

Understanding domestic and family violence

INFORMATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROFESSIONALS

What is domestic and family violence?

Domestic and family violence is an ongoing pattern of behaviour by one person in a relationship who uses violence or abuse to control their partner through fear.

Abusive behaviours can include threats to cause harm, physical and sexual violence, verbal and emotional abuse, restricting someone's access to money or who that person can talk to, monitoring their whereabouts, stalking or damaging their personal property.

Some facts about domestic and family violence

- Women are more likely to experience violence within the home by partners or ex-partners.
- Some groups of women are at greater risk of experiencing domestic and family violence — women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women and women from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- The most dangerous time for women (and their children) to experience domestic violence is when they are planning to leave, or have recently left, the relationship.
- Perpetrators can be charming and respected members of their community, or portray themselves as victims.

- Perpetrators will often deny their abuse, or blame the person they abuse. They feel justified or entitled to behave abusively.
- The impact on children who witness or experience domestic and family violence can be serious and long-term. Even if children don't see or hear the violence, they will still be impacted by the fear and disruption experienced by their protective parent.
- Gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex people can also be in violent or abusive relationships.
- Pregnant women are at increased risk of experiencing violence from their partner. If domestic and family violence already occurs, it is likely to escalate during pregnancy.
- Aboriginal women are 35 times more likely to suffer family violence and sustain serious injuries requiring hospitalisation, and 10 times more likely to die from family violence than non-Aboriginal women.

Possible signs of domestic and family violence

Early childhood education and care professionals may observe certain signs or behaviours that indicate domestic and family violence is occurring within a family. Signs of domestic and family violence include:

- regular enquiries from one parent about the whereabouts of the other parent, such as drop off and pick up times a parent loitering outside the centre, or

- turning up unannounced and collecting the children contrary to ordinary arrangements (particularly following separation)
- reports of damage to a parent's vehicle during pick up or drop off
- putting down the other parent or criticising their parenting (in front of, or in the absence of, the other parent)
- reluctance of children to leave with a particular parent
- hyper vigilance or fear by one parent, particularly when leaving the premises.

In situations where you believe domestic and family violence is occurring, it is important that you respond in a way that keeps the parent, child and other staff members safe.

How are children impacted by domestic and family violence?

When children are harmed by domestic and family violence, it can affect their:

- behaviour — they can act out, over-react, be hostile, impulsive, aggressive or defiant. They can also withdraw or dissociate themselves, or run away.
- development — normal development can be impaired. They can appear to be regressing or acting younger than their age. This can be a subconscious way of trying to get to a state where they feel safe and secure. It can also be a result of harm to the brain's development caused by exposure to trauma.
- relationships — they may avoid closeness and push people away. Children may also attach to peers or adults who may be unsafe for them as a way to find an alternative secure base if home feels unstable.
- emotions — children often feel fearful, stressed, depressed, angry, anxious or ashamed. Emotional security is the foundation of healthy relationships later in life. This security can be damaged if attachment between the mother and child is disrupted by domestic violence.

- learning — they may not be able to concentrate at school because they are hyper vigilant.
- cognitions — children may have low self-esteem and think negatively about themselves or people around them. For example, they may think 'everyone hates me'.
- physical health — a range of illnesses may be related to domestic and family violence. Headaches, stomach aches, stress reactions such as rashes or immune system related illnesses, and sleep disturbances such as nightmares, insomnia or bedwetting, are common.

How can you support children who are experiencing domestic and family violence?

Take time to listen to what the child tells you. Show empathy and offer support. You may be the first person the child has talked to about what is happening.

Childcare or kindergarten may be the only stable, secure and safe place for children experiencing domestic and family violence.

If a child discloses that there is domestic violence in their home, it is important that you share relevant information with colleagues who are responsible for the safety of the centre. This will ensure that appropriate measures are in place (if necessary) to maintain the safety of staff and children.

Responding to a disclosure by a parent

When domestic and family violence is present or suspected in a family, there are a number of safety measures you must apply, to ensure the safety of the victim and children. They are:

- Talk to the victim of the violence without the perpetrator of the abuse being present. This is important as the risk of violence and controlling behaviours can



increase if the perpetrator knows that the victim is seeking, or may seek, help.

- Provide contact details for domestic violence support services in a discreet way (for example, small enough to hide in a purse).
- Assist the victim to contact a domestic violence support service from the safety of the child care centre, if appropriate.
- Talk to the victim to seek their consent before you make a referral to a domestic and family violence service, as you do not know who answers the victim's phone or whether it is being monitored by the perpetrator.

Who to call for help

For crisis support, you can call:

DVConnect Womensline

Phone: 1800 811 811 (free from any public phone) 24 hours a day, seven days a week

DVConnect Mensline

Phone: 1800 600 636 between 9am to midnight), seven days a week

National Sexual Assault Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service

Phone: 1800Respect (1800 737 732)

Queensland Police Service (in an emergency)

Phone: 000