

## **How Are My Children Affected by Abuse?**

If your children have been exposed to your partner's abusive behaviors toward you, or your partner is verbally, physically, emotionally, sexually, or otherwise directly abusing them, they are experiencing painful effects. You may have the impression that your partner "would never hurt the children," but if your partner is abusing you, your children are feeling the pain and fear that comes from living with someone who is threatening and controlling. Since abuse and violence are learned behaviors, part of the impact on your children also involves taking on the cultural beliefs that support domestic abuse.

An abusive person may involve children in a variety of ways, such as telling the children that they are responsible for the hard times in the adults' relationship, or threatening to take the children, or turning the children against the other partner, or using them to monitor the other partner. Children may experience confusion between being loyal to the abusive parent who has the most power, and being loyal to the parent who is safer for them.

Children may respond to abuse in a variety of ways, ranging from emotional and cognitive effects, to physical and behavioral effects. When a parent or guardian uses abusive behaviors in the home or directly abuses them, children experience confusion and damage to their ability to trust the people in their lives. They may side with the abusive partner in order to stay safe, recognizing where the power lies in the family, acting like the controlling partner and expressing anger at the other parent. Alternately, they may take actions to protect the abused parent from the other, even to the point of physically coming between their parents. They may have a difficult time focusing at school because they are worried about what is happening at home. Or they may have an impulse to get away because home feels like a dangerous place. Older children may experiment with alcohol, drugs, overeating, or self-harm to numb their feelings.

You can help your children in many ways. Be honest with them and talk with them about the abuse in your lives. Tell them that the abuse is not their fault. Expand the supports in your own life so that you can model self-respect for your children and create a safer environment for you all. Invite them to tell you what they are feeling about what they have experienced. As you reach out to resources to help yourself, also explore resources that will specifically support your children. If you create a safety plan for yourself, include your children and talk with them about ways they can stay safer when trouble arises. As you create an environment around you and your children that is abuse-free, they will have the opportunity to learn to trust again.

### **More helpful reading**

- ✓ Children Who See Too Much: Lessons from the Child Witness to Violence Project by Betsy McAlister-Groves (Beacon Press, 2003)