

Children and Domestic Violence

Helping Your Child Navigate a Relationship with the Abusive Parent

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control and dominate the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is #9 in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

A child who has lived with domestic violence is likely to have confusing thoughts and feelings about the parent who has harmed the other parent. Whether the abusive parent still lives at home, sees the child sometimes, or has no contact, the child and parent have a relationship. Maintaining contact with both parents can be of benefit for some children, as long as everyone is safe. One of the biggest and most challenging jobs for you, the caring parent, is to help your child navigate his or her relationship with the abusive parent.



SAFETY FIRST

The first thing to think about is your own safety and your children's safety with the abusive partner. If you have concerns, contact a domestic violence advocate, a lawyer, or another trusted individual who is knowledgeable about domestic violence and can help you make plans for safety. If you believe your child has been injured or abused by the other parent, get medical help if needed and contact your local police or child protective services. Try to find time alone with your children to discuss plans for safety and respond to any worries they may have.

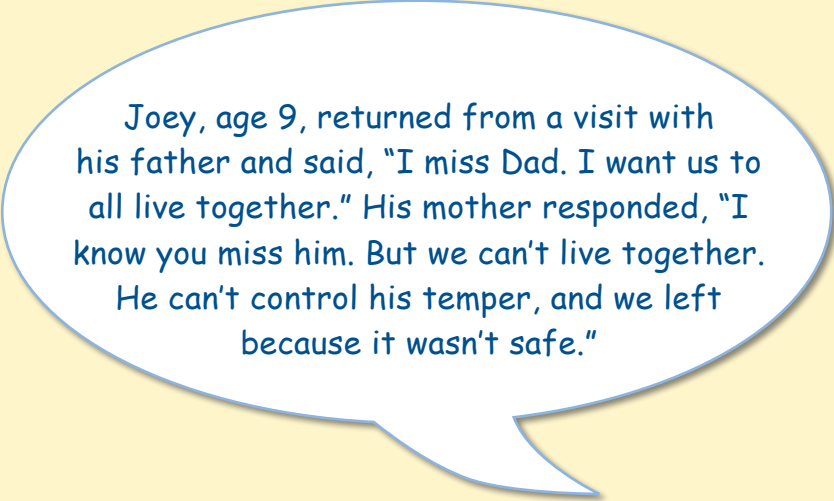
YOUR CHILD'S MIXED EMOTIONS

Most children have complicated feelings about the abusive parent. They may feel afraid, angry, or sad about what's happened in the home. They may also feel confused because the person who was hurtful was also loving and fun at other times. Many children feel that the abuse was their fault, not the parent's. They may think they have to choose between loving one parent or the other. Don't expect your kids to have the same feelings that you do about your partner. Instead, listen to and accept their feelings. Let them know that it's OK to talk to you, and that you won't be angry to hear that they love and miss their other parent. If your children trust you with their thoughts, over time you can help them to understand and accept the realities about the person who hurt you.

KEEPING YOUR CHILD OUT OF THE MIDDLE

Keeping children out of the middle of domestic violence means helping them to 1) avoid trying to break up an argument between the parents, and 2) avoid feeling like they have to take sides. If you and your partner have separated, your children should not be asked to “tell” on the other parent after visits (for example, if the parent is dating someone else) or relay messages for you. If your partner tells your children that you are a bad parent or that it’s your fault the family is not living together, remind your children that violence and abuse are the responsibility of the person who is abusive. Do not accept blame—but do not respond by criticizing the other parent.

If you think the other parent is pressuring your children for information that puts you or them in danger, contact a domestic violence advocate or lawyer for help.



Joey, age 9, returned from a visit with his father and said, “I miss Dad. I want us to all live together.” His mother responded, “I know you miss him. But we can’t live together. He can’t control his temper, and we left because it wasn’t safe.”

Managing Pick-ups and Drop-offs

If your child visits a parent who has been abusive to you, try not to fight or argue in front of the child even if the other parent starts it. If arguments keep happening, consider these steps:

- Contact your lawyer if you have one.
- Have another person present with you for your child’s pick-ups and drop-offs.
- Arrange the exchange at a neutral place.
- Ask a family member trusted by both parents to handle the pick-ups and drop-offs.
- Contact your local domestic violence agency to locate a supervised visitation center in your community.

The NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women’s advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources