

# CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST THEIR MOTHER

## Identifying and Dealing With the Effects of Children's Victimization

*A Manual for Social Workers*

**Produced by**  
UNESCO Chair in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment,  
University of Cyprus



**Funded by**  
- The European Commission, Daphne III Programme (action grants 2007-2013)  
Project VI.C.T.I.M.S (2009-2011, JLS/2008/DAP3/AG/1157)  
- University of Cyprus



# Sensitizing and Creating Awareness on the Subject of Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence

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<http://www.ucy.ac.cy/goto/unesco/el-GR/Home.aspx>

<http://www.ucy.ac.cy/victims>

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# CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST THEIR MOTHER

*A manual for professionals working with adults and children to sensitize, create awareness about the effects of children's exposure to domestic violence and provide information and guidance*

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IDENTITY OF THE PROJECT VI.C.T.I.MS (2009-2011)  
FUNDED BY DAPHNE III PROGRAMME

## Victimizing Children Through Injuring MotherS

*The project VI.C.T.I.MS was designed and conducted in four countries (Cyprus, Italy, Romania, Slovakia) with funding obtained by the European programme DAPHNE III (action grants 2007-2013), and elaborated on the background of the effects of violence against women-mothers upon their children if exposed, and on how these may be externalized in different contexts such as the school environment.*

### PROJECT IDENTITY

“An Indirect Harmful Effect of Violence: Victimizing the Child and Re-victimizing the Woman-Mother Through her Child’s Exposure to Violence Against Herself”.

*Sensitizing and creating awareness through research-product material, both transnational and differential according to the partner-context.*

### PROJECT AIM

- a) To examine the indirect harmful effect of violence against women mothers upon their children if exposed to it in the domestic sphere, as well as mothers’ consciousness of that effect;
- b) To sensitize all groups of people who are involved in the child’s development and education by producing awareness raising and research based material.

## PROJECT'S MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- a) Are there any differences between primary-school age children who are exposed to violence against their mother and children who are not exposed, with regard to their behaviour while being exposed to violence and or while witnessing violence? Do they adopt a violent or passive behaviour?
- b) Are there any differences between primary-school age children exposed to violence against their mother, and children not exposed, with regard to their views about their self-image and their school performance?
- c) Are there any differences between primary-school age children exposed to violence against their mother, and children not exposed, with regard to their views about their mother as a role model?

## REACHING THE AIM...

- a) By examining the mothers' awareness of the indirect harmful effect of violence inflicted upon the mothers on their children if exposed to it.
  - Analysis of written testimonies given by women and children, victims of violence;
  - Semi-structured interviews with women-mothers victims of violence.

- b) By investigating the possible indirect harmful effect of exposure to violence on children and comparison of their perceptions and self-images with those of children who are not exposed to violence against their mother.
- Child's self-evaluation (administration of the Self Perception Profile Test, Harter, 1985);
  - Child's evaluation by a teacher;
  - Child's perceptions on violence, self-image, school performance and mother as a role model (administration of a questionnaire with 14 scenarios-vignettes becoming filters through which children's perceptions could be examined).



### ***An example of a scenario given to children...***

*It's break time. Anna sits alone in the school yard eating her snack. Some kids, her classmates, approach her without Anna noticing their presence. They are frightening her with a sudden noise and push her. Anna automatically stands up.*

***The question...***

***What would you do if you were in Anna's place?***



***Answers from children exposed to violence against their mother...***

***"I would kick them to go away"***

***"I would be so mad that I would start damaging things"***

***"I would be so mad that I would beat them badly"***



# CONSIDERING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT

### ***Children exposed to violence...***

*Children witnessing violence by seeing, hearing, feeling or being aware of the violence that the one parent – usually the mother – suffers by the other parent – usually the father. “Children witnessing violence” or “children living with violence” are also used as terms.*

The term of “***children witnessing violence***” may imply a passive role... Instead “***children living with violence***” means/implies that children are “actively” involved, since they can interpret what they see or hear, they can feel the pain experienced by their mothers, they can get anxious about the consequences of violence and can even start blaming themselves for causing the violence...



## INTENDED AUDIENCE

This handbook is appropriate for **professionals** working with adults and children who may suffer either directly or indirectly from domestic violence. A professional (*i.e., a social worker working in an NGO*) may be the first person that the victim might have the confidence to approach for help. Things get more complicated if children are involved, and your response may make all the difference for their safety.

## IT IS IMPORTANT FOR PROFESSIONALS TO KNOW BECAUSE:

- ▶ Witnessing violence against their mother is harmful for primary-school age children, even if the children are not hurt by the violence themselves.
- ▶ The signs/effects of a child's exposure to violence may be externalized in different contexts such as the school environment.
- ▶ Primary-school age children witnessing violence against their mothers tend to have increased adjustment problems at several places such as school.
- ▶ Primary-school age children witnessing violence against their mothers tend to have increased behavioral and emotional problems.
- ▶ Professionals can support women victims and their children who are exposed to violence, and help them to leave the abusive relationship and deal with their children's possible challenging behaviours.



# CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST THEIR MOTHER. DIFFERENT STORIES, COMMON EFFECTS



Domestic violence can have harmful effects on women victims and things are getting worse if women have children. Each woman's story - experience of violence is unique and it is important to listen to it than making assumptions about the circumstances or her needs and feelings. But, while each woman's experience of violence is different and thus unique, *children's exposure to it can produce a number of common effects* that you must indicate to the woman - mother.

*Your role is to make the mother to realize the effects of children's exposure to violence; being conscious of these effects may motivate her leave the abusive relationship.*

**"I can realize that something isn't 'right' with my child..."**

**"...Teachers are often complaining about his/her behaviour..."**

- ♦ **Alex** participated in a fight with two other children. The odd thing is that Alex is beaten by the other two without making any effort to beat them back or defend himself.
- ♦ **Andrea** is most of the times distracted in class. She is not confident to raise her hand and whenever her classmates make fun of her, she starts shouting and threatening them.
- ♦ Whenever **Dan** walks in the school corridors, the younger pupils hurry to avoid him and hide from him because he always claims their food and money and sometimes even hits them.

*and the common question of mothers is ...*

**“What is wrong with him/her?”**

### **INDICATE THEM WHAT ...**

*Alex sees his dad getting hot-tempered and cries. You try to calm him by saying to him “don’t be afraid, mom and dad are just playing”.*

*Andrea has to listen to her father threatening you that he will kick you out of the house, if you keep going to work.*

*Dan’s father usually gets drunk due to the economic problems he faces. He cannot control his nerves and usually beats you. Dan witnesses all this.*

---

**Can you appreciate and recognise the emotional or psychological pain these children are going through?**

**Can you find something common in the above situations?**



**Exposure to Domestic Violence**



# DEFINING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## DEFINING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### *Domestic Violence...*

- ▶ is spread worldwide and can occur in all kind of social groups disregarding age, racial, socioeconomic, religious, educational and occupational differences and factors.
- ▶ is considered to be a human rights violation and a humiliation of human dignity.
- ▶ refers to an abusive relationship between a perpetrator (*abusive partner, batterer*) who causes the violence and a victim (*abused partner*).
- ▶ involves the perpetrator's repetitive behaviour including various forms of abuse – physical (*e.g., slapping*), emotional (*e.g., rejecting*), psychological (*e.g., threatening*), sexual (*e.g., enforcing to sexual actions*), economical (*e.g., economically exploiting*).
- ▶ refers to a violent behaviour that has been usually learned by the adult perpetrator (*e.g., existence of domestic violence in the family of origin*).
- ▶ is a systematic way for the perpetrators to demonstrate power and dominant behaviour over the victims.
- ▶ mostly results in the victim's survivor behaviour focused only on ensuring survival and not on leaving from the abusive relationship.

- ▶ makes the victim's attitude to be mainly determined by the discourses of powerlessness, of tolerance, of denying, of blaming self and of compassion.
- ▶ means either an injury (e.g., *from being hit, punched, slapped or from other trauma*) or stress (e.g., *from threats, humiliations, rejection or from other emotional and/or psychological cause*).
- ▶ has direct (e.g., *physical pain*) or indirect impact (e.g., *depression*) on the victims who can be either directly or indirectly hurt.

#### *A woman's victim words...*

*"..violence is like they are trying to make you fall apart so as to feel powerless.."*

#### *Another's woman victim words...*

*"..I was trying not to provoke him... I used to believe that if I kept him calm, he wouldn't use violence again. This is the first step for making yourself a victim. Then, he keeps telling you that he is sorry and you unfortunately believe him... you have the need to do so.."*



# VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### *Victims...*

- ▶ **suffer** the violence caused by the perpetrator.
- ▶ **feel unsafe** and insecure in their living environment.
- ▶ **are afraid** to react in any way (*e.g., talk to someone or testify against the perpetrator*).
- ▶ **adopt** mostly a **survival behaviour** and do not leave the abusive relationship.
- ▶ **suffer** either direct (*e.g., physical pain*) or indirect effects (*e.g., depression*).

### *Perpetrators...*

- ▶ **use violence** and **abuse** to establish control over their partner and power in their families.
- ▶ **want to be** the **head** of the household with their violent behaviour.
- ▶ **use violence** because they want to be the **decision-makers** in the family, and the **disciplinarians**.
- ▶ **use violence** because they believe that they can **get away** with it.
- ▶ **use violence** because **they have learned to do it** from their family or origin.



***Most of the times, victims of domestic violence are:***

- ✓ Women
- ✓ Children

***Children may be the:***

- ✓ direct victims of violence
- ✓ indirect victims of violence



*Children are considered to be the indirect victims of violence, if they are exposed to the violence that the one parent figure – usually the mother – suffers by the other parent figure – usually the father.*

Being exposed to violence is still harmful for primary-school age children since, even if they are not hurt themselves, they can see, hear, feel or imagine the wrong which is inflicted on their mothers, and this makes them feel unsafe.

***A woman's victim words...***

*“...violence is like you are killing firstly yourself and then the others around you...”*





# CHILDREN SUFFERING IN SILENCE

### *A mother's truth...*

*"...I made my daughter suffer a lot with my tolerant behaviour... But, when you are hurt and you are suffering, you cannot realize that you are hurting the others around you... that your children are suffering too..."*

## CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST THEIR MOTHER..

### *Children's narrations ...*

- ◆ *"...My father didn't come to see us; he only came to cause troubles... My brother went outside the house to call for help... my father closed the door. I don't want to listen to him because of all these he has done to my mother. I am very disappointed... I am also very angry with him..."*
- ◆ *"...my mother couldn't take off her clothes, she couldn't do anything since she was terribly in pain. I saw him kicking and beating her... I couldn't sleep that night, I was very scared and I didn't want to go at school the next day..."*
- ◆ *"...he beated her badly... I was in my bed and I could hear them quarrelling. I could hear clearly my mom crying and my dad yelling at her. I was so scared and I was crying. My mom went to the doctor..."*

**Love doesn't have to hurt...**

## MOTHERS' CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE INDIRECT IMPACT OF VIOLENCE UPON CHILDREN IF EXPOSED

### *Mothers' narrations ...*

- ◆ *“... I could see that my daughter did not smile. She totally withdrew into herself, she didn't want to make friends at school and during breaks she preferred to be alone ...”*
- ◆ *“...children are not in the room where we fight...sometimes they are in their own room. They are just sitting in their room scared but still, they continue their studying ...”*
- ◆ *“... due to this violent situation at home, my daughters came very close to each other. At school, during breaks the younger one is always looking for her sister ...”*
- ◆ *“... my son is very active at school and usually his teachers complain about his violent behavior. His school performance is also low... He doesn't care at all about his lessons ...”*
- ◆ *“... her teacher said to me that she is very often distracted at class. I can understand this because at home also, she cannot study by herself, she cannot concentrate... She needs me to be by her side all the time so as to feel safe and when I leave she keeps asking for me ...”*
- ◆ *“... whereas at home my kids were very active, when I went to their school to ask the teachers about their school performance and behaviour, they kept telling me that my children were too shy to participate in any school activity ...”*

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**Domestic violence – violence against women victimizes not only the women mothers but also their children, even if children are not themselves the target of violence and women are assaulted instead.**

**This occurs because most of the time the children are at home during the violence incidents and are in many ways witnesses to the violence.**



# IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON THE CHILDREN, IF EXPOSED

## IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON THE CHILDREN, IF EXPOSED

*Witnessing violence against their mothers makes children feel afraid and unsafe. Children's exposure to violence against their mothers is tantamount to psychological maltreatment and victimization, and differs according to the children's age, gender and type of exposure.*

- ✓ **Children exposed to violence often experience either short- or long-term impact that may also affect also their adjustment at school.**

---

### ***Children exposed to violence against their mothers may ...***

- ♦ choose to react aggressively in an ordinary situation
  - either verbally (e.g., *insulting their classmates while playing*).
  - or physically (e.g., *hitting their classmates while playing*).
- ♦ choose to react aggressively when exposed directly to violence
  - either verbally (e.g., *threatening and insulting while been pushed*).
  - or physically (e.g., *push while being pushed*).
- ♦ choose to react aggressively while witnessing violence (e.g., *interfering in a fight*).



***Exposure to violence may desensitize children to aggressiveness. When this happens, aggressive behaviour becomes part of the “norm” and is more likely to be adopted.***

- ◆ choose to adopt a passive behaviour
  - while exposed directly to violence (*e.g., stay silent while being threatened*).
  - while witnessing violence (*e.g., ignoring a fight*).
- ◆ have a low self-esteem and an inferior self-image.
- ◆ not be happy with the way they lead their life.
- ◆ feel less accepted by their peers and less popular among classmates and/or friends.
- ◆ not be happy with the way they look and feel that they are not so good-looking.
  
- ◆ reject their mother as a role model.
- ◆ feel more intensely the need to protect their mother.
  
- ◆ have a low school performance.
- ◆ have problems of concentrating in class and dealing with their school obligations (*e.g., homework*).
- ◆ display traumatic stress reactions (*e.g., sleep disturbances, constant fear of possible danger*).



# SIGNS THAT A CHILD IS LIVING WITH VIOLENCE

## SIGNS THAT A CHILD IS LIVING WITH VIOLENCE

*The signs/effects of a child's exposure to violence are as varied as children's personalities and may be externalized in different ways in the school environment. Some are the following:*

Have in mind

- ☛ **Some signs may seem completely unrelated to the child's exposure to violence.**
- ☛ **Still, children displaying these signs *may not* have been necessarily exposed to domestic violence.**

### *Signs...*

- ◆ **Increased aggressive behaviours and feelings of anger**  
*(physically or verbally assaulting peers, i.e., hitting, pushing, kicking, insulting, embarrassing, using violent wording, threatening).*
- ◆ **Increased passive behaviours and apathy**  
*(i.e., not reacting in any way while exposed to violence or witnessing violence, stay silent while being threatened or embarrassed).*
- ◆ **Diminished self-esteem and self-confidence**  
*(i.e., lack of confidence to raise hand in class, lack of confidence to participate in school activities or festivals).*



- ◆ **Withdrawal from peers - classmates, teachers, friends, relatives**  
*(i.e., being isolated).*
- ◆ **Lack of interest in school activities or any other activities**
- ◆ **Unreasonable and excessive worry about the safety of loved ones**  
*(i.e., asking constantly about mother, needing to be near siblings during the school day).*
- ◆ **Difficulty completing an activity or task**  
*(i.e., having trouble with schoolwork).*
- ◆ **Low school performance**  
*(i.e., apparent loss of previously learned skills, trouble concentrating).*
- ◆ **Constant worry about possible danger**





# DIFFICULTIES AND PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

## DIFFICULTIES AND PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL

*Primary-school age children exposed to violence against their mother may display various difficulties and problems in their school adjustment.*

### TEACHERS' NARRATIONS ABOUT ...

#### ***Victims – Primary-school age students identified to have been exposed to violence...***

- ♦ *“... The child is usually absent from school and some days he comes late at school. He seems tired and inexplicably scared and sad, I could say ...”*
- ♦ *“... He is very undisciplined and disrespectful to his teachers... He keeps taking pride in the fact that he is hitting his younger sister ...”*
- ♦ *“... Completing a task or homework seems to be boring for her... She cannot concentrate, whatever motives I try to give her... She is always so low –profile and shy ...”*
- ♦ *“... He tries very hard to be a good student... I can sense his need to make his mother feel proud of him... Although he is trying so hard, he feels that whatever he does is wrong or not good enough ...”*

**A problem in the domestic sphere, such as domestic violence and children's exposure to it, becomes automatically a social one; this means that it can consequently affect the whole social environment in which the victims socialize and become socialized.**

◆ **Behavioral Problems / Difficulties**

- Adoption of aggressive behaviours (e.g., using violent wording, physically hurting self and others).
- Adoption of passive behaviours and demonstrating apathy.
- Expression of negative feelings (e.g., anger, anxiety, testiness).
- Involvement in fights, easily getting into trouble and being undisciplined and rebellious.
- Lack of respect for peers – classmates, teachers.
- Rejecting school and school teachers.

◆ **Emotional Problems / Difficulties**

- Feeling lonely, not accepted and not respected by peers – classmates, friends, teachers.
- Demonstrating an excessive worry about the safety of loved ones.
- Feeling sad and unsafe at school.
- Inability to express feelings of joy and gladness.
- Lack of self-confidence – feeling incapable of doing something right.



# RESEARCH RESULTS IN FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

### *The findings and results of the Project VI.C.T.I.MS are the following:*

- (a) Children exposed to violence against their mothers tend to engage in more aggressive reactions than what is expected in an ordinary situation, while they are being exposed to violence and while witnessing violence. Boys are those who tend to be more aggressive and externalize in a more intense way their feelings of anger.
- (b) Children exposed to violence against their mothers also tend to adopt a more passive behaviour in an ordinary situation and while witnessing violence. Girls are those who tend to be more passive and who do not externalize their feelings.
- (c) Children exposed to violence against their mothers tend to have lower levels of self-esteem and an inferior self-image. They feel less accepted by peers and less popular among significant others – teachers, classmates, friends.
- (d) Children exposed to violence against their mothers tend to be less happy with the way they are leading their lives.
- (e) Children exposed to violence against their mothers tend to believe that they are not so good students. They tend to believe that they have a poor school performance and evaluate themselves as failures.

Primary-school age children learn how to behave in their future relationships from what they have experienced as children in their family. If they were exposed to violence, then the possibility of doing the same - taking either the role of victim or perpetrator - in the future increases.

*An example of a scenario given to children...*

*Chara has a big test tomorrow and tries to study. But her younger brother and sister are playing noisily in the other room. Chara asks them to stop being noisy, but they go on doing it, shouting even louder.*

*The question...*

*What would you do if you were in Chara's place?*



*Answers from children exposed to violence against their mother...*

*"I would start screaming and threatening to hit them"*

*"I would yell at them and hit them"*

*"I would start crying and I don't think I could do something"*

***Another example of a scenario given to children...***

*Josef is a boy/ Melina is a girl who is exactly your age. While playing with neighborhood children, one child tripped Josef/Melina on purpose. He/she fell down on his/her back. Since he/she did not expect it, he/she was quite hurt. The others, led by that child, began to laugh because he/she fell down in a funny way.*

***The question...***

*How would you act if you were in Josef's or Melina's place?*



***Answers from children exposed to violence against their mother...***

*"I would trip the child who hurt me so as to break his head"*

*"I would hit the one that made me fall down"*

*"I wouldn't do anything"*

***Answers from children not exposed to violence against their mother...***

*"I would call my mother to come"*

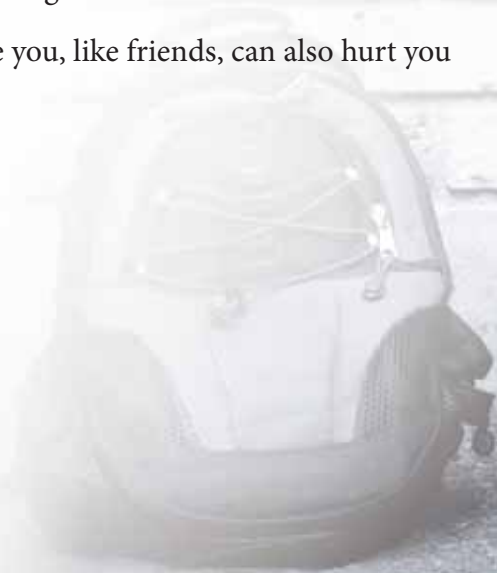
*"I would rather explain them that it is not right what they did"*

*"I would tell it to my parents. They always give me good advice"*



## LESSONS THAT CHILDREN EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE MAY LEARN

- ◆ Violence can be countered by violence
- ◆ Violence is the best way to solve a problem
- ◆ It is better not to react while being exposed to violence in order not to have trouble
- ◆ Violence can be countered by passive behaviour
- ◆ Violence and threats make you feel smarter and more powerful
- ◆ Negative feelings such as anger can lead to violence
- ◆ People you love and love you, like friends, can also hurt you





# CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS: ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIOLENCE AND SELF IMAGE

### Scenario

Demetris' mother went to school during break to talk with the teacher and saw Demetris participating in a fight with two other children. The weird was that Demetris was beaten by the other two without making any effort to beat them back or defend himself.

### The Question

*What would you do if Demetris was your younger brother?*



Girl - 5th Grade



Boy - 5th Grade



Boy - 5th Grade

### Scenario

Some money, which were intended for a school trip got lost from the classroom. Helen is wrongly accused for stealing the money, but she did not do it.

### The Question

*What would you do if you were in Helen's place?*



Boy - 5th Grade



Boy- 5th Grade



Girl - 5th Grade



# SUPPORT PRACTICES

## SUPPORT PRACTICES

*Women victims will initially ask for help from their families and friends, whose advices may be very important in influencing them, before approaching a professional for help.*

*Women will approach a professional – a social worker who they know and trust for information rather than going directly to specialist services they do not know about. Sometimes women will even have with them their children who may also feel the need to talk to the professionals.*

☛ *When interviewing victims – mostly women and children experiencing domestic violence, social workers should behave appropriately.*

## SOME MISTAKES...

### **Social Workers may ...**

- Force the victims to give more information than that which they are able to give.
- Force the victims to share their feelings with them.
- Be “curious” to learn more details than those needed about the victims and their lives.
- Share their feelings of sadness, anger and/or shock directly with the victims.
- Make negative comments concerning the victims and/or their behaviours.
- Judge the victims’ inability to leave earlier the abusive relationship.
- Blame the women for the abusive relationship.

- Be judgmental about the mother - victim's inability to discover the abuse done to her children when exposed to violence.
- Scrutinize the parenting role of women (usually victims) in much greater detail than the role of men (usually perpetrators).

## DOING RIGHT...

### ***Social Workers should ...***

- Be aware and informed about policies and procedures of their organization (*i.e., give accurate information*).
- Listen carefully to the victim's story so as to understand the relevant situation.
- Treat the victim with dignity and respect (*i.e., take the victim seriously*).
- Explain how they can help the victim within the limitations of their role.
- Be sensitive to the woman's or child's needs (*e.g., the woman may want to talk to a worker of the same gender*).
- Learn about the current circumstances of the relationship (*e.g., are there any threats?, what forms of violence does the woman suffer?*).
- Encourage the victim to talk about her fears.
- Be confidential (*e.g., by keeping secure the notes and records regarding the victim*).
- Encourage the woman to officially report the violence she suffers.
- Inform the woman about what follow up actions will be undertaken (*i.e., contacting her in the future*).
- Respect the women's right to make their own choices in their own time (*i.e., the decisions involved in dealing with domestic violence are complex*).



# RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE WOMEN VICTIMS AND AFFECTED CHILDREN



## RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE WOMEN VICTIMS AND AFFECTED CHILDREN

*Sometimes the professional's advice, guidance and help may not meet the specific needs of the women mothers who may choose to return back to their coping strategies and stay in the abusive relationship.*

*Still, in situations where children are exposed to violence against their mother, the most effective way to protect the children is to empower the mother and provide her with effective and appropriate support and protection.*

☛ *In this way, positive supportive approaches to mothers is more likely to have a follow-on effect, making it more likely that they will feel safe and respond more positively to their children's needs.*

## RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE WOMEN VICTIMS

- Make a plan for how women can respond to violence so as to feel more in control (for example, confess the problem to a relative or friend, identify a safe place from where to make a phone call, have in mind a relative, neighbor or someone they can trust to call in the case of an emergency, have an extra set of keys cut for the house and car).
- Advise the women to officially report the violence they suffer.
- Inform the women about policies and procedures on domestic violence.
- Give the women all the necessary information and help (i.e., telephone numbers of specialist services, shelters for women and children).
- Tell the women about the effects of violence upon their children when exposed.

➤ *What you can say to Mothers ...*

*“We are here for you when you are ready or when you are able to leave the abusive relationship”*

*“You and your children deserve better than this”*

*“Let’s work out a safety plan for you and your children”*

*“Tolerating violence does not have good results for you and your children”*

*“Children learn how to behave according to the experiences they have at home”*

*“You must protect yourself and your children”*

## RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE AFFECTED CHILDREN

- Listen to their stories. Let them describe what they have witnessed.
- Encourage them to express their feelings, whether positive or negative, about their parents.
- Make them feel safe and secure with you.
- Assure them that you are not going to share the information they will give you with anyone.
- Emphasize that violence in their family is not their fault.
- Do not minimize the problem of violence.
- Make them understand that it is not their responsibility to protect their mother.
- Discuss with them the “right” and “not right” behaviours during an activity or during playing.

## ☛ *What you can say to Children ...*

*“It’s not your fault that your parents fight”*

*“There are other children who are experiencing what you are, too”*

*“It’s not your responsibility to protect your mother”*

*“Don’t be afraid, you are safe here with me”*

*“You can feel free to talk to me, no one else is here”*

## LEAVING THE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP..

☛ *Encourage the non abusive carer – usually the mother – to leave the abusive relationship and advise her on how she can respond to her children’s possible challenging behaviours.*

### ✓ *In case of the children’s behavioural problems/ difficulties*

#### **A parent helps when she or he ...**

- discusses with the other parent the consequences of children’s exposure to domestic violence.
- discusses the matter with someone else who can help.
- tries to make the children feel safe at home.
- encourages the children to engage in joyful and positive activities (e.g., sports, dancing).
- devotes time to talk and discuss with them.
- cares about their school performance and progress.
- asks the teacher to discuss with the child about what behaviours are considered “right” or “not right”.
- rewards each child’s assertive behaviour and avoids strict punishment.

- uses non-violent and non-corporal discipline techniques at home to help the child feel safe.
- advises children on how they can respond to violence (i.e., calling for an adult to come).
- does not judge them harshly. Listen to their story, to what they have to say about the “bad” behaviour they have exhibited.

✓ *In case of the children's emotional problems/ difficulties*

- does not make hateful or angry comments.
- listens to what the children have to say about an emotional outburst they had.
- helps them express their feelings, negative or positive.
- encourages them to engage in joyful and positive activities.
- gives them motives to participate in school activities such as school festivals.
- establishes simple rules and routines so that children know what to expect.
- asks the teacher to engage the children in different joyful activities and give them responsibilities so as to make them feel useful and important.
- encourages children to make friends and spend time with them.

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### **Make the mother understand that ...**

All the above cannot erase all the emotional and psychological pain a child exposed to violence is going through. Furthermore, despite the fact that children at school learn behaviors and skills, this learning is always filtered through their experiences at home.

Therefore, the intervention of teachers, or parents who have left the abusive relationship, may only counterbalance those negative effects of a child's exposure to violence that may be externalized in several environments such as school.



# OTHERS WHO CAN HELP THE AFFECTED CHILDREN

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*Consulting, where possible, is helpful for professionals, since sometimes other people who are directly involved in the child's development and education can help too.*

### ◆ PARENTS

- Talk to them.
- Have a clear picture in your mind about which of the child's behaviours may be a cause of concern before talking to the parents.
- Prefer to talk initially to the child's mother about the effects of her child's exposure to domestic violence.
- Make sure that the communication is done in a safe place – preferably your place of work – and not by phone since this may cause problems to the mother – victim, especially if she is still suffering violence by the perpetrator.
- Make the mother feel comfortable with you and assure her that you are concerned about her and her child and that you wish to help.
- Take into consideration that the mother or a parent may consider that a family problem like domestic violence is a private matter which does not need to be discussed.
- Bear in mind that the mother may reject everything you choose to tell her, but stay calm and supportive.
- Give her information about available resources for help (associations, women's shelters, a police office or service dealing with domestic violence, psychologists, child protection services).

- ◆ PSYCHOLOGISTS (collaborating also with teachers at school)
- ◆ TEACHERS (working at the school the affected children attend)
- ◆ POLICE OFFICERS (dealing with the subject of domestic violence)

- Talk to them.
- Take their advice or advise them on how to deal with some of the children's challenging behaviours.
- Be confidential. It is inappropriate to gossip about children and their families.
- Ask them to inform you about the legislation that may apply in your country and act accordingly.
- Ask for their help in case you consider it right to fill in an official report about the mother and/ or the child, but also bear in mind the specific legislation that may apply in your country.



# EPILOGUE



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As authors, we could choose to conclude with some main remarks on the effects of children's exposure to violence against their mother. Still, we considered it better to end with some women-mothers' words combined together in what turned out to be a meaningful puzzle, a puzzle which can magically help this handbook reach its aim.

*"...he was violent; I mostly think that he was provoking violence, all the fights between us. Maybe I am to blame also since I wasn't reacting... I wanted to be the victim so I was... because I couldn't do anything to stop it..."*

*"...children were not in the room in which we were fighting...sometimes they were in their own room. I was trying not to make them feel uncomfortable... They needed their father so I was suffering violence for the sake of my family..."*

*"...but violence is like you are killing firstly yourself and then the others around you... I made my children suffer a lot... But, when you are hurt and you are suffering, you cannot realize that you are hurting the others around you... that your children are suffering too..."*

*"... I could see that my children weren't acting normal. My daughter was always depressed and my son was very violent at school. Their teachers were always complaining..."*

*"...for my children's sanity, I had to react and end all the violence...I had to speak to others near me and near my children to help us. I had to inform the teachers..."*

Awareness always helps.

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