

# Children & Youth Advocate Manual

## Section 2: Childhood Domestic Violence



### Introduction & Importance

Trauma is an extreme stress, such as a threat to one's safety or emotional well-being, which overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Children and youth are particularly vulnerable to trauma exposure because their brains are still developing. Although it is helpful understanding how children are exposed to domestic abuse, the externalized and internalized effects, the effects across all domains of a child's life, and the dynamics of domestic abuse; there is not a normal or typical reaction for a child. An individual may exhibit some, all or none of the reactions which is why it is so important to comprehend this material **AND** be flexible with each child.

### Common Misunderstandings

The following common misunderstandings are just some of the ways children & youth have viewed violence and gives a glimpse of why they might feel that way. As advocates we must recognize these misunderstandings and work with children and youth to help them heal from the traumas they have experienced.

*"They were both hitting and yelling at each other, why isn't [caregiver] getting in trouble?"*

Children often see BOTH caregivers as equal parties in the violence

*"If I would have/have not done [XYZ] they would not have started fighting."*

Children perceive the violence as their fault.

*"If I try really hard to be good, they won't fight again"*

They may feel that they can control their caregivers' behaviors.

*"They were only yelling at each other..."*

Children might believe that the protective caregiver is not hurt if there are no physical signs of injury.

*"They only punched the wall, not even near them"*

Children might not be aware of the underlying threats in the violence.

*"They stopped crying right away can we go home now?"*

Children might think that the protective caregiver is no longer upset or in danger if they are not crying.

*"They've stopped fighting and are talking again!"*

Children may believe that once the fighting stops, everything will go back to their perception of normal.

### Short Term Effects

Below is a small list of short term effects or immediate reactions from childhood domestic violence that children and youth may exhibit. Knowing these signs can aid in working with the caregiver to help with behavior modification techniques and with the child in a more trauma informed way.

**Anxiety, depression, aggression** - perhaps reenactment of the witnessed aggression

**Avoidance** – evade from activities to avoid reminders of trauma

**Behavioral issues** - fighting, oppositional behavior, tantrums, etc.

**Feelings of guilt or self-blame** – from the violence happening

**Hyperarousal** – reacting strongly to ANY stimuli

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**Physical complaints** – stomachaches, headaches, etc.

**Poor academic performance** - Impaired concentration; difficulty completing homework; lower scores on language, motor, or social skills

**Re-experiencing** – Intrusive and repeated thoughts or body stimulation tied to trauma. Reaction reminders to sights, smells, tastes, sounds, words, things, places, emotions, and/or people

- Similar to PTSD
- Triggers within school
- Sudden ‘tantrums’ can be a reaction to a trauma reminder

**Repetitive talk/play** – revolving around the violence

**Trouble sleeping** – going to sleep, staying asleep, having frequent nightmares, difficulty waking up in the morning, or difficulty staying awake during the day

**Withdrawal** – cut off from ‘usual’ life and other people

**Perfectionism/Overachievement** – hyper focusing on being exactly like others or getting the best grades

**Passiveness/Aggressiveness** – being complacent, agreeing with everything, or not wanting to be seen; being forceful, easily angered over minor inconveniences

**Worry about their caregivers and are afraid to be separated from them** - Children may express their distress through physical symptoms, such as stomach aches or headaches

### Long Term Effects

Long term effects are from repeated, chronic exposure to childhood domestic violence that affect different domains of a person across their lifespan. It is important to remember that any of these symptoms can also be associated with other stress, traumas, or developmental disturbances. The symptoms should be considered in the context of the child’s AND family’s functioning.

**Chronic physical health problems** – autoimmune disease, heart disease, liver disease

**Behavior issues in adolescence** –alcohol and substance use, impulsive acts, and criminal behavior

**Poor mental health issues** – depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, suicidal behaviors, and low self-esteem

**Learned negative lessons on using violence and power** – when violence is linked to expressions of intimacy and affection or victimization by an intimate partner.

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### Risk Factors Affecting Individual Response

The following questions may identify potential reasons for how children and youth may react to domestic violence and intimate partner violence. There are many other risk factors that may play into account that are not listed below, but this list may be a good place to start. Please note that **EVERY** child will perceive the violence they experienced differently no matter the frequency or severity of abuse.

#### *How serious and how frequent is the violence or threat?*

- Was the child physically hurt or put in danger?
- Was it life-threatening?
- Did the child witness the victim in terror?
- Was a weapon used or brandished?
- Was there a serious injury?

#### *What is the child's perception of the violence?*

- A child may perceive the violence as life-threatening even if adults do not. Children often have different perceptions of the violence that the protective caregiver believes or knows about.

#### *What is the child's relationship with the victim and abuser?*

- The relationship and emotional bond between the protective caregiver and abusive caregiver may make for some difficult and conflicting emotions.

#### *What other stress is going on in the child's life?*

- What other traumatic events has the child experienced?
- Was the child a victim of other forms of abuse?
- Has the child recently moved or changed schools where they would have had to leave behind their support systems?
- What mental health challenges is the family facing?

### Protective Factors

Like risk factors these protective factors may identify potential reasons for how children and youth are able to be resilient when faced with trauma. There are many other protective factors that may play into account that are not listed below, but this list may be a good place to start.

Positive relationship with protective caregivers

Access to positive social supports.

- Clubs, sports, group activities, teachers, coaches, mentors, day care providers, etc.

Intellectual development with good attention and social skills.

- Encouraging hobbies that are challenging and enjoyable.

Activities that attracts the praise and admiration of adults and peers.

- To encourage a positive self-esteem and social supports.

High self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- The confidence to do something on their own without paralyzing fear and self-doubt.

Connecting to something bigger than themselves or religious and spiritual affiliations

- Groups that encourage connecting and supporting a community together
- Volunteering

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### Resources

[Children and Domestic Violence: Questions and Answers for Domestic Violence Project Advocates](#) is a fact sheet on the effects of DV exposure on children and youth with information on how advocates and parents can respond in ways that promote resiliency and healing.

[Futures without Violence](#) a national website with immense resources regarding children, youth & teens; engaging men; colleges & universities; global violence prevention; health; leadership & professional development; policy & advocacy; human trafficking; and workplace safety & equity.

[Honor Our Voices](#) is an online training program which presents children's personal experiences of living with violence in their homes through diary entries while providing key issues and promising practices in working with children exposed to domestic violence. The training revolves around the diaries of three children, composites of real life stories and events of children exposed to domestic violence.

[Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children as They Grow](#) (pg. 8, 10-11) by Alison Cunningham & Linda Baker (2007). A resource for anyone looking to understand how children experience violence against their mothers and how those experiences may shape them as they grow, from infancy to adolescence.

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network - Domestic Violence & Children: Questions and Answers for DV Project Advocates](#) (Pg. 4) a factsheet designed for domestic violence project advocates. This factsheet includes helpful information how children react to domestic violence, short and long-term responses to domestic violence, possible reactions to domestic violence, factors that can help children recover and working with parents and their children through domestic violence situations.

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network - How Does Domestic Violence Affect Children Fact Sheet](#) The NCTSN Domestic Violence Collaborative Group's series of fact sheets created for protective caregivers whose children have been affected by domestic violence. The set of 10 fact sheets gets to the heart of the experiences and needs of these children and families, and offers education in support of their resilience and recovery.

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network - Questions and Answers About Domestic Violence](#) (pg. 1-4) Betsy McAlister Groves, MSW, a member of the NCTSN and founder of the Child Witness to Violence Project, answers commonly asked questions about the impact of domestic violence on children.

Needs of Children in Domestic Violence Shelters has information in [Chapter 1: The Impact of Trauma on Children Pages 8-14](#). This is a toolkit to assist Domestic Violence agencies and other service providers to identify and respond to children exposed to domestic abuse.

[Veto Violence - Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect](#) this website contains resources on risk factors, protective factors, and consequences and much more for learning about child abuse and neglect.

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*Please notify the Children & Youth Prevention & Outreach Coordinator, [Cody Warner](#), if ANY of the links are no longer working.*

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