

Exposing children to domestic and family violence

When domestic and family violence occurs between adults in **families with children**, those **children** are exposed to that violence. A significant number of Australian children are exposed to violence perpetrated most often against their mother by their father or their mother's current or former male partner [Richards 2011]. Much higher rates of exposure occur among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities [Flood & Fergus 2008]. According to the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey, approximately 50% of women 'who had children in their care when they experienced violence by a current partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence'. Further, almost 70% of women who had children in their care when they 'experienced violence by a previous partner reported that the children had seen or heard the violence' [ABS PSS 2016]. Children do not however need to see or hear the domestic and family violence to be exposed to it.

Childhood exposure to domestic and family violence [FCFCA 2021] may be direct or indirect, with either form having the potential to cause significant harm [Canada DV BB 2020].

Examples include [Richards 2011]:

- > Assault prior to birth
- > Attempting to stop the violence or defend a parent
- > Being threatened, harmed or abused by the perpetrator in order to control or intimidate the victim, for example: being used as a weapon or hostage; being blamed for the violence
- > Being forced to watch or participate in the violence, or spy on a parent.
- > Witnessing the violence
- > Witnessing a parent's physical injuries
- > Being neglected as a consequence of a parent's injuries
- > Sleeping during the violence, or overhearing the violence from another room and taking measures to avoid being affected, for example: turning up the volume; sleeping with pillows over the ears; leaving the house and walking the streets
- > Witnessing damage and destruction to furniture, toys and other family belongings
- > Witnessing harm to family pets, or becoming aware that a pet has been given away, harmed or killed
- > Experiencing the aftermath of the violence, for example: having to seek emergency assistance; witnessing a parent being interviewed or arrested by police; attending to a parent's injuries; having to interact with the perpetrator; knowing a parent may be stalked; coping with their own trauma, distress and injuries; assuming the care of family members; missing school; being removed home and community because they are not safe; being isolated from family and friends.
- > Being forced into poverty or homelessness as a consequence of the perpetrator's economic abuse

- Growing up in an environment of stress without stability or security, and without appropriate adult role models.

A perpetrator may also use a range of tactics to undermine or destroy the relationship between mother and child [Hooker et al 2016]. Depending on the child's age, the perpetrator may deliberately abuse the victim in front of the child so as to induce fear in the child or a sense that their mother is weak and unable to protect herself. The perpetrator may discredit the victim's mothering skills by accusing her of being a bad mother, or he may coach and recruit the child in the perpetration of the violence, or **isolate** the victim and children from family, friends and other sources of support and care. Over time these corrosive and manipulative behaviours may increasingly restrict and **control** all aspects of the everyday lives of victims and their children, including their sense of reality and their capacity to act competently and assertively; and may ultimately impair their **physical, emotional and mental health** and wellbeing.

Different children in the same family may give dramatically different statements and testimony as a consequence of different experiences, for example one child may be the targeted child, another may be the protected child [Canada DV BB 2020].

It should be noted too that notwithstanding the extent of exposure to domestic and family violence a child may be reluctant to disclose their experiences or feelings for fear of not being believed or making the situation worse, or because they have been groomed or coerced not to disclose [Hart 2004]. The prevalence of exposure may also cause the child to perceive violence as normal and disclosure as unnecessary.

Parents and caregivers who perpetrate domestic and family violence are far more likely than other parents and caregivers to also perpetrate direct forms of child abuse and engage in negative parenting practices. The affected children in their care are also more likely to experience multiple additional adversities such as exposure to other forms of physical, sexual and emotional violence and abuse in the home, at school, and in the community [Canada DV BB 2020]. A child's exposure to domestic and family violence at any age may result in a range of poor psychological, behavioural and physical outcomes including depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms, increased aggression, antisocial behaviour, temperament and mood problems, impaired cognitive functioning, learning and schooling difficulties, low self-esteem, pervasive fear, peer conflict, loneliness, increased likelihood of alcohol or substance misuse, and vulnerability to unemployment and homelessness. It is also possible that domestic and family violence -exposed children may as adults exhibit attitudes and behaviours that reflect their childhood experiences [Sety 2011].

Exposing children to domestic and family violence may be one aspect of a complex pattern of behaviours engaged in by perpetrators in order to control another person, sometimes referred to as **coercive control**.