



What Is Domestic Violence?

Head Start and Early Head Start programs can use this resource to learn what domestic violence is, how it affects children and families, and where to find resources for children and families experiencing domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior that one partner in a romantic or intimate relationship uses to gain and maintain power and control over another partner. It is not an isolated, individual event. Domestic violence can involve several tactics such as physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone of any age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, religion, educational level, or socioeconomic background, regardless of whether couples are married, living together, dating, or hooking up.

Relationships where one partner is using violence to control another partner can also involve stalking, sexual assault, and rape.

Who Is Affected by Domestic Violence?

- More than one-third of women in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime.
- Approximately one in seven men have experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime.
- One in five children is exposed to family violence in their lifetime. This exposure includes witnessing violence against a parent or sibling. By age 17, approximately one-third of youth in the United States have witnessed family violence.
- Children of either partner may be direct victims of abuse or suffer from exposure to the violence.

(Black et al., 2011)

How Does Domestic Violence Affect Children and Families?

It is important to remember that domestic violence may impact every individual and family differently. Research shows that all young children who experience domestic violence are affected. Children may experience different effects depending on exposure and genetic and environmental buffers. It is important, therefore, to partner with parent and child survivors to tailor your support.

The response that young children have to the experience of domestic violence depends on a number of factors, including age, severity of the violence, gender, temperament, and access to protective factors.

Domestic violence can affect children’s ability to learn and grow. It can lead to developmental delays, an inability to manage emotions, impaired ability to focus, and trouble learning (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Children who experience prolonged exposure to abuse and violence also may experience significant prolonged developmental and/or behavioral issues. These children may have health issues as adolescents and adults. These issues may include heart disease, stroke, depression, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted diseases, and substance abuse.

A person’s identity—race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and immigration or refugee status—influences how the person experiences and responds to domestic violence. Support for families should take into consideration their cultures, identities, and life experiences.

Is Healing Possible for Children and Families?

Relationships with supportive adults are key to helping children who have experienced domestic violence heal and thrive.

Children’s ability to do well or develop resilience often emerges from a combination of factors. These include biological resistance to adversity and strong relationships with the adults in their lives—parents, other family members, teachers, coaches, and health care providers. Use the following resources to learn more about supporting resilience.

Young children (from birth to age 5) who witness or experience domestic violence may also experience:

- Generalized anxiety
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Inability to sit still or hyperactivity
- Increased aggression or withdrawal
- Increased separation anxiety and worries about their parent’s safety
- Increased startle response and increased fussiness
- Trouble nursing or eating
- Loss of acquired skills
- Disrupted attachment relationship with their parent

(The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.)

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that mitigate or eliminate risk and promote well-being. The presence of strong protective factors in families increases the probability of achieving positive outcomes, even in the face of adversity.

Resources

Hotlines and Crisis Counseling for Families

- Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-422-4453; <https://www.childhelp.org/hotline/>
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7, multiple languages offered): 1-800-799-7233; <https://www.thehotline.org/>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255; <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/talk-to-someone-now/>
- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 866-331-9474; <https://www.loveisrespect.org>
- StrongHearts Native Helpline: 1-844-762-8483; <https://www.strongheartshelpline.org/get-help/>

Additional Resources For Staff Partnering With Families

- Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence (API-GBV): www.api-gbv.org
- Changing Minds: <https://changingmindsnow.org/>
- Futures Without Violence: www.futureswithoutviolence.org
- National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities, Casa de Esperanza: www.nationallatinonetwork.org
- The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse: <https://www.nwnetwork.org/>
- Ujima, Inc.—The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community: www.ujimacommunity.org

References

Black, M. C., Basile, K. C., Breiding, M. J., Smith, S. G., Walters, M. L., Merrick, M. T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M. R. (2011). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 summary report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). Effects. Retrieved from <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/intimate-partner-violence/effects>

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