**Talking to Young Children about Domestic Violence**

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*No Matter Their Age*

**By: Sydney Martin**

Violence in the home can be a difficult subject to approach. There are many complicated feelings associated with domestic abuse – fear, love, shame, sadness, hope – that can make it difficult to try to speak about with other adults.

Now, trying to address this same topic and all of its complicated feelings with children can seem like a daunting task. However, just as it is incredibly important and valuable to create a system of support for yourself as a survivor of domestic violence, it is just as necessary to talk about the issue with your children. Because otherwise, all of those confusing feelings remain unresolved in their heads. They don’t have the ability to understand the situation fully, and might end up placing blame where it doesn’t belong, feeling responsible and internalizing these feelings.

Talking about domestic violence with your kids seems an insurmountable task. But don’t worry, because Break The Silence Against Domestic Violence is here to help you through the process – from figuring out how to start a conversation, what to say during the talk to strategies for helping your child afterward.

**Start the Conversation**

1. The right time to talk to your child is whenever they are ready. Lizeth Toscano, a parenting educator with Echo Parenting and Education, said in an article on [DomesticShelters.org](https://www.domesticshelters.org/domestic-violence-articles-information/explaining-violence-to-kids#.WLb2FPnyvIU) that in order to gauge whether a child wants to talk, parents can ask open-ended questions after incidents of violence. If your child witnesses abuse, asking questions such as “What did you see? What do you understand? How do you feel?” can open up dialogue about what happened, and allow you to measure whether your child wants to talk about it. Along with this, it’s important to look for nonverbal signs that your child is struggling. Children tend to internalize issues so if they start having tummy aches or don’t want to leave your side to go to school, these can be signs that your child needs to talk.
2. A child is never too young to talk about domestic violence. Although this might seem a bit scary, and you might think your child is too young to start having conversations about violent behavior, the truth is you should never wait to have this conversation. Children are never too young to understand that something is happening when there is violence in the household. In an [informational article](http://www.doj.state.or.us/victims/pdf/domestic_violence_and_children.pdf) from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), it said some parents are reluctant to admit that children experience the violence, saying they were asleep, or at school or didn’t know what was happening. However, many children who have experienced it *need* to talk about it. Without discussing it, children can misunderstand what happened or why it happened, place blame on the victim, themselves or police who intervened, have fantasies about “fixing” their family or take the silence as a cue to be silent and ashamed.
3. Now you realize your child needs to talk about it, and you’re on the look-out for the moment when they want to talk about it. How do you start?
   1. Take the lead. According to a [fact sheet](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/childrenanddv_factsheet_4.pdf) from NCTSN, when you open up the conversation, you send the message to your child that it is safe to talk and they don’t have to be left alone with thoughts and worries.
   2. As Lizeth Toscano said, start with asking your child open-ended questions. A good way to start a conversation is to see if your child has any questions about the violence they witnessed. Children’s minds work differently than adults, so your child might be worrying about something you never would have thought about. The best way to truly understand is to ask them. Never be afraid to ask your child what they know, what they understand and how they feel. These can be powerful tools to opening up that pathway for communication about a hard topic.
   3. Open up with messages of support, such as “I care about you and am willing to listen to you” or “You won’t get in trouble, I won’t be angry.” This will help your child feel comfortable.

**What to Say During the Conversation**

1. **Some important messages to share with your child** from NCTSN:
   1. Violence is not OK.
   2. It isn’t your fault.
   3. I will do everything I can to help you feel safe.
   4. It’s not your job to fix what’s wrong in the family.
   5. I want to you to tell me how you feel. It’s important, and I can handle it.
   6. It is OK to have mixed feelings about either or both of your parents.
2. **Dealing with complicated feelings can be tricky.** But let your children know it’s natural for them to struggle with a wide range of emotions. Children often feel caught in the middle, and confused about their contradictory feelings, according to NCTSN. Some important messages to share with them in order to help them with these feelings are as follows:
   1. It is OK to feel more than one emotion at the same time.
   2. It is normal to feel angry at either or both parents when violence happens.
   3. You can love someone and hate their behavior.
   4. It’s OK to love both parents at the same time.
   5. Violence is an adult problem and it isn’t your fault or responsibility. You can’t fix it.
3. **Be age-appropriate.** Talk to children with words you know they understand, according to NCTSN. Don’t dwell on adult concerns or talk about things with an adult’s level of understanding. Focusing on a child’s questions can help with this, because it will help you understand what they know and are worrying about. Speak in a calm and confident manner to make your child feel secure.
4. **How do I talk to them about the abuser?** Talking about the one who causes violence can be a bit hard, but NCTSN suggests some different messages to share about the abuser.
   1. Their behavior is not OK; violence is not OK.
   2. The abusive person is the one who is responsible. Not you. Not me.
   3. It’s OK to love and want to spend time with the person who was abusive.
   4. It’s OK to be mad at or scared of the person who was abusive.
   5. It’s OK to feel mad but still love the person who was abusive.
5. **Don’t overshare and be aware of when to end the conversation.** Continuing to ask if your child has any questions will be important because children will often stop asking questions when they have enough information to feel safe and secure, according to NCTSN. This can also help you stop from giving them more information than they need or want. Children who have heard enough might also get restless, silly or stop listening, so be aware of these signs to end the conversation. It is necessary to have adults who support you so you don’t overshare and put worry or stress on them.

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**Now What?**

1. **Offer an outlet to your child**. Not all children will deal best with their feelings and thoughts through talking. DomesticShelters.org suggests offering an outlet to your child – some might find comfort in art or journaling.
2. **Continue to discipline**. Structure and stability are incredibly important to children, perhaps even more so in a house that experiences domestic violence. Although it might be tempting to take it easy on your child after they experience violence, DomesticShelters.org suggests continuing a routine and discipline can help children remain secure.
3. **Seek counseling** for your child if you believe they need more support and help talking through it. This can also help you, as it takes some pressure off because someone else is talking to your child about this difficult topic as well. Counseling for you and your children is never a bad option.

Talking about domestic violence is never easy. But with preparation, you can have the ability to help your child process through difficult thoughts and feelings. In the long run, having this conversation with your child will help them recover from witnessing violence and learn to cope in healthy ways.