

Healing Messages for Children Who Witness Violence

In an ideal world, violence would not exist. Children would not have to witness violence or be a victim of it. Yet, this is not what happens in the real world. In the real world, children may see their parent hit someone or be hit, or they may hear their parent cry after being hit. They might also see fighting, hitting and yelling in their neighborhoods. This is very hard on children.

Here are some ways to help children who have violence in their family.

Feelings

Children need to:

- Know that it is normal and OK to feel angry about this
- Be able to express anger in safe ways
- Learn that it's OK to feel both anger and love toward someone
- Know it is OK to love their parent even when they hate the behavior they see
- Know that it is OK to love both parents at the same time
- Be able to talk about their feelings with someone they trust

Safety and security

Children need to:

- Make a safety plan with someone they trust. The plan should include ways to keep themselves safe and what to do when there is violence. ("I will go over to my neighbors when it happens.") This will give them a feeling of control in the situation.



- Find areas in their lives where they can have control and make plans and decisions.
- Create structure and stability where they can. Daily routines also help provide a sense of control.

Support systems

Children need to:

- Get help with setting up a support system of extended family or friends outside the home
- Know that the violence is not their fault and that it is an adult problem for the adults to work out

Children need and deserve to be safe. In an unsafe family, it is best if the parent could leave the situation and take the children to safety. Ideally, children could have adult models of ways to deal with anger and frustration.

Healing Messages for Children Who Witness Violence

It is common to hear from women who are being abused that they stay in a relationship because “the kids need a father” or “I want us to be a family.” An important message for all parents in this type of situation to hear is that they can parent alone. Single-family homes can be positive and healthy. The first step is to take action so that the children live in a safe and protected place.

What children need to hear from the survivor

If your family has dealt with domestic violence, it will help your child if you take time to check in, reassure them and tell them:

- The violence is not OK.
- The violence is not their fault.
- You know that the violence is scary for them.
- You will listen to them.
- They can tell you how they feel because that is important to you.
- You are sorry they had to see or hear it.
- They do not deserve to have this in their family.
- You will keep them safe.
- There is nothing they could have done to prevent or change it.
- That you want them to be safe if it happens again. Come up with ideas, like staying in their room or going to a neighbor’s.
- You care about them and they are important.
- About the behavior – such as, “Dad broke the ‘no hitting’ rule”; don’t label Dad as bad.

- You are going to be OK and that you are going to get help. Tell your child they are doing their part by being a kid and not taking the blame or trying to fix the problem.

To Learn More

- Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-562-6025
- Children and Family Services: 800-562-5624
- Children’s Home Society Family Support Centers: www.chs-wa.org/Our_Services/Family_Support/Family_Resource_Centers.html
- Catholic Community Services Family Centers: www.ccsww.org/site/PageServer?pagename=families_families_index
- Consejo Counseling & Referral: 206-461-4880
- Community Health Access Program: 1-800-756-5437
- Children’s Response Center: 425-688-5130
- Harborview Sexual Assault and Trauma Center: 206-744-1600
- School counselors
- www.seattlechildrens.org
- Your child’s healthcare provider

Seattle Children’s will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call Marketing Communications at 206-987-5205 or 206-987-2280 (TTY).

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children’s. However, your child’s needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child’s healthcare provider.

© 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013 Seattle Children’s Hospital, Seattle, Washington. All rights reserved.

7/13
CE476