

Choosing Positive Paths

Parenting a toddler who has experienced violence 1.5 to 3 years

Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common. According to Australian statistics (2012), women are most likely to experience violence from a male partner or ex-partner. Three quarters of women who experience family violence are mothers or care for children. Almost half said their children had seen or heard the violence. People caring for a child who has experienced family violence are often worried about how the child is affected.

Children respond to what's going on around them.

For children, experiencing family violence means knowing about, seeing or hearing violence in their home. It also means the child themselves may be hurt, abused or controlled. All forms of violence in the family affect children and are types of child abuse. A child's ability to cope can depend on many things.

You can do a lot to help.

This brochure can help you understand and support children who

have experienced family violence. Most family violence is directed at women so the language used here is for mothers ('you').

However, the information is also helpful for other primary carers – fathers, grandparents, aunts, family friends and foster parents. The phrase 'your child' means 'a child in your care'; 'dad' or 'father' refers to the child's other parent.

This brochure contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on toddlers
- Activities you could try together
- Stages of development

During or after an experience of family violence, your toddler will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. It is common for children to feel:

- Confusion about what is happening and why
- Fear of being hurt or of you being hurt
- Sadness about the violence, changes to the family and their losses
- Anger about what is happening

How toddlers think

Toddlers usually show their feelings through their behaviour. Some use toys or play to act out things they have experienced. Some talk about what they have seen or experienced.

Toddlers are fully dependent on their carer. They usually don't understand why their parents are fighting or why their whole family is not together any more. Toddlers think the whole world revolves around them; they often believe that the problems and the violence are their fault. The way children see the world can be very different to the way adults see things, so it's important to notice how your child is feeling.

Toddlers are 'tuned in' to their mothers and carers and can pick up on their mood. If you can appear to be relaxed and calm for your toddler in your words, tone and actions, your child is more likely to be relaxed. They can learn from you how to calm down when they're upset.



The impact of family violence

Many parents worry that the experience of family violence will affect their child forever. Children need time and support to recover from traumatic situations. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your toddler can begin to heal.

If your child has experienced violence they could:

- Be afraid of the person who has hurt them, you or others
- Be clingy or afraid of new people and situations
- Find it hard to share or play with other children

- Have trouble with speech, movement or memory
- Find it hard to listen, ask for help or show you what they need
- Have problems in their social relationships
- Be a restless sleeper or picky eater
- Return to old behaviour like night-time waking
- Give them simple, truthful explanations and responses
- Tell them the violence is never their fault
- Try to stick to parenting routines - regular play, meal, bath and sleep times
- Be patient; listen to them and watch what they're showing you

Ways you can help your child:

- Give them lots of affection, care and reassurance (hugs, playing, positive words)

Tips

Behaviour and feelings

Parents often worry that their child will copy the violent behaviours they have seen. Sometimes children worry about this too. It's important to discuss these worries with your child. All children need to learn to express their feelings and understand which behaviour is okay and which is not. Reassure your child that it is okay to be angry; it's just not okay to hurt anyone.

Toddlers have a short attention span. If your child is not doing what you ask, try saying it another way or distract them. So if your child is throwing blocks near the window, you could say, 'Please come and help me make something with this play dough'. Talk about actions rather than time, 'We can play after you've finished your fruit'.

Listen to your child and show that you understand things are hard, scary or frustrating for them and notice what makes your child feel happy.

You don't have to hide your feelings. If your child notices or asks questions, it can be good to talk about it together.

The best way for your child to learn about expressing their feelings and worries is to be surrounded by adults - men or women - who provide safety, stability and love.

See more tips in brochure 8.

These behaviours can be common in toddlers, even if they have not experienced family violence. If you are worried seek advice.



The importance of play

Children who have experienced violence usually have mixed feelings that they can't express in words. They may be less confident and slower to try new things.

Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for children to express their feelings and develop:

- Physical skills such as catching, throwing, holding and drawing
- Confidence and the ability to work through their worries
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills
- The ability to communicate and share with others
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions

Some mothers who have experienced violence can find it difficult and strange to play with their child at first. Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together. It can be useful to:

- Follow their lead, but make sure the game is safe
- Let them make the rules wherever possible but make sure the game is safe
- Listen and talk with them about what they are doing
- Allow them to try different things and make mistakes
- Give them praise and encouragement
- Have fun!



Activities to try together

You might find the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child. It can take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you. You could:

- Encourage language development by talking naturally to your toddler about what you are doing
- Point and name objects when you are out walking, on the bus or in the car
- Give your child choices when you ask questions, for example:
 - ‘Which pants do you want to wear today?’
 - ‘Would you like to play with your toys or read a story?’
- Sing and play with pots and spoons or simple instruments
- Play with dough, crayons or cardboard boxes
- Finger paint with non-toxic paints
- Read to your toddler or tell simple stories. Bedtime stories can encourage them to settle and start a good routine
- Spend quiet time together
- Encourage your toddler to do simple tasks like packing up toys and putting dishes away. Praise them
- Teach your toddler how to brush their teeth



Ages and stages

Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Stress or trauma can slow down their progress, children often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again. Some children at this stage may have difficulty separating from their primary carer.

1½ to 2 years

Gets around with increasing ease
Wants to try lots of new things
Wants to be independent but often feels insecure
Very dependent on familiar adults
Makes clear sounds and simple words
Understands simple questions

2 to 2½ years

Enjoys the company of others
Enjoys playing alone
Not yet ready to share
Likes to help with simple tasks
Remembers people, places and books
Can name some foods and body parts
Can say two-word phrases
Toddles but falls frequently

2½ to 3 years

Can talk in simple sentences
Likes adult attention
Asks a lot of questions
Possessive about play things
Has more control over their body (including bladder) and fine movements
Needs help understanding how to share
May rebel and have tantrums

Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful. Some women living with family violence find it hard to cope because they feel like they can't protect their child.

You are one of the people who know what is good for your child. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and to your child. It's also important to listen to and learn from people whose wisdom and experience you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a mother, it can help to talk things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other mothers. You could also talk to doctors, child care workers, social workers or counsellors. You can find these people and support groups for mothers and children at your local community health centre, council or call the **Maternal and Child Health Line** on 13 22 29, **Parentline** on 13 22 89 or **Tweddle Child and Family Health Service** on 9689 1577.

If you are worried about your child hurting themselves in any way (for example, pulling their hair out or biting themselves), call the **Royal Children's Hospital** on 1800 445 511. If you are worried that your child is being sexually abused, call the **Gatehouse Centre** on 9345 6391.

Crisis services

If you are in immediate danger call:
Victoria Police 000

Safe Steps

1800 015 188
24hr family violence response line for women

Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491
24hr family violence support line for men

Women and children's services

If you think you are experiencing family violence contact the service in your region (Mon-Fri, 9-5):



Berry Street

Northern suburbs
(03) 9450 4700

Grampians
(03) 5330 5000



Women's Health West

Western suburbs
(03) 9689 9588

Referral services

Call these services to find the closest family violence service to you:

WIRE Women's Support Line

1300 134 130

1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732

Please photocopy any part of this parenting kit freely. For extra copies call Women's Health West or Berry Street, or download the kit from our websites: www.whwest.org.au or www.berrystreet.org.au

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