

Children and Domestic Violence

Managing Challenging Behavior of Children Living with Domestic Violence

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 **#7** 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

Children who live with domestic violence often react to it with changes in how they behave. They may have trouble controlling their feelings, and will act in ways that make life even harder for the family. Some common changes are tantrums, aggressive behavior, and sleep problems. Children might also stop following directions or play in ways that mimic scenes of violence in the home. If your children react in ways like these, you can take steps to help them feel more secure and in control of their emotions and actions.



It might be difficult or impossible for you to follow some of the suggestions listed here. Perhaps you are still living with a partner who is abusive and interferes with your parenting. Or maybe you are living in a public shelter or other temporary home. If you have left an abusive situation and you are now in charge of your home, be patient with your children and yourself as you all adjust to new roles and new rules.

TANTRUMS AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Children have tantrums because they are overwhelmed by their feelings and don't know any other way to "let go." This is especially true for young children who can't easily use words yet. Children and teenagers may be aggressive as they struggle to feel in control of things instead of helpless. When they live with domestic violence, they may try to resist your authority as a parent and test the limits of your rules in order to feel independent and strong. They may try to imitate the parent who has been abusive, or act out violent scenes during their play.

What you can do:

- ▶ Set clear and regular routines at home. They make daily life more predictable, especially for younger children.
- ▶ Think carefully about which behaviors you might safely ignore and which are unacceptable. The ones you ignore will usually decrease over time.
- ▶ Praise your child for the positive things she does.
- ▶ Do not try to reason with your child when you are in the middle of a struggle with her.
- ▶ Offer your child choices. Say that she may do what you ask, talk about why she is upset, or go to her room to calm down.
- ▶ Explain that it is your job to set limits and make decisions.
- ▶ Make the consequences of behavior clear and always follow through.
- ▶ If you see your child mimicking abuse during play, use the moment to talk about his feelings and worries. For example, say "It seems like you're thinking about what happened between Mommy and Daddy."

SLEEP TROUBLES

Sometimes children have trouble going to sleep or sleeping alone, especially if they are under stress. They may be afraid of having nightmares or scary thoughts. They may be worried that something terrible will happen while they are sleeping.

What you can do:

- ▶ End each day with bedtime routines. Read or play a quiet game with your child, or have him take a warm bath or shower to wind down for sleep.
- ▶ Calm your child if she is upset. Hold her, rub her back, or breathe slowly with her.
- ▶ Encourage your child to talk about his fears. If you are now living in a safe place, reassure him that he is safe in his own bed. If he has reason to be afraid, for himself or for you, take steps to increase safety in the home and tell him you are doing so.
- ▶ Stay calm. Your own sense of calm is the best reassurance for your children.

As a caring parent, you are the most important person in your children's lives, especially in times of stress and conflict at home. You can help them regain a sense of safety, security, and trust by offering your love and support, setting clear limits, and seeking help when needed from knowledgeable professionals. You and your children are not alone. For information about getting advice and help with your child's behavior, see fact sheet #8 in this series, **Where to Turn if You Are Worried About Your Child**.

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

When to Seek Advice

Children's reactions to domestic violence usually start to go away once the stress in the home has gone down and the child feels safe again. Consider reaching out for professional advice if

- Your child's behavior changes don't go away, or they get worse.
- Your child is unusually sad, angry, or withdrawn.
- You are concerned that your child may harm himself or others.
- You are overwhelmed by your child's behavior.
- The violence in the home has been extreme.