

Tips for Supporting Child Witnesses: What You Might See and What You Can Do

Many factors influence our developmental journey through infancy, childhood, and adolescence - our biology, our relationships with caregiving adults, our experiences, our environment, and the interaction between all of these. Painful, scary, and overwhelming experiences, such as community violence and domestic violence, can profoundly impact that developmental journey. Although there are common trauma responses across childhood, understanding the specific needs and experiences of children at each developmental stage will help you best support them in their ongoing development while increasing healthy coping skills in the wake of violence. The following pages give a brief overview of what you may observe and what you can do at each developmental stage.

Infants, Toddlers & Preschoolers	
What you may observe:	How you can help (and support mothers to help):
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sleep disturbances 2. Disturbances in feeding 3. Feelings of helplessness and passivity 4. Generalized fearfulness 5. Specific new fears 6. Loss of recently acquired developmental skills (e.g., walking or talking) 7. Clinginess and separation anxiety 8. Inhibited play and exploration 9. Thinking and talking about the traumatic event 10. Being upset at reminders and doing their best to avoid reminders 11. Irritability 12. Aggressiveness 13. Scanning for danger/expecting danger 14. Easily startled 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support mothers in keeping their children close to them. 2. Help the child anticipate what will happen. 3. Give choices. 4. Provide reassurance when the child needs it. 5. Name the child's feelings. 6. Expect to need to do these over and over again. It is normal for children to need repeated reassurance.

Adapted from the Domestic Violence and Mental Health Policy Initiative's 2008 Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: A Curriculum for DV Advocates (written by Patricia Van Horn, JD, PhD). Chicago, IL: DVMHPI

P: (312) 726-7020

TTY: (312) 726-4110

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www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org

Center for Domestic Peace • Phone: 415-457-2464 • www.centerfordomesticpeace.org

Bilingual Hotline: 415-924-6616 • ManKind/WomanKind/Mujer Gentil: 415-457-6760 • Youth Textline: 415-526-2557

School-age Children	
What you may observe:	How you can help (and support mothers to help):
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Posttraumatic play* 2. Thinking and talking about the trauma outside play 3. Being upset at reminders of the trauma and doing their best to avoid reminders 4. Specific fears, often triggered by traumatic reminders 5. Feeling guilty about the trauma and responsible for what happened 6. Fantasies of revenge 7. Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings 8. Digestive upset 9. Impaired concentration and difficulty learning 10. Sleep disturbances 11. Headaches, stomach aches, or other physical symptoms 12. Concerns about their own safety and the safety of others 13. Aggressive behavior 14. Anxiety 15. Withdrawn behavior <p>*Posttraumatic play is a kind of play that some children engage in who have been exposed to trauma. Posttraumatic play is a repetitive reenactment of a traumatic experience or event.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listen to the child's concerns. 2. Answer questions truthfully and simply. 3. Support the mother in letting the child stay close to her. 4. Offer reassurance that you and the mother are working together to keep the family safe. 5. Name the child's feelings and encourage the child to find ways to express them through language, play, or drawing. 6. Help the child anticipate what will happen next. 7. Give choices. 8. Expect to have to do these things again and again.

Adolescents	
What you may observe:	How you can help (and support mothers to help):
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Detachment, shame, and guilt 2. Self-consciousness about their fears and intense feelings 3. "Acting out" and sensation seeking behaviors that may include life--threatening reenactments 4. Abrupt shifts in relationships 5. Desire for and plans to take revenge 6. Radical changes in attitude and changes in self-identity 7. Premature entrance into adulthood or reluctance to leave home 8. Being upset at reminders of the trauma and doing their best to avoid reminders 9. Coping behaviors that may include self-endangering behaviors such as substance abuse, cutting, or disordered eating. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide an environment in which the teen can talk about concerns. 2. Give choices. 3. Support mothers in letting their teens stay close to them—even relatively independent teens may need extra support after a traumatic event. 4. Help teens anticipate what will happen next. 5. Answer questions honestly. 6. Help teens find ways to express their strong feelings: journaling, writing stories or poems, art. 7. Expect to have to do these things again and again.

For more information or for technical assistance, please contact the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health at info@nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org or 312-726-7020(P) or 312-726-4110(TTY).