



Tools and Techniques for Parents with Children

Children deserve a safe home and a life free of fear. If you are a parent who is now or was in an abusive relationship and you have children, the following **Tools and Techniques** may be useful for you.

Acknowledge that the abusive relationship puts both you and your child(ren) at risk for both physical and emotional harm. As the primary caregiver, your priority is to keep your children safe from abuse.

If the threat of violence is still present, it is important to create a safety plan for the family. If your children are old enough to understand the situation, they can assist in the creation of a safety plan.

The first step in safety planning is to talk to your children about the violence—as long as it is safe to do so.

1. Explain to your child(ren) that the abuser's behavior is wrong and unacceptable.
2. Reassure your children that they are not responsible for the abuser's behavior and that they cannot stop it.
3. Reassure your children that they may have mixed emotions about either or both of their parents and that it is not necessary to "take sides."

When making a safety plan:

1. Think about what your child is actually able to do. A safety plan must be age appropriate.
2. Ask your children to think of a person or people who could help and make sure that they are comfortable asking that person for help.
3. Ask your children to come up ideas for how to keep themselves safe. This may include the following actions:
 - go to their room or another place in the house that is safe,
 - leave the house and go somewhere safe (house of a friend, neighbor, relative)
 - call a friend, neighbor, or relative for help
 - stay out of the way of the abuser
 - don't intervene to try to stop the violence
 - dial 911

If the threat of violence is past, and your family is in a safe and secure location, reassure your children that they are safe. Beginning a dialogue with your children about the domestic violence

they have witnessed is the first step in the healing process. Before talking about the violence with your children, think first about how the violence has affected/changed you and how it may have affected your children, and then consider the message that you want to give your children.

When you sit down to talk about the violence with your children, keep in mind the following:

1. Tell your children that you are there for them, that you love them and that you will look out for them.
2. Open the conversation with messages of support. Reassure your child that it is safe to talk to you about his/her feelings, thoughts, and worries, including feelings of anger, frustration, or rage, and that you can and will listen to anything they want to tell you. While it can be difficult to hear about your children's bad feelings, fears or worries, it is important to remember that you are doing your best right now to help them recover.
3. Whether the conversation is planned or spontaneous, be sure to talk to your child in an age appropriate way.
4. Let your child know that it is always okay to ask you questions.
5. Expect that your children will know more than you think, whatever their ages.
6. Support and acknowledge your children's feelings, experiences and their version of the story.
7. Do your best to remain calm and confident and to convey a sense of security. A calm tone sends the message that you are in charge and capable.
8. Be alert to signs (restlessness, silliness, not listening) that your child is ready to end the conversation and end it. This is a continuing topic for discussion that will not be wrapped up in one conversation.

Living with domestic violence and its aftermath is stressful for all members of a family. Children respond to domestic violence in different ways over time. Even if your children are performing well in school, making friends, and "behaving well" at home, witnessing domestic violence in their own home may well have affected them on an emotional level. To help your child recover emotionally and to move forward, consider the following steps:

1. Identify your child's strengths and share your pride in your child with him/her.
2. When disciplining your child, focus on the behavior and don't equate the behavior with who your child is as a person. Say, "Your room is so messy. Please clean it." Not "You are so messy."
3. When disciplining your child, be consistent and try your best to remain calm and in control. This will help your child stay calm as well. Discipline should always be non-violent.
4. Praise your child's good behavior frequently.
5. Offer opportunities for your children to make choices (which shirt should I wear today, what game do I want to play). This will help them to feel in control of their lives.
6. Help your child build upon their strengths—involve them in activities (i.e. sports teams, art and music programs, community or faith-based programs) where they can find children with similar interests, supportive adults, and opportunities to be the best they can be.

7. Try to find some time every day to play with your child. Playing with your children and your teenagers is an essential part of childhood and can help your child feel more secure and connected to you. Art activities, games, sports, and hanging out are all forms of play.
8. Create structure and predictability in your children's lives. Some examples include sitting down to dinner at the same time every night, maintaining age-appropriate bedtimes every day, and reading to/with your children every night before bedtime.
9. Set reasonable limits and expectations for your children. This is especially important for teenagers who need limit-setting (curfews, no alcohol, no drugs) from their parents.
10. Send clear messages to your children that they are not at fault or responsible in any way for the domestic violence: the abuser alone is responsible for his abusive behavior.
11. Don't be afraid to be appropriately affectionate with your children. Sometimes, the best way to demonstrate your unconditional love for your child is through a simple hug or kiss.

Many children who have witnessed domestic violence exhibit psychological, behavioral, and/or physical changes that can be detrimental to their health and well-being. There is a vast array of possible symptoms that vary with the age of the child and these symptoms can range from mild to severe. Some common symptoms include:

- Sleep disturbances
- Failure to thrive
- Headaches and stomach aches
- Increased aggressive behavior
- Hyperactivity
- Constant worry
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Trouble concentrating
- Depression or anxiety
- Suicidal behavior
- Drug and alcohol use/abuse
- Criminal activity

If your child's behavior changes do not go away on their own or they get worse, if you are concerned that your child may harm himself or others, or if you feel overwhelmed and unable to help your child, seek outside guidance, i.e. from friends, relatives, school counselors, shelter service providers. You are not in this alone.

It is difficult for a parent who is under extreme stress to provide the support and guidance that her children need to heal themselves. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to your own levels of stress and to find ways to reduce stress and relax. There are many different methods to reduce stress and you need to find the one that works for you. Some ideas include:

- Listening to music
- Practicing yoga
- Praying
- Exercising
- Creating artwork

- Meditating
- Taking a hot bath or shower
- Breathing deeply
- Joining a support group

When you find a method that works for you, stick with it and try to do it every day.