

Pre-school children exposed to violence sometimes don't feel guilty about their unkind behaviour, making it hard for parents to discipline the child.

- *Inattention* – Some children can't focus their attention. They can have signs that are mistaken for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). These children can have problems with learning in the classroom as they reach school age.
- *Changes in sleep* – When young children don't feel safe and secure they may have trouble falling asleep, sleeping alone, or staying asleep.

### What can I do to help my child?

The most important step a parent can take is to end the violence in the home. There are many people in your community who will help you keep your family safe and deal with the effects of violence on yourself and your children.

## Resources

### Books for Children

*A Family That Fights* (1991)  
S.C. Bernstein. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.

*Never, No Matter What* (1988) by M. Otto.  
Toronto Ont. Women Press.

*Something is Wrong at My House* (1984)  
Diane Davis. Seattle: Parenting Press, Inc.

### Website

Alberta Government  
[www.familyviolence.alberta.ca](http://www.familyviolence.alberta.ca)

### Resources used in this pamphlet:

*A Handbook for Health and Social Service Providers and Educators on Children Exposed to Woman Abuse/ Family Violence* (1999). Marlies Sudermann and Peter Jaffe, Family Violence and Prevention Unit, Health Canada.

*Building Your Baby's Brain – A Parent's Guide to the First Five Years* (2002). Diane Trister Dodge and Cate Heroman, U.S. Dept. of Education, Washington, D.C.

*The First Years Last Forever: I Am Your Child*. The New Brain Research and Your Child's Healthy Development. Canadian Institute of Child Health, Ottawa, Ont.

If you have questions or concerns, please call Access Mental Health at 403-943-1500 or your family doctor.

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*This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.*

health information

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# How Family Violence Affects Young Children



## What is family violence?

Family violence happens within the intimate and trusting relationships of the family. The home, instead of being a place the child feels safe and secure becomes a place where the child feels distrust and fear.

Family violence includes a range of behaviours like verbal putdowns, manipulation, threats, withholding money, property damage, hurting pets, physical injury, and sexual abuse or exploitation.

## How are children affected when exposed to family violence?

Many parents believe that if their child is not a direct target of the abuse, he or she is not harmed by violence in the home. However, children do feel the fear, tension, and distress in their parents.

Children are often in situations where:

- those they seek comfort and help from in dealing with their fears, are also the source of their distress
- they struggle whether to identify with the aggressor or feel helpless
- they feel responsible for the violence or that they were not able to protect the victim
- they see the world as a hostile place

When young children are exposed to repeated episodes of violence, it can affect their ability to learn, manage their emotions, and develop normally.

When violence in the home happens regularly and for a long time, children can have behaviour and emotional problems that last long after the abuse has stopped.

## What kinds of symptoms do young children have when they are exposed to violence?

During the first five years of life, the brain is busy making connections and developing pathways. When a child has the same experience over and over again, the brain develops a pathway that will change the way that child thinks, feels, behaves and learns. These changes can permanently shape how a child develops.

This is why being exposed to violence in the home over and over harms young children. Their developing brain can be permanently changed by the stress of violence in the home. When children are very watchful and attentive for signs of danger, they are less able to play and learn.

### *Infants*

When infants see or hear violence or feel tension in their home, the effects can include:

- *Failure to thrive* – Even very young infants can become depressed. This can cause problems with eating and sleeping, which then causes poor weight gain
- *Weak emotional ties with parents* – The parents may not have been able to always respond to their infant's needs because they are trying to cope with their own distress.

- *Being overly fearful or anxious* – This can cause an infant to be hard to soothe and have trouble adapting to new situations, adding to the worry in the home.
- *Delays in development and learning* – When infants are worried or afraid, they are less likely to explore their surroundings. This may cause delays in their development.

### *Toddlers*

When young children see or hear violence between their parents they, like infants, become very upset. Even mild arguments will cause toddlers to stop what they are doing and look for comfort from their caregiver. Effects can include:

- *Anxiety and Withdrawal* – Some young children become clingy and anxious. Others may avoid or withdraw from the parent(s). Withdrawn children sometimes seem to be more independent or self-reliant.

Other toddlers react to violence in the home by becoming sad, withdrawn, or worried. They may complain of headaches, tummy aches, or other symptoms. Bullies on the playground are more likely to pick on these children.

- *Aggression* – Sometimes children copy the behaviour they see, causing problems with playmates. These children can be aggressive with peers, cruel to animals or other children, or damage property.