

# Babies and Toddlers

**Babies and toddlers need safe environments to grow into healthy and well-adjusted children.**

...**Environments** where there is violence, intimidation, uncertainty and fear are not safe.

...**These environments** are not good for children.

...**Ongoing and abusive** parental conflict has a worse effect on children's development and adjustment than separation or divorce (*Jaffe et al 1990*).

...**Some people feel** they do not have a choice to leave a violent relationship.

...**Even if they do leave** the relationship, the children will, in most cases, continue to have contact with the person using violence.

...**This very often results** in the abusive person continuing to exert some control and violence through their contact with the children.

This factsheet talks about the **effects of domestic and family violence on babies and toddlers**. It talks about **strategies** for adults to help **protect children against these effects**.

**Many people don't understand** the deep emotional harm children can suffer when domestic and family violence is part of their lives.

The emotional scars might be harder to see, but they often affect children for the rest of their lives.

**Children do not understand domestic and family violence** the same way as adults:

- they often blame themselves
- they often worry that the violence will kill their parent or family member
- they often believe that they are responsible for stopping the violence.

**Children rely on their family for safety and protection.** It is often very traumatic for children to see and feel the tension, terror and aggression that domestic and family violence creates.

**These children need strong, positive and reliable relationships.**

**They need:**

- the violence to stop
- to feel safe
- to be soothed
- predictability in their environment
- reassurance
- comfort



**Ongoing domestic and family violence can stop parents from providing these things** (*McIntosh 2000; Knowlton & Schultz 1999*).

*...But my kids don't see it...*

Even if you think your children have not seen or heard the domestic or family violence, chances are the children know that it is happening.

Research with children tells us that kids know much more about what goes on in their family than we think (Edelson 1999).

Kids are very good at detecting tension and fear between the people important to them. Kids are also very good at reading the feelings of adults.

## CONTACTS LIST

**If you are in immediate danger  
call 000**

**dvconnect (24 hrs)** - Ph: 1800 811 811  
Domestic and family violence telephone  
service for women, children and young  
people

### **dvconnect Men's Line**

Ph: 1800 600 636  
(Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)

### **Kids Help Line (24 hrs)**

Ph: 1800 551 800

### **Parentline** - Ph: 1300 30 1300

(8am – 10pm 7days/week)  
Confidential support, information and  
referral for parents

**If you are worried that a child is being  
abused, contact the Department of  
Families:**

#### **General enquiries**

Ph: 1800 811 810, or  
(07) 3224 8045 (Brisbane)

#### **After hours & emergencies**

Ph: 1800 177 135, or  
(07) 3235 9999 (Brisbane)

*For a list of area offices look in your White  
Pages under Department of Families*

### **Community Child Health Service –**

Telephone Information & Advisory Service  
Ph: 1800 177 279 (outside Brisbane)  
Ph: 07 3862 2333 (Brisbane)

### **Lifeline (24 hrs)** - Ph: 13 11 14

### **Men's Line Australia (24 hrs)**

Ph: 1300 789 978  
Information, support and referral

### **Disability Information & Awareness Line**

- Ph: 1800 177 120 or (07) 3224 8031  
(Brisbane)

### **Immigrant Women's Support Service**

Ph: (07) 3846 3490 (Brisbane)  
Website: [www.iwss.org.au](http://www.iwss.org.au)

### **Kinnections**

Counselling line  
Ph (07) 3435 4300 (Brisbane)  
Parenting courses  
Ph: (07) 3435 4343 (Brisbane)  
Website: [www.kinnections.com.au](http://www.kinnections.com.au)

### **Relationships Australia**

Ph 1300 364 277

### **Legal Aid Queensland**

Women's Legal Aid - Ph: 1300 651 188  
Domestic Violence Unit  
Ph: 1300 651 188 (men and women)

### **Women's Legal Service**

Ph: 1800 677 278 or  
(07) 3392 0670 (Brisbane)

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal and Advocacy Service**

Ph: 1800 442 450

### **Local Contact:**

**...Children's reactions vary** depending on their age, how often the violence happens and how parents and other adults respond to the child's distress.

**...Initially it may be difficult** to tell if a child is affected by the violence in her/his family. This is because the trauma of seeing the violence often results in the child 'splitting off' from their strong feelings and memories. In these cases, the child might sometimes seem 'spaced out', very quiet, or behave as though nothing has happened (*McIntosh 2000; Briere 1992*).

## All Children Need...

**... A reliable and positive relationship** with their caregiver, where they can seek comfort and emotional safety during times of stress and fear.

**...This enables a child to predict his/her world**, feel safe, seek and receive comfort, calm him/herself, build positive relationships, consider others feelings, cope with stress and become confident adults.

### ***A reliable and positive relationship is vital to helping children manage the stress and trauma in their lives.***

Looking after the needs of your children when you are in an abusive relationship is extremely difficult. It's very important to take good care of yourself - find ways to keep contact with friends and family; make sure you *have a safety plan* if, for whatever reason, you remain in the relationship; **Ask for help.**

REMEMBER: There are people who can help you and your children confidentially, regardless of whether you want to leave the relationship or stay. The priority is the safety of you and your children. (See the Contacts List on the left for details)

## BABIES & TODDLERS

*"He slapped me in the face when I was feeding my baby.  
He hit my son" (Irwin et al 2002 p 90).*

Thinking that babies and toddlers are too young to be affected by domestic and family violence is a mistake.

Living with ongoing domestic or family violence affects the development of babies and toddlers brains. These effects can be permanent.

Babies as young as six weeks show clear disturbances in response to domestic and family violence.

Babies and toddlers react strongly to tension, fear and aggression in their environment.

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## Is my baby affected?



### Babies' reactions to tension, fear and aggression in their environment show in behaviours such as:

...excessive irritability.....

.....clinginess.....

.....sleeping problems.....

.....feeding problems...

Domestic and family violence causes so much fear, worry and stress for parents, that they often are not able to comfort and soothe their babies and toddlers to help them feel safe again.

When babies and toddlers don't regularly find comfort, safety and security, their relationship with their parents becomes damaged. These damaged relationships can lead to serious emotional problems for the child, both now and in the future.

## Is my toddler affected?



### Toddlers' reactions to tension, fear and aggression in their environment show in behaviours such as:

...greater irritability

...clinginess

...eating problems

...sleep disturbances, nightmares

...going backwards in their toileting and speech

...aggression

...withdrawing

...worrying about their parent

...sadness

...headaches, tummy aches

...repeated acting out of the violence in their play.

Continuing tension, fear and aggression in the environment can interfere with babies' and toddlers' development of trust and independence.

(Sources: Perry 2002, 2001, 1997; Unite for Kids 2001; McIntosh 2000; Behrman 1999; Shore 1997; Briere 1992)

*"My son started punching me when he was just over two years old"*

(Irwin et al 2002 p 87).

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## WHAT CAN I DO?

**Get support for yourself** – find ways to keep in contact with family, friends, professional help. Kids look to parents for reassurance, security and certainty – getting support and help for yourself is an extremely important way to help your child.

**Babies and toddlers need lots of affection** and positive attention, sensitive responses to their fears, consistent and caring discipline, regular routines and an environment that is safe and predictable.

Make a decision to keep **you and your children safe** – there are people who can help you.

Remember that a **positive and reliable relationship** with you is vital to helping children cope with the stress and trauma that domestic or family violence creates.

**Recognise what you are doing** to make a reliable and positive relationship with your baby or toddler, and build on this. For example:

- ... Get to know your baby's / toddler's moods, signs of tiredness or distress. Hold her/him closely, rock gently and use gentle tones to soothe and comfort her/him when distressed
- ... Look at your baby / toddler in their eyes when you are talking to them
- ... Smile and use a soothing and gentle voice when you're changing nappies, feeding, bathing her/him
- ... Play short games with your baby / toddler – eg: gentle tickles, peek-a-boo, nursery rhymes
- ... Sing and read to your baby / toddler
- ... Follow your child's lead in communication – eg: mimic her/his babbles, coos, "ba-ba-bas"; follow her/his lead in games as they make up their own versions
- ... Say positive and encouraging words like "Good girl/boy; you're beautiful; Mummy loves you"
- ... Use gentle touch and kisses and firm cuddles to show your baby or toddler that she/he is safe in your arms
- ... Keep a regular routine of meal times, sleep times, bath times and quiet times. This makes your child's daily life predictable and helps her/him feel secure
- ... Join a playgroup with your toddler – mixing with other parents and children can be fun and reassuring that you are doing a good job.

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