



Parenting after Domestic Violence – FAQ

1. Why am I reluctant/nervous/scared to talk to my children about the abuse that occurred in our home?

Recognize that it is natural to feel worry and/or ambivalence about discussing domestic violence with your children, and that it can be hard to describe what happened to you. Some reasons for this reluctance may be that you:

- Think that your child is too young to understand or won't listen;
- Are scared to discuss it;
- Don't know what to say or how to say it;
- Are embarrassed or believe that you will worsen the situation;
- Don't want to "rock the boat";
- Don't want your children to hate the abusive parent;
- Don't want to scare your children;
- Fear that the abusive parent will be mad at them or at you.

Acknowledge these feelings and find someone to talk to about them. This could be a domestic violence professional, a therapist, or a trusted friend or relative.

2. Why is talking to my children about the abuse so important?

Talking to your children about the domestic violence is the first step of the healing process for you and for them. Not talking about the violence at all can leave your children confused, scared or feeling responsible for what happened. It is important to acknowledge what has happened and to give your children the opportunity to share their feelings with you. You can validate the importance of listening to each other and respecting each other's feelings and experiences. Listening and exchanging thoughts and feelings also presents an opportunity to bond with your children. By approaching it in this way, you can use this occasion to:

- Show understanding;
- Acknowledge that the situation is hard/scary for them;
- Remind them that you love them and will do your best to keep them safe;
- Reassure them that the violence was not their fault;
- Let them know that violence is never acceptable.

3. What should I do if my child(ren) are reluctant or refuse to talk with me about the abuse?

There are many valid and normal reasons for children to be reluctant to talk about the domestic violence with you. If this is the case in your family:

- Be patient. Don't push it.
- Don't give up. Be prepared to try another time.
- Recognize that this discussion may be difficult for you and make sure that you are conveying a willingness and desire to talk, not reluctance or embarrassment.
- Be sensitive to nonverbal cues communicated by your children and spend time with them even if they are not talking.
- Talk to them at an appropriate time and in an age-appropriate manner.
- Acknowledge that talking about the violence may be hard/scary for them and for you.

Even if they are not ready to talk, by initiating a conversation, you are sending an important message that you are ready to listen when they are ready to talk.

4. Why do I sometimes feel like the bad parent when I am not the abuser?

Whether you have decided to stay with the abuser or leave them, you may still feel responsible for the effects of the violence on your children. You may feel guilt or regret that you "broke up" your family and took your children away from their other parent – *even though* you did so to protect them and yourself from the violence. Your children may blame you for being weak and a victim, and for breaking up the family. They may treat you the same way that the abuser treated you, or they may put you down and refuse to listen to you.

Sharing your feelings with a counselor or another trusted individual may help you to recognize and move beyond these negative emotions, to forgive yourself, and to recognize that the decisions that you made were to protect the health and well-being of yourself and your children.

5. I am often stressed, and I think it is affecting my parenting. How should I deal with this stress so that I am a better parent?

Think about what activities, in the past, have helped you to deal with stress in your life. For example, these could be activities such as: listening to music, practicing yoga, exercising, cooking, reading, getting together with a friend, seeing a movie, or just treating yourself. Recognize that you need to take care of yourself in order to take care of others, and try to find time every day or every few days to do things that nourish you.

6. What behaviors in my children should alert me to the possibility that they may be suffering from trauma caused by witnessing domestic violence in our home?

Children who have witnessed domestic abuse react in many different ways. The following factors may affect how an individual child will respond after this kind of trauma:

- The seriousness and frequency of the violence
- Whether the child was physically hurt
- The child's relationship with the abuser
- The age of the child
- Whether there is other stress in the child's life
- The resiliency of the child
- Whether the child has positive relationships with supportive and loving adults

Domestic violence professionals can help you to identify when your children may be exhibiting signs of trauma and/or stress, and when mental health services may be beneficial or necessary.

7. What should I do if the abusive partner wants visitation with our children?

Your first priority is to protect your safety and the safety of your children. If you have safety concerns, contact a domestic violence advocate, a lawyer, or another individual who can help you to make a safety plan. If age-appropriate, share your concerns with your child and involve the child in the making of the safety plan.

Recognize that your children may have complicated feelings toward the abuser and that their feelings may be different than yours. Listen to and accept their feelings and avoid making them "take sides." Don't accept blame for the abuse but try not to criticize the other parent.

To manage the pick-up and drop-off in the most peaceful manner possible, try to arrange for the exchange at a neutral place and have another person present with you or ask a third party to handle the pick-up and drop off. If you have any questions about how to manage contact with the abuser safely, please reach out to a domestic violence advocate.

8. What do I say if my child blames me for the loss of our family home and the relationship with the other parent?

Remind your children that:

- Their emotional and physical needs are your number one priority;
- The decision to leave the family home was to protect their physical safety and emotional well-being;
- It is never justifiable for a person to use violence against his or her partner;
- You will listen to and accept all of their negative feelings;
- You love them unconditionally, and
- As long as all violence and controlling behavior has ceased, they are free to have a relationship with their father.

9. What should I do for my child who has trouble sleeping at night?

Although the reasons for sleep troubles are different for every child, here are a few suggestions:

- End each day with a bedtime routine, such as a shower/bath, a book, or a quiet game;
- Make sure your child is calm at bedtime;
- Hold your child or stay physically close;
- Try to focus on your child and not allow distractions to interrupt the routine.

10. My child suffers from low esteem and self confidence. How can I help him/her to feel better about him/herself and be more confident?

- Show unconditional love
- Praise good behavior
- Offer your children opportunities to make choices
- Identify and nurture your child's strengths
- Be proud of your child and tell him/her
- Make time for your child and create opportunities to have fun together

If you don't see any improvement in your child or the situation worsens, seek professional assistance.

11. My children are doing well in school and are well-behaved at home, should I still worry about whether the violence they witnessed in our home has affected them in a negative way?

Despite these "good signs," it is highly unlikely that your children have been unaffected by the violence. Children respond to domestic violence in various ways over time. Some children exposed to domestic violence may cope by engaging in behaviors that they believe will please their caregiving parent. However, at some point, this coping mechanism may break down. A move, a disappointment at school, the end of a friendship, or entering adolescence may trigger new feelings about the domestic violence. They may suddenly start to act differently, and it is important for you to be prepared for the breakdown of their coping mechanism and for the expression of these unexplored feelings about the violence.

12. What is the single most important action that I can take to help my children heal?

Tell you children every day how much you love them.