

# Relationship Between Domestic Violence & Child Abuse



## Cycle of Violence

Children who are abused or neglected are more likely to become criminal offenders as adults. An American study from 1992 found that childhood abuse increased the odds of adult criminality by 40%. Victims of child sexual abuse are also at risk of becoming part of this cycle of violence. One expert estimates that 40% of individuals who use sexually abusive behaviours were sexually abused as children. Victims of child sexual abuse are 27.7 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution as adults than non-victims.

The vast majority of abusive parents have themselves been abused as children; however, not all victims of abuse go on to assault children. Previous victimization is not the cause of child abuse; rather, it is a significant contributing factor.

Victims of childhood abuse are at a greater risk of becoming individuals who use abusive behaviour. A recent study done for Correctional Services Canada found that 75% of abusive husbands came from violent abusive families.

Case histories of abusive parents frequently reveal that as children they were made to feel unloved, unwanted, unappreciated, and unworthy. Their low self-worth often stems from a self-fulfilling prophecy initiated by their parents: told they were “no good”, maltreating parents tend to believe this and continue to exhibit behaviours which support that perception.

- High school students whose parents had been in violent relationships have a statistically higher rate of violence in their own relationships.
- Men who have witnessed their parents’ domestic violence are three times more likely to abuse their own wives than children of non-violent parents.
- Boys who witness parental abuse during their childhood are at a higher risk of being physically aggressive in dating and marital relationships.
- Girls who witness maternal abuse may tolerate abuse as adults more than girls who do not.
- Finally, kids being violent with other kids may be acting out to exert power over other children, as they feel powerless at home.

## Abusive environments harm children now and in the future

Sometimes people abused by their partners think their children do not know about the abuse or that the abuse does not harm the children. But children are harmed, even if they are not directly abused. Being exposed to anger and violence negatively affects children’s brain development.

According to a 2005 study, brain scans show that children in abusive environments use much of their brain to watch out for danger, leaving less of their brain available for healthy growth and development. A 2003 study of post-traumatic stress and other disorders among children exposed to domestic violence found that this affects their physical, emotional, and mental development as well as their ability to form healthy relationships, **even when the child isn’t consciously aware of the violence in the home.** Children in a threatening environment may:

- Feel anxious or panicky
- Have an increased heart rate
- Be very watchful and attentive all of the time

As a result, they may find it hard to concentrate and have difficulty sleeping and learning.

## Relationship Between Domestic Violence & Child Abuse (cont.)

Adult victims of family violence often think that abuse between adults in the home does not affect children, or that they can shield them from what is going on. That is not true. As long as children live in a threatening or abusive environment, the trauma will affect their brains, leaving them unable to heal. However, the brain can heal over time if the child has a safe, predictable and loving place to live.

### **Children who grow up in abusive homes and become healthy adults**

Children who grow up in unhealthy environments but become healthy adults often have several of the following three experiences.

1. The children understand: “This is not normal.”
  - a. At some point, the children are exposed to a healthy environment and healthy relationships between people. They realize that not everybody lives the way they do
  - b. They become aware that what is happening in their home is violent. They learn that violence and abuse are not normal or acceptable, and that it does not have to be that way
2. A healthy role model takes an interest in them.
  - a. This person treats them with respect. The children’s opinions and feelings matter to the person, and he or she believes the children are worthwhile people
  - b. A healthy role model has high expectations of the children, believes in them, and says, “Of course you can”
  - c. A healthy role model helps them to believe that they can have a better life no matter what has happened in their family. He or she gives the child hope that a better life is possible.
3. The children have reasons to believe in themselves, so there is hope.
  - a. The children believe they are good at something
  - b. The children believe they can influence or control some parts of their lives

In your contact with all children and young people—those who appear to be safe and healthy and those who appear to be in high risk environments—you can make sure that:

- You treat them with courtesy and respect
- You demonstrate healthy and respectful behaviour between adults
- You notice their strengths and gifts
- You help them to believe in themselves

### **Talking to young children when a parent is convicted of domestic violence**

If a parent has been arrested for, is on trial for, or has been convicted of domestic violence, it is a time of crisis for the whole family.

Rather than avoiding a dialogue with children about domestic violence, we can choose to help them understand difficult events in their lives. We owe it to them to give them honest answers that respect their developmental capacities. When answering questions about the criminal consequences of domestic violence, young children will benefit from the following guidelines.

- Connect the abuser’s absence to children’s concrete experiences and framework of understanding. For example, “Jail is like a time-out for adults.” Children younger than four will be unable to think abstractly and thus need such concrete references.
- Differentiate consequences for adults from consequences for children. For example, “When adults make big (or serious) mistakes, they have to go to court. Children are still learning and have more chances.”
- Tell them that when one person hurts other people, they have to be separated in order to keep people safe. Everyone, child and adult, has the right to a safe body.

## Relationship Between Domestic Violence & Child Abuse (cont.)

---

- Keep it simple. Use short sentences and avoid elaborating. Try to answer only the question asked. Wait for the child to ask you for more information.

When we answer children's difficult questions honestly and appropriately, we respect their right to know the truth and we also validate their reality. Without this validation, they will integrate trauma into their worldview in potentially detrimental ways. However, merely talking honestly to children about domestic violence is not enough. It is vital to refer children and parents to resources that will support them in their healing process and prevent the recurring cycle of violence in the future.