

ADULT ISSUES

The primary focus of this guide is violence in the home between adults, be they in heterosexual relationships or gay or lesbian relationships, and its effects on children.



ACT
Government

Community Services

Most people argue with other members of their family from time to time. Parents may argue about money, the children and household jobs; children fight about any number of things.

Sometimes arguments in families get out of hand and people get hurt. When this happens between adults, this affects everyone, especially the children.

Domestic violence happens in all sorts of families and plays a major part in the breakdown of families. Most people don't want to think that what happens in their family is 'domestic violence'. It is hard to talk about, and people may ignore or even deny it is happening. Many people find that talking about it, even to their closest friends, is something they cannot do, or feel they shouldn't do. Unfortunately, domestic violence hardly ever goes away by itself. It usually gets worse over time unless real changes in attitude and behaviour are made.

What is domestic violence?

When most of us think of domestic violence we think of hitting, and this is certainly part of it. Abuse or violence happens when people use their power to hurt, control or bully someone else. **This can be with words or with actions.** Domestic violence happens in relationships between couples going out together, living together, married, separated or divorced. It happens between men and women and in same sex relationships.

Males and females of all ages can be abusive or violent. When people are abusive they tend to 'play down' what they do, while those on the receiving end tend to blame themselves or 'play down' the effect on themselves of what has happened.

Unfortunately some people accept violence and abuse as a part of relationships. Abuse and violence can be seen everyday on television programs, in films and newspapers. There are fewer examples around of how to value, respect and consider other people.

There is never any excuse for bullying, abuse or violence.

Arguing is not domestic violence. Arguing, or telling someone that you disagree with them, and even feeling and expressing your anger, is a necessary part of relationships. Arguing can be done without anyone being hurt and is one of the ways people manage their differences and sort out problems. Children learn about relationships and how to manage a disagreement by watching how others do this, particularly their parents.

Domestic violence is what happens when one partner is hurt physically or emotionally and fears that it will happen again.

Why does this happen?

It might be hard to understand why people could deliberately hurt others, especially those they say they love.

Many different things can lead to domestic violence.

- Some people are stronger, bigger, louder and have more authority or control than others, and may think they have more right than others to get their own way.
- Some people do not have the skills to deal with the stresses of life or know how to handle their feelings. They may get frustrated and angry and 'take it out' on others.
- Some people may be jealous and believe they have the right to control the behaviour of their partner.
- Some people see their partner as someone they 'own' and believe they can treat them as they like.
- Some people grow up in families where abuse and violence was learnt as a way for people to deal with their differences, or to get what they want. They may not know other ways of behaving.

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How does it start?

In some families disagreements and arguments can end in domestic violence. This happens when people believe they know best, have a right to try and make everyone do what they want, and insist on having their own way no matter what it takes. Sometimes drugs and alcohol can play a part, though they are never an excuse.

There is a common pattern to this abuse and violence—sometimes called the 'cycle of violence'. This cycle often gets worse over time and occurs more often. It does not usually go away by itself.

Build up

This is the time when a person begins to feel irritated and annoyed. Your partner may believe you are 'pushing' even though you may in fact be doing everything you can to 'keep the peace'. As feelings become more intense your partner may get more verbally abusive and threatening. Build-up leads to an explosion sooner or later if nothing is done to deal with feelings. This build-up can take weeks, days or only minutes.

Explosion

This is the time when you can get hurt physically if your partner uses physical force. This can include pushing, shoving or beatings, which leave bruises or broken bones. There can be yelling, cruel language or threats made. Violence at this point can be life-threatening.

Feeling sorry

Sometimes afterwards your partner may show regret or say 'sorry' or may act helpless and guilty. There may be promises that it will never happen again. There may be talk about how much you are loved.

Some people do not see themselves as responsible for what has happened. They may blame their partner, alcohol or drugs, or brush it off as not being important. Some may deny that anything happened at all.

False honeymoon

Your partner may try to make up for the behaviour by buying gifts, doing extra things around the house and generally trying to please you. This may be a relief, as things between you both may seem better than they have for a long time.

However, unless your partner follows through the promises with changes to the behaviour, it is likely that the pattern will start again.

What are the effects of domestic violence?

Effects on family life

Domestic violence can result in:

- family members not feeling safe, not trusting or feeling supported by others within the family
- a loss of confidence or low self esteem in family members
- a separation or divorce.

Effects on parents

The partner who is abused may feel:

- intimidated, stressed, anxious, shamed, guilty, depressed and very alone
- less able to cope with parenting
- less able to cope with life.

The partner who abuses may feel:

- frustrated
- strong anger that is hard to control
- not appreciated by the family
- less able to parent well
- very alone.

Effects on children

Children and young people are deeply affected by domestic violence, both as witnesses and as victims. Living with it can affect them both physically and emotionally. How badly they are affected will depend on their age, sex, and how long it has been happening and what happens. It can be hard for children to cope with the seesawing feelings at home as the pattern continues. Children often live in a constant state of anticipation—waiting for it to happen again.

The effects on children can include:

- feelings of fear, mistrust, shame, anger, helplessness, low self esteem and depression
- signs of stress such as headaches, stomach aches, sleeping problems, nightmares and bedwetting
- believing that violence in families is normal
- learning that the only way to get what you want is by using violence
- learning that it's okay for men and boys to be violent and for women and girls to be abused
- missing school to stay near a parent who is hurt
- running away from home
- using drugs and alcohol
- aggressive language and behaviour
- poor school performance
- not having friends and withdrawing from family activities.

Note: There may be other reasons for these behaviours in children.

What parents can do

If you think domestic violence is happening in your home then you need to get help.

The partner who abuses

- If you bully or abuse your partner, or find it hard to control your anger, you can learn ways other than using violence and abuse to deal with your feelings. Talk to someone who understands the problem of domestic violence or phone the Domestic Violence Crisis Service.
- If you think you could be a danger to your family, leave until you have calmed down. You can phone the Domestic Violence Crisis Service.

The partner who is abused

- You have a right to be safe. You are not responsible for your partner's violence and abuse.
- If you or your children are in immediate danger call the Police on 000.
- If you are scared or living in fear of your partner, then it's important to consider your safety and the safety of your children. Your children need to understand that violent behaviour is not acceptable.
- Some time away from your partner can help you to see things more clearly.
- Talking to someone who understands the problems in these situations can help you to sort out what to do.

How to help your children

Children need:

- protection from physical, emotional and verbal abuse
- to know that bullying, abuse and violence is not okay
- encouragement to talk about their feelings and worries
- reassurance that it is not their fault
- reassurance that they are loved
- extra support from a trusted adult
- support with schooling
- professional help if they show signs of behavioural or emotional problems
- to know where they can get help in an emergency (Police, Domestic Violence Crisis Service or Kids Help Line).
- to always feel safe in their home.

One of the most important things you can do for your children (by what you do) is to show that you can disagree about things, not get violent and still respect and care for the other person.

- **If you think you could be a danger to your family—leave until you are calm.**
- **Call the Domestic Violence Crisis Service 6280 0900.**
- **If you think you or your children are in immediate danger, leave or call the Police 000.**
- **If you want to talk to someone and don't know what to do, call the Domestic Violence Crisis Service 6280 0900 or your local community centre.**

One of the most important things you can do for your children (by what you do) is to show that you can disagree about things, not get violent and still respect and care for the other person.

Reminders

- Everyone has the right to be safe.
- There is never any excuse for bullying, abuse and violence.
- Abuse, bullying and violent behaviour often becomes a pattern of behaviour.
- Children suffer in an environment with domestic violence.
- People who are abusive and bully others can learn to behave differently.
- You can teach your children by your example how to handle arguments without using abuse and violence.
- If you are concerned about your behaviour on your family, or are frightened by your partner's behaviour, get professional help and advice. Don't wait hoping it will go away.

While recognising that some women are violent, in the large majority of cases it is more likely men than women who are violent and abusive.

In communities where men have most of the power and control and when domestic violence occurs, there can be a damaging effect on both boys and girls and how they see themselves and their role in society.

For statistics and domestic violence fact sheet refer to www.cyh.com

Contacts

Domestic Violence Crisis Service	24-hour	6280 0900
Family Relationships Advice Line	8am–8pm Monday–Friday, 10am–4pm Saturday	1800 050 321
Legal Advice Information Line	9am–4pm weekdays	1300 654 314
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833
Police	24-hour—emergency	000
	24-hour—assistance	131 444

Websites

www.csa.gov.au	Free CD dealing with separation and other publications
www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides

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