

Children and Domestic Violence

Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is #4 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

When children see, hear, or know about abuse by one parent against the other, they may have many feelings, thoughts, and questions. As a caring parent, you are the most important person to your children as they try to sort things out. It may not be easy for you to talk about what's happened. In some families' culture and religion it is not the custom to talk to children about adult problems. However, your communication and support can help your kids do better in the aftermath of their experiences.

If you still feel unsafe at home, you may worry that talking with the children will put the family at greater risk. If this is the case, talk to a domestic violence advocate or someone else you trust to help you increase the family's safety. Let your kids know that you are taking steps to make them safer. And remember, if you are in immediate danger, call 911 for emergency assistance.

HOW TO TALK, WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Conversations with children can't always be planned—sometimes they just happen. The following tips will help you make the most of the conversation whether it's planned or spontaneous:

- ▶ Take the lead: when you open the conversation, you're telling your child it is safe to talk and that she doesn't have to be alone with her thoughts and worries.
- ▶ Open with messages of support, like "I care about you and I will listen to you."

Helpful Messages for Kids About Domestic Violence

- Violence isn't OK.
- It isn't your fault.
- I will do everything I can to help you be safe.
- It's not your job to fix what is wrong in the family.
- I want you to tell me how you feel. It's important, and I can handle it.
- It's OK to have mixed feelings about either or both of your parents.

The Co-chairs of the NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group Betsy Groves, Miriam Berkman, Rebecca Brown, and Edwina Reyes along with members of the committee and Futures Without Violence 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

Jonathan's mother and stepfather were quarreling, and the stepfather started shoving. Jonathan, who is 12, stepped in to stop it. When things calmed down his mother said to him, "I understand and appreciate your concerns about my safety, but it isn't your job to stop the fighting. I want you to stay safe."

- ▶ Ask what your child saw or heard or already knows about the troubling events in the home.
- ▶ Support and acknowledge your children's feelings, experiences, and their version of the story.
- ▶ Expect that your children will know more than you think, no matter how young they are. Sometimes when adults assume children are asleep or not paying any attention, they are actually listening to everything. If they are too young to get what's going on, they may fill in the gaps with their imaginations and end up worrying about something that's worse than reality.

- ▶ Let your child know it is always OK to ask you questions. Often the ideas or questions that trouble children are different from the ones that adults think about. Listening to your child's questions helps you know what is really on his mind.

- ▶ Talk to your children in a way that's right for their ages. Use words that you know they understand. Be careful not to talk about adult concerns or at an adult's level of understanding.

- ▶ If your child asks a question you're not ready to answer, you can say, "That's a really important question. I need some time to think about it and then we can talk again."

- ▶ Monitor your own feelings. If you are able to talk calmly and confidently, you convey a sense of security. A calm tone sends the message that you are in charge and capable.

- ▶ Be alert to signs that your child is ready to end the conversation. Children who have heard enough may get restless or silly, stop listening, or stop asking questions.

- ▶ Have other adults for your own support so you children are not your only support system. You don't want to put undo worry or stress on your children.

- ▶ Be mindful of the age of your child. For younger children, sharing too much of your worries or fears may make them more worried or upset.

Seven-year-old Janet was at home when her parents began shouting. Her father threatened to take Janet away from her mother. Afterward, Janet's mother told her, "I will always be there for you. What Daddy said wasn't true. Even when you are angry, it isn't OK to scare other people."