

# kids helping kids



## A GUIDE FOR CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS



VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

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CHILDREN EXPOSED  
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This guide is the third of a three-part series intended to help mothers, caregivers and service providers who support children who are living with, or have lived with, domestic violence.

The other guides in the series are:

- 1. Helping my child: a guide to supporting children exposed to domestic violence**
- 2. Helping my child: a guide to supporting children exposed to domestic violence**
- 3. Interventions with children exposed to domestic violence: a guide for professionals.**

Guides in this series can be downloaded free of charge from the website of BC/YSTH <http://www.bcysth.ca>.

Copies can be ordered from

BC/YSTH, 507-475 Howe St, Vancouver, B.C., V6C 2B3.

Phone: 604-669-6943, Fax: 604-682-6962, Email: [admin@bcysth.ca](mailto:admin@bcysth.ca).

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“

I didn't like it when dad hurt mom, but I still love my dad and want to spend time with him. My counsellor helps me understand my feelings...”

## INTRODUCTION for adults

This guide has been developed using children's ideas, artwork and play. Children have shared their worries and feelings about living in violent homes. And told us how they have tried to understand and cope with problems and difficulties. We hope that children reading this guide will be helped and encouraged. They will know they are not alone, and that children and their families can find ways to be safe and healthy.

This guide is intended for children aged five through twelve years. Some will be able to read it on their own. But adult participation and support is very important. The stories and information may stir up distressing feelings about children's own experiences of being exposed to violence at home. So we suggest that children read, or have read to them, just a few pages at a time. Then they should talk with a trusted adult about what they have read and how they feel about it.

The guide begins with stories told by two children exposed to domestic violence. Jordan's Story is written in a journal format and is intended for children nine to twelve years of age. Thaylor's Story is for children ages five to nine years and is written from a first person perspective.

A section outlining issues experienced by children exposed to domestic violence, such as responsibility for the abuse, the expression of feelings, and safety planning, follows.

The final resource section provides children with information to help them deal with their experiences of domestic violence. Through increased self-awareness and self-confidence, children are more able to make use of, and benefit from, resources and support services available in their communities.

“

I used to think that I was the only one that had problems in my family. Since I started getting counselling, I have learned that lots of other kids like me have problems too.”

## INTRODUCTION **for children**

Children often feel better by knowing that other children have gone through similar things in their families.

This guide starts with two stories about children who lived with violence in their families. Jordan’s Story is a journal or diary, and is for children nine to twelve years old. Thaylor’s Story is for younger children ages five to nine years.

Each story describes feelings, worries, and ideas that children from violent homes often have. You may have similar feelings and worries about your family.

This guide also helps you understand your feelings and worries; learn ways to stay healthy and safe; and find help when needed.



**Clay volcano... explosive feelings of anger.**

ADAM, 6 YEARS OLD





## Thaylor's Story

My name is Thaylor and I am 7 years old. I live with my mother in a small town. I am in Grade 2 and I like to write stories. I want to tell you a story about my family.

I don't live with my dad anymore because he used to yell at my mom and call her names. I remember the bad fight that happened before we left our house in the middle of the night.

I was playing Nintendo in my room when dad came home and started fighting with mom. I went to my room and closed the door like I do when I feel scared. Then I fell asleep.

When mom woke me in the middle of the night she looked like she had been crying. She told me we were leaving and to choose one toy to take with me. I brought my Spiderman Super Soaker with me that dad gave me for my birthday.



Feelings of sadness ...

15 YEAR OLD BOY

We went to a place called a transition house where we were safe. The lady there was nice and gave me milk before I went to bed. I had a hard time sleeping because I missed my room and my bed. I slept with my mom that night.

I missed my friends, toys and even my dad. I felt worried and wanted to be with mom all the time. She told me that she would be OK and that I had to be brave. She went out a lot to find a new home for us and get a job.

I played with a lady called a counsellor. I liked drawing with her, and playing with her puppets. I painted a picture of my family the way it used to be. Sometimes I got to talk to my dad on the phone... and I really liked that.

When we moved into our own apartment, mom said dad could not live with us. She said it wasn't OK to hurt people you love and dad hurt her with his words and actions. This was called abuse and was against the law.

I didn't like it when dad hurt mom, but I still love my dad and want to spend time with him. My counsellor helps me understand my feelings. I like being in her playroom. I guess children need help so they don't get in trouble at school or hurt anyone.

I wish that things were different in my family. When you are a kid, and your parents have lots of problems, you sometimes feel very alone. My counsellor helps me understand that other kids have problems in their families too. These problems are not their fault. Knowing this helps me feel stronger and believe in myself.





## Jordan's Story

My name is Jordan and I am 11 years old. I live with my mother and 7-year-old brother in a basement suite in Vancouver. I am in Grade 5 and I want to share parts of my journal with you....

### March 6, 2004

I have moved three times since Grade 4 and don't have many friends in my new school yet. I have to take care of my little brother because my mother has two jobs now that her boyfriend Dan doesn't live with us anymore. I miss Dan but I don't miss how he used to treat my mom.

We used to hear a lot of screaming and fighting when Dan lived with us. When he got angry with my mom, he would call her names and sometimes even hit her. He thought we didn't see this because we were watching TV in the other room, but we did and it was really scary. I used to hold my brother on my lap so that he wouldn't cry.

### March 10, 2004

One day Dan came home from work and wanted mom to make dinner right away. Mom was helping me with my math so Dan threw my books on the floor and yelled at us. I ran to my brother's room because I knew he would be scared.

Then we heard a loud crash and my mother crying. A while later the police came to our house and took Dan away.



## March 11, 2004

The next day mom's lips looked bruised and swollen. Mom told us that Dan would not be living with us any more. She said we couldn't see him for a while because he had to get help with his problems. She let me phone Dan and he said he missed us and wished we could all be together like before.

## March 13, 2004

The counsellor in my school told me that it was normal to have mixed up feelings about my family. It really helped to talk with her about what happened in my family.

You see, I have learned that it is not OK to hurt someone you love. It's not OK to hurt them with your words like putdowns and yelling, and it's not OK to hurt them with actions like hitting, punching, or kicking. That is called abuse and it is against the law.

Now I understand why Dan can't live with us anymore. Before I thought that I did something to make Dan fight with mom — I was glad to learn that it was not my fault.



**“This is my dad when he was mad after he hung my sister upside down by her foot because she was wiggling when he was changing her diaper.”**

SHERICE, 7 YEARS OLD



**March 19, 2004**

I got to go to a group with other kids who went through the same things that I went through. This is called group counselling and my mom went to a group as well. The group I go to helps me feel stronger and believe in myself.

I now know that I can't change the way adults act, or lots of other things about my family. I can choose how I treat others though.

I used to think that I was the only one that had problems in my family. Since I started getting counselling, I have learned that lots of other kids like me have problems too. I wanted to share my journal with other kids to let them know my story, and to let others know that there is hope and that they are not alone in the way that they feel.



## What children from violent homes go through

The stories you read were about children's experiences living with domestic violence.

Domestic violence happens when adults hurt other adults, using words, (like swearing and yelling), or actions, (like hitting and kicking). This is called abuse and usually happens between mothers and fathers. Sometimes the abuser can be a step father or boyfriend as well.



**Feelings about dad.**

SAMANTHA, 8 YEARS OLD



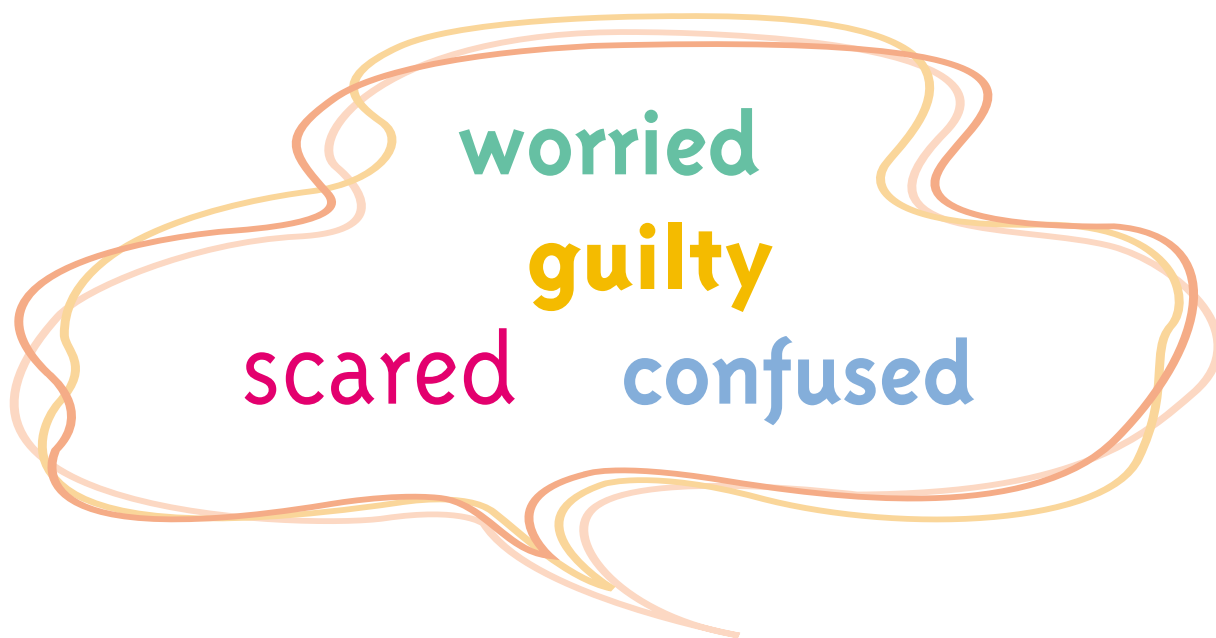
These feelings, thoughts, and worries are common for children from violent homes:

**Feelings about domestic violence in their families.**

Children have all sorts of feelings about the abuse in their families. Sometimes children feel scared or worried about their families, or angry about what has happened.

These feelings can be confusing so it's helpful to talk to an adult you trust to learn healthy ways of handling all your feelings.

**Sometimes children feel:**



All your feelings are normal and OK. Learning healthy ways of handling your feelings is very important.



**"D is for "Different."**  
10 YEAR OLD GIRL

## Feelings about parent(s) and caregivers

Children can be confused by their feelings towards their mother, father and other adults in their lives. They often have loving feelings about their father and at the same time feel very angry at him.

It is OK to care about your father or mother's partner even if his actions were hurtful towards others. It is also normal to feel angry with him because of the way he acted.

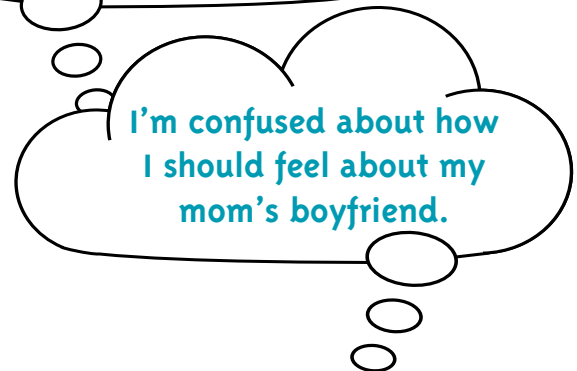
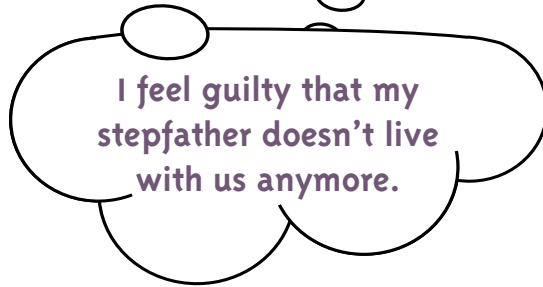
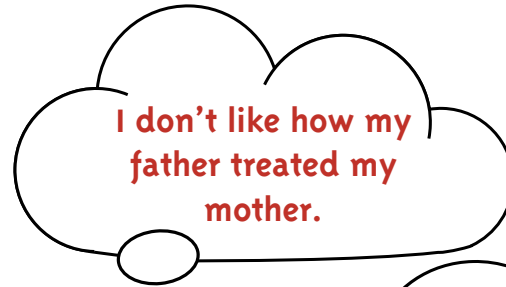
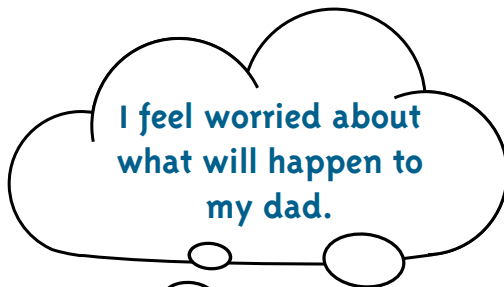


**"It's someone mad ...  
face is red and  
hands are fists."**  
LEESA, 10 YEARS OLD





## Some things children say about their feelings:



- **worried** about their mother's safety
- **angry** at their mother for not getting back together with their father
- **frustrated** about having lived with domestic violence for so long

It is normal to have mixed feelings about your parents or caregivers. It's helpful to talk to someone you trust to learn healthy ways of handling all of your feelings.



**“Dad is bad. He hits me even when he is not mad. Once he slammed the door on my sister. I was sleeping.**

KAGOMI, 5 YEARS OLD

## Changes in the family

Everyone in the family is affected by domestic violence. Violence and abuse makes children and adults feel very unsafe. Many things may change in your family if there’s been abuse.

You may notice that:

- \* Your mom and dad spend less time having fun with you
- \* You worry about your safety or the safety of people you love
- \* You help out more around the house or stay closer to home in case a fight happens
- \* You spend less time with friends. You worry that friends will find out about the fighting in your home
- \* You don’t listen to your mother as much (and maybe even treat her badly like your father does)



**“You could go to your friend's house and stay there until the fight is over.”**  
MARTA, 7 YEARS OLD

Sometimes children have to move away from their home to find safety. Transition houses are safe places for children and their mothers to live. Some children need to stay in a foster home without their parents for a while.

**Children from violent homes may go through these changes in their lives:**

- **Not living with both parents**
- **Moving to a different home**
- **Leaving toys, pets, and friends behind**
- **New family rules to get used to**
- **New school, new friends, new neighbourhood**

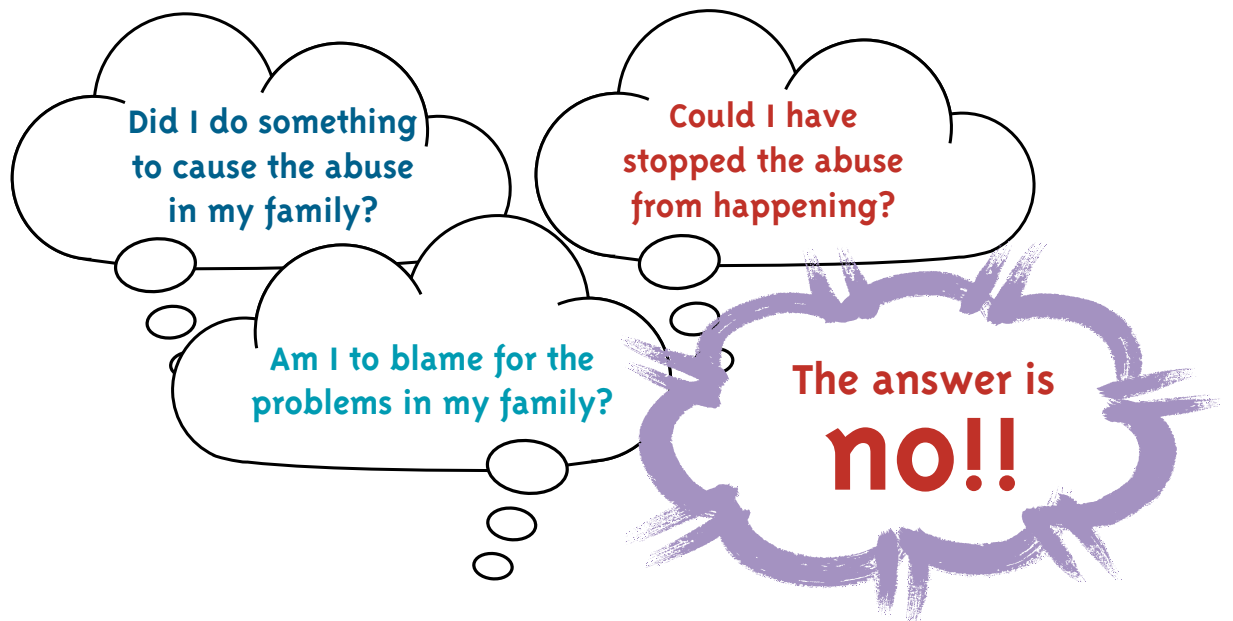
It's important for everyone in the family to get help. Children feel better when they meet with a counsellor that understands their feelings about the many changes in their family.

## Responsibility for the abuse

Children may feel they are to blame for the abuse in their families. They may believe they could have stopped the abuse from happening at all.

Abuse and violence in families is never a child's fault! Adults are responsible for their own behaviours.

### Children wonder:





Adults are responsible for the ways they deal with their feelings and problems. It is not your job to take care of the adults in your family. It is their job to take care of you.

## How children from violent homes act

Children from violent homes act in different ways. Some children show their feelings by acting out, such as by hitting or yelling. Others keep their feelings to themselves and seem quiet or sad.

Children often learn how to deal with their feelings and problems from the adults in their lives.

When children talk about their feelings with an adult they trust, they feel better and learn healthy ways to handle their feelings.

### Children from violent homes sometimes:

- **Keep their feelings to themselves**
- **Show they are angry by hitting or yelling**
- **Spend a lot of time alone**
- **Have a hard time getting along with other kids**
- **Worry about their mom being hurt**
- **Want to take care of their mom**
- **Act younger than their age**
- **Seem sad**
- **Have stomach aches or headaches**

Children let adults know how they feel with their words, actions, drawings, and play activities. Counsellors help children learn healthy and safe ways to show their feelings.

## Living in a transition house

Transition houses are safe places for children and mothers to live. They look like normal houses but their addresses are private to keep everyone safe.

Counsellors and child care workers are there to help children and their mothers. They understand what children go through when they live in violent homes.

Leaving your home can be very scary. Children usually feel safe and protected in the transition house and like making new friends.



**“This is me in my room, I am angry because I have been grounded.”**

ALEX, 9 YEARS OLD





“The hearts are my family, the skull is my dad and there is fire besides him that means he is dangerous and the blue heart is me... red heart is my sister... green is my mom.”

YU-GI, 9 YEARS OLD

## Visits with dad or mom’s partner

Once children are safe, they might have telephone contact or visits with their dad. Sometimes a judge decides that this is OK for the child. Other times mothers decide what is best for their children.

Visits can happen at the dad’s house or somewhere else like a grandparent or neighbour’s house. Visits last for a few hours, a whole day, overnight, for a weekend or longer.

Some children are happy to spend time with their father and their visits go very well. Others prefer not to visit at all.

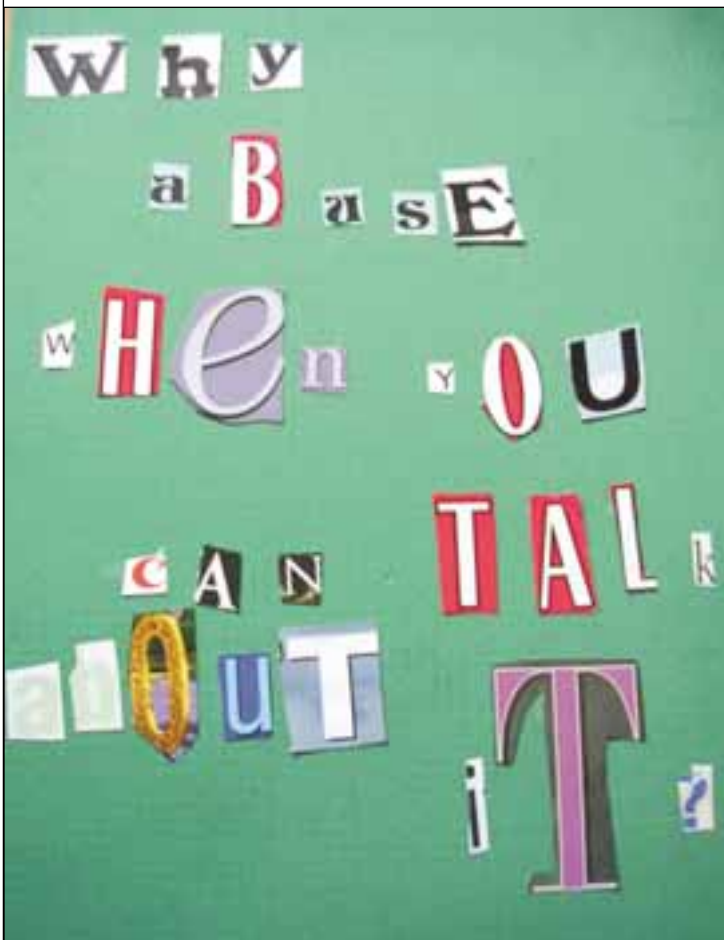
If you are worried about having visits with your father, tell an adult you trust so they can help you.

## Safety Planning

Keeping yourself safe if a fight happens is very important. There are different ways children take care of themselves during a fight.

Having a safety plan helps you remember what to do if a fight happens between your parents. A safety plan has phone numbers of people you trust, and ideas about where to go to stay safe.

It is never safe to try to stop a fight between adults. You can get seriously hurt. The best thing to do is to stay somewhere safe and call 911, or your local emergency number, if you can.



SASHA 9 YEARS OLD



**Ideas that children have about staying safe during a fight between their parents:**

**Find a safe place** to go like your room, sister or brother's room, or neighbour's house.

**Call 911**, or your local emergency number, for help...

**Have a safety plan** ready to know what to do

**Have names of adults** you trust, and their phone numbers, ready so you can call them if you need help

**Never try to stop a fight** with your words or actions. This can be dangerous.

**Stay in your safe place** until the police or help gets there



SHARI, 9 YEARS OLD.

**“To stay safe...you can go to your room and let a pet protect you.”**

## Going for counselling

Many children go for counselling to get help with their feelings about the abuse in their families. Questions that children usually have about counselling are:

### **What is a counsellor?**

A counsellor is someone that helps children and adults understand their feelings and problems. They do this by talking, doing art, or playing together.

### **How can a counsellor help me?**

A counsellor is a safe person you can trust who can help you understand yourself and your family better.

### **What is play therapy?**

Children feel comfortable when they play because it is a natural thing for them to do. Counsellors use play activities, like games, sand toys and puppets, to help children feel comfortable with their feelings and worries.



### **What is a children's group?**

Sometimes children spend time with a counsellor on their own. Other times they spend time with other kids who have gone through similar things in their families. Kids enjoy group counselling because they feel less alone. Children feel better by not having to keep their family problem a 'secret' from others.

A children's group usually meets once a week for 10 weeks to participate in fun activities like watching videos, reading books, and doing art.

### **Where do counsellors work?**

Counsellors work in different places like schools, transition houses, and community programs.

Counsellors in schools help students with problems with schoolwork, friends, or families. You can ask your teacher, principal, or an adult you trust to help you meet with a school counsellor.

Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellors are available in many communities. Your mother or caregiver can help you find one of these counsellors near your home.



SARA, 8 YEARS OLD.

**Sandtray, self image as warrior in boat on water, two homes where parents now living separately.**

## What kinds of things will I learn in counselling?

Every child is unique and will learn different things in counselling. Even so, most children gain similar things from counselling.

## What children from violent homes say about going for counselling.

### I learned

- to deal with my feelings about the abuse
- healthy ways of dealing with anger
- to deal with changes in my family
- I am not responsible for abuse in my family
- that domestic violence is against the law
- what domestic violence and abuse is

- to believe in myself
- to trust others
- about power and control in relationships
- to understand male and female roles

### I felt

- better about myself
- less alone
- supported
- stronger and more confident



Most of all, counselling helps children learn ways of having healthy relationships with others in life!

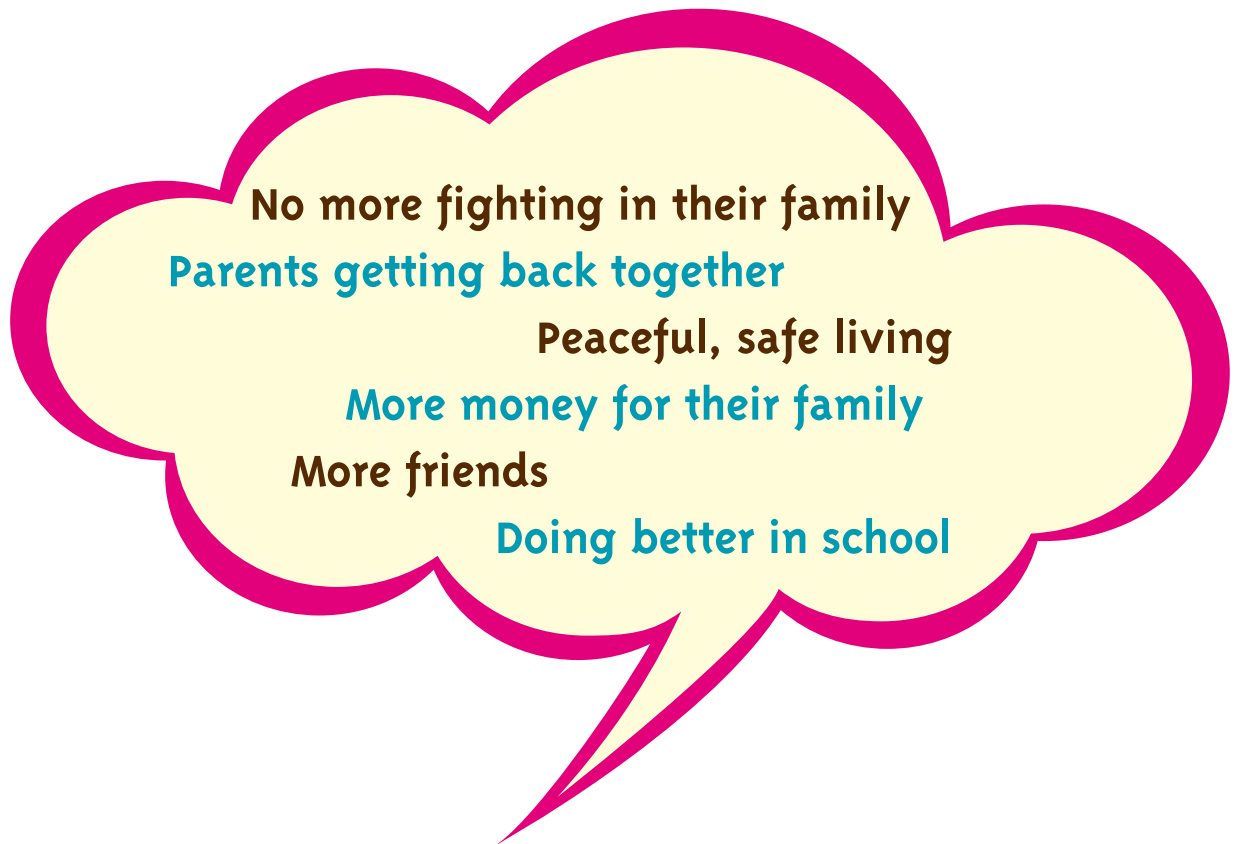




## Wishes for family and self

Children often have wishes for themselves and their families. These can be about their family living together again; their mom and dad getting back together; or living in a different family themselves.

Wishes, hopes, and dreams children sometimes have:



Although you may not be able to change things in your family, having dreams and wishes help you believe good things can happen in your life.

Did you know that every person has the right to

**Feel safe, loved  
and cared for?**

**Feel supported?**

**Feel good about themselves?**

**Grow up in a safe and healthy home?**

**Learn healthy relationship skills to enjoy  
safe relationships with others?**





YANNI, 9 YEARS OLD.  
“To stay safe...you  
can go to your  
godmother's house.”

## Getting Help

It is very important for children from violent homes to get help to deal with their feelings about their family, themselves, and the abuse they've experienced.

This section helps you understand, and feel better about, what happened in your family. It also helps you know where to get help in your community. If you are reading this on your own, it can be helpful to talk to an adult you trust about what you are learning and feeling.

### Where to get help

Help is available for children in every community. This section helps you know where to get help in your community.



TAMARA, 3 YEARS OLD.  
**Painting her feelings**

### **Police and Emergency Response**

You can dial 911, or your local emergency number, from any telephone, even a pay phone without putting any money in.

Give as much information as you safely can and then find a safe place to wait for the police/ambulance/ fire department to arrive.

It is a good idea to practice calling 911, or your local emergency number, on a pretend telephone ahead of time.

### **Transition Houses**

In British Columbia, you can call 1-800-661-1040 to get information about a transition houses in your area.

A transition house is a safe place for women and children to live. Sometimes women and their children cannot live in their own home because it is unsafe to do so.



10 YEAR OLD GIRL. Snake and colours show her feelings. Red – anger, silver – happiness, green – sadness, gold – in-between feelings.

### **Children's Help Lines**

There is also telephone help for children and families anytime day or night.

In BC, the Children's Help line has counsellors for children to speak to by calling 310-1234. These counsellors can help you deal with your feelings and worries about the problems in your family and find help in your community.

### **Children Who Witness Abuse Programs**

There are 56 CWWA programs in BC to help children from violent homes. Children often meet with counsellors in these programs once a week, and use art and play activities to understand their feelings about the violence in their families.

Sometimes children meet with other children that have gone through similar things in their families. This is called group counselling. Children say they like meeting other children because they feel less alone.

To find out about a Children Who Witness Violence Program in the Lower Mainland, call the BC/Yukon Society for Transition Houses at 604-669-6943. For out of town calls, call 1-800-661-1040.

## School Support and Counselling

There are adults at your school to help you. Telling your teacher or principal about the problems in your family is an excellent way to get help for yourself and your family.

Sometimes, with your parent's permission, the school can find a counsellor in the community to help you.



8 YEAR OLD BOY. Hands over ears because he doesn't want to hear all the fighting

## Community Mental Health Services

Sometimes children and adults need help from a psychologist or mental health worker.

Children can feel very sad or depressed, or have trouble with their behaviour at home or school, when they've lived with violence in their home.

In Vancouver, you can find out about mental health programs by calling 604-709-4111. If it is an emergency, you can call 604-874-7307 anytime day or night.

## Community Centres and Neighbourhood Houses

These places are well known in communities because they have many programs and activities for all members of the family. Children play sports, swim, skate, or even take classes at community centres in their neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood houses have similar programs but don't have the same things that community centres have like gyms, swimming pools, ice rinks and youth rooms.





You can find out about these centres in your phone book or by asking your teacher in school. Usually there is help for families that cannot afford the costs of programs in a community centre.

### **Family Doctors, Health Clinics and Hospitals**

Taking care of yourself and your health is very important. There are many people and places in your community to help you stay healthy. Your parents will probably take you to a doctor or clinic if you are not feeling well.

If you have an emergency like an injury or a serious illness, your parents may take you to the hospital.

Everyone (especially children) has a right to get medical help as soon as it is needed.

### **Aboriginal and Multicultural Resources**

If you are from an aboriginal background, or your family is from a different culture, there may be special programs and services for you in your community. Many communities have counselling, recreational, health and other programs for aboriginal children and their families. In some communities there are programs for immigrants and families that have a different language or culture.

You can find out about these services through your family, teachers, counsellors, or community centre close to your home.



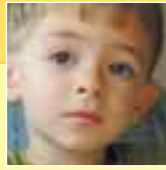
14 YEAR OLD BOY.

**Feeling different and alone**

### **Legal, Court and Victims Services**

Since domestic violence is against the law, children and families sometimes need help from a lawyer, family court counsellor, or victim services counsellor. These people help you and your family learn about your legal rights, what happens if you have to go to court or talk to a judge, and how to stay safe.

You can get information about lawyers, family court counsellors, or victim services workers from the adults in your life you trust, or from a phone book or community centre.



**KIDS HELPING KIDS** is a guide for children exposed to domestic violence. Our goal is to provide information and support to children whose mothers or caregivers are targets of violence in a relationship.

This guide is designed to help children understand how abuse affects their families, how to protect themselves, and how to find the help they need.

**Kids Helping Kids: A Guide for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence** is the second in a three-part series intended to help mothers, caregivers, service providers and children.

The other booklets are:

- Interventions with Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: A Guide for Professionals
- Helping My Child: A Guide to Supporting Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

All three publications are available at no cost online at: [www.bcyouth.ca](http://www.bcyouth.ca) or can be ordered from

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