

# Choosing Positive Paths

## Parenting a baby who has experienced violence

Birth to 18 months

Everyone has the right to feel and be safe, yet family violence is still very common. According to Australian statistics (2012), women are most likely to experience violence from a male partner or ex-partner. Three quarters of women who experience family violence are mothers or care for children. Almost half said their children had seen or heard the violence. People caring for a child who has experienced family violence are often

worried about how the child is affected.

Children – regardless of their age – do know and respond to what's going on around them.

For children, experiencing family violence means knowing about, seeing or hearing violence in their home. It also means the child can be hurt, abused or controlled. All forms of violence in the family affect children and are types of child abuse. A child's ability

to cope can depend on many things.

You can do a lot to help.

This brochure can help you understand and support children who have experienced family violence. Most family violence is directed at women so the language used here is for mothers ('you').

However, the information is also helpful for other primary carers – fathers, grandparents, aunts, family

friends and foster parents. The phrase 'your child' means 'a child in your care'; 'dad' or 'father' refers to the child's other parent.

### This brochure contains tips and information about:

- The impact of family violence on babies
- Activities you could try together
- Stages of development

During or after an experience of family violence, your baby will probably be feeling a huge mix of emotions. Some people think babies are not affected by what's going on around them. This is not true. Babies are fully dependent on their carer and pick up on the emotions and stresses of people around them.

### How babies think

Your child can't talk yet, so they show how they feel by the way they act. You may notice that your baby is:

- More difficult to settle
- Shutting down
- Crying more
- Easily startled
- More clingy

Your baby's body language can give you clues to how they are feeling, for example they might tense up when they are scared or smile when they're happy.

Babies are sensitive to the mood of their mothers and carers. If you can appear relaxed and be calm in your voice, tone and actions with your baby, your baby is more likely to be soothed and calm.



# The impact of family violence

For any mother experiencing family violence, her baby or infant is particularly vulnerable. Babies rely on the adults who care for them, to be safe and soothed. Babies can't move out of the way or may be in their mother's arms when her partner is using violence. They can be severely hurt if dropped or shaken and frightened by what is happening around them.

Repetition and routine is important for babies' learning and development, including their brain. If noise, violence and fear occur, over and over again, it can affect their development.

Many parents worry that the experience of family violence will affect their child forever. Babies need time and support to recover from traumatic situations. Like you, once the violence has stopped and they feel safe, your baby can begin to heal.

If your baby has experienced violence they may:

- Be frightened of new people, voices or loud noises
- Be slower to roll over, pull themselves up,

crawl, walk, talk and other physical signs of development like holding small objects

- Be less responsive or interested in the world compared to other babies
- Be very distressed
- Return to newborn behaviour

In the short term, these kinds of difficulties can be tiring and stressful for you and your child. It's important to look after yourself and to find support.

Ways you can help your baby:

- Give them lots of affection – hugs, cuddles, rocking
- Respond with eye contact and calm words
- Talk to them (your baby learns language from before they are even born and the early months are very important)
- Try and focus on your baby's routine, e.g. regular sleep, bathing and feeding times

For other ideas, see the tips below and brochure 8.

## Tips

### Feeding and sleeping

Babies who have experienced violence might not seem interested in food or may refuse to eat. Some babies do not put on enough weight for their age. Other babies may feed more and be difficult to wean. Sleep can be a problem. If your baby is unsettled or not sleeping well, it can help to try to stick to a regular routine of 'feed, play, bath, sleep'. Babies who have experienced violence can get sick more often. This could be related to sleeping or eating difficulties, or because they are stressed.

All of this behaviour can be common for babies who have not experienced violence. If you are worried about your baby's sleeping or feeding, or your baby is unwell, talk to a doctor or maternal and child health nurse.

### Crying and settling

One of the most difficult effects of violence can be that your baby screams and cries more than usual, or becomes too quiet. It is important to check with your doctor or maternal and child health nurse that there are no physical reasons for this behaviour. If you are feeling overwhelmed by your baby crying, it's okay to put your baby in a safe place like the cot for a short time. Check regularly that your baby is safe but take some time to:

- Do something calming (for example, take ten deep breaths, listen to a favourite song or step outside for a few minutes)
- Call a friend, family member or service you trust

If your baby is being too quiet, encourage them to interact with you by making eye contact, smiling or talking to them calmly. If you are worried seek help.



## The importance of play

Babies who have experienced violence usually have mixed feelings that they aren't yet able to talk about. Play can help them to develop their confidence and work through their feelings.

Play is a fun, normal and very important part of growing up. It can also help you develop your relationship with your child.

Play is one of the easiest and safest ways for babies to express their feelings and develop:

- Physical skills e.g. holding a toy
- Imagination, creativity and problem solving skills
- The ability to communicate, play and share with others
- Understanding of rules, fairness, taking turns and consequences of actions

Some mothers who have experienced violence can find it difficult and strange to play with their child at first. You could start by just sitting with them and watching what they do.

Playing can strengthen your relationship and help you to relax and have fun together.

### It can be useful to:

- Be patient
- Be curious about what they are try to tell you
- Allow them to try different things and to make mistakes
- Give them praise and encouragement
- Have fun!



## Activities to try together

You might feel the experiences of violence have affected your relationship with your child.

It might take time and patience to strengthen the relationship and communication between you.

These are some activities you can try:

- Talk and sing with your child
- Make lots of eye contact, make faces, smile
- Cuddle your baby often
- Read stories with your baby
- Play peek-a-boo
- Clap and sing with your baby in front of a mirror
- Play hide and seek (for young babies use an object for them to find)
- Play imitation games (babies love to copy you laughing, coughing, poking out your tongue, blinking your eyes and moving your hands, arms and feet)
- Encourage your baby to do the things they enjoy (rolling, crawling, sitting)
- Play chasing games when your child starts crawling and walking (make sure you give your child a head start!)
- Add a massage to their bath routine

# Ages and stages

The early stages of a child's life are very important, this is when verbal language is forming and when a child learns to relate to other people. Every child is different and develops at their own rate, but there are common stages of development. Stress or trauma can affect your baby's development. Children will often catch up once the violence has stopped and they feel safe again. Some children at this stage may have difficulty separating from their primary carer.

## Newborn to 6 months

Responds to cuddling  
Smiles at familiar faces  
Sits with support  
Rolls over, kicks arms and legs  
Pulls self up to sit with help  
Sees things and reaches for them  
Holds objects and puts in mouth  
Makes many noises  
Squeals, screams and smiles

## 6 to 12 months

Crawls or shuffles around  
Walks a few steps with support  
Holds cups and tries to feed self  
Laughs and shows enjoyment  
Gets upset or frightened if left alone  
Recognises own name and can't speak clearly yet  
Tries things using trial and error (e.g. drops toys from high chair)

## 12 to 18 months

Walks quite well but falls easily  
Climbs stairs and explores  
Can turn pages point to pictures  
Can say simple words  
Copies other children and adults  
Points to what they want  
Plays skillfully with simple toys  
Can't remember things for long  
Can say yes and no

## Who can help

Parenting can be very stressful. Some women living with family violence have said they felt like they couldn't protect their child and found it hard to cope. You are one of the people who know what's good for your baby. Your judgement and instincts are valuable, so listen to them and listen to your child. It's also important to listen to and learn from people whose wisdom and experience you respect.

If you would like some new ideas to help you as a mother, talking things through with trusted family, friends, and/or other mothers may help. You could also talk to doctors, maternal and child health nurses, child care workers, social workers or counsellors. You can find these people and support groups for mothers and children at your local community health centre, local council or call **WIRE Women's Support Line** or **Parentline 13 22 89** (7 days/8am-12pm).

## Crisis services

If you are in immediate danger call:  
**Victoria Police 000**

## Safe Steps

1800 015 188  
24hr family violence response line  
for women

## Men's Referral Service

1300 766 491  
24hr family violence  
support line for men

## Women and children's services

If you think you are experiencing family  
violence contact the service in your  
region (Mon-Fri, 9-5):



## Berry Street

Northern suburbs  
(03) 9450 4700

Grampians  
(03) 5330 5000



## Women's Health West

Western suburbs  
(03) 9689 9588

## Referral services

Call these services to find the closest  
family violence service to you:

## WIRE Women's Support Line

1300 134 130

## 1800 RESPECT

1800 737 732

Please photocopy any part of this parenting kit freely.  
For extra copies call Women's Health West or Berry  
Street, or download the kit from our websites:  
[www.whwest.org.au](http://www.whwest.org.au) or [www.berrystreet.org.au](http://www.berrystreet.org.au)

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