

Fostering Family

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE STUDY GUIDE

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1 in 15 children is exposed to intimate partner violence each year, and 90% of these children are eyewitnesses to this violence. In 2010, New Mexico law enforcement looked at domestic violence metrics, and they found that there were 19,587 incidents of domestic violence. Of those, 6,787 children were reported to be at the scene. 37% reported an injury to the victim. 64% of them reported an injury to the child. That's 64% of the 6,787.

Domestic violence happens when one person in a relationship expresses power and control over another. This can manifest as threats, coercion, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying, and blaming.

For example, isolation is when the abuser controls what the victim does, whom they see or speak with, what they read, or where they go—limiting outside involvement. They might use jealousy to justify actions.

How do you support somebody in an abusive relationship? You can educate yourself. You can let your loved one know you're concerned. You can listen and support their decisions. You can encourage small steps. If you're supporting somebody, practicing that self-care is going to be crucial.

Exposure to traumatic events affects everybody differently. Some children are fearful, anxious, or on guard. This looks a little different depending on their age. For children who are pre-school age, you might see some regressive behaviors: bed wetting, thumb sucking, increased crying, and whining. They also might have issues with sleeping or show signs of anxiousness. They might also present with intense separation anxiety.

For school-aged children, we often see some guilty behaviors coming out. They might blame themselves. They might have lower self-esteem due to witnessing domestic violence. They might not be participating in activities or getting good grades like they used to. They might have fewer friends or get into trouble more. They might be acting out. They also tend to show physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches.

Teenagers who witness abuse might be engaging in fighting with family members or other teens. They might start to skip school, drink, use drugs, display lower self-esteem, or get in trouble with the law.

The goal is to create resilient children and a resilient family. Children need a sense of belonging. This is friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection. When our physiological or safety needs are not met, we can't really be thinking about the bigger picture. If you're a second-grade student who's been through a traumatic situation and has been placed into a different home, worrying about a math grade when your safety needs are not met, is not appropriate. It's not fair, and they're going to struggle.

You're providing for those physiological needs now. You're providing safety and consistency in their schedules, letting them know that they're very loved and they belong. You help them rebuild self-esteem, which includes respect, status, recognition, strength, and freedom.

Resilient children and resilient families require healthy boundaries. For children that have been in abusive situations or exposed to abusive situations, help them to create their own boundaries. A large part of healthy relationships include non-threatening behavior. Act in a way so that the other person feels safe and comfortable expressing themselves. Listen nonjudgmentally, be emotionally affirming, and understand and value each other's opinions. This is trust and support.

Honesty and accountability are part of responsible parenting. Be a positive nonviolent role model. Mutually agree on a fair distribution of work and make family decisions together.

Build a support system. Are there close friends that you can call on? Is your child involved with friendships? Are you connected to your neighborhood? Are you connected to your community? If not, how can you become more connected. It just takes researching and finding new avenues and groups to involve.

Seek professional help. If your children have witnessed domestic violence, or have suffered any type of abuse, you can get professional help. You don't need to have a level 10 crisis to benefit from professional help. It might just be, "Hey, we're bringing in additional children. Now my partner and I are feeling overwhelmed," and so getting that extra support is always a benefit.

Keep routines that are super predictable. For example, every morning, the family wakes together and has breakfast together. Everybody gets ready. They go to school. When they come home, they have a snack, do homework, or have playtime. Then there's dinner and then maybe a fun family activity. Consistent bath time and bedtimes. Creating structured routines for these children is super therapeutic because many of them are used to chaotic situations, and you're helping on a neurological level to create emotional stability.

.Dr. Bruce Perry and says, "There is no more effective neurobiological intervention than a safe relationship." Children who have been in rough situations are overstimulated. Maybe their behaviors are really intense. When you provide a safe relationship and allow them to join in your space, you help calm their nervous system and become stable.

When your kids express intense behavior, maybe it's a tantrum; the best thing you can do is be a stable force. As you continue to maintain your stability through this event, they will naturally attune to you. It takes time. We're retraining their nervous systems.

We are ready to help. If you're working with the children that have come into your care and need some additional support, please let us know. We can get you set up with any type of service that you may need. It doesn't have to be long-term. We have a lot of resources at your disposal.