

Every child who “lives domestic violence” experiences it in different ways. Children are remarkable in their resiliency, but they must be protected from continued exposure with their caretaker’s abuser in order to heal. Here are some symptoms of children who live domestic violence:



Academically

- Absenteeism
- Declining school performance
- Delinquency
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Inability to concentrate
- Over-achieving or under-achieving
- Truancy
- Short attention span

NOTE: Later in life, over-achieving child tends to become perfectionist, causing problems with self-image and adult relationships.

Behavioral

- Aggressive, acting out (usually boys)
- Bedwetting
- Changes in eating habits
- Crying, whining, distress
- Disobedient, defiant, tantrums
- Disturbed sleep, sleepwalking, nightmares
- Early interest in drugs/alcohol
- Excessive attention-seeking
- Fighting with other children
- High risk play/activities
- Hurting other children/animals
- Hyper vigilant, “startle” reaction
- Poor impulse control
- Premature sexual activity or promiscuity
- Reenacts trauma through talk or play
- Rigid defenses—aloof, sarcastic, prickly
- Running away
- Self-abuse
- Stealing, shoplifting
- Substance abuse
- Uses violence to resolve conflict
- Withdrawn, unresponsive, passive (usually girls)

NOTE: Look for behaviors in opposite extremes

Cognitive

- Attempts to understand/explain violence
- Believes anger = someone getting hurt
- “Black and white” thinking or reasoning
- Blames others for own behavior
- Blurred parental boundaries
- Concentration and memory deficiencies
- Concern about disrupted routines
- Confuses love and violence
- Develops tolerance for violence

- Fantasizes about rescuing victim, family
- Inability to express needs/wants
- Inability to learn “cause and effect”
- Inflexibility in gender roles
- Intrusive thoughts or images of violence
- Limited understanding of violence
- Sees violence as way to gain power
- Short-term memory of events
- Understands that using violence gets needs/desires met
- Views assault as normal
- Wants family reunited

NOTE: Often misdiagnosed as ADHD/ADD or (in teens) ODD

Developmental

- Born with medical conditions
- Cognitive development delayed
- Delay of self-care skills
- Delayed ability to toilet-train
- Develop more slowly vs. children from non-abusive homes
- Inability to communicate needs
- Inability to develop sound reasoning/thinking skills
- Incontinence (after previously being toilet-trained)
- Learns inappropriate coping skills
- Minimal/delayed speech, muteness
- Motor development delayed
- Regression

Emotional

- Anger, rage, irritability
- Angry about violence/chaos in life
- Anxiety, fear, panic, nervousness
- Conflicted feelings towards parents
- Confusion, numbness
- Depression, sadness, listlessness
- Embarrassment, shame
- Explosive feelings
- Fear of abandonment/separation
- Fear of abuse/retaliation by abuser
- Fear of expressing feelings
- Fear of going to sleep
- Fear of personal injury
- Fear of male or loud voices
- Feels responsible to stop violence
- Feels responsible to protect victim
- Grief over losing one parent, or home
- Mourning loss of abuser’s positive image
- Guilt, self-blame
- Helpless to intervene
- Hopelessness, powerlessness
- Insecure, low self-esteem
- Stressed, worried
- Suicidal ideation

Physical

- Victimization (physical, incest, etc.)
- Born prematurely
- Chronic illness
- Desensitized to pain
- Eating disorders
- Failure to thrive
- No energy for normal activities

- Poor personal hygiene
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Range of physical ailments (headaches, stomachaches, ulcers, asthma, etc.)
- Sleeping disorders
- Tired, lethargic
- Unintended injuries
- Suicide

Social

- Abusive towards victim
- Accepts violence/abuse in relations
- Acts out violently, sometimes to divert more dangerous violence
- Aggression/cruelty towards others
- Ambivalent about family separation
- Ambivalent allegiance to one parent
- Ambivalent towards abuser (cont’d)
- Anger towards victim for allowing abuse
- Anger towards victim for failure to protect
- Antisocial behavior (such as bullying)
- Anxious attachment to parents
- Conflicted loyalties
- Destruction of property
- Dissociative
- Distrustful of adults
- Disturbed relationships with peers
- Embarrassed by family
- Engage in exploitive relationship (as perpetrator or victim)
- Explosive/violent interpersonal behavior
- Hypersensitive to danger cues
- Identifying with abuser
- Inability to create/express/honor others’ boundaries
- Inhibited/passive social behavior
- Isolated, lonely
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of social skills
- May become family caretaker
- Parentification or role reversal
- Poor anger management/problem-solving skills
- Prematurely serious dating relations
- Problems with peers
- Relationships are stormy, intense—end abruptly

Drawn into Violence by:

- Seeing/hearing violence
- Attempting to intervene
- Attempting to/kill the abuser
- Being abused for victim’s compliance
- Being coerced by abuser to abuse
- Being forced to participate in attack
- Being interrogated by abuser
- Being physically or sexually abused
- Being removed from non-violent parent
- Being restricted from contact with others
- Being used as a “spy” or confidante
- Choosing one parent to defend
- Getting injured while intervening
- Having to call police for help
- Running for help

Children Who Live Domestic Violence

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It is a dangerous myth that just because batterers abuse their adult victims doesn't mean they will abuse children in their home. Not only are abusers harmful and neglectful as parents, they are willing to use children as "collateral damage" to maintain their dominance in their intimate relationships. We minimize abusers' direct impact on children when we make "Using Children" a symptom of coercive control against adult victims, instead of recognizing that perpetrators deliberately use the exact same tactics of power and control on their child victims in order to gain their partner's compliance. Here are examples of how:

Grooming & Luring:

- Offers children gifts, special favors or privileges to influence victim to "go back"
- Keeps old/makes new promises to gain children's compliance
- Gives children access to alcohol, drugs, pornography, etc.
- Bribes children to come live with him
- Temporarily helps with household chores
- Briefly allows contact with friends to gain child's compliance
- Enlists children to entice or cajole partner back into the relationship

Exploiting Male Privilege & Status:

- Treats children like servants
- Dictates family roles and duties
- Refuses or fails to fulfill parenting responsibilities
- Uses status in the community or exploits professional relationships to discredit children's disclosures
- Cultivates favor with community professionals to avoid accountability for abuse

Spiritual Conflict:

- Misuses religious texts to justify child abuse
- Claims to be all-powerful, all-knowing
- Forces children to participate in or witness ritual sacrifice of animals
- Refuses to allow children to participate in religious activities during his parenting time
- Coercing the adult victim to stay "for the children's sake"
- Forcing or manipulating children to do things they know are wrong

Emotional Abuse:

- Constantly criticizes, belittles, punishes or puts children down
- Talks over, interrupts or humiliates children
- Minimizes children's accomplishments and achievements
- Yells, shouts or swears often
- Calls children vulgar or hurtful names
- Disregards children's feelings and opinions
- Uses guilt or "The Silent Treatment" as a means of control
- Characterizes children as uncooperative, difficult, paranoid
- Uses the children to deliver messages, gifts, etc., to adult victim
- Modeling poor relationship skills

Economic Control:

- Withholds child support, or other court payments, forcing family into poverty
- Confiscates children's earnings
- Dictates how parent victim spends child support payments
- Uses children's social security numbers to access credit
- Tells children that adult victim is making him poor because he has to pay child support

Medical Neglect:

- Withholds necessary medications from child
- Denies child treatment for injuries or illness
- Refuses to care for sick child
- Denies routine medical or dental care for child, or drops medical insurance for child

Legal Harassment:

- Coerces children into doing illegal acts
- Threatens to report partner to child protection
- Threatens to take custody of the children, or hurt them
- Uses visitation with the children or parenting classes to access or harass partner
- Pressures children to write letters to court or other professionals denouncing adult victim

Monitoring & Stalking:

- Texts nasty-grams to children
- Uses technology to track family's location
- Interrogates child about partner's daily routine or activities
- Uses child to spy on or contact parent victim
- Leaves gifts or "messages" to send back to adult victim in spite of restraining order

Deprivation & Isolation:

- Deprives children of sleep
- Deprives children of basic necessities
- Sabotages family's housing, school, activities, vehicle, etc.
- Cuts off utilities when partner gets restraining order
- Sabotages or denies children's relationships with others
- Denies children access to outside services
- Forces family into homelessness

Psychological Torment:

- "Crazy-making" (playing mind games)
- Makes gestures meant to frighten or intimidate children
- Threatening to hurt the children if they disclose abuse
- Threatens to harm or kidnap children
- Abuses or kills animals/family pets
- Destroys children's personal belongings
- Punches walls near or throws things at child
- Drives recklessly with child in the car
- Menaces children with weapons
- Hurts child to torment or punish adult victim
- Forcing child to participate in hurting victim parent

Sexual Coercion & Force:

- Molests children
- Grabs children's breasts or genitals
- Has sex with intimate partners where children will see/hear
- Watches pornography when children are up and about, in their presence
- "Girlfriends" children with inappropriate gifts (lingerie, etc.)
- Traffics or exploits children for money

Physical Assault:

- Restrains or prevents children from leaving or calling for help*
- Bites, spits on, grabs, pinches, shoves, pulls, slaps, elbows, knees, head-butts, hair-pulls, twists, kicks, punches, strangles, smothers, burns, stabs, or shoots children
- "Accidentally" hurting children as he assaults victim

Note: This list is illustrative only, and is not intended to be an all-inclusive list.

