

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There are several general reactions that children from violent homes are likely to show. The same emotional reaction can be acted out differently, depending on the child's age.

- **Responsibility:** Children often feel they are to blame for the abuse. They might think, "If I had been a good girl/boy, Daddy wouldn't have hit Mommy."
- **Anxiety:** Children from violent homes live in a constant state of anxiety, even when things are calm. They never know when the next fight will start.
- **Guilt:** Children often feel guilty about the abuse because they feel as though they could have done something to stop it. Children also experience guilt over the good feelings they have about the abusive parent.
- **Grief:** Children who are separated from their parents (whether abusive or not) grieve the loss of being with that parent. Children may also grieve over losing the lifestyle and positive image of the abuser they had before the violence began.
- **Ambivalence:** The idea of not knowing how one feels, or having two opposite emotions at the same time, is very difficult for kids. When a child says, "I don't know how I feel about it" they may be hedging. They are confused about how to sort out the feelings, thoughts, and events they are experiencing.
- **Fear of Abandonment:** Children who have been removed from one parent as a result of violent acts may have strong fears that the other parent will also leave them or die.
- **Need for Adult Attention:** Like children going through any kind of crisis, children from violent homes are likely to ask for more adult attention, both in the violent situation and for a period of time after leaving home. If children don't receive the amount of attention they need, they are likely to act out or misbehave in order to get it. This need can be especially troublesome for mothers who are trying to deal with their own pain and decisions. As a routine is established and children begin to feel less anxious, the extreme need for adult lessens.
- **Transfer of Anxiety from Mother to Child:** Children are very sensitive to the facial reactions, body language and gestures of adults. Even if children can't understand adult words, they know how adults feel. Very often, children's anxiety and acting out decreases when the mother begins to make decisions about her life.