



Services Australia wide include:

Police or Ambulance

Call 000

National Sexual Assault, Family and Domestic Violence Counselling Line 24 hours

1800 RESPECT or 1800 737 732

LifeLine telephone counselling (general)

131 114 or www.lifeline.org.au

Translating and interpreting

Telephone to gain access to an interpreter in your own language:

131 450 or www.immi.gov.au/tis/

With thanks to Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) www.dvrcv.org.au



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McAuley Community Services for Women
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Infants and family violence

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Infants and Family Violence

BABIES AND TODDLERS don't yet have the language skills to tell us how they feel about family violence. However, this doesn't mean that they are not affected by family violence and that they can't let us know in other ways that they feel frightened, sad, depressed or unsafe. It may also be hard to know what to do for our infants when they have witnessed or been in the same home where violence has occurred.

The effects on young children who witness family violence are often not acknowledged by the community, because they have not been seen as direct abuse of the children. They may have been "asleep, in another room" or "quietly feeding" at the time of the abuse, but infants are very aware of what is happening around them.

At this family violence support service, we acknowledge that infants and young children are affected by what they have seen or heard even if they don't comprehend it. We understand that they may seem more difficult to settle, they may seem more demanding or less demanding than usual. We understand that these changes may be due to their experiences, and is part of how they are communicating this.

How do infants let us know about the harm they experience from family violence?

Some of the effects on infants who witness domestic violence may include:

- Finding it difficult to be comforted, look away from us or seem to "shut down".
- Physical reactions such as sleeping too much or too little, eating difficulties, frequent illness, constant crying.
- Delays in development such as speech.
- Behavioural problems such as aggressive behaviour (to themselves and/or others).

Help for you is help for your infant

No matter how caring a parent you are, at some level your ability to do your best for your children will be affected by your experience of family violence.

This is also a time when your children are likely to need your care and attention more than ever.

Until you can get the help you need to make yourself physically and emotionally safe, your children cannot feel safe or happy, knowing that their mother is being hurt.

Difficult choices

Concern for infants is probably a major factor (if not the major factor) in whether you decide to separate, as it is for many women in abusive relationships. It is likely to be confusing and difficult for you to weigh up which situation is best for your infants. Dilemmas may include:

- How can I take them away from their home, their pets, their pre-school, their Dad whom they love?
- He says he will get custody of the children.
- Can I offer the children anything better?
- Are we in more danger if we leave? What about the danger to my infants development and wellbeing and our safety if we stay?

The following suggestions may assist you in caring for your children, and in making choices about your situation.

If you are living with an abusive partner:

- Even though your children may not have been in the room, they will have been able to sense that something is wrong, so if you can, explain to them what is happening.
- Let them know it is not their role to protect you.
- Let them know that you want to know how they feel.
- Assure them that you understand if they are feeling frightened, angry, confused or sad.
- If you are worried about your infant's health, behaviour or emotions you can ask the workers here. We can try to direct you to appropriate supports.

If you have separated, or are leaving the situation you can:

- Seek counselling and support groups for yourself and your children.
- Try to understand that your infants may communicate their feelings through their behaviour, play or drawings.
- Seek parenting support.
- Contact family violence and/or legal services.
- If you leave your home, try to take favourite toys and some of your children's other items as this will provide some important comfort for them.
- Seek legal advice. The Family Court now considers the witnessing of family violence as harmful to children.
- Speak to the staff at this crisis accommodation service for the relevant support services in your State.