VEILIG THUIS
GGD Gelderland-Zuid

Domestic violence affects children

Information and advice for parents

Domestic violence includes:

- arguing, shouting, threatening
- ignoring, humiliating, swearing
- hitting, kicking, shaking
- threatening to use or using weapons
- locking up, exclusion, extortion
- distrust, stalking, following

A child always notices the tension between parents, even if they are asleep in the attic.
Children are often overlooked in domestic violence between partners or ex-partners, yet they are aware of more than you may think. It can have major consequences, even for babies and very young children.

Did you know that the consequences of seeing or hearing domestic violence are just as great as being beaten yourself? Even when the violence has stopped, it continues to haunt a child.

Violence or the threat of violence affects the sense of security, even for children who don't seem to have any problems. Many children hide their problems from their parents, often because they think their parents have enough to worry about. Almost all children think that they are to blame for the arguments in the house, so they shoulder their parents' problems.

Children on violence between their parents

'It feels like a piece of my heart has been torn out.' Nadya, age 8
'I think the fight between mom and dad is my fault. But now Mom has explained it all. Now I know it's not my fault.' Joey, age 7
'I don't really want to tell you how I feel. When I talk about it, I think about it more and I have to cry again.' Sophie, age 7

Statements from children who participated in the Boomhut, a 'Let op de kleintjes' project which helps young children who have witnessed violence between their parents. Names have been changed.

Facts

- In the Netherlands, more than 118,000 children grow up in unsafe family situations every year.
- Sometimes only one parent is violent, but more often it's both.
- Alcohol often plays a role in domestic violence.
- Every child reacts differently to stress and violence at home.
- It depends on age and character. Boys also usually react differently than girls.
- Children are ashamed of the violence in their own homes; it confuses them. They don't talk about it easily, not even with their best friends. Most children will continue to defend their parents and pretend nothing is wrong at home. They carry a secret: a family secret. It makes them lonely.

Consequences for children at different ages

0 – 2 years

- stunted growth
- frequent crying
- eating and sleeping problems
- listlessness

2 – 6 years

- anxious and easily startled
- headaches and stomach aches
- remarkably loud or remarkably quiet
- aggressive towards peers

6 – 12 years

- obstinate behaviour
- disappointing results at school
- withdrawing, being absent
- easily angered

12 and older

- truancy or other school problems
- vandalism
- running away
- drug and alcohol use

Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience domestic violence again in adulthood, either as victims or as perpetrators.

The longer the violence lasts, the more often it occurs, the more serious the violence, or the younger the child, the greater the consequences—and they won't go away on their own. Children continue to feel the threat of repeat violence, even if it has stopped for a while.

What can you do for your child?

If the violence at home has not stopped yet:

- Agree with your partner that you will stop arguing and make a concrete plan for this. Read the folder 'How do I keep my relationship healthy and safe?' from Movisie and take the test.
- First, ensure the safety of your children and yourself.
- If the threat is serious, go to the police.
- Talk to your GP, a family member or someone you trust. You can also visit the child health clinic.
- Contact Veilig Thuis in your region. They know exactly what help is available in your area. Veilig Thuis is also there for the abusive partner.

What can you do for your child?

If the violence at home has stopped:

- Your child has to process what happened. Please contact your general practitioner or your district team for this. They can work with you to determine what help your child needs. The sooner you do this, the better.
- Talk to your child in a way they can understand.
- Try to restore the child's confidence.
- Seek support from people who you and your child trust.
- Professional help
- Professional counsellors can help your children cope with the violence they have experienced. This often happens in groups, together with other children who have similar experiences.
- Social workers can support you if you want to talk to your children about what they have been through. Do not hesitate to ask for this!
- Seek help for yourself, together with your partner if possible. That is also in the best interests of your children!
- What can group help mean for children?
- Less anxiety
- More fun
- More confidence
- More social skills
- Greater sense of security

Support in a group really helps

'I like it so much here. I can talk about things I wouldn't dare to talk about otherwise.' Boy, age 10
'I feel safe here, like someone is protecting you' Mariam, age 8
'She is much happier. It's as if a weight has fallen off her shoulders. She has truly become a child again and is happy to be part of the group.' parents of Lisa, age 9
Statements from children who participated in the Boomhut, a 'Let op de kleintjes' project which helps young children who have witnessed violence between their parents. Names have been changed.

Tips for parents

- Show that an argument does not have to lead to domestic violence
- Show that it is important to make amends
- Let your children know you love them: give them compliments and attention.
- Do fun things and activities together.
- Tips for talking to your children
- Talk to your child about what happened—together with their siblings as well as separately.
- Ask your child how they experienced the violence.
- Show understanding; acknowledge the way your child experienced the violence, even if you experienced it differently.
- Explain to your child that it was not their fault.
- Ask your child who else they would like to talk to.
- Tips in case of divorce
- Do not argue in the presence of the children, about visiting arrangements, for example.
- Make good agreements with each other about where and when you will discuss matters concerning the children.
- Do not talk negatively to your children about your ex-partner.

A helping hand

Besides professional help, your child may need extra support, for example, from a teacher at school or the mother of a good friend—someone to confide in. Talk to your child about this. Children usually recover well from the consequences of domestic violence, but recovery takes time. The sooner a child gets help, the better.

Consequences for parents

The consequences of domestic violence for children often only really become clear to parents once the violence has stopped; this is because an abusive relationship takes a lot of time and energy. When the violence ends, children can suddenly become troublesome. It can be difficult for parents to deal with.

- Sometimes parents realise that, because of all the problems, they have very little contact with their children. It can make them feel guilty and sad.
- Sometimes parents get the feeling that they are no longer taken seriously by their children, because they don't listen, for example.
- Sometimes parents find it difficult to punish their children, because they feel their children have been through enough, or they don't know how to reward their children. Does this sound familiar? Does this sound familiar?

Some reasons for parents to ask for advice or help:

- to stop violence in your family
- to ensure safety
- to make the family secret a topic for discussion
- to get a better understanding of how domestic violence affects you and your children
- to ensure that your child's development is not endangered
- to ensure proper supervision of your children
- to learn to deal differently with tensions and arguments
- to learn how to deal with your feelings of sadness about the violence

What's your reason?

Don't be afraid to ask for help
Many parents are afraid to ask for help because they think their children will be taken away from them. However, seeking help does not mean losing your children. It is rare for children to be removed from the home when parents themselves provide adequate help and support.

You can download this leaflet from www.movisie.nl.