



Health and Safety Notes California Childcare Health Program

Supporting Families Experiencing Domestic Violence

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is an abusive behavior that occurs within an intimate relationship. It includes different types of abuse including physical assault, psychological abuse, emotional abuse and economic abuse. These behaviors are used to intimidate, humiliate or frighten victims as a way of maintaining power and control over them. It occurs in all age, racial, socioeconomic, educational, occupational and religious groups. It is a criminal offense when actual or threatened physical or sexual force is used.

Impacts of domestic violence on children

Exposure to domestic violence can have a profound impact on the development of young children. Children who live with violence face numerous developmental risks such as behavioral, social and emotional problems, as well as attitudinal and cognitive difficulties. These problems may persist into adulthood. Children living with domestic violence are also at increased risk of experiencing physical injury or child abuse. Children learn the attitudes modeled in the family where the abuse occurs. If a child thinks that violence is normal, the cycle of violence continues.

When a child makes a disclosure

If a child tells you "Daddy hit Mommy last night," gathering more information is essential. Allow the child to tell the story. Reassure the child. Do not pressure the child to talk. Gently ask if the child is ever hurt when Mommy gets hurt. Children often have confused feelings, so do not criticize or speak negatively about the abusive parent. Follow the child's lead and permit the child to say as much or as little as needed. After hearing the child's story, consult with a supervisor or trusted co-worker.

Meeting with the parent

Once a child has made a disclosure of being exposed to domestic violence you will need to talk to the parent. Find a safe and private place. Show that you are concerned for the well-being of the child. Share what the child has told you. Listen respectfully and without judgment to gain trust. Remind the parent that you are a mandated child abuse reporter but more importantly, that you want to help her and her child. It takes time to make changes that could end a pattern of domestic violence. Offer support over time.

Referral and consultation

The victim of domestic violence may need your help locating community resources. Keep a list of important contact numbers. This list should include:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline:
1-800-799-7233
- shelters for women and children
- family counseling services
- legal aid and advocacy agencies
- Child Protective Services (CPS)
- The local police department

For immediate assistance in a crisis call 9-1-1.

Signs that a child may be living with domestic violence

You might observe behavior changes in a child who is exposed to domestic violence; however, be aware that a young child may show these problems for many other reasons.

- sleep disturbances
- intensified startle reactions
- constant worry about danger
- mixed feelings toward the violent parent; affection with feelings of fear and disappointment
- separation anxiety

- physical complaints like headaches and stomach aches
- aggressive behavior
- withdrawal
- difficulty choosing or completing a task

If a pattern of any of these behaviors appears, monitor the child closely. Share your observations with the child's parents in a safe and supportive way.

Ways to support the child

- Provide predictable routines so that the child knows what to expect.
- Allow for natural expression of anxiety through talk and play.
- Give simple explanations for things that worry him.
- Teach healthy ways of relating such as non-violent problem-solving and encourage healthy relationships based on equality and fairness.
- Establish policies for pick up. Make sure that you have clear written policies for who can pick up the child and who cannot. Have a plan in place in case an abusive parent arrives to pick up the child without permission.

Guidelines for reporting domestic violence to CPS

Early education teachers and childcare providers are mandated child abuse reporters. Under California law, a mandated reporter needs to consider whether the circumstances of domestic violence pose a risk of physical or emotional harm to the child. The fact that a child's parent has been the victim of domestic violence by itself is not a reason for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect; other evidence should exist before assuming that a child's emotional or physical health is endangered. Each situation must be evaluated to determine whether factors exist that must be reported.

Mandated reporters must report incidents that:

- Cause physical injury; or
- Create a serious risk of physical injury to the child.
- Cause serious emotional damage; or
- Create a serious risk of emotional damage to the child.

A report to CPS does not mean that the child will be removed from the domestic violence victim's home. Also, the CPS screener can advise you whether or not there is reasonable cause to make a report.

Violence prevention

Teaching children how to deal with anger, frustration, and disappointment in non-violent ways can give them the skills they need to stop the cycle of violence. Lessons learned at an early age can have life-long consequences for children in your care.

- teach negotiation skills and conflict resolution
- foster good relationships
- model non-violent behavior
- discourage name-calling
- use praise for positive behavior
- help children develop a sense of responsibility for one another in the group

Caring for the caregivers

It can be upsetting to hear about the abuse of a mother of a child in your care. Feelings of sadness and anger are normal. The responsibility to protect the child as well as the desire to help the family may seem overwhelming to the child care provider. Talk to a supervisor or a trusted co-worker to air feelings and concerns in a professional and confidential manner. Practice healthy strategies for coping with the stress; for example, exercise, take regular breaks, eat meals that provide good nutrition and enjoy hobbies.

References and Resources

¹Baker, L.L., Jaffe, P.G., Ashbourne, L., Carter, J. (2002). *Children Exposed to Domestic Violence, An Early Childhood Educator's Handbook to Increase Understanding and Improve Community Responses*, London, Ontario, Canada.

²Baker, L. & Cunningham, A. (2005). *Learning to Listen, Learning to Help, Understanding Women Abuse and its Affect on Children*, Ontario, Canada.

³Finch, S. (2000). *Towards a Non-Violent Society, Checkpoints for Early Years*, National Children's Bureau Enterprises, London at www.ncb.org.uk.

⁴Clark, L. M. (2003). *When to Contact in Domestic Violence Cases: A Guide for Mandated Reporters*. Santa Clara County, California.

⁵Edleson, J. L. (1999). *Problems Associated with Children's Witnessing of Domestic Violence*, University of Minnesota, School of Social Work at <https://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/>.

⁶National Clearing House on Child Abuse and Neglect Information (DHHS). (2004). *Children and Domestic Violence: A Bulletin for Professionals*, Washington DC