



# Tips for Tots



## Tip #5: Supporting Young Children who Witness Domestic Violence

## Strategies

Did you know?

### Infant/Toddler:

Infants and toddlers are emotionally impacted by domestic violence. The risk of being maltreated in childhood significantly increases if the child is exposed to violence. The high levels of stress and insecurity effects children. They may exhibit distress by being unable to settle or having strong reactions to loud noise or raised voices. They may also become lethargic or unresponsive. The primary need is for stability and security in the child's day-to-day life and with his/her primary caregivers.

### Preschool:

Preschoolers who witness domestic violence are more likely to experience emotional and behavior problems. They may function at a state of "high alert" unable to discern real versus perceived danger and often have a low threshold for frustration. Preschoolers may have sleep problems; physical complaints such as, headache; stomachache or being over tired. Anger and anxiety maybe expressed through aggression. They may also withdraw from friends & activities and avoid seeking adult support when needed. Preschoolers may feel guilt or shame about being unable to protect a parent from domestic violence and may be preoccupied with the safety of the parent, siblings, or family pet.

### Infant/Toddler:

- Observe the child's body language to understand how he/she is processing the violence they have been exposed to. A child may show signs of distress by: crying, pushing away when trying to be held, over/under eating or sleeping. Comfort the child when necessary to help him/her feel safe and secure. A soft familiar toy/object may help soothe a child experiencing distress.
- Infants and toddlers understand their world through their senses. Support an environment that is soft, quiet, and not overly bright or stimulating. Use soft voices and gentle soothing.
- Children this age explore their world through play & interactions with others. Fear and instability may inhibit exploration. Use age appropriate toys and books to encourage the child to play. Role model for the parents' ways to play with their child.
- Social interactions and relationships are initially experienced within the family. Infants and toddlers who observe violence may act aggressively toward others and have difficulty with self-regulation skills. It is important to scaffold such skills. This may be done through matching their breathing to help them slow, rocking, humming, or redirection.

### Preschool:

- Preschool children may express what they have been witness to verbally, through play or drawings. Provide children with opportunities to talk, draw or play out what they have experienced.
- A child may present as hypervigilant. Children may need to be approached slowly, ask permission for physical contact, help them understand startling situations by approaching together or talking them through it.
- A child may be feeling angry, fearful, powerless and out of control. Children need to experience an environment that is supportive and structured. Ensure the child's environment is as predictable as possible, prepare the child in advance for any changes and support him through these.
- At least one supportive and nurturing relationship can make a great difference in the life of a child who has been witness to domestic violence. Efforts should be made to preserve positive relationships with members of the child's family; family friends; supportive teachers or providers.
- The parents may need support securing community resources to help them with safety planning and coping with daily stress.

### Resources:

Understanding the Effects of DV, a Handbook for Early Childhood Educators, Baker, Jaffe, and Moore: 2001, [A Terrible Thing Happened](#): Holmes, Mudlaff, and Pillo [www. NCCEV.org](http://www.NCCEV.org)

Contact your area ECCP Consultant for [free](#) Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation services.

To learn of the consultant in your area visit [www.eccpct.com](http://www.eccpct.com) or call ECCP at (860) 704-6378

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