

# FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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## Helping Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

As many as ten million children and adolescents witness violence between their caregivers each year. This kind of violence is called domestic violence or intimate partner violence. The US Department of Justice defines domestic violence as “a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner.” Domestic violence can be verbal, physical, sexual, or psychological. Domestic violence can occur between heterosexual or same sex couples.

Parents or caregivers involved in a violent relationship may think that the fighting does not affect their children. Even children who do not see domestic violence are affected by the conflict in the family. Children may develop serious emotional and behavioral problems. These problems are not always recognized by their parents or caregivers. As a result, children do not always get the help they need.

When there is domestic violence between partners, there is often child abuse as well. Sometimes children get hurt accidentally. Children need to be assessed for their health and safety when domestic violence occurs.

Symptoms to watch out for in young children include:

- Anxiety or increased fear
- Depression
- Loss of interest in school, friends or other things they enjoyed in the past
- Sleep problems including nightmares or bedwetting
- Increased aggression
- Anger
- Spending more time alone
- Fighting at home or at school
- Bullying or being bullied
- Changes in appetite

Symptoms to watch out for in adolescents include:

- Drug or alcohol abuse
- Skipping school
- Changes in peer groups
- New rebellious or oppositional behavior
- Declining grades
- Social withdrawal
- Depression or anxiety
- Loss of interest in school, friends or other things they enjoyed in the past

Children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence should be evaluated by a trained mental health professional. There are good treatments for the emotional and behavioral problems caused

by domestic violence. Treatment can include individual, group or family therapy, and in some cases, medication may also be helpful. It is critical for the child/children and victimized parent to receive treatment in a setting where they feel safe.

It is important to remember that the non-abusive parent needs support as well. There is no typical victim—domestic violence can happen to anyone. Shame or embarrassment often gets in the way of victims getting help.

If domestic violence happens once, it usually happens again. It is important to put a crisis plan in place, both for the caregiver and the child. A crisis plan should include a safe place to stay, friends or relatives who can help with childcare, transportation and financial support.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline for victims is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), 1-800-787-3224 (TTY) or [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org). Information about local programs or resources is also available through this service.

For more information, see the following Facts for Families:

[#4 The Depressed Child](#)

[#5 Child Abuse: The Hidden Bruises](#)

[#18 Children's Bedwetting](#)

[#34 Children's Sleep Problems](#)

[#53 What is Psychotherapy for Children and Adolescents](#)

[#70 PTSD](#)

Also visit the [Child Abuse Resource Center](#).

References:

<http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm>

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