



# *little eyes, little ears*

how violence against  
a mother shapes  
children as they grow

by Alison Cunningham & Linda Baker

the Centre for Children and Families

in the Justice System

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Some of the material used here first appeared in *Learning to Listen, Learning to Help: Understanding Woman Abuse and its Effects on Children* (2005) and *Helping Children Thrive: Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers* (2004).

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Government of Ontario, through the Ontario Women's Directorate, during the development of these documents.

**Development of this resource was funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, Government of Canada.**

The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Public Health Agency of Canada.

Également disponible en français sous le titre : *Petits yeux, petites oreilles : Comment la violence envers une mère façonne les enfants lorsqu'ils grandissent.*

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Cunningham, Alison J., 1959 -  
Little eyes, little ears : how violence against a mother  
shapes children as they grow / Alison Cunningham, Linda Baker.

Also published in French under title: *Petits yeux, petites oreilles.*

Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 978-1-895953-32-9

1. Children of abused wives. 2. Abused women. 3. Family violence.  
I. Baker, Linda L. (Linda Lillian), 1955- II. Centre for Children  
& Families in the Justice System III. Title.

HV6626.C856 2007      362.82'92      C2007-902492-0

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# Seeking to understand

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*Children are changed  
by growing up with  
violence and abuse at home*

Bad sights, sounds and experiences take many forms. A hit or slap is obvious to see. Abusive words and interactions cause invisible bruises.

## Change can be sudden or change can be gradual

Violence at home can take the form of one or more traumatic incidents triggering sudden change. Or changes can occur slowly in reaction to the daily dynamics of abusive relationships, shaping a child incrementally as he or she grows.

## Change can be visible or change can be inside

Some changes show in a child's behaviour, such as crying, aggression, or disrespect to women. Violence in the home also changes how children think and feel - about themselves, their families and life in general.

## Children are not passive witnesses to noise, tension and violence at home

Little eyes and little ears don't miss much, soaking in sights and sounds. Child "witnesses" of violence and abuse are overwhelmed by intense feelings and concentrate hard on their own thoughts. They may feel confused and scared and blame themselves. As they watch or listen, they guess what caused the "fight," imagine what might happen next, and anticipate potential consequences.

## Change can be bad and change can be good

By understanding a child's view, we can nurture positive changes: correct distorted ideas, encourage helpful coping, build good interpersonal skills, and foster management of intense emotions. And we can support mothers as they help their children heal and thrive.

### ***Little Eyes, Little Ears***

This resource draws together, in one place, information from the best and latest research for professionals and volunteers who help women and children. Topics addressed include what children might feel, think and do during violent incidents against their mothers, roles they might adopt before, during or after incidents, strategies of coping and survival, and how violence may be experienced by children of different ages, from infancy to adolescence. The purpose is to examine how violence against a mother can shape a child. By learning how each child as an individual was shaped by experiences in his or her home - and considering important contextual features of family life - we can devise ways to help.

***A child who lives with violence is  
forever changed, but not forever  
"damaged." There's a lot we can  
do to make tomorrow better.***

### special features of this guide

These symbols highlight important points  
or direct you to further information.

Of special note:  
an important  
point



A web site  
with more  
information



A document  
with more  
information



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## Glossary of terms

*Clarifying definitions helps us communicate with a shared understanding of important concepts.*



Abuse can be used by females against males and early evidence suggests the effect on children is different than when a man is the aggressor.<sup>14</sup> In this resource, we address the abuse of women by men and how it is experienced by their children.

### coercive control

An on-going pattern of domination using strategies that include irrational demands, surveillance, isolation, and the realistic threat of negative consequences such as physical harm. It can be used as a guise for child "discipline." The Power & Control Wheel from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project [[www.duluth-model.org](http://www.duluth-model.org)] shows the spectrum of tactics used against women such as threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimization, and denial of harm.



Evan Stark (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.

### domestic violence

The abuse, assault or systematic control of someone by an intimate partner, usually but not always a pattern of behaviour used by men against women.

### child exposure to domestic violence

Seeing, hearing, being told about, or seeing the aftermath of abuse and coercive control used against a parent.



### child maltreatment

Also called "child abuse," a term that can mean physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and/or physical or emotional neglect and/or denial of medical care.

### intimate partner violence

A term now common in the research literature usually referring to what can be gender symmetrical or bi-directional violence in a relationship: male to female, or female to male.



When reading research articles, check to see how the authors define violence: who, what, where and when. Does it match your definition? Does it match the profile of people you meet in your work?

### woman abuse

A pattern of male behaviour characterized by coercive control tactics against a woman that may, or may not, involve physical assault.



Many people use the term "woman abuse" because it denotes the gendered nature of domestic violence.

## Types of abuse against women and children

*Abuse does not always involve physical violence*

Abuse can be motivated by a need to be in control, to demean, to intimidate, and to put the victim in a position of powerlessness. Abuse can be directed at adults, teenagers, or children. Several types of abuse can be present in the same family.<sup>11,15</sup>

### child sexual abuse

Any sexual contact with a child or any activity undertaken with a sexual purpose. It can include genital fondling, digital penetration, or an invitation to sexually touch the perpetrator.

### emotional abuse

Demeaning comments, insults, taunts about being useless, lazy, fat, ugly, or stupid, dictating how she dresses, threats of suicide, threats of taking the children, surveillance, baseless jealousy, cutting her off from family or friends, abusing pets, destroying sentimental or valued possessions. Children can also be emotionally abused. Emotional abuse is also called "psychological abuse."



In some parts of Canada, exposing children to domestic violence may be considered a form of emotional harm or emotional injury. See page 37.

### economic abuse

Withholding money, taking her money, spending frivolously while the children do without necessities, making all major purchases, denying access to bank accounts, preventing her from taking or keeping a job.

### neglect

On-going failure to provide needed age-appropriate care, such as food, clothing, supervision, medical care and other basic needs for development of physical, intellectual and emotional capacities in children.



Look on the web site of the **National Clearinghouse on Family Violence** for overview papers about child maltreatment, child sexual abuse, emotional abuse, intimate partner abuse against men, abuse of older adults, and woman abuse.

### sexual abuse

Forced sex, distasteful or painful sexual activity, exposure to AIDS or other sexually-transmitted diseases, refusal to permit the use of birth control.

### spiritual abuse

Ridicule or punishment for holding a religious or cultural belief, forbidding practice of a person's religion or forcing adherence to different practices.

### physical abuse

Slapping, punching, kicking, shoving, choking, burning, biting, pushing down stairs, stabbing or slashing with a knife, shooting, hitting with an object.



## Facts & figures

*Abuse in the home is hidden  
behind closed doors*

That makes it difficult to get an accurate statistical picture.

### How do we learn about violence against women in intimate relationships?

- anonymous telephone surveys of the general population
- review of cases reported to or discovered by the police
- review of cases where women were murdered by an intimate partner
- talking with women who are experiencing or have survived violence

### General Social Survey <sup>24, 26</sup>

The GSS is an anonymous telephone survey conducted annually. In 2004, surveyors asked 24,000 randomly chosen adults (over the age of 15) 10 questions about "spousal violence." They asked about incidents ranging from threats to being beaten, all of which are against the law. Among women who were married or in a common-law relationship at any point over the previous five years:

- 7% reported at least one incident of spousal violence at some point over those five years
- 63% had separated from that partner by the time of the survey
- 60% reported more than one incident over those five years
- 9% felt afraid for their children during the incident

- 40% said a child heard or saw the violence or threat
- 51% of female victims whose children witnessed the violence called the police, a higher rate than women whose children did not witness the incident (30%) or women who had no children (25%) <sup>24</sup>

**According to the GSS, in almost 5% of incidents of spousal violence (perpetrated by either a male or female) a child was threatened or harmed.**

Statistics Canada used data from the GSS to estimate the incidence of spousal violence in the adult population of Canada. According to their calculations, 196,000 women, or about 2% of women in relationships, experienced at least one incident of spousal violence in the previous 12 months.



Each year, Statistics Canada releases a document called *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*. Find it on-line or order a copy from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

### What do police statistics show?

- 87% of complainants in partner assault cases reported to or discovered by the police are female <sup>25</sup>
- in most cases where police are involved they are called one time (86%), but police attended five times or more in 3% of cases with male perpetrators <sup>24</sup>

***Most crime victims do not involve the police. According to the GSS, only 36% of female victims of spousal violence called the police.***



### **How many children live in shelters for abused women?<sup>27</sup>**

- about **half** of women entering a shelter bring children with them
- on any given day in Canada, about **2,500** children are living in an abused woman's shelter with their mothers
- **67%** were under 10 years of age

***In the GSS, 11% of women who reported at least one incident of spousal violence in the previous year went to a shelter or transition house.***<sup>26</sup>

### **How many women are murdered by intimate partners?**

- among the 658 homicides known to the police in 2005, 62 women and 12 men were killed by a current or former partner<sup>10</sup>
- in 2005, four pregnant women were murdered by an intimate partner<sup>10</sup>
- in 4.4% of the spousal homicides in 2004, children of the perpetrators were also killed<sup>24</sup>

### **Who is most likely to experience violence in an intimate relationship?<sup>25</sup>**

- young women, specifically those under 25 years of age
- women recently separated or in the process of ending a relationship
- women in common-law relationships rather than legal marriages
- Aboriginal women<sup>5</sup>
- poor women and others marginalized from the main stream of society

***Never generalize from aggregate statistics about women to the life of an individual woman. For example, most young women recently out of a relationship are not abused.***

These quantitative data give one perspective. Qualitative data such as case studies show the context, dynamics and consequences of abuse.



Paula Wilcox (2006). *Surviving Domestic Violence*. New York NY: Palgrave.

## Woman abuse and children<sup>2</sup>

*Abuse threatens a child's sense  
of his or her family  
as safe and nurturing*

When a man is abusive to a child's mother, it's more than bad role modelling. It's bad parenting. He may maltreat the children directly<sup>23</sup> and they are at risk of injury during violent incidents. Women living with abusive partners face enormous challenges in being the best mothers they can be. Children may be isolated from potential sources of support and can learn to see the world as scary and unsafe.

### How children are "exposed" to woman abuse

- seeing a mother assaulted or demeaned
- hearing loud conflict and violence
- seeing the aftermath (e.g., injuries)
- learning about what happened to a mother
- being used by an abusive parent as part of the abuse
- seeing a father abuse his new partner when they visit him on weekends
- being denied what is owed them for child support

### How children might be "used" by an abusive parent

- suggesting a child's misbehaviour is the reason the parent must be abusive
- encouraging the children to abuse their mother
- threatening violence against the children and/or pets

- talking inappropriately to children about their mother's behaviour
- prolonged court proceedings about custody and access, especially when the abuser has previously shown little interest in the children
- holding the children hostage or abducting them



Each child is unique. Even children in the same family are affected in different ways, depending upon factors such as age, gender, relationship to the abuser, and role in the family.

### Children are not "witnesses" to events in their homes

In the research literature, children are often called "witnesses" to domestic violence. This term implies a passive role - but children living with conflict and abuse will actively interpret, predict, assess their roles in causing a "fight," worry about the consequences, engage in problem solving, and/or take measures to protect themselves or siblings, both physically and emotionally.

### During violent incidents

Children may referee, try to rescue their mother, try to deflect the abuser's attention onto them, try to distract the abuser, take care of younger siblings, or seek outside help (e.g., calling the police, running to a neighbour's house).

### What children may think and feel

As we discuss on page 8, they may feel fear, distress, anxiety, self-blame, guilt, anger, grief, confusion, worry, embarrassment, and hope for rescue. To quell these intense emotions, they may use coping strategies such as those listed on pages 24 and 25.



Children who do not blame themselves for the abuse and who develop helpful coping strategies (e.g., reaching out for help) may well have the best outcomes.

- anger causes violence or drinking causes violence
- people who love you can also hurt you
- anger should be suppressed because it can get out of control
- unhealthy, unequal relationships are normal or to be expected
- men are in charge and get to control women's lives
- women don't have the right to be treated with respect

### Between incidents

Children may try to predict the next incident or believe that changing their behaviour might prevent another eruption of violence.



Elena Cohen & Barbara Walthall (2003).  
*Silent Realities: Supporting Young Children and their Families who Experience Violence.*  
Washington, DC: National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-centered Practice.

### Unhealthy lessons children may learn from violence against their mothers

- violence and threats get you what you want
- a person has two choices - to be the aggressor or be the victim
- victims are to blame for violence
- when people hurt others, they do not get in trouble
- women are weak, helpless, incompetent, stupid, or violent



## Little eyes, little ears

*Children are good observers  
and poor interpreters*

They listen and they see but don't understand situations the same way adults would.

### What children may feel

Fear, confusion, guilt, anger, frustration, tummy aches, and worry. The smallest children are too young to appreciate what other people are feeling. Nevertheless, visible cues like blood and crying signal that someone is hurt. Older children and teenagers are better able to put themselves in their parents' positions. If a mother gets physically hit, many can imagine how she feels.

### What children may think

Some try hard to stay out of the way - below the radar - lest they become the next target. They may think, "will I get in trouble, will I get yelled at, will I get hit, will I die?" Children who feel responsible for starting the "fight" are likely to blame themselves for any negative consequences such as visible injury, arrest, incarceration, or one parent leaving the family. Some hope for rescue, perhaps by super heroes.



Alison Cunningham & Linda Baker (2004).  
*What About Me! Seeking to Understand  
the Child's View of Violence in the Family.*  
London ON: Centre for Children & Families  
in the Justice System. [[www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)]

Some children will blame their mother for doing whatever she is being accused of by her partner, perhaps spending too much money or not having dinner ready on time. If their father was taken away by police on a previous occasion, they wonder if it might happen again. His arrest is welcomed by a few but dreaded by others. Some children believe they themselves will be taken by the police, for being bad and causing the fight. Some are angry at their mother for not stopping the "fight" to prevent the police from coming.

### Common misunderstandings among young children who see violence at home

- the man and the woman are equal parties in what appears to be a "fight"
- "it's my fault they are fighting"
- if there is no blood or other signs of injury, Mommy is not hurt
- if Mommy is not crying, she is not upset or no longer upset
- once the "fight" stops, everything goes back to normal
- "if I try really hard to be good, they won't fight again"

### Examples of What Teenagers May Think or Feel

sadness	why is this happening again?
confusion	why doesn't Mom just kick him out?
concern	Mom is going to get really hurt one day
frustration	I have problems too, but no one seems to care
isolation	I can't talk to anyone about this
guilt	I could have done something to prevent this
fear	he might turn on me next or hurt me
anxiety	is this what my future relationships will be like?
embarrassment	other families don't do this / the neighbours will hear
resignation	this is never going to stop
vengeful	I wish he would die or get hit by a bus
worthlessness	if they really cared about me, they would stop this
helplessness	there is nothing I can do to help my mom
responsibility	I have to protect my younger siblings from this situation
anger	why does Mom let him treat her (and me) so badly?
worry	I don't want to move so I hope Mom puts up with it
panic	how will we afford to eat if Mom leaves him?

### What children may be doing

Hiding, praying, wrapping pillows around their ears, humming, clutching teddies, hugging pets, wearing headphones and turning up the music, concentrating intently on something else, pretending they are somewhere else. Older children may shepherd the younger ones to a safe place and try to keep them calm. Some teenagers intervene in the "fight," playing the peacemaker, the referee, the rescuer, or the protector.

### Thoughts and feelings go on after the "fight" stops

Next morning, next week, next month – one thought remains: will it happen again? Being keen observers, little eyes watch for anything they believe (rightly or wrongly) to be triggers. Seeing beer or liquor bottles may unleash a flood of emotions. Adults know that alcohol does not cause violence but in some homes, alcohol and violence seem to young eyes to go hand-in-hand. Little ears listen for raised voices or swearing and bad names. When violence has long been a feature of family life, children are hyper-sensitive to the cues and know when it is time to gather the younger kids and get out, or time to be sad and afraid because it's the only thing they can do.



Caroline McGee (2000). *Childhood Experiences of Domestic Violence*. London UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

## 10 ways a child can be changed by violence at home

*Seeing how violence  
shaped a child is  
the first step to helping*

Then we can address the distorted ideas, encourage helpful coping and healthy interpersonal skills, or foster healing of the mother/child bond.

### 1. Children are denied a good father and positive male role model

As described by psychologists Lundy Bancroft and Jay Silverman, most abusive men are self-centered and manipulative and either use authoritarian parenting or have little involvement with the children. A man's abusive behaviour fosters disrespect for their mother and undermines her parenting authority. Even between violent incidents, abusive men can have a toxic influence on daily family dynamics.



Lundy Bancroft & Jay Silverman (2002). *The Batterer as Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

### 2. Abuse can harm the mother/child bond

An abusive man undermines a mother's efforts to parent, whether by contradicting her, sapping her confidence as a parent, or eroding the children's view of her as a person

worthy of respect. She may change her own parenting style in reaction to his parenting style. Children may be angry that she stayed with him, afraid she will go back, or worried she will get involved with another abusive man. They may not trust her to keep them safe and may even doubt if she loves them.



Look on page 12 for more information about abuse and mothering.

### 3. Children can develop negative core beliefs about themselves

We all have core beliefs about ourselves. Am I smart, compassionate, or optimistic? Am I someone who deserves to be happy? Am I someone with something to offer the world? Am I of lesser value because I'm female? Am I am entitled to having my way even if it disadvantages others? Am I in control of my choices or does life throw bad luck my way? Core beliefs are formed in childhood and parents are a big part of that process.

### 4. Children can be isolated from helpful sources of support

To hide family secrets, children who live with woman abuse usually don't invite friends home, they try and prevent parents' contact with others (e.g., hiding memos about parent/teacher night), and even deny anything is wrong if queried by a concerned adult. They know instinctively, or are warned, that bad things will happen if the world learns the family secrets. They learn to pass as "normal." In consequence, they are cut off from people who could listen and help or people who could recognize the problem.

### **5. Unhealthy family roles can evolve in homes with domestic violence**

Roles in abusive families reflect how each person adapts and copes with the secret, confusing, and sometimes dangerous situation in which they live.



Look on page 26 where we discuss family roles.

### **6. Abuse destroys a child's view of the world as a safe and predictable place**

We list on page 7 some of the distorted messages children might learn from living with woman abuse. They could also learn that you have to deal with your problems by yourself, adults don't keep their promises, bad things happen no matter how hard I try to be good, and life is not fair. In contrast, children who grow up with encouragement, fairness, and safety can approach life with enthusiasm and embrace new opportunities.

### **7. Abuse co-occurs with other stresses and adversities with negative effects**

Research consistently documents how domestic violence almost never stands alone as the only problem or stress in a family.<sup>9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15</sup> Family dynamics will probably be affected by one or more of these other problems: parental substance abuse or alcoholism, criminal behaviour and possible incarceration of a parent, mental illness, poverty, residential instability, unemployment, and child abuse or neglect. Children may believe that one of these other issues is responsible for the abuse against their mother.

### **8. A child's style of coping and survival may become problematic**

Children's innate ability to adapt serves them well when trapped with abuse, conflict, and violence. Strategies can involve ideas (e.g., fantasizing about a better family); actions (e.g., running away); or, feelings (e.g., anger, guilt). Their actions and choices are survival skills: temporarily helpful adaptations to an unhealthy situation. But some, such as running away, create new problems.



Look on page 24 for a discussion of coping.

### **9. Children may adopt some of the rationalizations for abuse**

Male rationalizations for abuse can include "I'm the man so I'm in charge" or "God demands that I keep the family in line." A child believing these ideas could blame the woman for her own victimization, see women as inferior, excuse the man's abusive behaviour, or even try to emulate him. Such a child could grow up to justify or accept abuse in intimate relationships, workplace settings, or with friends.

### **10. Children can believe that victimization is inevitable or normal**

Messages conveyed by violence can teach tolerance of abuse and discourage help seeking. Some women clearly stay with their partners out of fear, knowing they'd be seriously injured, stalked or killed. Some believe "all men are like that so the next one won't be any better" or that "things will get better when he finds a job." Girls may develop low expectations of men or believe women shouldn't expect happiness.

## Effects of coercive control tactics on a mother<sup>3</sup>

*Tactics of coercive control  
are the hallmarks of  
an abusive relationship*

How might coercive control tactics affect a woman as she parents her children?

### 1. woman believes she is an inadequate parent

- woman is portrayed by abuser as unfit mother or the cause of children's deficits
- she fears having her children taken by child protection services
- she is frustrated in attempts to create structure or be consistent
- children may have problems at school or in the neighbourhood, fuelling her belief she is a bad parent

### 2. woman loses the respect of some or all children

- children may grow to devalue or be ashamed of their mother
- children learn to disregard her parental authority, don't follow her rules
- some children come to see her as legitimate target of abuse

### 3. woman believes man's excuses for abuse and reinforces them with children

- tells children abuse is her fault so she must change or improve her behaviour
- feels responsible for abuse and guilty for its effects on children
- excuses abuse because she thinks it is linked to alcohol or his stress
- believes and teaches that woman abuse is culturally or religiously appropriate
- believes and teaches children that men and boys should have more privileges and power in the family

### 4. woman changes her parenting style in response to abuser's parenting style

- she is too permissive in response to authoritarian parenting of abuser
- she is authoritarian to try and keep children from annoying abuser
- she makes age-inappropriate or unreasonable demands on children to placate abuser
- she is afraid to use discipline because the children have been through so much
- she assumes the demanding parts of parenting while he takes the fun parts

Watching a mother abused by her partner over time, children and teenagers may come to see her as vulnerable, emotionally unavailable to them, not a person with legitimate parental authority, or as someone who cannot protect them.<sup>16</sup> They may become her protector, her confidant, or her caretaker.

### 5. woman's capacity to manage is thwarted or overwhelmed

- depression, anxiety, poor sleeping, etc. compromise her capacity to care for children and provide for their daily needs
- if denied use of birth control, too many children are born too close together
- may be denied sufficient money to meet children's basic needs for food, etc.
- reactive rather than pro-active parenting, responding to crisis not preventing problems

### 6. woman may use survival strategies with negative effects

- may leave children with inadequate caretakers to get a break
- may avoid being at home (e.g., working double shifts)
- may use alcohol or drugs to excess
- may maltreat children, physically or verbally

### 7. woman's bond to children is compromised

- children may be angry at mother for failing to protect them or evict abuser
- mother prevented by abuser from comforting distressed child

- one child assumes care-taking role for mother
- children anticipating a mother's deportation or leaving may become anxious or may emotionally disengage to protect themselves from impending loss
- children may blame mother for absence of father from the home and other disruptions (e.g., moving, changing schools)

### 8. woman gets trapped in competition for children's loyalties

- abuser attempts to shape child's view of himself as good and mother as bad
- after separation, abuser entices children to support his bid for custody with promises of great life at his house
- during access visits, abuser is fun parent who has no rules
- abuser has more money and can offer more material goods and nicer home

Watching a man abuse their mother over time, children and teenagers may see him as frightening or unpredictable. Some will see him as powerful or the only legitimate parental authority. They may believe his rationalizations for abuse or accept his excuses, such as alcohol or job stress. Each sibling may have different opinions of him, depending on their age, gender, emotional closeness to him, whether he abused them directly, and the frequency and severity of his violence against their mother.

## Myths about woman abuse and children

### *Common assumptions can be wrong*

Some choices and reactions of women and children may not seem logical, until you understand them as survival strategies or normal child development.

**Myth: A woman who loves her children would get out of an abusive relationship to protect them from harm.**

**Reality: Some women stay in abusive relationships to protect the children.**

Especially when the violence is severe, the period around and after a relationship break-up can be dangerous.

- in the GSS, among women who reported violence in a previous relationship, 49% said the violence continued or started after the relationship ended<sup>26</sup>
- the probability of being murdered increases when the relationship ends<sup>17, 25</sup>

A woman might fear losing custody, especially if the man threatened to report her to child protection services, can finance a protracted custody battle, or might abduct them, perhaps to his country of origin. Even a woman who retains custody will worry about children's safety during visitation

with their father, because she is no longer there to run interference and protect them. Some women leave the relationship only to reconcile later for safety reasons, or because she has difficulty providing for or managing the children.

**Myth: Children will recognize their mother as a victim and their father as the cause of the problems and abuse.**

**Reality: Children can blame their mothers as much or more than they blame their fathers.**

Young children don't recognize the power imbalance when parents "fight." Both adults seem equally powerful to them. Toddlers or pre-schoolers live predominately in the present, so an abusive father who bestows a nice present will be quickly forgiven for a recent upsetting incident. Not until they approach adolescence will most children develop a more adult-like understanding of the dynamics of violence and abuse. Still, older children may be angry at and blame a mother for bringing an abusive man into the home, not protecting herself or them from his abuse, staying with him after it was evident that he was abusive, or reconciling with him after leaving.

**Myth: Children would hate a father who abused them or who abused their mother.**

**Reality: Children can love a man who is abusive to them or their mother.**

An abusive man seen as an unfit parent by most adults can be adored and respected by his children. Over time, some children will grow closer to and identify more with him than their mother, perhaps believing his rationalizations about the abuse being her fault. Once gone from the family, children may grieve his absence as in any parental separation. For children too young to comprehend cause and effect, the separation seems to be caused by the mother who leaves the relationship rather than the father whose behaviour made the relationship untenable and unsafe.

**Myth: When the abusive man is out of the picture, any family problems the children have will get better.**

**Reality: When the man leaves the home, children may be more out-of-control, angry, sad or in conflict with others including siblings.**

Ending a child's exposure to violence at home is the single best intervention but, if that exposure has been lengthy,

problems may not evaporate. Strained family dynamics and conduct problems are linked to many factors including:

- **the absence of an authoritarian parent**

On the surface, authoritarian parenting seems effective by keeping the children "in line." When an authoritarian parent leaves, the children can misbehave because they never developed internal controls and cannot regulate their behaviour and impulses.

- **struggles by the mother to establish her parental authority**

As we discussed on pages 12 and 13, an abusive man can undermine a mother's parenting. When he is gone, the children may resist her authority.

- **the strains of crisis and transition experienced by the family**

Leaving an abusive partner is often associated with decline in standard of living, residential moves, changing schools, disruption in a child's peer relations, and perhaps one or more stay in a shelter. Such disruption can have a deleterious impact on children's behaviour and some children will blame their mothers for the unwelcome changes.

***Another myth: with domestic violence in a home, all a child's problems are caused by the violence. In reality, it is difficult to isolate one cause when children have concerning difficulties and sometimes multiple struggles.***

## Infants and toddlers<sup>3, 8</sup>

*Babies can't understand  
what is happening  
between adults...*

...but they hear the noise and feel the tension.

Babies may be distressed or scared, upset if not getting their needs met promptly, too frightened to explore and play, or sense the distress of their mothers. They can't protect themselves or leave a stressful situation and depend entirely on adults to keep them out of harm's way.

### What features of woman abuse might be most stressful for this age group?

- loud noise such as banging and yelling
- sudden and unpredictable eruption of loud noise
- a distracted, tense, unhappy, socially isolated mother
- an angry, self-centred, inconsistent father or father figure
- chance of being injured physically by accident or physical maltreatment
- compromised nutrition and health if financial abuse restricts money to buy formula, vitamins, diapers, home safety devices, etc.

Some stress is okay, even beneficial, because it's how we all learn to cope with life. At first, baths are stressful for babies but quickly become normal and expected. When yelling and tension become normal, even babies learn to adapt: they stay in a heightened sense of arousal<sup>22</sup> or they numb and turn inward.<sup>4</sup> Neither is a healthy response, but it's how they adapt.

### How might violence at home shape normal development?<sup>3, 8</sup>

KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT IN INFANTS	POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Take in information from the world around them through five senses	loud noises, vivid visual images associated with violence can be distressing
Form secure attachments	parents may not consistently respond to infant's needs, negatively affecting the parent-child bond
Become more active explorers of their world through play	fear and instability may inhibit exploration and play; imitation in play may be related to aggression they saw or heard
Learn about social interaction and relationships from what they hear and observe in their families	learn about aggression in observed interactions



Find a two-page handout for mothers of babies and toddlers on page 50 of *Helping Children Thrive / Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers* (2004). [[www.lfccc.on.ca](http://www.lfccc.on.ca)]

### Points to keep in mind

- babies are highly vulnerable to maltreatment including shaken baby injuries
- mothers of babies require and deserve extra support with basic needs
- helping a new mother can ensure things are on the right track early in a child's life
- a parenting course or guidance on parenting issues
- legal advice and advocacy about custody, child maintenance, and/or protective options available through the courts such as restraining orders
- to learn the difference between normal infant behaviour and the effects of conflict, abuse and violence at home
- some women need respite from the daily caretaking of a challenging child

**Between 1997 and 2003, 27 infant deaths in Canada were classified as "shaken baby syndrome" <sup>26</sup>**



An affordable, high-quality child care program will be respite for the mother and help the child with self-regulation and age-appropriate socialization.



Public Health Agency of Canada and Department of Justice Canada (2005). *Feelings: Responding to Your Child's Feelings*. Ottawa ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services. [[www.publications.gc.ca](http://www.publications.gc.ca)]



Health Canada (2002). *First Connections ...Make all the Difference: A Resource Kit on Infant Attachment*. [[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca)]

Alberta SBS Prevention Network *When Your Baby Can't Stop Crying* (2006) and *The Crying Plan* (2006) [[www.cryingbaby.ca](http://www.cryingbaby.ca)]

Attachment Across Cultures Tool Kit [[www.attachmentcrosscultures.org](http://www.attachmentcrosscultures.org)]

### What mothers with babies may want or need

- safe, affordable housing accessible to conveniences, parks, health services, etc.
- assistance finding child care, child care subsidies, or similar services
- a link with other young mothers, such as a moms-and-tots group

# little eyes, little ears

## Pre-schoolers<sup>3, 8</sup>

*For this age group, what they experience is more real than anything you tell them*

A child aged three to five years who sees violence and other loud conflict may:

- worry about being hurt and may have nightmares about being hurt
- believe they caused the “fight” by something they did
- hope that a TV character or super hero will come and save them
- try and stop the “fight” by, for example, yelling
- “tune out” the noise by focussing on something else like toys or television
- be distressed when Mommy is upset but feel better when she seems okay again
- be confused if Daddy is gone and worry that Mommy may leave too

Because of their egocentric nature, they might blame themselves for bad events such as when their parents “fight.” Pre-schoolers are easily upset by changes to daily routines and separation from cherished items such as blankets or pets. It helps to maintain or re-establish comforting routines such as bedtime schedules. The present is more important to pre-schoolers than the past.

***Children of this age need to hear that what happened was not their fault, they are still loved, and that important features of daily life will go on even if their families have changed or moved.***

## How might violence at home shape normal development?<sup>3, 8</sup>

KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT	POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Learn how to express angry feelings and other emotions in appropriate ways	learn unhealthy ways to express anger and aggression
Experiences and observations most salient in forming meaning in their world	confused by conflicting messages (e.g., what I see vs. what I am told)
Outcome is more salient than the process	may be distressed by perceived unfairness, father's arrest and/or trip to shelter
Think in egocentric ways	may attribute violence to something they did
Form ideas about gender roles based on social messages	learn gender roles associated with violence and victimization
Increase physical independence (e.g., dressing self)	instability may inhibit independence; may see regressive behaviours



Find a two-page handout for mothers of pre-schoolers on page 52 of *Helping Children Thrive / Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers* (2004). [[www.1fcc.on.ca](http://www.1fcc.on.ca)]

### What features of woman abuse might be most distressing for this age group?

- seeing Mommy upset, crying and maybe bleeding or with a bruise
- seeing (and hearing) Daddy angry and yelling
- sounds and sights of first responders when they secure the scene and assist on a call to the home
- chaotic change and unpredictability
- fear they might be injured
- disruption in their routines if they leave a familiar home (e.g., to go into shelter) or if a father is no longer in the home

### What lessons does spanking teach children?

Spanking is not a good discipline strategy for any child. For children who lived with woman abuse, spanking is especially bad. The unspoken messages of spanking are the same as some male rationalizations for violence against intimate partners:

- a big person is more powerful than a little person
- some types of people have the right to hit other types of people
- a person who says they love you can hurt you
- being angry is a good excuse to hit someone
- people who get hit are the ones to blame
- people who do the hitting always have a good reason
- apologizing for “losing control” makes what happened acceptable



Child Welfare League of Canada (2002). *Discipline Without Hurting: Information for Parents of Young Children*. [www.cwlc.ca]

Heidi Kiefer & Nancy Cohen with Bonnie Pape (2004). *Handle With Care: Strategies for Promoting the Mental Health of Young Children in Community-Based Child Care*. Toronto ON: Canadian Mental Health Association & Hincks-Dellcrest Centre. [www.cmha.ca]

Barbara Preston (2000). *A Booklet for Service Providers Who Work With Immigrant Families: On Issues Relating to Child Discipline, Child Abuse and Child Neglect*. Ottawa ON: Health Canada. [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn]



## School-aged children<sup>3, 8</sup>

*As children grow through  
the elementary school years...*

their understanding of abuse against their mothers gets more sophisticated.

A school-aged child may recognize how actions have reasons and consequences and that mothers may be upset even after a “fight” ends. They probably see “fighting” as caused by stress, family finances, alcohol, or whatever else their parents argue over. Believing this explanation is easier (emotionally) than seeing a beloved parent as someone who is mean on purpose. Seeing a “fight,” they judge the behaviour by its fairness: who started it, who is bigger, and if any consequence is deserved.



Sue Penfold et al. (2005). *Helping My Child: A Guide to Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*. Vancouver BC: British Columbia's Children's Hospital. [www.bcysth.ca]

***At this age, children come to identify with their same-sex parent. They learn what it means to be male and female in our society, but this learning is distorted when they live with violence against their mother.***

### How might violence at home shape normal development?<sup>3, 8</sup>

KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT	POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Increased emotional awareness for self and others	more aware of own reactions to violence; more aware of impact on others (e.g., mother's safety, father being charged)
Increased complexity in thinking about right and wrong; emphasis on fairness and intent	possibly more susceptible to rationalizations heard to justify violence (e.g., alcohol as cause, victim deserves it) or may challenge rationalizations not viewed as fair or right; may assess “was the fight fair?”; can see discrepancies between actions and words and consider intent; justifications involving children may lead to self-blame or guilt
Academic and social success at school has primary impact on self-concept	learning may be compromised (e.g., child may be distracted); may miss positive statements or selectively attend to negatives or evoke negative feedback.
Increased influence from outside family (e.g., peers, school) and competition assumes new importance within peer group	possibly more influenced by messages that confirm attitudes and behaviours associated with partner abuse; may use hostile aggression to compete; increased risk for bullying and/or being bullied
Increased same-sex identification	may learn gender roles associated with partner abuse (e.g., male as perpetrators, female as victims)



Find a two-page handout for mothers with children aged six to 12 on page 54 of *Helping Children Thrive / Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers* (2004). [[www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)]

### What features of woman abuse might be most stressful for this age group?

- a realization that their mother can't control her partner to protect herself (or perhaps even to keep them safe)
- understanding that mother is sad and upset between incidents
- concern that their mother may be hurt
- scared no one will take care of them if mother is seriously hurt or dies
- if he is loved, concern that their father might experience negative consequences like arrest or that the parents will separate
- fear they might be injured (now or in the next "fight")
- when noise keeps them awake at night, school performance may be affected
- anticipatory anxiety about next incident, unpredictability of father's "moods"
- worry that neighbours and friends will hear the noise or find out

- because of a need to preserve a sense of their father as a good person, may be upset by negative comments others make about him
- changing schools and losing touch with friends will be upsetting if the family has to move (e.g., to go into shelter)

Helpful interventions with school-aged children can include efforts to support school success and encourage fun, pro-social activities with peers.



ShelterNet has a resource area called "Just for Kids": [[www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca)]

The Family Violence Youth Site (Department of Justice) has a resource area designed for 10 to 12 year olds: [[www.familyviolencehurts.gc.ca](http://www.familyviolencehurts.gc.ca)]



### Resources for teachers:

Linda Baker & Peter Jaffe (2007). *Woman Abuse Affects our Children: An Educator's Guide*. Toronto ON: OISE/University of Toronto. [[www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)]

Susan Cole et al. (2005). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Supportive School Environments for Children Traumatized by Family Violence*. Boston MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children. [[www.massadvocates.org](http://www.massadvocates.org)]



*little eyes,  
little ears*

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## Teenagers<sup>3, 8</sup>

*Now physically larger,  
teens may intervene in incidents  
and even risk injury*

Adolescence is a challenging stage for both parents and youth, with its dramatic physical and mood changes. Young people are drawn closer to their peer group and how they are perceived by others is immensely important. While gaining more autonomy, they still need guidance and supervision. At this age, young people who live with woman abuse may feel:

- embarrassment / strong need for privacy / need to project an image of their family as “normal”
- responsibility for taking care of younger siblings and perhaps their mother
- anger at either or both parents
- concern for the well-being of their mother
- vengeful toward the abuser, or relief if he is gone
- worry their mother may take him back or start dating someone equally abusive

Some will be injured or arrested for assault by intervening in “fights” between adults.

Teenagers can access a wider range of coping strategies than younger children (see page 24). Some techniques are effective at solving the immediate problem, like running away or using drugs to numb the emotional pain, but this relief comes at a cost if it leads to problems at school or in other contexts. At the same time, teenagers are better able

to reach out for help, by talking or chatting with others who have similar experiences or by using a confidential telephone help line like Kids Help Phone.

**Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868**

**[[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)]**

**Toll free across Canada,  
24/7 in English and French.**

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We still have a lot to learn about how boys and girls are affected differently but suspect that gender plays a major role in how teenagers understand and react to violence against their mothers.



The Family Violence Youth Site (Department of Justice) has a resource area designed for teenagers: [[www.familyviolencehurts.gc.ca](http://www.familyviolencehurts.gc.ca)]

Other web sites you can recommend to teenagers are:  
[[www.burstingthebubble.com](http://www.burstingthebubble.com)] (Australia)  
[[www.notyourfault.org](http://www.notyourfault.org)] (Wales)  
[[www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk)] (England and Wales)



You may meet teenagers who are victims of child abuse, witnesses to domestic violence, perpetrators of abuse in the home, or who are in abusive dating relationships. Some are all four.

## how violence against a mother shapes children as they grow

### How might violence at home shape normal development? <sup>3, 8</sup>

KEY ASPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT	POTENTIAL IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Increased sense of self and autonomy from family	accelerated responsibility and autonomy, positioning youth in care-taking roles and/or premature independence; family skills for respectful communication and negotiation may be poorly developed, so transition to adolescence may be more difficult and result in such challenges as parent-child conflict, early home leaving, school drop-out
Physical changes brought on by puberty	may try to stop violence; may use increased size to impose will with physical intimidation or aggression
Increased peer group influence and desire for acceptance	possibly more embarrassed by family resulting in shame, secrecy, insecurity; might use high risk behaviours to impress peers (e.g., theft, drugs); may increase time away from the home; may engage in maladaptive defensive (e.g., drugs) and offensive (e.g., aggression towards abuser) strategies to avoid or cope with violence and its stigma
Self worth more strongly linked to view of physical attractiveness	view of self may be distorted by abuser's degradation of mother and/or child maltreatment; may experience eating disorder and use image management activities (e.g., body piercing, tattoos)
Dating raises issues of sexuality, intimacy, relationship skills	may have difficulty establishing healthy relationships; may fear being abused or being abusive in intimate relationships, especially when conflict arises; may avoid intimacy or prematurely seek intimacy and child bearing to escape and create own support system
Increased capacity for abstract reasoning and broader world view	"all or nothing" interpretations of experiences may be learned and compete with greater capacity to see "shades of grey" (e.g., everyone is a victim or a perpetrator); this style of processing information may be intensified by experiences of child maltreatment; may be predisposed towards attitudes and values associated with violence and/or victimization
Increased influence by media	possibly more influenced by negative media messages re: violent behaviour, gender role stereotypes



Find a two-page handout for mothers of teenagers on page 56 of *Helping Children Thrive / Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers* (2004). Also there is guidance for when a child is abusive to other family members and for knowing when a child needs more help than most mothers can provide. [[www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)]

## Coping and survival strategies of young people<sup>2, 3</sup>

*When facing a difficult situation,  
children and teenagers find  
ways to “cope”*

They come to an understanding (possibly distorted) about what is happening and deal with the flood of hurtful emotions. Their strategies can involve feelings (emotional), thoughts (cognitive), or actions (behavioural).

### **Some strategies may be helpful in the moment but are costly in the long run**

- coping strategies help a child get through a time of stress or crisis, such as when there is woman abuse at home
- however, if used as a general response to other circumstances, these strategies may create problems in the long run
- the longer a costly strategy is used, or the more effective it is in shielding a youth from overwhelming emotions and hurt, the harder it may be to modify or extinguish



Young children have limited coping strategies and need adults to buffer them from the harmful consequences of stress and adversities.

The following are coping strategies you may see in children and teenagers living with woman abuse and child maltreatment. Remember that coping styles vary with age and that some of these strategies can be triggered by other adversities such as severe marital conflict and parental substance abuse.

### **Mental blocking or disconnecting emotionally**

- numbing emotions or blocking thoughts
- tuning out the noise or chaos, learning not to hear it, being oblivious
- concentrating hard to believe they are somewhere else
- drinking alcohol or using drugs

### **Making it better through fantasy**

- planning revenge on the abuser, fantasizing about killing him
- fantasizing about a happier life, living with a different family or a kind father
- fantasizing about life after a divorce or after the abuser leaves
- fantasizing about abuser being “hit by a bus”
- hoping to be rescued, by super heroes or police or “Prince Charming”

### **Physical avoidance**

- going into another room, leaving the house during a violent episode
- finding excuses to avoid going home
- running away from home

### Looking for love and acceptance in all the wrong places

- falling in with bad friends
- having sex for the intimacy and closeness
- trying to have a baby as a teenager or getting pregnant to have someone to love them

### Taking charge through caretaking

- protecting brothers and sisters from danger
- nurturing siblings like a surrogate parent or taking the “parent” role with siblings
- nurturing and taking care of his or her mother

### Reaching out for help

- telling a teacher, neighbour, or friend's parent
- calling the police
- talking to siblings, friends, or supportive adults

### Crying out for help

- suicidal gestures
- self-injury, carving
- lashing out in anger, being aggressive with others, or getting into fights

### Re-directing emotions into positive activities

- sports, running, fitness
- writing, journalling, drawing, poetry, acting, being creative
- excelling academically

### Trying to predict, explain, prevent or control the behaviour of an abusive man

- thinking “Mommy has been bad” or “I have been bad” or “Daddy is under stress at work”
- thinking “I can stop the violence by changing my behaviour” or “I can predict it”
- trying to be the perfect child
- lying to cover up bad things (e.g., a bad grade) to avoid criticism, abuse or family stress



When the family is safe, gradually extinguishing strategies with negative effects while replacing them with healthier strategies is an important way to help children and teenagers.



## Roles children may assume<sup>3, 8</sup>

*In our family, we adopt or are given “roles” we willingly or unconsciously play*

Examples of family roles are the mediator of disputes, the “baby” of the family, the prized child who can do no wrong, the responsible one on whom everyone relies, or the “black sheep” who does not fit in and is expected to disappoint the others.

Roles that develop or are assigned in families characterized by woman abuse reflect the unique ways each person adapts and copes with the secret, confusing, and dangerous situation in which they live.

### Key points about family roles...

- a role may be imposed on the child or it may be assumed by the child
- children can play more than one role
- children may play roles before, during or in the aftermath of violence<sup>16</sup>
- during abusive incidents, child might play the referee, rescuer, deflector/distractor, or caretaker of younger siblings
- a child may use the role as a strategy to cope, so it might not be turned off overnight once the abuser is gone
- roles assigned by the abuser can lead to guilt, grief and other hurtful emotions, especially after he leaves

### Examining family roles is important because...

- it helps us understand how a child interprets and copes with violence (so we can intervene effectively)
- it helps us understand how different children in the same family can have dramatically different understandings of what happened in their homes
- it helps us understand how a child may think and feel once the abuser is gone
- it is a framework for understanding how tension can occur between siblings or in the mother-child relationship
- role identities formed in childhood are often used into adulthood<sup>16</sup>

For example, children who adopt pseudo-adult roles such as the “caretaker” may have difficulty adjusting when expected to assume the role of child once again. The “abuser’s ally” may take up the role of the now-absent abuser. The “scapegoat” child’s isolation within the family may be intensified by feelings of responsibility for the marital break-up. The “perfect child” may be impatient with and blaming towards siblings who misbehaved or otherwise “triggered” abuse by the abuser.



Assessing the role of each child can be helpful when families continue to struggle with conflict or abuse even after the abusive man has left the home.

## how violence against a mother shapes children as they grow

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These are examples of roles played by children and teenagers in families characterized by male violence towards their mother.

**Caretaker** Acts as a parent to younger siblings and mother. May oversee routines and household responsibilities (e.g., meals, putting young siblings to bed), help to keep siblings safe during a violent incident and comfort them afterwards (e.g., reassuring siblings, getting tea for mother).

**Mother's Confidant** The child who is privy to mother's feelings, concerns, and plans. After witnessing abusive incidents, his or her recollections may serve as a "reality check" for mother, if abuser later minimizes or lies about events.

**Abuser's Confidant** The child who is treated better by abuser and most likely to be told his justifications for abuse against mother. May be asked to report back on mother's behaviour and be rewarded for doing so with, for example, privileges or absence of harsh treatment.

**Abuser's Ally** The child who is co-opted to assist in abuse of mother (e.g., made to say demeaning things or to physically hit her).



**Perfect Child** The child who tries to prevent violence by actively addressing issues (wrongly) perceived as triggers, by excelling in school and never arguing, rebelling, misbehaving, or seeking help with problems.

**Referee** The child who mediates and tries to keep the peace.

**Scapegoat** The child identified as the cause of family problems, blamed for tension between parents or whose behaviour is used to justify violence. May have special needs or be a step-child to abuser.



For more information on the child's perspective, see Alison Cunningham & Linda Baker (2004). *What About Me! Seeking to Understand the Child's View of Violence in the Family*. London ON: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System. [[www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)]

## Services

*A range of services is available  
to help abused women  
and their children*

### Abused women's advocates

Women's centres or abused women's advocacy agencies provide confidential counselling and support and can help women access the legal system.

### Crisis lines

Check the telephone directory for the local crisis line. Some areas have crisis lines specifically for abused women.

### Women's shelters and transition houses

In Canada, there are 500 emergency shelters, transition houses, safe houses, and second-stage housing facilities. See [www.shelternet.ca](http://www.shelternet.ca) to find one near you. There are 31 shelters on Aboriginal reserves and others serving First Nations families. See the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence: [www.nacafv.ca](http://www.nacafv.ca)

### Child protection agencies

These organizations investigate and intervene when a child is or may be in need of protection from abuse or neglect by caregivers. Find information on this topic on page 37.

### Family-serving organizations

These agencies provide a range of services including assessment and treatment that can include play therapy, parenting guidance and support, and family counselling.

### Police

The police can lay charges for crimes such as assault and criminal harassment. An emergency 9-1-1 system is available in most - *but not all* - parts of Canada.

### Victim services

Police-based or court-based services help victims of crime. For links to programs across Canada, see [www.vaonline.org](http://www.vaonline.org)

### Abusive men's treatment programs

Most programs accept self-referred and court-ordered clients. The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence has a directory of over 200 Canadian programs.



The **National Clearinghouse on Family Violence** has directories of Canadian services for both victims and perpetrators of family violence.

## Supporting women as parents

*Helping a mother is among  
the most effective strategies  
to help her children*

A mother's love, affection, availability, and investment in her children's well being and healthy development are powerful factors to harness in our work helping children. Each day yields dozens of priceless opportunities for "teachable moments" which foster healing and promote healthy development.

### Three strategies for helpers

"Counselling" may be the first thing that comes to mind when we think about how to help. But these three strategies are also important interventions.

#### **1. Ending a child's exposure to domestic violence and maltreatment is the single most important way to help children.**

Severity of violence (including frequency) and the number of types of maltreatment are statistically correlated to the probability and level of later problems in children.<sup>12</sup> Using psychological testing as the measure, most children function in the "normal range" after the exposure to violence stops and they can feel safe.

#### **2. If required, help the family find a safe place to live, a source of income, and other features of daily living to meet basic needs and create stability.**

Outcomes in children are also statistically correlated with stresses and adversities typically seen in conjunction with domestic violence, such as socio-economic disadvantage, low standard of living, low parental educational level, parental alcohol problems, and child sexual abuse.<sup>8, 12, 13, 14</sup>

#### **3. Support women as mothers by fostering good parenting skills and encouraging them to address any personal issues compromising their parenting (e.g., depression).**

Outcomes in children exposed to domestic violence are correlated with family functioning and parenting style including discipline techniques.<sup>8, 13, 14</sup>



Find a pamphlet with 10 tips for parenting children who lived with domestic violence at [www.lfcc.on.ca](http://www.lfcc.on.ca)

## How to help

*Our helping can take many forms...*

counselling (individual, group or family), legal and practical advocacy with mothers, and educational approaches.

### Symptom-specific interventions

Some approaches address the struggles and difficulties children manifest. For example, Project Support helps women whose children have conduct disorder.<sup>20</sup> Many approaches are well supported for use with child and adolescent depression.<sup>1</sup>

### Violence-specific interventions

Techniques used with children include individual child-centred therapy,<sup>18</sup> child-parent psychotherapy,<sup>21</sup> trauma-focussed cognitive behavioural therapy,<sup>7</sup> play therapy, healing of the mother/child bond,<sup>6</sup> and many different psycho-educational group programs. Because most children living with woman abuse experience other types of abuse, techniques validated for child abuse may also help.<sup>7</sup>

### Issues potentially addressed by interventions with children and teenagers

- trauma symptoms or traumatic grief symptoms
- distorted thoughts about abuse (e.g., self-blame, victim blaming, and shame)
- management of intense emotions, such as anger or anxiety
- stress management and relaxation techniques
- modifying or extinguishing costly coping strategies
- building constructive problem-solving skills
- improving self-confidence and perceived capacity for self-protection

***Be aware of how "safety planning" can be experienced by a child who already feels the world is dangerous and unpredictable.***

### In addition to helping women with their own healing, these areas can be helpful

- positive parenting practices such as non-physical discipline
- parent/child communication skills
- parenting skills designed for children who lived with violence
- modelling of constructive problem solving and management of emotions

### Issues to work on with mothers and children together

- mapping out expectations for healthy (non-violent) family relationships
- strengthening healthy communication and practising problem-solving
- establishing safe ways to talk together about the past
- working to heal and move forward as a family
- identifying activities and engaging in family "fun"



Healing the father/child bond in a healthy way that holds abusive men accountable is a difficult but worthwhile goal in the appropriate circumstances.

### Some points to keep in mind

Research on this topic generally suffers from methodological limitations, but the best evidence now available suggests interventions be individualized and logically derived from an understanding of each child's unique situation.<sup>8</sup>

#### Begin with a thorough trauma assessment

Woman abuse varies greatly in the forms it takes and in variables such as duration, severity, frequency, and harm caused. Most children who lived with severe woman abuse have experienced direct maltreatment and other traumas as well. Exposure to more than one adversity or trauma elevates concern.

#### Look for how a child's problems are manifested

Sometimes a violence-specific intervention is the best course of action while sometimes a symptom-specific intervention is dictated. Determine which patterns of behaviours, emotions or thoughts are concerning to caregivers and teachers. That information can be a guide to intervention planning and case management.

#### Timing is important

You can do the right thing for the right child at the wrong time. Ask yourself if this is the time to intervene with this child using a violence-specific intervention or if other issues must be addressed first.

#### Think developmentally

How individuals remember and are affected by traumatic events depends in part upon their age at the time. Also, coping styles vary with age. Children, teens (and also adults) may remember past events through the eyes of the age they were at the time. However, they may judge themselves using today's expectations of themselves (e.g., "why didn't I just run away?") Some traumas in early life (e.g., child sexual abuse) may re-emerge as issues in later stages, like when beginning to date.



Exposure to adversities over several developmental stages will be more detrimental because negative effects can accumulate.

#### Use collaborative approaches

Our well-meaning efforts to help sometimes reinforce the disempowerment of women and children. We should work together to support women as mothers without penalizing them for the behaviour and choices of an ex-partner.

## The need for differential response<sup>2</sup>

*Interventions should ensure  
safety and respect individual  
needs and differences*

In devising an intervention strategy, service deliverers consider the severity and frequency of violence, look for power and control tactics, and ask about any other adverse experiences affecting the children.

### **Woman abuse is different than marital conflict**

While woman abuse can occur without physical assaults, relatively minor incidents such as slapping and pushing can occur once or twice in relationships not otherwise characterized by coercive control tactics.<sup>19</sup>

### **The hallmark of woman abuse is coercive control**

Woman abuse involves the ongoing, instrumental use of coercive control tactics against a woman by her partner to meet his needs. Physical violence or the threat of it is often present.

### **Marital conflict is different than woman abuse**

Marital conflict may be part of an abusive relationship. However, marital conflict characterizes a substantial number of intimate relationships where one will not find woman abuse.

### **The two are often confused in research**

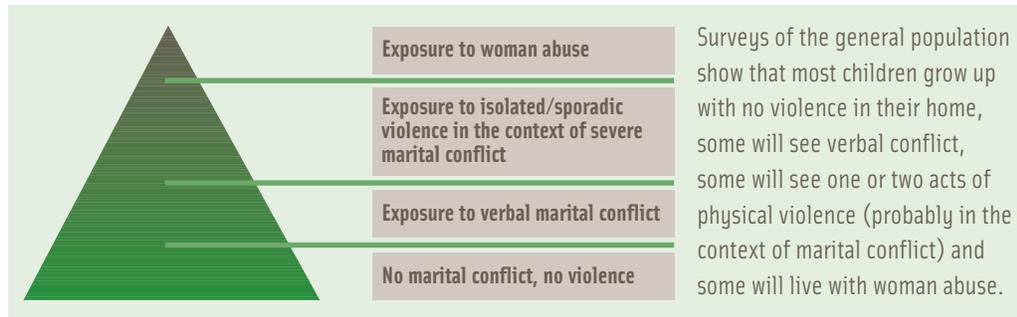
The boundaries between marital conflict and woman abuse can be blurred in general population surveys, minimizing the true impact of woman abuse on adult victims and their children. Also, symmetry between the rates of violence reported by men and women are likely to occur when sporadic violence within the context of marital conflict is lumped together with the patterns of intimidation and threat that characterize woman abuse.

### **The type of intervention will be different**

Couple therapies appropriate for marital conflict are ineffective for relationships characterized by woman abuse and may increase the risk faced by a woman and her children. Likewise, the reverse is true. Interventions designed for male perpetrators of woman abuse are not appropriate to deal with marital conflict.



Judy Martin, John Langley & Jane Millichamp (2006). *Domestic Violence as Witnessed by New Zealand Children*. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 119: 1-14.



### The adversities of childhood

Other co-occurring challenges potentially affecting the children are ideally considered in planning an intervention for children.

***A mother's ability to be the best parent she can be may be compromised by the abuse and its emotional and financial consequences.<sup>2</sup>***



Adverse Childhood Experiences Study:  
[www.acestudy.org](http://www.acestudy.org)

Large-scale studies of childhood like the ACE Study help us see that children who live with woman abuse will typically face other challenges as well. The more frequent the physical abuse of a mother in a family, the more likely these are true:

- The child is maltreated (emotional or physical neglect, physical or sexual abuse, or emotional abuse) and subject to physical punishment.<sup>12, 14, 15, 23</sup> This is sometimes called poly-victimization or multiple victimization.
- The family experiences socio-economic hardship, unemployment, alcoholism, parental criminality, and/or the recent introduction or exodus of a parental figure.<sup>9, 12, 14</sup>

For many children, this “package” of adversities will compromise health, emotional well-being and academic success, in the short and/or long term. Statistically, the effect appears cumulative: the more types of victimization and adversities, the longer they last, and the more severe they are, the more profound is the ultimate effect.



Children may also be “exposed” to violence in the media (like movies and music lyrics), in the news, on the play ground or in school corridors, and some children are exposed to violence in their neighbourhoods.

## Responding to child disclosures<sup>2</sup>

*When working with children,  
some may tell you they  
are being abused*

A child may tell you that someone is hurting him or her, that she worries about someone who may hurt her, or that he is not taken care of properly or supervised at home.



If you suspect a child is being abused, at risk of abuse, or not having basic needs met, it is your legal responsibility (in most parts of Canada) to call the appropriate child protection authority: see page 37.

While you may consult a supervisor for guidance, if you heard the child disclose abuse or neglect, you must make the call, and you must call immediately. Letting the child leave your agency before you make the report can put him or her at risk.

### Disclosures of woman abuse

A child may tell you that his or her mother is being hurt by her partner. In some parts of Canada, this is explicitly a reason to involve the child protection authorities. Exposure to domestic violence may be seen as a form of emotional harm or as a factor that elevates the likelihood a child will be maltreated directly. If unsure of the situation in your province or territory, consult your supervisor or ask the local police.



Ask the child if others are ever hurt when Mommy gets hurt. If the answer is yes, ask, "who?" If the child says "me" or another child such as a sibling, call child protection services.

If you are unsure how to respond, you can call the authorities and ask for guidance.

### When a child makes a disclosure of abuse...

... stop for a minute and take stock of the enormous responsibility you have:

- appreciate how difficult it was to reveal a family secret
- assume the child has decided that help is needed
- understand the risk to the child if you do not respond appropriately



Failure to act may discourage a child from telling anyone for a long time and place him or her at risk of further harm.

### Allow the child to tell his or her story

Use active listening. Do not pressure the child to talk. Remember that your role is not to gather evidence or conduct an investigation.

### Reassure the child by validating his or her feelings

Acknowledge the child's feelings with statements such as "sounds like that was scary for you." Depending upon the situation, it may be helpful to say you are glad he or she told you and that you want everyone to be safe.



If a child asks you to keep this secret, it is important to explain that you may need to tell someone whose job it is to help children be safe.

### Do not criticize or speak negatively about the abusive parent

Children often have confused feelings. They may hate the abuse, but have a close bond to the abusive parent and enjoy times spent together. Reluctance to tell may be linked to a fear of marital separation. If you criticize the abusive parent, a child's feelings of loyalty and protectiveness toward the parent may cause the child to feel that you are not the person to speak with about the abuse.



A child who does not receive the hoped-for reaction may not disclose again.

### Do not make commitments you cannot keep

Statements such as "I'll keep your secret" or "I won't let him hurt your mom anymore" may diminish a child's trust in you and others if subsequent experience shows those statements were not true. The child might come to believe that no one can help and it is not worth telling anyone.

### Follow the child's lead

Some children have short attention spans and spend little time on any one topic, even if it is a distressing one. Let the child say as much or as little as needed.

***The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect found that, among substantiated incidents of exposure to domestic violence reported to or discovered by child protection authorities, in 9% of cases there was emotional harm serious enough to require treatment.***



Nico Trocmé, Barbara Fallon, Bruce MacLaurin et al. (2005). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect - 2003: Major Findings*. Ottawa ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada. [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn]

## Barriers to child disclosure<sup>2</sup>

*Children take an  
enormous risk in  
revealing family secrets*

It is a common misperception that children experiencing abuse at home will readily tell adults such as teachers, counsellors, or health practitioners.

While most children will blithely relate intimate family things that would mortify their parents, children who grow up with woman abuse or child maltreatment are just the opposite. They are warned or know instinctively that revealing family secrets will have dire consequences. At an age when children want to blend in with peers and be the same, they have already realized how different their family is.

### Why would children not tell?

This depends on many factors including age and relationship with the abuser. Also important in some cases are:

- not understanding that abusive behaviour is wrong or not normal
- embarrassment or desire for privacy
- being warned to “keep your mouth shut”
- being denied contact with people who could intervene (e.g., doctor) or having that contact monitored
- believing they caused the violence
- having no trusted adult in their lives

- fear of consequences for themselves (e.g., being taken from the family)
- fear of consequences for the family (e.g., arrest of father, divorce, mother being hurt)

***Children may deny anything is wrong  
even if asked a direct question.***

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### What is at stake for a child in telling someone?

- risking more (or worse) abuse
- potentially being “taken away” by child protection services
- being pitied, shunned, or teased by other kids
- having family be angry at them and/or being kicked out of home

Some fears are realistic and some are misunderstandings.



Child Witness Project (1995). *Tipping the Balance to Tell the Secret: The Public Discovery of Child Sexual Abuse*. [www.lfcc.on.ca]

## Reporting child maltreatment

*Report suspected maltreatment  
to the appropriate authority  
without delay*

Each province and territory has its own system for investigating and responding to child maltreatment. Some differences exist but there are many common elements.

### Statutes and regulations

The legal framework will be spelled out in a statute and regulations defining the powers and jurisdiction of provincial or territorial child welfare authorities. For example, you will find the *Child & Family Services Act* in Nunavut and the *Youth Protection Act* in Quebec.

### Legal definition of “child in need of protection”

The legal definition typically describes experiencing or being at risk for physical abuse including inappropriate discipline, sexual abuse, emotional or practical neglect, denial of medical or dental care, and factors causing emotional harm or injury.



Exposure to domestic violence is one of the factors that may cause emotional harm or injury. This is spelled out in the statutes of some provinces/territories and implied in others.

### When a child is living with domestic violence, is that a reason to make a report?

If unsure, call the local child protection agency and ask for direction. Be prepared to describe the specific circumstances of the child about whom you are concerned. A skilled social worker will consider a range of factors to evaluate each situation individually and determine if an investigation is required.



Children who live with domestic violence are often abused directly, especially if the abuse against the mother is frequent or severe.<sup>23</sup>

### How to find the child protection authority where you live

- call the police to ask where you must report suspected child abuse
- visit [www.cwlc.ca](http://www.cwlc.ca) (the Child Welfare League of Canada) or [www.fncfcs.com](http://www.fncfcs.com) (the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada)



Chiachen Cheng, Catherine Munn et al. (2006). *Child Maltreatment: A “What To Do” Guide for Professionals Who Work With Children*. Ottawa ON: National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. [[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn)]

Child Welfare League of Canada (2001). *Parenting in Canada*. [[www.cwlc.ca](http://www.cwlc.ca)]

## Taking care of yourself<sup>2</sup>

*Hearing horrific stories  
from women and children  
changes us*

Be prepared for the emotional impact you may feel when working with victimized women and children. Their stories may leave you feeling sad, angry, or shocked. While these feelings are normal, it is not helpful to share them directly with the woman or her children.



When you need to talk, find a supervisor or colleague for debriefing.

### How can this work affect me?

- how I feel (e.g., anxious), think (e.g., diminished concentration), act (e.g., use of coping strategies such as alcohol to relax), and interact with others (e.g., withdrawal from friends)
- my health (e.g., somatic reactions, impaired immune system)
- my work as a professional, including performance of job tasks, morale, interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and behaviour on the job (e.g., absenteeism)



If you start to feel that your work is affecting you in these ways, seek assistance or consult a supervisor.

### What can I do?

- develop constructive coping strategies such as good nutritional habits, exercise, adequate sleep, hobbies, massage, time to relax
- avoid overwhelming myself with overwork, take breaks, limit overtime hours
- be aware of negative coping strategies (e.g., using alcohol/drugs to cope)
- develop and maintain good support networks, both on and off the job
- work within my agency to establish debriefing protocols and other strategies to mitigate the cumulative effects of the work



Jan Richardson (2001). *Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma: Recommended Solutions for Anti-Violence Workers*. Ottawa: Health Canada. [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn]

## How can I make a difference?<sup>2</sup>

*Working with women and children is an important way to address domestic violence*

It's also important to work at the societal level to promote equality of women and challenge attitudes condoning violence. Here are just a few examples.

### In my family...

- I can challenge rigid gender roles
- I can challenge any sexist remarks, jokes or demeaning comments
- I can be a good role model for younger members of the family

### In my intimate relationships...

- I can create a healthy, equal relationship for myself and my partner

### As a parent...

- I can raise my children to respect themselves and respect others
- I can use positive discipline that teaches and choose not to spank

### In my school...

- I can ask that violence against women and children be part of the curriculum
- I can support my friends when they experience intimate violence, not judge them, and provide information so they can make good decisions to be safe

### On the job...

- I can encourage my employer to acknowledge the issue, have policies against sexual harassment, and create a respectful workplace environment



New Brunswick Family Violence and the Workplace Committee  
*Family Violence, It's Your Business: A Workplace Tool Kit* [[www.toolkitnb.ca](http://www.toolkitnb.ca)]



Health Canada (2004). *What's Wrong With Spanking? Positive Parenting Tip Sheet.* [[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn)]

## Where to get more information

*There is a lot more information  
available on this topic*

Lundy Bancroft (2004). ***When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse***. New York NY: Penguin.

Margaret Feerick & Gerald Silverman, eds. (2006). ***Children Exposed to Violence***. Baltimore MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Peter Jaffe, Linda Baker & Alison Cunningham, eds. (2004). ***Protecting Children from Domestic Violence: Strategies for Community Intervention***. New York NY: Guilford Press.

### Additional on-line Documents not Previously Mentioned

American Psychological Association (2003). ***Teach Carefully: How Understanding Child Development Can Help Prevent Violence***. Washington DC: APA. [www.actagainstviolence.apa.org]

Linda Baker & Alison Cunningham (2005). ***Professor's Resource Guide to Teaching About Woman Abuse and its Effects on Children***. London ON: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System. [www.lfcc.on.ca]

Michael Bopp, Judie Bopp & Phil Lane Jr. (2003). ***Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada***. Ottawa ON: Aboriginal Healing Foundation. [www.ahf.ca]

Tara Black, Nico Trocmé, Barbara Fallon et al. (2005). ***Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence in Canada: CECW Information Sheet # 28E***. Montreal QC: School of Social Work, McGill University. [www.cecw-cepb.ca]

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters & Alberta Children's Services (2006). ***Building a Collaborative, Community-based Response: A Guide for Shelters and Child and Family Services Authorities in Protocol Development***. Edmonton AB. [www.acws.ca]

UNICEF (2006). ***Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children***. New York NY: UNICEF. [www.violencestudy.org]

### Statistics Canada [www.statcan.ca]

Use the Internet to find these sources of statistics.

- 2004 General Social Survey (victimization survey of the general population)
- Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (annual police statistics)
- Homicide Survey (annual police statistics)
- Transition House Survey (biennial)
- Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect
- National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth (on-going)

See also the summaries of statistics in the series called Juristat from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

## National Clearinghouse on Family Violence [[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nc-cn)]

This site from the Public Health Agency of Canada has a wealth of information. All documents can be downloaded at no cost and are available in both French and English. Among the many documents are directories of services across Canada and fact sheets with summaries of the latest research.



Many resources cited in *Little Eyes, Little Ears* can be downloaded or ordered from the **National Clearinghouse on Family Violence** web site.

### Other helpful web sites

National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence  
[www.nacafv.ca](http://www.nacafv.ca)

British Columbia Institute Against Family Violence  
[www.bcifv.org](http://www.bcifv.org)

Parent Link Centre (Alberta)  
[www.parentlinkalberta.ca](http://www.parentlinkalberta.ca)

Ontario Women's Directorate  
[www.ontariowomensdirectorate.gov.on.ca](http://www.ontariowomensdirectorate.gov.on.ca)

HotPeach Pages  
[www.hotpeachpages.net](http://www.hotpeachpages.net)

Centre québécois de ressources en promotion  
de la sécurité et en prévention de la criminalité  
[www.crpspc.qc.ca](http://www.crpspc.qc.ca)

White Ribbon Campaign  
[www.whiteribbon.ca](http://www.whiteribbon.ca)

Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse  
[www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au](http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au)

Minnesota Center Against Violence & Abuse (MINCAVA)  
[www.mincava.umn.edu](http://www.mincava.umn.edu)

### The Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System

has many on-line resources that can be found at:

[www.lfcc.on.ca/children\\_exposed\\_to\\_domestic\\_violence.html](http://www.lfcc.on.ca/children_exposed_to_domestic_violence.html)

### Some recent articles

If you have access to scholarly journals, these articles might be of interest.

Linda Davies & Julia Krane (2006). Collaborate with Caution: Protecting Children, Helping Mothers. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2): 412-425.

Shanta F. Dube, R.F. Anda, V.J. Felitti, V.J. Edwards & D.F. Williamson (2002). Exposure to Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction Among Adults Who Witnessed Intimate Partner Violence as Children: Implications for Health and Social Sciences. *Violence & Victims*, 17(1): 3-17.

David Fergusson, Joseph Boden & L. John Horwood (2006). Examining the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence in a New Zealand Birth Cohort. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30(1): 89-108.

David Finkelhor, R.K. Ormrod & H.A. Turner (2007). Poly-victimization: A Neglected Component in Child Victimization. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(1): 7-26.

Jennifer Hardesty & Lawrence Ganong (2006). How Women Make Custody Decisions and Manage Co-parenting with Abusive Former Husbands. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23(4): 543-563.

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3. Linda Baker & Alison Cunningham (2004). *Helping Children Thrive / Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers: A Resource to Support Parenting*. London ON: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System.
4. G. Anne Bogat, E. DeJonghe, A.A. Levendosky et al. (2006). Trauma Symptoms Among Infants Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30: 109-125.
5. Jodi-Anne Brzozowski, Andrea Taylor-Butts & Sara Johnson (2006). Victimization and Offending Among the Aboriginal Population in Canada. *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics: Juristat*, 26(3).
6. Wendy Bunston & Helen Crean (2001). *Group Work Manual for Children and their Mothers Living with Domestic Violence: Parents Accepting Responsibility - Kids are Safe (PARKAS)*. Flemington, Australia: Royal Children's Hospital.
7. Judith A. Cohen & A.P. Mannarino (2006). Psychosocial Interventions for Maltreated and Violence-exposed Children. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(4): 737-766.
8. Alison Cunningham & Linda Baker (2004). *What About Me! Seeking to Understand the Child's View of Violence in the Family*. London ON: Centre for Children & Families in the Justice System.
9. Mia Dauvergne & S. Johnson (2001). Children Witnessing Family Violence. *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics: Juristat*, 21(6).
10. Mia Dauvergne & Geoffrey Li (2006). Homicide in Canada, 2005. *Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics: Juristat*, 26(6).
11. Maxia Dong, R.F. Anda, V.J. Felitti et al. (2004). The Interrelatedness of Multiple Forms of Childhood Abuse, Neglect, and Household Dysfunction. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 28(7): 771-784.
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18. Dermot Hurley (2006). Internalized Other Interviewing of Children Exposed to Violence. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 25(2): 50-63.
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