

Keeping Your Children Safe in a Violent Home

No matter how young or old your children are, if you are living with an abusive partner, they will be impacted by this. Children see and hear much more than we often realize, and they may have a hard time understanding the situation. They will have many feelings and thoughts about what is happening, and they have limited life experience to be able to make sense of it all. As their parent, you are the most important person to your children, and they will need your help to sort out their thoughts and feelings, and to be kept safe if they are living in a home with family violence.

1. TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE SITUATION

- a. It may not be easy for you or for them, but it can be very helpful in reducing the harmful impacts of what they are seeing and hearing, and it can also help to keep them safe.
- b. Conversations with children can't always be planned. Often, they will just happen, and may start with a question. Always respond with a message of support like, "I care about you and want to hear what you think."
- c. If your child asks a question that you're not ready to answer, you can tell them, "That's a really important question. I need some time to think about it, and then we can talk more later on."
- d. Expect that your children already know more about the situation than you think. Ask them what they have seen and heard, and what they think may be happening. Sometimes their imaginations can make things seem even worse in their minds than they are, especially when they are only seeing and hearing parts of conversations. Be prepared to hear their version of the story that may be different than yours.
- e. Talk to your children in a way that is right for their ages. Use words that they can understand and be careful not to talk about adult concerns.

ADELE'S STORY

This morning, Nicky, Adele's 6-year-old daughter, sat quietly at the breakfast table, just picking at her food. When Adele asked her what was wrong, she started to cry. "I don't like it when you and Daddy fight!", she shouted. "Why don't you just do what he asks you?!" She jumped up and ran to her room, slamming the door shut. Adele was shocked! She has tried so hard to keep the problems between her and her husband away from the kids, but she knows that sometimes they hear and see too much. She had thought that because they were so young, they wouldn't be bothered by the arguing, but she knows now that it is impacting them. She knows she needs to talk to both of them and help them understand that she wants to keep them safe. But they are still so young! How can she begin to talk about all this with them?

- f. Think about how you are feeling. If you can talk calmly and with confidence, you can help make them feel more secure by showing them that you are in control.
- g. Your job in these conversations is to listen to your child and provide reassurance for them. Be careful not to pass on your own worries and fears to them. It is important that you have other adults to talk to about the situation. The children should not become your support system, even if they are older.

HERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT MESSAGES TO TALK ABOUT WITH YOUR CHILDREN:

VIOLENCE ISN'T OKAY

Acknowledge that what is happening isn't right, and that you are making efforts to stop it, but that you can't always prevent it from happening.

THIS ISN'T YOUR FAULT

Many children assume that the abusive behaviour is happening because their parent doesn't love them, or because they aren't behaving properly or are "being bad".

Explain that this is not their fault, and they are not the reason for the behaviour. Assure them that they are loved.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIX THIS

Explain that this is an adult problem, and it is up to the adults to fix it.

It is not their job to try and fix the family problems.

I WILL KEEP YOU SAFE

Reassure them that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.

Teach them things they can do to stay safe.

Let them know that you will look after yourself, and your first concern is that they keep themselves safe.

TELL ME HOW YOU FEEL

Explain that you are always willing to listen, and that you are ready to hear whatever they want to tell you.

IT'S OK TO BE ANGRY WITH US

Let them know that it is normal for them to feel angry.

They may be angry with you OR your partner, and that is understandable.

Talk to them about better and healthier ways to express their anger.

2. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN HOW TO BE SAFE

- a. There is no point in lying to your kids or trying to protect them by pretending that violence is not happening in your home.
- b. Give them as much of this information as appropriate for their age and maturity level.
- c. Teach them a code word or phrase you can say to them when it is time for them to get to a safe space and/or get help.
- d. Arrange for a safe space for them to go to when you use the code word or when violence begins in the home. Some options include:
 - i. A room in the house that has main floor outside access and/or a locked door.
 - ii. A room with a phone in it (if possible).
 - iii. A safe place nearby – a neighbour, a business, or an organization where they can be safe and get access to a phone.
 - iv. Identify things they can do to make themselves feel better and free helplines they can call.
- e. Rehearse your escape plan with the children – during daylight and in darkness.
- f. Teach your children that it is not safe, and it isn't their responsibility to get in the middle of a fight or argument.
- g. If they can't get away from a violent attack, teach them how best to protect themselves. Discuss making themselves into a smaller target by diving into a corner and curling up into a ball. Protect the face, put arms around each side of the head, and wrap fingers together.
- h. Teach them how to call the police or 911. (See the section on how to do this.)

Teach Your Child How to Call Police 911

If your children are old enough to use a phone, teach them the steps for calling police or 911 if a violent attack begins.

- **Tell the Operator your full name.** “My name is Joseph Williams.”
- **Tell the Operator where you are and why you are calling** – 911 in the NWT cannot trace calls, so it is very important to tell the operator where you are calling from, and the reason for the call. “My dad is hurting my mom and we are in Tsiigehtchic. Our address is 32 Raven Road.”
- **Give the operator your phone number** – This way the operator can call back if the call is disconnected. “Our phone number is 867-953-5555.”
- **Don't hang up** – Either stay on the line to wait for instructions, or leave the phone off the hook so the operator can hear the situation.
- **Practice this with your children just like a fire drill** – Obviously you can't practice by actually calling 911 but have them practice saying the lines anyway.

10 Ways to Support Children Who Witness Family Violence

In a perfect world, we would not choose to live with an abusive partner. However, there are times when it is not easy or possible to leave. In those situations, it is very important to provide as much love and support to your children as possible in order to reduce the impact of the trauma they are living with.

10 WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILDREN

- Spend **time** with them. Spend a few minutes reading to them, let them help you cook, have a conversation with them. Anything that builds a positive connection with foster happiness.
- Check in** regularly with how they are coping but let them lead. Sometimes they may not feel like talking.
- Listen.** Don't pressure your children to talk, but when they do open up, let them have their say.
- Be **honest** with them. Answer their questions as honestly as you can but be sure you are only giving them information appropriate for their age and maturity level.
- Don't make promises you can't keep.** Rather than promising to keep them safe or promising them that you are going to make the violence stop you can tell them "I will do everything I can to keep you safe", or "I am going to try my best to make this situation better"
- Help them learn **copng skills.** Ask them what activities make them feel better. Sports, reading, listening to music, writing, taking deep breaths, spending time with a pet – whatever helps them to relax should be suggested when they are feeling stressed.
- Encourage **friendships.** Ask them who makes them feel happy to be around and encourage them to spend time with those friends.
- Be a **role model.** Show children how you deal with your own stress. Show them how you express emotions in a healthy way.
- Manage challenging behaviour.** Provide consistent, clear expectations for behaviour. Set clear limits for unacceptable behaviour that includes logical consequences. Challenging behaviour may be a sign that they are struggling with trauma, and it is necessary to recognize that, but not to allow the behaviour to continue.
- Build a **calm, stable home** environment. Obviously, it won't always be calm, but you can help your child feel more confident by providing schedules and routines that you follow whenever possible. Create a schedule for yourself and your children regarding homework, mealtimes, bedtimes, etc. Establish routines for getting ready in the morning, bedtime routines like reading a story before bed each night, etc.