

Supplemental Material

Tab #5: Children's Experiences of Family Violence

Children's experiences of family violence are highly relevant in the family law context. The *Divorce Act* and most provincial and territorial family law statutes include provisions addressing the impact of family violence on children. For example, section 16 of the *Divorce Act* requires judges to consider the impact of any family violence on the best interests of the child when determining parenting arrangements. It requires judges to give primary consideration to a child's physical, emotional and psychological safety, security and well-being.

1. Direct abuse

Child abuse includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse. A few examples of direct forms of child abuse include:

- ▶ causing a child physical pain or injury (e.g. pushing, slapping, strangling, biting, burning, excessive shaking);
- ▶ sexually touching a child, forcing a child to touch someone else, or making a child watch a person touch their own private parts or engage in other sexual activity;
- ▶ using words or actions to control, frighten, or isolate a child (e.g. threatening to harm them, deliberately intimidating them); and
- ▶ failing to meet a child's basic needs (e.g. not providing proper food or clothing).

2. Exposure to intimate partner violence

Direct or indirect exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) is another form of child abuse. Children may be direct witnesses to IPV because they are in the room and see what is happening or are close enough to hear it. They may be even more directly involved if they are in the way of the abuser during a physical assault or if they attempt to intervene to stop the abuse from happening.

Even when they are not direct witnesses, children can be exposed to and affected by family violence in the home. They may experience the aftermath of abuse, for example by seeing a parent's physical injuries, observing changes in a parent's behaviour, or knowing about police or child protection involvement with the family. Children are also sensitive to atmosphere and tension, and can often tell when one parent is afraid of the other, no matter how hard that parent attempts to hide what is going on.

3. When there are children in the home where IPV has occurred, assume that the children have been exposed and affected.

Research from 2008 shows that children's exposure to IPV represented 34% of substantiated child protection cases in Canada.³⁵ Additionally, in 2009, almost three-quarters (72%) of individuals with children who experienced violence post-separation reported that a child had seen or heard a violent incident.³⁶

IPV and direct child abuse overlap considerably. Research has found that in families where IPV occurs, child abuse is often present.³⁷ This increased risk to children is reflected in the data, notably:

- ▶ In 2014, 70% of adults who reported having witnessed parental violence in the home as children also reported being a victim of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse.³⁸
- ▶ Children who witnessed parental violence were more likely to have experienced the most severe forms of childhood physical and sexual abuse.³⁹
- ▶ Between 2008 and 2018, police found that in over one-third (34%) of family-related homicides that involved one child victim and one accused, there was a history of family violence.⁴⁰
- ▶ Not only does separation increase the risk for domestic homicide (killing of an intimate partner), but it also increases the risk of retaliating filicide (killing of a child to cause harm and suffering to the other parent).⁴¹

4. Impact of family violence on children

Violence within the family affects the children, even if they do not experience or witness the abuse directly. The impacts of being exposed to family violence are similar to those of direct abuse and can be severe and long-lasting.

Experiencing family violence through either direct abuse or exposure to IPV can cause a child to suffer emotional, physical, social, cognitive and behavioural problems. The stress and anxiety caused by living in a home with family violence can negatively affect the development of a child's brain, with life-long consequences.

Some of the impacts of family violence for children at different developmental stages include the following:⁴²

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (ages 0-3)	School-age children (ages 4–12)	Adolescents (ages 13-19)	Into adulthood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ infant mortality, preterm birth, and low birth weight ▶ adverse neonatal outcomes from mother’s abuse of substances in order to cope with violence ▶ parent experiencing violence forms unhealthy attachment with child due to heightened state of stress/anxiety ▶ behavioural issues ▶ social difficulties including difficulty in regulating emotions ▶ Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms ▶ difficulty with empathy and verbal abilities ▶ excessive irritability, aggression, temper tantrums, sleep disturbances, and emotional distress ▶ resist comfort ▶ adverse psychosomatic effects ▶ impact neurocognitive development ▶ filicide ▶ physical injuries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ develop anti-social rationales for abusive behaviour ▶ self-blame ▶ internalizing behaviours (e.g., humiliation, shame, guilt, mistrust, low self-esteem) ▶ anxiety and fear ▶ difficulty with social skills ▶ difficulties with emotional regulation ▶ negative peer relations ▶ depression ▶ bullying ▶ academic abilities compromised ▶ filicide ▶ physical injuries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ depression ▶ suicidal ideation ▶ anxiety ▶ aggression ▶ social withdrawal ▶ unhealthy attachments leading to difficulties forming healthy intimate relationships ▶ distorted views of intimate relationships ▶ lack of trust ▶ heightened risk for violent behaviours toward peers or intimate partners ▶ substance use ▶ anger issues ▶ long-term emotional distress ▶ filicide ▶ physical injuries ▶ difficulties with emotional regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ risk of perpetrating violence in own families ▶ depression ▶ anxiety ▶ dissociation ▶ PTSD ▶ difficulties in emotional regulation ▶ decrease in parenting quality ▶ low educational achievement ▶ chronic diseases (e.g., liver disease, sexually transmitted diseases) ▶ sleep disorders ▶ substance abuse

5. Impact of family violence throughout a child's life⁴³

Children of any age who experience family violence are likely to feel grief or sadness because their family is not the same as their friends' families or those they see in mainstream representations. They may experience self-blame, or they may mistrust or feel anger towards either or both parents or more generally.

As children become older, they may begin to take on a parental role at home or engage in protective behaviours towards a parent who has been abused, such as misbehaving to draw the abuser's attention away from the other parent or intervening physically between the parents to protect the victim.

Because children want to feel safe, they may identify with the abusive parent even though they know the abuse is wrong and are worried about their other parent. This can create complex feelings of guilt and resentment. They may also feel that they have two choices in terms of their own behaviour: to be the aggressor or to be the victim.

Because of the often-gendered nature of family violence, particularly coercive controlling violence, children who experience it over time may develop stereotyped and unhealthy views of men – aggressive and angry – and women – weak and vulnerable – that they will take into their adult lives and relationships.

If a child lives in a home with IPV, they may be denied the opportunity to learn about appropriate adult role models, and healthy intimate relationships and parenting.⁴⁴

While many children who experience family violence grow up to have happy, healthy relationships, research has identified that boys who grow up in abusive homes are at greater risk of perpetrating violence in their intimate relationships later in life, while girls are at greater risk of being victimized.⁴⁵

6. Impact of trauma on children – individual factors

As with adults, the impact of trauma on a child and how it manifests will depend on many factors, including:

- ▶ the age and temperament of the child;
- ▶ the nature and extent of their experience of family violence; and
- ▶ the ways in which the adults who are around them and care for them respond to the family violence.

If a child is well supported and has strong, safe and secure attachments to other adults, such as the other parent or grandparents, the impact of the family violence can be reduced. This contributes to what is known as the child's resiliency, or their ability to cope effectively following a negative response.

Another important resiliency factor for children who are exposed to IPV is the safety and well-being of an abused parent. Generally speaking, greater protection for parents who are victims of violence also means greater protection for their children.