

What happens when children are exposed to violence?

Children are very resilient—but they are not unbreakable. No matter what their age, children are deeply hurt when they are physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or when they see or hear violence in their homes and communities. When children see and hear too much that is frightening, their world feels unsafe and insecure.

Each child and situation is different, but exposure to violence can overwhelm children at any age and lead to problems in their daily lives. Some children may have an emotional or physical reaction. Others may find it harder to recover from a frightening experience. Exposure to violence—especially when it is ongoing and intense—can harm children’s natural, healthy development unless they receive support to help them cope and heal.

The warning signs in this brochure are offered as a tool to help the adults in a child’s life recognize potential signs of exposure to violence so that appropriate and positive steps can be taken to help the child regain a feeling of safety and trust.

This brochure prepared
by
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using information from
Safe Start Center—
a National Resource Center for
Children’s Exposure to Violence
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05-2012


When Children See or Hear Too Much ...

What to watch for



**Trauma-Informed Care
for Children Exposed to Violence**


What are some things you might see in a child's behavior when they have seen or experienced a frightening, disturbing traumatic, or violent occurrence? Children's reactions to exposure to frightening, traumatic or violent occurrences/events/situations can be immediate or appear much later. Reactions differ in severity and cover a range of behaviors. People from different cultures may have their own ways of showing their reactions. How a child responds also varies according to age. The checklists below highlight some of the potential warning signs.



Infants (birth to 12 months) - Building a sense of security in an environment in which infants can trust parents, family members, and others to lovingly take care of their needs is the most important developmental task of infancy. When infants are exposed to violence, the world begins to feel like a scary place. The attachment process is affected because the environment is not trustworthy and dependable.

Some warning signs of exposure to violence for infants include:


- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Clinginess
- Difficulty separating from adults (especially parents)
- Inconsolable crying
- Fear of new things
- Being easily startled
- Sadness



Toddlers (13-16 months) - Growing feelings of independence and beginning to use words or gestures to communicate are the key developmental task during these months. When children are exposed to violence the development of language, curiosity and exploratory skills are interrupted.

Some warning signs of exposure to violence in toddlers include:


- Difficulty paying attention
- Isolation
- Fearfulness
- Aggressiveness
- Anxious reactions to loud noises
- Stomachaches and other physical complaints.



Preschoolers (18 months—5 years) - Critical developmental tasks during these years include separating fantasy from reality, realizing how thoughts and feelings are related to consequences, and playing cooperatively with peers. Exposure to violence during this period may distort children's thinking about themselves and the world around them.


Some warning signs of exposure to violence for preschoolers include:

- Atypical aggressive behaviors
- An increasing desire to withdraw from those around them
- Repeating the events in play or stories
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of previously developed skills
- Difficulty concentrating



Elementary School-age Children (6-12 years) - Elementary and middle school children exposed to violence may show problems at home and school. **They may:**

- Have difficulty paying attention
- Become quiet, upset, and withdrawn
- Be tearful and sad and talk about scary feelings and ideas
- Fight with peers or adults
- Show changes in school performance
- Want to be left alone
- Eat more or less than usual
- Get into trouble at home or school



Teenagers (13-18 years) - Older children may exhibit the most behavioral changes as a result of exposure to violence.

Depending on their circumstances, teenagers may:

- Talk about the event all the time or deny that it happened
- Refuse to follow rules or talk back with greater frequency
- Complain of being tired all the time
- Engage in risky behaviors
- Want to be alone, not even wanting to spend time with friends
- Experience frequent nightmares
- Use drugs or alcohol, run away from home, or get into trouble with the law.

What can you do? Do not ignore the warning signs! Seek additional help from a professional such as a psychologist, social worker, school counselor, pediatrician, family doctor, etc.

What else can you do?
 *Help children feel safe—emotionally and physically. *Remain calm and reinforce a stable and safe environment. *Be patient and let children identify and express feelings. *Provide extra attention, comfort, and encouragement