

## Coming Out of the Dark: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children & Youth and How to Help Promote Healing

Research from the Child Welfare Information Gateway suggests that nearly 30 million children in the United States will be exposed to some type of family violence by the age of 17. That is a very high number, especially when we consider that these numbers reflect only the incidents of domestic violence that have been reported. There is often a cloud of secrecy surrounding domestic violence that engulfs the victim as well as the children who are witnesses. It isn't hard to imagine that this number is probably higher; especially for those children and youth who have been or are currently involved with the child welfare system.

It can sometimes be difficult to know for certain if a child in your care has witnessed domestic violence. That cloud of secrecy is pervasive; a child may have been taught that what they saw is a normal way for partners to interact or they might be the "secret keepers" for their family and taught to deny or minimize what they have witnessed. Sometimes, you might learn about the history of domestic violence from caseworkers or the child's case record. Being able to listen openly, as a caregiver, can be important for a child to share their experience and to help him or her build trust with you.



### What is Domestic Violence?

There are a number of variations on the definition of domestic violence. The

Women's Resource & Rape Assistance Program's definition is pretty descriptive of what domestic violence is and its effects on children and society. They describe 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 physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or

wound someone. Domestic violence can happen to anyone regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It affects people of all socioeconomic background and education levels. Domestic violence occurs in both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships and can happen to intimate partners who are married, living together, or dating. Domestic violence not only affects those who are abused but also has a substantial effect on family members, friends, co-workers, other witnesses, and the

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*community at large. Children who grow up witnessing domestic violence are among those seriously affected by this crime. Frequent exposure to violence in the home not only predisposes children to numerous social and physical problems but also teaches them that violence is a normal way of life—therefore, increasing their risk of becoming society’s next generation of victims and abusers.”*

### **How Children and Youth are Affected**

Children who are exposed to domestic violence can experience both short-term and long-term effects. Short-term effects can include (but are not limited to) anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hypervigilance, and school issues. Long-term effects can include higher dispositions for substance abuse and use of violence in future relationships.

There are a number of things that influence the impact of domestic violence on children and youth; for example, the type of violence that is occurring, the age of the child, the frequency and/or intensity of abusive instances, if the child has been a victim of abuse, and the child’s own coping ability. Children may experience a wide range of feelings about what they have seen or heard. They might feel helpless; they see or know about what is happening, but are unable to get help. A child may feel guilty for not being able to prevent or “save” the victimized parent. Almost certainly a child may feel afraid – for their victimized parent, their siblings, or for themselves.



You may notice that children who have come from a home where domestic violence has occurred can take on various roles within the family. These roles are a way for children to cope in such an environment. Children have to deal with many fears and feelings and develop ways to make sense of or deal with their realities. Children can take on one or many of the following roles as a way to handle living in a violent home environment:

- **Caretaker**—a child may become “parentified,” that he or she takes on the responsibilities of caring for siblings. This can look like a child (often an older sibling) parenting their younger siblings, such as helping with homework, preparing meals, bedtime routines, etc. Very often, children continue to play this role, even after they leave the home where the abuse took place.
- **Friend to the victim and/or abuser**—a child may overhear or be specifically told the reasoning behind the abuse or be asked to keep family secrets. Or, he or she may be the sounding board for the victimized parent.
- **Abuser’s partner**—a child may be put in a position to aid in the emotional or physical abuse of the victimized parent.
- **Perfect child**—a child may take on the persona of being the “perfect child,” receiving good grades, doing chores, following directions, never causing problems, etc.

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- Scapegoat—sometimes the child is blamed for the family problems. For example, a child with special needs may become the scapegoat for the financial stress of the abuser, which “causes” him or her to victimize the child or another adult in the home.
- Referee—a child may try to keep the peace in the family as best they can.

Even after leaving that home environment, children may continue using these roles as ways to cope. You may notice some of these behaviors in the child for

whom you are caring. Perhaps, if the child overhears a disagreement between you and your significant other or spouse, he or will insert himself in the conversation, attempting to take blame for why one of you – or both of you – are upset (scapegoat role). If you have other children in your home and one of them is being disciplined, the child who has experienced violence may step in to point out her accomplishments or accolades (perfect child role).

Or, if you are caring for siblings who have experienced violence, you may see that one of the children consistently takes the lead to get the other ready for school or bed, or insists upon taking the dinner plate to the other child (caretaker role).

### Helping the Child in Your Care Heal

A powerful way to help a child in your care who has witnessed domestic violence is to model healthy relationships and healthy, appropriate conflict resolution. Being able to show the child that there are safe, non-

threatening ways to resolve disagreements is a good start to teaching a child that not all conflict is scary or hurtful.

Another way to model appropriate ways to deal with conflict is being aware of how you respond to everyday frustrations. For example, you received poor customer service at the auto repair place and are feeling annoyed. Remember that the child in your care is watching and listening to you. Losing your temper and yelling is probably not an effective way to resolve the situation and will reinforce the idea that becoming aggressive is

the only way to solve problems. Instead, try taking some deep breaths or counting to 10 and, with a calm voice, attempt to work out your issues with service provider or manager.

You may want to be especially careful and mindful of possible situations or actions that might trigger the child in your care who has experienced or witnessed domestic violence. For example, the child may see the use of any kind of alcohol (or other substances) as a prequel to a

domestic incident. Raised voices may also rouse anxiety, because the child may associate them with an escalating situation. To that end, any argument or disagreement may also be a trigger, as these may have been precursors to a violent situation in the child’s home. Discussing what is and isn’t normal and acceptable when members of the family are having a disagreement in your home may be important to visit and re-visit with the child in your care. (Note: because, in many cases, children may have witnessed their mothers being victimized, you may find that



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male caregivers need to be especially mindful of situations that may trigger a fearful response from the child in your care.)

A child coming from a home where he or she experienced domestic violence has learned that anger and violence are normal or to be expected from intimate relationships. The child may also believe that anger and violence are ways to show or express love, thus having a skewed understanding of what healthy love looks like and how to show it. This misunderstanding of love can translate into other relationships, such as with siblings, friends, or dating partners.

When the child in your care reaches dating age – or if you are already caring for a child at this age – this may be another time to be vigilant about domestic violence or abuse. Youth who have grown up in a violent home or who witnessed domestic violence may have a higher tendency to become victims of abuse or take on an abusive role in dating relationships. Talking with them about dating and the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships is important. The Coalition’s tip sheet, [Is This Love? Teen Dating Violence](#), is a tool for both caregivers and youth to use.

What you say and how you act are always important things to keep in mind as a caregiver, but perhaps take on an extra significance when caring for children or youth who have witnessed domestic violence. A child coming from this situation may be hyper vigilant to a caregiver’s tone of voice, body language, and ability to sense tension. As a caregiver, you cannot always know what is in a child’s past, but being supportive and modeling healthy adult relationships can be impactful long into a child’s adult years. If you need additional support when caring for children or youth who have experienced a history of domestic violence, please know

that the Coalition is here to help. We have included some additional resources about domestic violence in this tip sheet, and are always here to help you find even further support when needed.



### Resources

- [Sojourner Family Peace Center](#)
- [Domestic Violence & Sexual Abuse Resources—City of Milwaukee](#)
- [End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)
- [Fostering Perspectives](#)
- [Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare System \(PDF\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway-Domestic Violence](#)
- [Healing the Invisible Wounds \(PDF\)](#)
- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network-Domestic Violence](#)
- [Child Witness to Domestic Violence \(PDF\)](#)



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