



# Trauma-Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence

## *Tips for Parents and Other Caregivers*

### **What happens when children are exposed to violence?**

Children are very resilient—but they are not unbreakable. No matter what their age, children are deeply hurt when they are physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or when they see or hear violence in their homes and communities. When children see and hear too much that is frightening, their world feels unsafe and insecure.

Each child and situation is different, but exposure to violence can overwhelm children at any age and lead to problems in their daily lives. Some children may have an emotional or physical reaction. Others may find it harder to recover from a frightening experience. Exposure to violence—especially when it is ongoing and intense—can harm children’s natural, healthy development unless they receive support to help them cope and heal.

### **What are some of the warning signs of exposure to violence?**

Children’s reactions to exposure to violence can be immediate or appear much later. Reactions differ in severity and cover a range of behaviors. People from different cultures may have their own ways of showing their reactions. How a child responds also varies according to age.

#### ***Young Children (5 and younger)***

Young children’s reactions are strongly influenced by caregivers’ reactions. Children in this age range who are exposed to violence may:

- Be irritable or fussy or have difficulty calming down
- Become easily startled
- Resort to behaviors common to being younger (for example, thumb sucking, bed wetting, or fear of the dark)
- Have frequent tantrums
- Cling to caregivers
- Experience changes in level of activity
- Repeat events over and over in play or conversation



#### ***Elementary School-Age Children (6–12 years)***

Elementary and middle school children exposed to violence may show problems at school and at home. They may:

- Have difficulty paying attention
- Become quiet, upset, and withdrawn
- Be tearful and sad and talk about scary feelings and ideas
- Fight with peers or adults
- Show changes in school performance
- Want to be left alone
- Eat more or less than usual
- Get into trouble at home or school

### Teenagers (13–18 years)

Older children may exhibit the most behavioral changes as a result of exposure to violence. Depending on their circumstances, teenagers may:

- Talk about the event all the time or deny that it happened
- Refuse to follow rules or talk back with greater frequency
- Complain of being tired all the time
- Engage in risky behaviors
- Sleep more or less than usual
- Increase aggressive behaviors
- Want to be alone, not even wanting to spend time with friends
- Experience frequent nightmares
- Use drugs or alcohol, run away from home, or get into trouble with the law



### What can you do?

The best way to help children is to make sure that they feel safe (for example, creating a predictable environment, encouraging them to express their feelings by listening and hearing their stories) and ensuring that they know that whatever happened was not their fault.

If your child's behavior worries you, share your concerns with a family member, friend, teacher, religious leader, or someone else you trust. Don't accept others' advice, such as "you worry too much" or "the child is too young to understand," that dismisses your concerns.

Other ways you can help children cope with the impact of exposure to violence include:

- Remaining calm and reinforcing a stable and safe environment
- Keeping a regular schedule or routine for meals, quiet time, playtime, and bedtime
- Helping children prepare for changes and new experiences
- Spending more time together as a family
- Being patient and letting children identify and express feelings
- Providing extra attention, comfort, and encouragement

With a younger child, it is helpful to provide comfort with frequent hugging and cuddling, following the child's lead (for example, wanting to be held, being clingy, or wanting to talk). You should also correct misinformation and

answer questions without giving more information than what was asked for.

School-age children should be told that most people have many feelings when confronted with violence and it is normal to be upset, scared, angry, sad, or anxious. Children at this age need to have their questions answered, have the opportunity to correct their misconceptions, and talk about the experience as many times as needed.

Teenagers should not be forced to talk about the event, but they should have factual information if they request it and an opportunity to provide their perspective on the violent act. It helps for caregivers to be understanding of teenagers' moodiness, fears, and the need to be with peers.

### How do you know if more help is needed?

Remember that when something frightening happens everyone has difficulty, including children. This is normal and may go away. But sometimes the impact stays with the child. If your child continues to experience problems after a few weeks or starts having more problems, you may want to talk to someone about how to help your child cope.

Do not ignore warning signs! It is natural to hope that your child's reactions will go away on their own if given enough time, but it is best to take positive action to help your child regain a feeling of safety and trust.

## Mandated Reporting

Many children experiencing crises or violence are also at risk for child abuse and neglect. All States have child welfare systems that receive and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect, offer services to families, provide foster homes for children who must be removed from their parents' care, and work to find permanent placements for children who cannot safely return home.

Domestic violence does not equal child abuse and neglect, and therefore not all cases of domestic violence must be reported to child protective services. When responding to families affected by domestic violence, it is very important to consider simultaneously the safety of the child and the safety of the adult victim.

State by State information on reporting requirements can be found at [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state)

**For more information and resources, please contact the Safe Start Center, a National Resource Center for Children's Exposure to Violence:**

**<http://www.safestartcenter.org>  
1-800-865-0965  
[info@safestartcenter.org](mailto:info@safestartcenter.org)**

## Additional Resources

Center for Mental Health Services. (2005). *Tips for Talking to Children and Youth After Traumatic Events: A Guide for Parents and Educators*. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/KEN01-0093R>

Chicago Safe Start. (2011). *Exposure to Violence Toolkit*. Chicago: Office of Violence Prevention, Chicago Department of Public Health. <http://www.chicagosafestart.net>

Child Witness to Violence Project. (2007). *Tips for Parents and Other Caregivers: Raising Our Children in a Violent World*. Boston: Boston Medical Center. [http://www.childwitnessstoviolence.org/uploads/2/5/7/9/257929/tips\\_brochure\\_2007.pdf](http://www.childwitnessstoviolence.org/uploads/2/5/7/9/257929/tips_brochure_2007.pdf)

Diamond-Raab, L., Toor Joshi, P., Lewin, S.M., & Shambaugh, G. (2007). *Hands-on Approaches to Helping Children Heal from Traumatic Events*. Washington, DC: International Center to Heal Our Children, Children's Medical Center. [http://www.childrensnational.org/files/PDF/DepartmentsandPrograms/ichoc/Pages\\_for\\_web\\_HandsOn.pdf](http://www.childrensnational.org/files/PDF/DepartmentsandPrograms/ichoc/Pages_for_web_HandsOn.pdf)

Family Violence Prevention Fund. (2009). *Connect: Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence, In-Service Training for Resource Families*. San Francisco: Family Violence Prevention Fund. <http://www.endabuse.org/content/features/detail/1314/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2011). *Parenting in a Challenging World*. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.nctsn.org/print/72>

Safe Start Center. (2009). *Healing the Invisible Wounds: Children's Exposure to Violence, A Guide for Families*. North Bethesda, MD: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. <http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/caregiver.pdf>