

Talking to Children and Young People... about domestic violence and abuse

A guide for parent/carers



We hope that you will find this leaflet useful. Talking about domestic violence/abuse (dva) can be very difficult for adults, children and young people but it can be even more difficult for children not to talk.

You may find it upsetting to think about the possible effects of dva on your children but you have already protected them by leaving the situation and keeping them safe. It's not easy to start again and it takes courage.

Looking after yourself is really important. Children may wait for you to be ok before they can show you how they feel.

Fortunately children and young people are usually very resilient and will heal with your help and the help of others. Additional sources of support may be found at the end of the leaflet.



Feelings

Children often feel:

- powerless
- confused
- angry
- guilty
- sad
- scared/unsafe
- isolated/lonely
- relieved that it's in the past

Behaviour

They may:

- become fearful, clingy and anxious about being separated from you
- go back to younger behaviour eg bedwetting or thumb-sucking
- become preoccupied with thoughts and memories of the domestic violence/abuse
- be unable to concentrate on their school work and fall behind
- be irritable and disobedient and get into trouble at home or school
- be unable to enjoy playing or seeing friends/family
- find it difficult to sleep/have nightmares
- complain of physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches or hyperventilate.



How to help

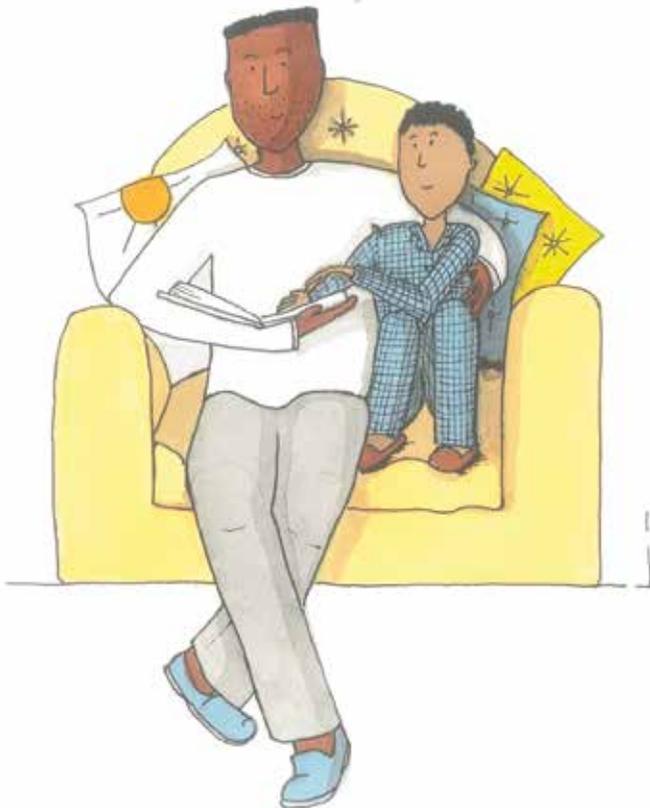
- Look after yourself first: make sure you eat regularly, get plenty of sleep, rest, and exercise. Talking to someone who will listen without judging can be helpful. Let your child know that you have support and show them it's ok to ask for help.
- Continue to give them love and support; help them to understand what has happened; let them know that their feelings and changes in behaviour are a normal reaction; give repeated reassurance that they are not to blame – they couldn't have done anything to prevent or stop it – and that you are taking steps to keep them safe; initially you may need to spend extra time with your child until they feel more secure.
- Re-establish routines and boundaries, particularly around meal times and sleep routines; try to be consistent with boundaries, discipline and expectations – keeping normal rules will make the child feel safer.
- Take the lead and talk to them – ask them what they saw or heard or already know about what happened. Expect it to be more than you think, no matter how young they are. It can be difficult but it will help your child to understand rather than fill in the gaps with their imaginations. They will learn from you it is safe to talk, they will feel less alone with their worries and they will begin to regain a sense of control. Give them opportunities to talk but only if they want to, let them do it in their own time.



- Talk to them in a way that's right for their age in words they can understand and encourage questions so that you know what's on their mind. Use play/games, drawings, stories/storytelling if talking is hard.
- Listen to them – giving them your time will let them know that what they say matters to you and that you take them seriously; accept and help them name their feelings, however difficult. It's ok to admit to your children when you are feeling sad and upset. At the same time, you need to make it clear that you don't expect them to look after you.
- Acknowledge your child may still love the abusive parent and may be confused by feeling this way. This could be hard for you but it will really help your child if she/he is able to express these conflicting feelings.
- Ensure they feel as safe and secure as possible; do a detailed safety plan with them so that they know what to do should they be in danger again; explore and practise problem solving and ways of expressing feelings that do not harm themselves or others. Involve them in decisions appropriate to their stage of development; it's important that they feel they have some control over their lives.
- Sometimes, children find it easier to talk to other adults – they may be worried about upsetting you. Give them permission to talk to a trusted adult; explain why you would like to tell someone at school – to improve the teacher's understanding of how your child has been affected and what they can do to help; talk to your child about what may be appropriate to tell their friends.



- Help them build their self-esteem by encouraging them to spend time with their friends and continuing activities they enjoy; this can help distract them from worries and may reduce feelings of stress.
- Try not to compare the child with the abuser, especially if they look like them – they may feel they will automatically become like them.
- Sign up for one of the domestic violence/abuse programmes and/or ask for a referral to one of the general parenting programmes.



Supporting them emotionally

Loss

Child's emotion:

Loss of a healthy, safe family; loss of one parent if they leave (or the constant threat of this); loss of comfort in the home.

Child needs to:

Talk about feelings with someone they trust; develop a support system of extended family and/or friends outside the home.

Fear

Child's emotion:

Frightened by or for those they love and depend on; fear they may be hurt.

Child needs to:

Be able to talk to someone they trust about their feelings; be helped to make a safety plan with an adult they trust and have some feeling of control in the situation (eg it has been arranged I will go to the neighbour if it happens again).



Anger

Child's emotion:

Anger at the abuser or at the survivor for not leaving the situation; anger because of what they have had to leave behind – home, toys, pets, friends; anger at the disruption in their lives.

Child needs to:

Learn that it's okay to feel both anger and love towards someone; know that it is okay to love their parent even when they hate the behaviour they see; learn ways of expressing their anger without harming themselves or others.

Confusion

Child's emotion:

Feeling they need to take sides (for example, if I love Mum, I can't love Dad and vice versa); not understanding what is happening.

Child needs to

Know that it is ok to love both parents at the same time; know they are not bad if they love the abuser; talk to them in language they understand.



Guilt/responsibility

Child's emotion:

Guilt for causing the violence/abuse, or not stopping it. Feeling responsible for preventing the violence/abuse and taking care of Mum/Dad or other family members.

Child needs to:

Understand that the violence/abuse is not their fault and that it is an adult problem for the adults to work out.

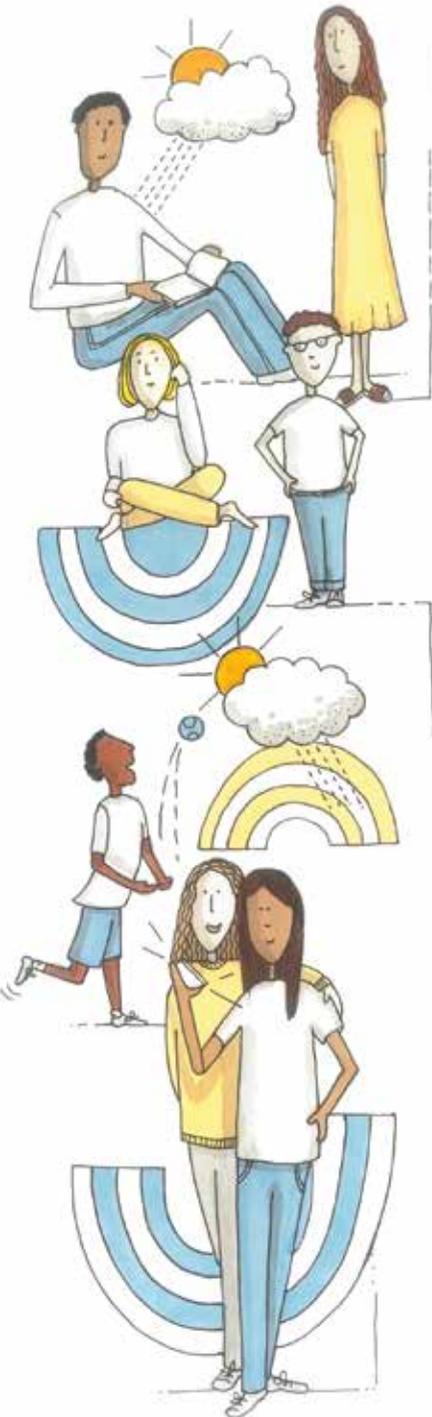
Feeling life is unpredictable/powerless

Child's emotion:

Feeling vulnerable on a daily basis, with no power to control what is happening.

Child needs to:

Find areas in their lives where they can have control and make plans and decisions; create some structure and stability whenever possible (eg maintaining daily routines).



Useful contacts

Your GP is a good first contact who can refer you or your child for further help. North Somerset's online directory nsod.n-somerset.gov.uk lists local and national organisations. Here are some dedicated helplines:

Domestic Abuse FreeFone Service (DAFFS)

0800 694 9999

9am – 6pm (Mon to Fri)

For confidential advice and information on local support; courses; drop-ins; and a survivors' handbook.

Women's Aid website

www.thehideout.org.uk

Provides useful information and signposting specifically for children and young people living with domestic violence/abuse.

Young Minds Parents' Helpline

www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents/parent_helpline

0808 802 5544

Free, online and telephone support to any adult worried about the emotional wellbeing, behaviour or mental health of a child/ young person up to the age of 25.

Family Lives (Parentline Plus)

www.familylives.org.uk/

0808 800 2222

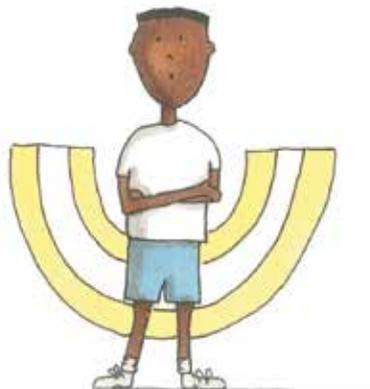
Confidential and free (for most mobiles and landlines) information, advice and guidance service on any aspect of parenting and family life.

Childline

www.childline.org.uk

0800 1111 (24-hours a day)

Provides information for both children and adults on issues of concern to children. Includes factsheets about different kinds of abuse, bullying, bereavement, and peer pressure. All children and young people in trouble or danger can call anonymously. No problem is too big or too small.





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health partnership, and
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Illustrations by Kristina Evans
krisvevans@yahoo.co.uk



Council documents can be made available in large print, audio, easy read and other formats. Documents on our website can also be emailed to you as plain text files. Help is also available for people who require council information in languages other than English.

For more information email:
community@n-somerset.gov.uk
or call **01934 426 752**.

