

Talking with your child after family violence

A guide for parents and carers, from *Where's My Daddy?* Based on published advice from the Australian Psychological Society and the US National Child Traumatic Stress Network (sources at the end).

Messages children need to hear

- It isn't your fault.
- You are loved.
- I will do everything I can to keep you safe.
- Violence isn't OK.
- It's not your job to fix what went wrong in our family.
- You can tell me how you feel. It's important, and I can handle it.
- It's OK to have mixed feelings, and it's OK to love and miss Daddy.

The first three are the book's own messages. The rest are adapted from the NCTSN's "Helpful Messages for Kids About Domestic Violence" (fact sheet 4). The NCTSN also reminds parents that love can be shown without words, like a hug or just staying close (fact sheet 3).

Before you talk

- **Safety first.** If you're still living somewhere unsafe, talk to 1800RESPECT or a family violence service about keeping you and your children safe before planning what to say.
- **Notice your own feelings.** Children pick up on how you feel. Anger, exhaustion, fear and sadness are all normal after what you've been through.
- **Find your own support.** Lean on other adults, so your child doesn't feel responsible for looking after you.

When your child asks about Dad

- Be matter-of-fact. Give simple messages about safety.
- Be clear that the behaviour was not OK, without putting Dad down. This means your child doesn't have to take sides, and can keep talking to you about him.
- Explain that hurting people is a choice, and there are always other ways to solve problems. You can link it to rules they already know, like "we don't use our bodies or words to hurt people".
- If police, courts or other services were involved, you can explain they helped because what happened was not OK.

- Accept their feelings, even when they're different from yours. Let them know you won't be angry if they say they love and miss him.

Example words (quoted from the sources):

"I know you miss him. But we can't live together... we left because it wasn't safe."

(NCTSN, fact sheet 9, shortened)

"I wonder if you are feeling very sad that you can't see Daddy at the moment?" (APS)

"That's a really important question. I need some time to think about it and then we can talk again." (NCTSN, fact sheet 4)

How to talk and listen

- **You can start the conversation.** It tells your child it's safe to talk and they don't have to keep their worries to themselves.
- **Ask what they saw, heard or already know.** Children usually know more than adults think. When they don't understand, they can fill the gaps with worries worse than the truth.
- **Use words they understand,** and keep adult worries out of it.
- **Stay calm.** A calm voice tells them you're in charge and they're safe.

- **Watch for "that's enough".** Getting restless or silly, or no longer listening, usually means it's time to stop.
- **Let them play, draw or write** if words are hard.

Everyday things that help

- **Routines.** Regular mealtimes, bedtimes and weekends make the world feel predictable and safe again.
- **Closeness.** Cuddles, eye contact and greeting them warmly after time apart.
- **Play.** Playing together helps children feel safe, valued and worthwhile.
- **Calm bedtimes.** A quiet story, a warm bath, or slow breathing together. If you're now somewhere safe, tell them they're safe in their own bed.
- **Notice the good.** Praise kind and helpful things, and keep consistent, gentle rules.
- **Tell them when it's over.** When the danger is in the past, say so, and help them see that their fears come from scary things that already happened.

Try not to

- Talk about Dad negatively, or about how the violence affected you, where your child can hear.
- Ask your child what happened at visits with their other parent, or ask them to pass on messages. They'll talk when they're ready.

What you might notice

Children can show big feelings as crying, clinginess, tantrums, trouble sleeping, aggression, or blaming one parent. These reactions are common. The APS notes they can even be a sign your child finally feels safe enough to let their feelings out. They usually ease once home is calm and safe.

When to get more help

- Changes in behaviour don't go away, or get worse
- Your child seems unusually sad, angry or withdrawn
- You're worried they might hurt themselves or someone else
- You feel overwhelmed by their behaviour
- The violence they lived with was extreme

Start with your GP, a family violence service, or your child's school counsellor. They can refer you to a counsellor who works with children.

Support in Australia

- **In immediate danger:** call 000
- **1800RESPECT** (24/7 family violence counselling): 1800 737 732, 1800respect.org.au
- **Kids Helpline** (for ages 5 to 25, 24/7): 1800 55 1800, kidshelpline.com.au
- **Lifeline** (crisis support, 24/7): 13 11 14

Where this information comes from. Zoe Jones is a mum who has lived through leaving family violence with her child. She is not a psychologist or counsellor, and nothing in this guide is her own professional advice. It brings together, in plain words, guidance from child psychologists and trauma experts that also draws on survivors' lived experience:

- Australian Psychological Society (2018). *Separating parents, family violence: Promoting children's wellbeing when one parent is leaving a violent partner*. Written by clinical psychologists with expert review. psychology.org.au/for-the-public/psychology-topics/parenting/parenting-after-separation-family-violence
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Domestic Violence Work Group with Futures Without Violence (2014). *Children and Domestic Violence* fact sheet series for parents, sheets 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9. Developed from the experiences of domestic violence survivors, research, advocates and mental health professionals. nctsn.org/resources/children-and-domestic-violence-parents-fact-sheet-series

Example phrases are quoted or adapted from those sources. The NCTSN is a US organisation, so for services, use the Australian numbers above. This is general information, not advice for your family's situation. A counsellor, your GP or 1800RESPECT can help with that.