



Helping Children Who Witness Domestic Violence

There are lots of things we can do to help kids when they have witnessed domestic abuse. Two of the most important things are:

- **Talking to them**
- **Listening to them**

It is normal for people who have been in a violent relationship to NOT want to talk to their kids about it. It is easier to pretend that it didn't happen, that the kids didn't know about it, that they will just forget about it. Denying the violence often causes kids to be more confused and scared.

Ideas for helping kids when they've witnessed domestic violence:

- Talk about it with them when they are ready
- Listen to them
- Talk about their feelings in language they can understand
- Show understanding
- Let them know it's not their fault
- Let them talk, if they want to
- Let them know you love them (*if appropriate*)
- Let them know you will try to keep them safe/act in a way that is safe
- Let them know the violence is not okay
- Acknowledge it's hard/scary for them
- Accept that they may not be willing or able to talk about it right away
- Always act in a way that is non-threatening and non-violent with kids
- Take them to counseling if they need it
- Don't expect the child to respond immediately
- Be patient. Don't push it. Try another time.

What children need to hear about domestic violence from you:

- It's not okay
- It's not their fault
- It must be scary for them
- They can tell you how they feel; it's important
- You're sorry they saw or heard it
- They do not deserve to have this in their family
- You will do your best to keep them safe

- There is nothing they could have done to prevent/change it.
- You can talk to them about what to do to keep themselves safe if it happens again. (For example, staying in your room, going to the neighbors, etc.)
- Tell them you care and that they are important.

Tips for listening for and accepting feelings:

- Listen for the feelings you hear.
- Let them know you hear them. Say, "It seems like you feel _____."
- Don't say anything else. Allow some time for the child to respond.
- Don't tell the child what to do, how to feel better, or why she/he feels the way she/he does.

After the child has had time to respond, you can let him/her know you understand by saying things like:

- That sounds frustrating, hard, etc.
- Sometimes I feel that way, too
- I understand
- I'm here for you if you want to talk about it now or later

If you are wondering how to respond to a child's question with an age appropriate response, try posing the question back to them.

For example:

Child asks, "Why did dad do that?"

Helper's response, "Why do you think he did that?"

This will give you 2 things:

- 1) You will learn what assumptions the child is making about the abuse (i.e. who is to blame, what causes the abuse, etc.)
- 2) You will learn where the child is developmentally which will help you form the age appropriate response.

Let's practice the listening skills we learned earlier with another example.

Child asks, "When do I get to see my dad again?" or "why can't we all live together again?"

Respectful response, "Sounds like you really miss your dad. I understand that you want your family all together. I hear you really care about your dad."

Sometimes when children ask questions, they are not necessarily looking for an answer. This is good, because we don't always have an answer!

There is usually a feeling behind a question, which is what we want to listen for. **LISTEN FOR THE FEELING!**

(Adapted from the Parenting Curriculum *Helping Children Who Experience Domestic Violence* Meg Crager & Lily Anderson 1999-2000)