



UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR WHEN CHILDREN HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Domestic violence is classified as violent or abusive behaviour (physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, verbal, or financial) that is used by one person to control and dominate another with whom they have or have had a relationship. Domestic violence is not limited to any particular class, ethnic, or social group.

IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

IMPACT IN UTERO

Domestic violence can negatively impact early brain development in children from as early as pre-birth, due to experiencing high cortisol levels (stress hormones) within the uterus. This occurs as a result of the mother experiencing abuse.



IMPACT ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT




As young children living with domestic violence grow through the early stages of their development, they find it difficult to make sense of the violence and often don't feel safe in their world, either through experiencing direct abuse or witnessing their attachment figure being abused.

Young children will view the abuse and internalise this as being their own fault, along with experiencing feelings of guilt, stress and anxiety.

Repeated exposure to domestic violence can result in children suffering from complex trauma along with attachment disruptions with their primary caregiver. Healthy attachment can only occur if there is a feeling of safety between the child and caregiver. Complex trauma and attachment difficulties can have detrimental effects on a child's behaviour. Young children that cannot express themselves verbally will often use behaviour to communicate how they are feeling.



FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE

<p>FIGHT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The child becomes aggressive, argumentative or angry. Underneath these behaviours the child is scared and is trying to keep safe. 	<p>FLIGHT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The child runs away from the situation to escape the perceived danger. 	<p>FREEZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The child will appear unresponsive, may appear as if they are daydreaming, or frozen and unable to move their body. This response is the brain's way of protecting the child from becoming overwhelmed. 
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The fight, flight and freeze responses are all designed to prepare the body to react to dangerous situations. For traumatised children, the smallest everyday things can become triggers of past traumatic events causing the child to become agitated and over-reactive. Traumatized children may respond to stressful situations in varying ways, from hyper-arousal using fight or flight responses, or hypo-arousal such as freezing or dissociation. In all these responses, different behaviours will emerge. It is important to recognise when your child is being triggered and remind them that they are safe.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS THAT CAN OCCUR AS A RESULT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Behavioural
• Poor attention and concentration
• Hyperactivity and hypervigilance
• Attention-seeking behaviour
• Erratic behaviour
• Obstructive behaviour
• Inflexibility and heightened need for control
• Extreme responses to seemingly minor things
• Disaffection
• Present as challenging to authority figure

Psychological/emotional
• Anger
• Aggression
• Anxiety
• Sadness
• Fear of failure
• Difficulties distinguishing fact from fantasy
• Passive
• Withdrawn
• Disassociation

Sterne & Poole, 2009

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT YOUR CHILD?

- Positive attention – hugs and encouragement.
- Validate feelings – “it’s ok to feel sad about this”.
- Reassure the abuse was not their fault.
- Reassure the child that they are safe now.
- Listen without judgement.
- Ask them to place an emotion on their feelings; use art or play to enable this.
- Create feelings of safety within their environment, and familiar routines.
- Build resilience – label your child’s emotions; embrace all mistakes; demonstrate healthy coping skills; teach your child problem solving skills; build a strong emotional relationship; promote healthy risk taking.
- Find safe ways in which they can let out their anger and frustration, such as kicking a ball or punching a pillow.
- Seek professional support for coping strategies.

