

INFORMATION, FACT AND TIP SHEET FOR PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN ARE ON THE WAITING LIST FOR FOUNDATION CHILDREN'S THERAPEUTIC SERVICE

Effects on children who have experienced living with domestic abuse

Children are individuals and may respond to witnessing abuse in different ways. These are some of the effects described in a briefing by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2004):

- They may become anxious or depressed
- They may have difficulty sleeping
- They have nightmares or flashbacks
- They can be easily startled
- They may complain of physical symptoms such as tummy aches
- They may start to wet their bed
- They may have temper tantrums
- They may behave as though they are much younger than they are
- They may have problems with school
- They may become aggressive or distressed and withdraw from other people
- They may have a lowered sense of self-worth
- Older children may begin to play truant or start to use alcohol or drugs
- They may begin to self-harm by taking overdoses or cutting themselves
- They may have an eating disorder

Children may also feel angry, guilty, insecure, alone, frightened, powerless or confused. They may have uncertain feelings about both the abuser and the non-abusing parent.

Remember these behaviours are normal for children who have experienced domestic violence and they are not your fault - the blame belongs to the perpetrator.

How you can help your children

Some mothers and children use silence or denial to try to cope with the abuse. But most children appreciate an opportunity to acknowledge the violence and to talk about what they are feeling.

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So:

- Do talk to your children - and listen to them. Try to be honest about the situation, without frightening them and give them as much age appropriate information they need and ask for, as this will reassure them. Remember, your children will naturally trust you - try not to break that trust by directly lying to them
- Do reassure them that the violence is not their fault and that they are not responsible for adult behaviour. Explain to them that violence is wrong and that it does not solve problems.
- Do encourage your children to talk about their wishes and feelings but do not insist on it, let them talk when they want to. You could do this by doing an activity together, or encouraging them to draw or write about what is happening and how they feel about it. Sometimes children will wait until they feel safe and are no longer in the violent environment before they start to talk about their feelings. You could suggest that your children look at the Women's Aid website for children and young people, The Hideout: <http://www.thehideout.org.uk/>. This website has information, activities, a quiz and stories of children living with domestic violence.
- Do make them feel loved - give them lots of cuddles and hugs and spend time with them - even teenagers appreciate special time - remember children may be working on a much lower emotional age than their chronological age.
- Do be available for them and show them, that all their concerns - no matter how small or unimportant they seem, are taken seriously.
- Do try to introduce structure i.e. bedtimes, mealtimes, play times etc. into their and yours daily routine as quickly as you can. Boundaries and structure make children and young people feel safe and cared for, as they know you are in charge and what to expect and when it's going to happen.
- DO NOT talk to other people about the abuse in front of the children. If you need to see a solicitor or other professionals where you will be expected to talk about the domestic violence get someone to look after the children if they are not at school.
- Do seek legal advice if you have concerns around the safety of your children during contact.
- You may believe it is best for your children if you try to keep or get the family together in order to provide the security of a home and father - despite the ongoing fear, and the emotional and physical abuse. However, children will feel more secure and suffer from the psychological effects less with one parent in a stable environment than with two parents whose relationship is unstable and violent.