

Children and Domestic Violence

Before You Talk to Your Children: How Your Feelings Matter

Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior that one person in a relationship uses to control the other. The behavior may be verbally, emotionally, physically, financially, or sexually abusive. You as a parent may have left an abusive relationship or you may still be in one. This fact sheet is **#3** in a series of 10 sheets written to help you understand how children may react to domestic violence, and how you can best help them to feel safe and valued and develop personal strength. For other fact sheets in the series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

Parents often worry about what to say to their children about domestic violence. It can be hard to explain what has happened and why it happened. Before you speak, take time to reflect on your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions to stressful events, because they will affect the way your children react. Even very young children are tuned in to your emotions. They can sense how you feel even before you talk to them. Your thoughts and feelings give your children important information about how they themselves should react to their circumstances.

SAFETY FIRST

If you are still in an abusive situation, talking privately with your children may be difficult or impossible. Think first about your safety and support system. Talk to a domestic violence advocate, a counselor, or a trusted friend or family member about your situation and how you can keep yourself and your children safe. Then you can think about what you want to say to your children.

EXPLORING YOUR FEELINGS

Children ask questions at surprising times. Not every conversation can be planned. However, thinking ahead will allow you to consider what you want your children to learn from their experiences. Ask yourself how domestic violence has affected you. What feelings are you carrying with you? Are you angry? Exhausted? Depressed? Fearful? Overwhelmed? All of these feelings are normal for someone who has dealt with partner



The Co-chairs of the NCTSN Domestic Violence Work Group Betsy Groves, Miriam Berkman, Rebecca Brown, and Edwina Reyes along with members of the committee and Futures Without Violence developed this fact sheet, drawing on the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research findings, and reports from battered women's advocates and mental health professionals. For more information on children and domestic violence, and to access all fact sheets in this series, visit www.nctsn.org/content/resources

conflict, abuse, and changes in family situations. Recognizing feelings in yourself is a key step in understanding how your children may be affected by domestic violence.

Tips for Getting Ready to Talk to Your Children

- Consider your own and your children's safety first.
- Recognize how your experiences have affected you.
- Think about how domestic violence may be affecting your children.
- Consider what messages you want to give your children.
- Recognize your strengths as a person and a parent.
- You should know that what your child may share can be difficult and painful for you to hear.

For information about what to say to your children about domestic violence, see fact sheet #4 in this series, **Listening and Talking to Your Child About Domestic Violence**. When you are ready to talk, no matter what words you use, the most important message for your kids is that you are there for them, that you love them, and that you will look out for them. Sometimes these messages are communicated without words: in a hug or a kiss, or just by staying close.

IMPORTANT!

If you feel unsafe now and need help for yourself, your family, or someone else in a domestic crisis, contact

- 911 for emergency police assistance
- The National Domestic Violence Hotline. Advocates are available to intervene in a crisis, help with safety planning, and provide referrals to agencies in all 50 states. Call the confidential hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or go to www.thehotline.org
- Your local child protective services have resources for you if your children are in danger.