

## Trauma-Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence

### *Tips for Parent Education Programs*

#### **Why should parent education programs address children's exposure to violence?**

Recent national surveys show that a large number of children are directly or indirectly exposed to violence in their homes, schools, and communities.<sup>1</sup> Many families involved in parent education programs are likely to have been exposed to violence. Exposure to violence seriously impairs the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of children leading to seriously negative outcomes for children and a very large cost to society.

#### **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 hard 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.

#### **What are some of the warning signs of exposure to violence?**

Children's reaction to exposure to violence 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.

##### ***Young Children (5 and younger)***

Young children's reactions are strongly influenced by caregiver reactions. Children exposed to violence in this age range may:

- Be irritable or fussy or have difficulty calming down
- Become easily startled
- Resort to behaviors common to being younger (for example, thumb sucking, bed wetting, or fear of the dark)
- Have frequent tantrums
- Cling to caregivers
- Experience changes in level of activity
- Repeat events over and over in play or conversation



<sup>1</sup> Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R., Hamby, S., & Kracke, K. (2009). *Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available at [www.safestartcenter.org](http://www.safestartcenter.org).

### Elementary School-Age Children (6–12 years)

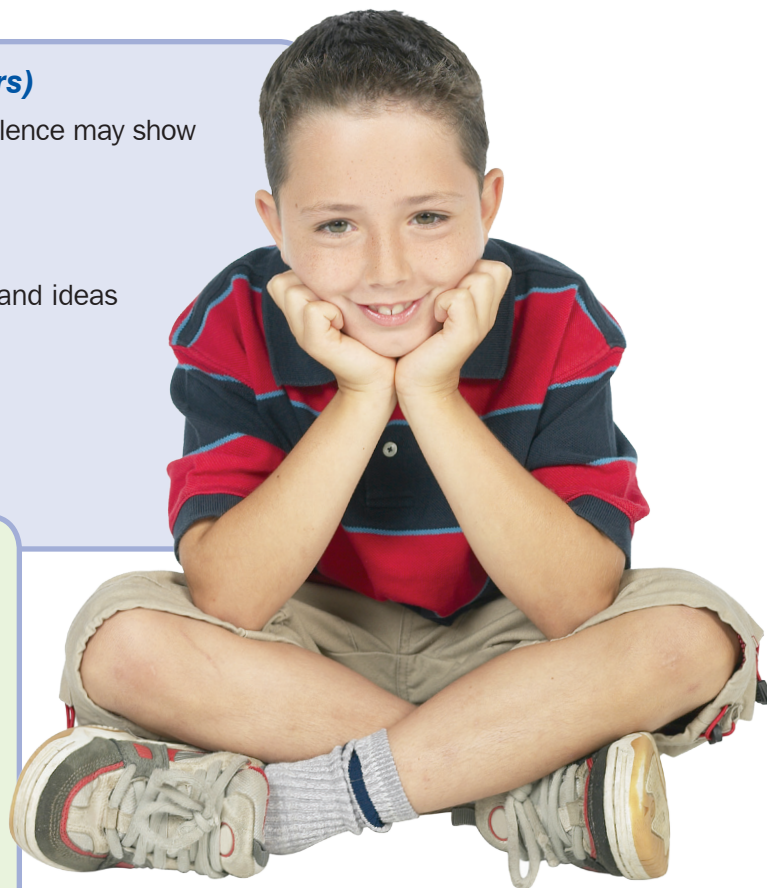
Elementary and middle school children exposed to violence may show problems at school and at home. They may:

- 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
- Sleep more or less than usual
- Increase aggressive 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



Improved parenting skills and relationships can enhance the lives of everyone in the family.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve successful outcomes, however, parent education programs must first recognize and address the history of exposure to violence in the families they serve because:

- Under stress, parents may rely on familiar ways of parenting—even when they have learned new parenting skills and want to change their parenting behavior.
- A parent who has a poor developmental history, psychological difficulties, and/or a drug or alcohol disorder may not be emotionally available to learn skills that build better parent–child relationships. The parent’s own developmental needs may be so great that she cannot participate in programs that focus on her children.

### What can parent education programs do?

Early intervention and treatment play a pivotal role in reducing the impact of exposure to violence on children and their families. Specifically, parent education programs can promote safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between children and caregivers. They can help parents by teaching them to create a predictable environment, to listen to their children, and to assure children and adolescents that whatever happened was not their fault.

<sup>2</sup> Several parent education programs have achieved success in improving parenting and child outcomes. **Parent Management Education** is mostly used to help parents with children engaged in seriously disobedient or destructive behaviors and in cases of child abuse and neglect. **Project Safe Care**, derived from Parent Management Education, has shown success in reducing child maltreatment. **Triple P: Positive Parenting Program**—first developed in Australia—follows a public health approach to the prevention of child maltreatment and out-of-home placements of maltreated children. **The Incredible Years** is designed to strengthen competencies in positive communication, consistent and clear limit setting, and nonviolent discipline strategies. **Nurturing Parenting Program** builds parenting skills to stop the cycle of child abuse and to reduce the rate of juvenile delinquency, alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy. **1-2-3 Magic** helps parents learn effective methods of controlling negative behavior, encouraging good behavior, and strengthening the child–parent relationship.

- Several factors may reduce the effectiveness of parent education programs, including parental depression, drug addiction, or alcoholism; a parent's low literacy skills and limited education; domestic violence and marital conflict; the blending of families after divorce; and excessive punishment of children.
- Parents who are stressed by environmental conditions (for example, neighborhoods with recurrent violence, few adult role models, or persistent unemployment) may be less able to benefit from parent education programs.

Specific ways that parent education programs can help parents of children exposed to violence include:

### **Being aware of the impact of exposure to violence on parenting capacity**

Parent educators working with high-risk families should be supported and prepared to know how to respond to and work with families with a history of exposure to violence as a matter of routine practice. Knowing the types of problems parents are coping with (for example, substance addiction or mental disorders) can help identify issues that may affect parenting.

### **Assessing the impact of exposure to violence on parenting capacity**

An evaluation of parenting capacity requires the identification of how the unique constellation of problems and strengths in the family results in children's parenting and safety needs being met. Observing parent-child interactions and assessing the quality of the home environment, the parent's perception of child behavior, his social support networks, and his ability to solve problems are more important than identifying or diagnosing parental problems such as domestic violence.

Parent educators may find it worth exploring—when appropriate—the extent to which children are aware of their parents' problems. Parents may minimize or underestimate the impact of their problems on their children because of their assumption that children have only a limited awareness of the problems. However, research has shown that children know a great deal more about their families' problems than their parents realize.

### **Knowing and watching for signs of possible exposure to violence on children**

Parent education programs can work with parents to develop skills to recognize potential indicators of exposure to violence such as unexplained changes in behavior and emotional signs such as depression, mood swings, and fearful or anxious behavior. Parents are in a good position to determine whether a young child is crying more than usual, is difficult to calm, startles easily, or screams and panics during sleep.

School-age children may become more aggressive and fight a lot, return to old fears or develop new ones, become apprehensive about going home, express a wish to be with other adults (such as teachers), or become overly active.

Teenagers may use violence to get what they want or may rebel in school. They may stop being concerned about their appearance or refuse to follow rules.

### **Responding appropriately to children's disclosures**

A parent's willingness to listen to a child's story can provide the foundation on which to increase resilience and personal strength. The most meaningful assistance parent educators



can offer parents of children exposed to violence is to encourage skills that promote a safe and comfortable environment where children can talk.

A child's relationship with a caring adult is critical for developing resilience and beginning the healing process. It is very important that children have an opportunity to talk about what they have witnessed and how they feel with caring parents who can listen and understand.

Another important priority for parents is to create an emotionally safe place for all children to express themselves. These safe spaces will enable children who have been exposed to violence to begin their healing journey.

### Helping parents find support from others who can provide specialized help

Children exposed to violence may need specialized assessment and interventions that parents cannot provide. If that is the case, parents need to know where they can find help. Teachers, psychologists, school counselors, and even religious leaders can help children and their families. These professionals can help by offering ways to keep the problems from getting worse. In some instances, they may help families find ways to stop the cycle of violence.

### Mandated Reporting

Many children experiencing crises or violence are also at risk for child abuse and neglect. All States have child welfare systems that receive and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect, offer services to families, provide foster homes for children who must be removed from their parents' care, and work to find permanent placements for children who cannot safely return home.

Domestic violence does not equal child abuse and neglect, and therefore not all cases of domestic violence must be reported to child protective services. When responding to families affected by domestic violence, it is very important to consider simultaneously the safety of the child and the safety of the adult victim.

State by State information on reporting requirements can be found at [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state)

**For more information and resources, please contact the Safe Start Center, a National Resource Center for Children's Exposure to Violence:**

**<http://www.safestartcenter.org>**

**1-800-865-0965**

**[info@safestartcenter.org](mailto:info@safestartcenter.org)**

### Additional Resources

*Directory of Evidence-Based Parenting Programs:* <http://whatworks.uwex.edu/Pages/2parentsinprogrameb.html>

*Parent Training Programs: Insight for Practitioners:* [http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pub/parenting\\_meta-analysis.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pub/parenting_meta-analysis.html)

*Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting:* <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/>

<sup>1</sup> The report is available at [http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix\\_2011.pdf](http://www.safestartcenter.org/pdf/Evidence-Based-Practices-Matrix_2011.pdf).