

CHILDREN EXPOSED TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

WHAT IS FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Family violence is the result of an imbalance of power, the aim of which is to frighten, intimidate and gain control. Family violence can take the form of physical, sexual, emotional, financial, or spiritual harm. It is common for abusers to repeat the cycle of violent behaviour, with increasing severity. Where there is family violence, the home environment in which children live is often described as “toxic” where, in many cases, their well-being and development are severely compromised.*

Family violence can erupt in all families, and does not exist solely in male/female relationships. It is also found in any intimate relationship and in homes where extended families live together. In heterosexual relationships, men are not the only perpetrators. However, statistically, women are more likely to be victimized by family violence and the perpetrator is most likely to be the male partner. Therefore, the partner being abused throughout this resource is referred to using feminine terms and the abuser using masculine terms.

The terms “witnessing” or “exposure to” family violence refer to the multiple ways in which children are exposed to family violence: directly seeing and/or hearing the violence; being used as a pawn by the perpetrator; and/or experiencing the physical, emotional and psychological repercussions of violence (e.g., a family member who is physically injured, child protection and/or police intervention).

Research indicates that 11-23% of all Canadian children witness some violence against their mother in the home – it is estimated that 2-6 children in each classroom have witnessed some form of woman abuse in the home over the past year.*

Children who have witnessed the abuse of their mothers often experience the same types of emotional and behavioural problems experienced by children who have been abused themselves. These may include symptoms of an attachment disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, lower self-esteem and social competence, aggressive behaviour, conduct problems, anxiety and depression.

Research demonstrates a significant degree of overlap between child maltreatment and family violence. This suggests that when one form of abuse is suspected or identified, staff should be tuned into the possible indicators of other types of abuse occurring within the same family. (See the resource *Possible Indicators of Child Abuse & of Exposure to Family Violence*.)

*Source: Sudermann, M. & Jaffe, P. *A Handbook for Health and Social Service Providers and Educators on Children Exposed to Woman Abuse/Family Violence*, 1999.

DO'S & DON'TS WHEN THERE IS A DISCLOSURE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

If a woman discloses family violence, her concerns, fears, worries and situation must never be minimized or not taken seriously. Her decision to talk to someone usually means she wants to consider options to change her situation. The response of the person to whom she discloses has a significant impact on her ability to take positive steps toward ending the abuse, or to reinforcing her guilt, isolation, feelings of powerlessness and loss of hope.

If a woman discloses family violence, keep the following in mind when responding to her disclosure.

CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS

- If a woman is calling you on the telephone, determine how safe it is for her to talk.
- Try and stay calm and relaxed, no matter what she tells you – she needs to sense that you are able to help.
- Validate her feelings and experiences – never minimize how she has been treated – give her the message that you think the abuse is concerning.
- Do not say negative things about her partner – although he has mistreated her, they may still care about one another.
- Do not confront the abuser. This could put her or her children at further risk and affect successful safety planning.
- If your tone is judgmental and she chooses to stay with her partner, she may feel she cannot call back for additional help and support. Do not judge her inability to take action today.

PROVIDE A RESPECTFUL PERSPECTIVE

- Reinforce that family violence (domestic violence, woman abuse, intimate partner violence) is a crime.
- Emphasize that she is not responsible for her partner's behaviour – she did not cause the abuse, no matter what he says she has said or done.
- Acknowledge any steps she has taken toward safety and change, no matter how small, including her disclosure to you.
- Always recognize the impact of cultural values and beliefs on someone's perception of choices.

PRESENT OPTIONS

- Strongly encourage her to get medical treatment if she (or the children) have sustained any injuries.
- Brainstorm with her about her options and any formal or informal avenues where she might get help, but remember only she can decide what is right for her, taking into consideration what feels safe.

- Express your concern for her safety and the safety of her children. Encourage her to develop a safety plan both for staying and leaving, and emphasize that this should be done with a staff person who specializes in this area – offer the names and numbers of local specialized services with expertise in safety planning (e.g., a domestic violence worker, the local women’s shelter, a crisis line/Assaulted Women’s Helpline, police and a child protection agency). Ensure she understands and knows how to call 911.
- Inform her that there are services available (including legal options) to protect and help families; abuse does not stop without outside intervention. Ask her if she wants to involve police. (Be sensitive to the fact that immigrant or refugee women who have been abused may have experienced police as cruel and oppressive, and may, therefore be fearful of them.)
- Encourage her to seek legal advice before she takes any steps that could have legal consequences; this is particularly important if children are involved.
- Do not give advice or try to make decisions for her, even if you feel your advice is sound (e.g., “I think you should...” or “If it were me, I would...”).
- Ask her what she wants to see happen, what are her main concerns now, and how you can help.
- Do not overwhelm her with too much information – she may have to begin with small steps on her way to taking control of the situation (e.g., making a list of who she can call for help).

WHEN TO CALL A CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY IF FAMILY VIOLENCE IS SUSPECTED

Where a child or adult has disclosed family violence and/or child abuse, the person who received the disclosure has a legal obligation to contact a child protection agency (see the resource *Steps in Reporting Suspicions of Child Abuse*). At times, there may not be a purposeful disclosure, but suspicions of abuse may be raised because of the presence of other indicators.

If faced with the knowledge or suspicion of any of the following indicators of family violence, a call to a child protection agency to discuss the situation is necessary.

- A child who has been physically harmed or almost injured by either partner, deliberately or “accidentally” during or after a violent episode.
- A child who has “accidentally” been hurt when caught in the cross-fire of objects thrown during a violent episode, or injured in any way because of the situation (e.g., the child has cut their foot stepping on broken glass).
- A child who has been physically harmed while trying to protect a sibling(s) or other family member(s).
- A child who believes that they are responsible for precipitating or stopping the abuse.
- A child who has been threatened with physical harm or death, or an abusive partner who threatens to harm the child(ren).
- The abusive partner has assaulted or thrown objects at someone holding the child.

- A child who is exhibiting serious symptoms of emotional distress because of exposure to family violence, or is likely to suffer emotional harm (e.g., by being forced to observe/listen to the assault; expresses fear for their own safety or the safety of other family members).
- The family returns to an abusive partner who is believed to pose a threat to the child(ren).
- Conditions of release, probation or parole, or restraining order with respect to the abusive partner not having access to the child(ren) have been violated, and no one has reported this to authorities (i.e., a child protection agency or police).
- The primary caregiver requires hospitalization and there is no suitable alternate arrangement for the safe care and supervision of the child(ren).
- The child is denied the necessities of life because the abusive partner does not allow the other partner access to financial resources and/or isolates them.
- One or both parents are substance abusers or have mental health issues that impair their capacity to adequately care for their child(ren).
- There is an awareness or suspicion that the alleged abuser is in a situation with access to other children.

Staff/caregivers are not to attempt to prove their suspicions of abuse/violence, nor are they to 'interview' anyone for this purpose. Staff/caregivers are responsible for reporting any suspicions of child abuse if they feel a child has been abused or is at risk of abuse – this would include a child who has been physically or emotionally abused or is at risk for abuse as a consequence of exposure to family violence.

In situations where there is uncertainty as to whether or not the indicators support suspicions of child abuse or family violence and reporting requirements, consult with a child protection agency. Avoid speaking with anyone else about the details of the suspicions until speaking with a child protection worker. To do so could have negative implications for an investigation and court proceedings.

Staff/caregivers who provide services for families where there is family violence often struggle with the best way to support children who are exposed to family violence, while ensuring that their mothers are also supported. Reconciling the potentially conflicting needs of children and women can create challenges for both of them, and for staff/caregivers working with the family. If family violence or child abuse is suspected and not reported, the child(ren) may be at further risk. Although a woman wants to protect her children, she may not be in a position to ensure their safety due to the violence in her home.