ❖ a sense of powerlessness
- ❖ physical reactions such as stomach cramps, headaches, sleeping and eating difficulties, frequent illness
- ❖ slowed developmental capacities such as poor school performance, low self-esteem, difficulty relating to peers
- ❖ substance abuse, glue sniffing
- ❖ behavioural problems such as running away from home, aggressive language and behaviour
- ❖ learning that violence is a legitimate means for obtaining control of a situation, or for resolving conflict.

*"Sometimes dad locks all the doors and hides the phone, so we can't get out or talk to anyone."*

## Ways you can help children who have witnessed family violence

- ❖ Tell them that the violence is not their fault.
- ❖ Give them an opportunity to talk about the violence.
- ❖ Help make a safety plan which they can follow.
- ❖ Let them know that others have had similar experiences.
- ❖ Support and assist the mother to protect both herself and her children.
- ❖ Ring and discuss the situation with a domestic violence worker and/or the Child Protection Unit to find out how else you can help the children.

# Information for mothers

## You are not to blame

The prevailing community attitude that mothers should be "perfect" and almost wholly responsible for their children's well-being can lead to blaming the mother even when the father is the one who is violent. You may be feeling responsible for your partner's violence, and for the impact his behaviour has on the kids.

**Remember, you are not to blame for his violence and you are not responsible for the effect that his abuse of you has on your children.**

## "He hits me, but he's good to the kids"

By abusing you, the children's mother, he is not being "good to the kids". Showing attention or affection to his children cannot make up for denying them (through his violence) their right to a safe and happy childhood. Your role as a parent may be much more difficult because you are not treated with respect.

## You need help so you can help your children

No matter how caring a parent you are, at some level your ability to do your best for your children will be affected by your partner's violence. This is also a time when your children are likely to need your care and attention more than ever.

**Until you can get the help you need to make yourself safe, your children cannot feel safe or happy knowing that their mother is being hurt.**

*"Sometimes we miss school because we have to stay home to look after mum when dad hits her."*

## Difficult choices

Concern for your children is probably a major factor (if not the major factor) in deciding whether to separate, as it is for many women in abusive relationships. It is likely to be confusing and difficult for you to weigh up which situation is best for your children. Dilemmas include:

- ❖ "How can I take them away from their home, their pets, their school, the dad they love?"
- ❖ "He says he will get custody of the kids."
- ❖ "Can I offer the kids anything better?"
- ❖ "Are we in more danger if we leave?"

*"I still love dad but I wish he wouldn't shout at my mum."*

# Where to get help

## Statewide services

### **Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service**

(03) 9373 0123 or toll free 1800 015 188 (24 hours, 7 days a week) Provides support, information and referrals to safe accommodation

### **Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service**

(03) 9898 3145 (9.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday)  
Provides support and information to immigrant women in their primary language

### **Child Protection Crisis Line**

131 278 (24 hours, 7 days a week)  
Receives notifications and investigates allegations of child abuse

### **Kid's Help Line**

Toll free 1800 55 1800 (24 hours)  
Counselling line for children aged 5 to 18  
Email and web counselling [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

### **Police**

000 for urgent attendance throughout Victoria  
For non-urgent police assistance contact your local police.

### **Translating and Interpreting Service**

131 450 (24 hours, Australia wide)  
1300 655 082 to book an on-site interpreter

### **Victims Referral and Assistance Scheme**

9603 9797 (24 hours) or toll-free 1800 819 817 (8.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday except public holidays)  
Support and information about entitlements for anyone who has suffered physical injury, emotional trauma or loss because of a criminal act.  
Website [www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime)

### **Centre Against Sexual Assault**

After hours statewide service 9349 1766 or toll-free 1800 806 292 (5.30pm to 9.00am Monday to Friday; all day weekends and public holidays)  
Confidential counselling for survivors of sexual assault and non-offending family members.

### **Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre**

9486 9866 (9am to 5pm Monday to Friday)  
9417 1255 (TTY) Website [www.dvirc.org.au](http://www.dvirc.org.au)  
For telephone numbers for domestic violence services, counsellors and support groups closest to you. DVIRC also provides books for loan, pamphlets and other information. Website for young people experiencing family violence [www.burstingthebubble.com](http://www.burstingthebubble.com)

# Domestic Violence Outreach Services

Provide information & practical support. Contact times usually within business hours.

## **Eastern Metropolitan region:**

Ringwood 9870-5939

## **Northern Metropolitan region:**

Heidelberg 9457-5087

## **Inner South region:**

St Kilda 9536-7720

## **West Metropolitan region:**

Footscray 9689-9588

## **Southern Metropolitan region:**

Frankston (main office) 9781-4658

## **Barwon South West region:**

Geelong 5224-2903

Warrnambool 5561-1934

Hamilton 5571-1778

Camperdown 5593-1370

Portland 5521-7937

## **Gippsland region:**

Sale 5144-7777

Leongatha 5662-4502

Warragul 5623-4168

Morwell 5134-8555

## **Grampians region:**

Horsham 5382-6669

Ballarat 5333-3666

Stawell 5358-3700

Ararat 5352-2555

## **Hume region:**

Wodonga (02) 6056-1550

Shepparton 5831-2012

Broadford 5784-1306

Wangaratta 5721-8277

## **Loddon Mallee region:**

Mildura 5021-2130

Bendigo 5443-4945

Swan Hill 5033-1899