

Promoting children's wellbeing when one parent is leaving a violent partner

Separating can be stressful and upsetting under any circumstances, and there are additional complexities to be aware of when one parent is leaving a violent partner.



Tips for separating parents in the context of family violence

The rates of family violence in Australia are high, and many children are exposed to it. Many relationships end because of family violence.

Family violence can involve intimate partner violence, when one person in the relationship intentionally uses violence, threats, force or intimidation to control or manipulate their partner or former partner. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is not just the use of physical violence/threats, but also includes verbal, emotional, economic, sexual, and spiritual abuse. It is a repetitive pattern of abusive behaviours used to exert control.

Violence can also be directed to children, where it constitutes child abuse. Children experience high rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and neglect (usually from the perpetrator of violence) within the context of family violence.

Living with family violence is a distressing experience for children. Its impacts can be traumatising, ongoing and long-lasting. They can build up over time and affect every aspect of children's lives, including health, development and wellbeing (Anda et al., 2006; Perry, 2001).

When families living with violence separate, this can be beneficial for children, if they are removed from the violence and kept safe, and are able to begin to recover. However the effects of family violence can continue to take their toll, even after the parents' relationship has ended. Family violence can also worsen or even happen for the first time at the point of separation, thus separation can also be a dangerous time for women and children leaving a violent partner and father¹. Even if physical violence stops, post-separation family violence can continue in the form of threats, intimidation, stalking, and so on. This information sheet provides advice for parents around how to look after their children's needs in the context of separating from a partner who has used violence.

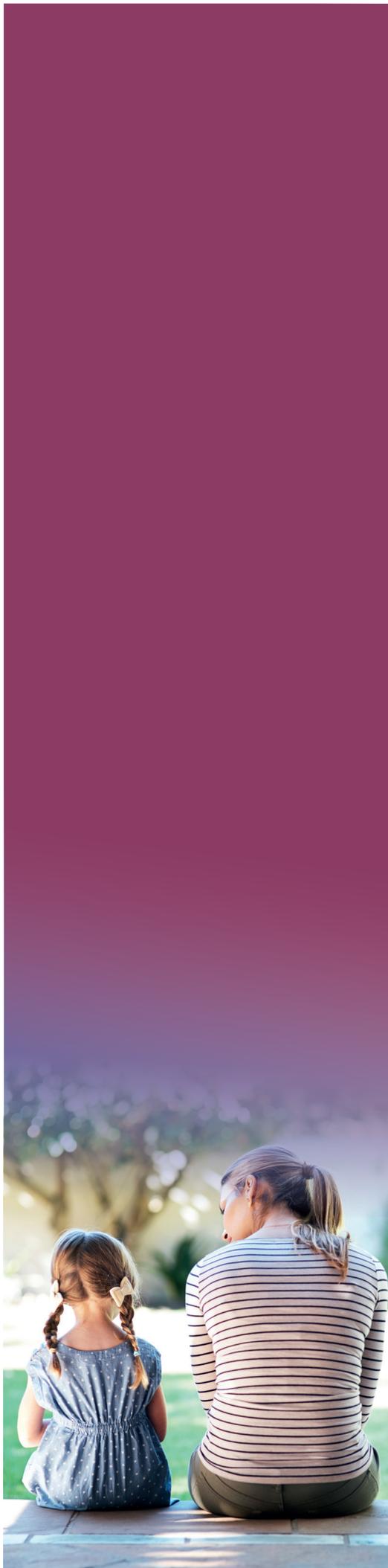
Provide Safety

Children who have been impacted by family violence often view their families, and the world in general, as unsafe places. Helping them to regain a sense of safety includes paying attention to both their physical and emotional safety.

- Creating physical safety usually requires removing both yourself and your children from the ongoing exposure to family violence. This of course can be difficult and complex, so seek as much support as you can to do this (for example, contact 1800 Respect, family violence agencies, police, supportive friends and family members). Put together a clear plan which protects the safety of yourself and your children, both during and after the separation.
- Emotional safety means providing an atmosphere of support and comfort for your child where their thoughts, feelings and opinions are valued. Reassure them as far as possible that things are going to be different now, that it is now ok to talk about their fears and worries, and that you are going to do your best to make things safer.

Acknowledgments: This information sheet was based on work by Olivia Powell (Clinical Psychologist) and Kathy Morrison (Psychologist), with expert input from Dr Susie Burke, Professor Ann Sanson, Professor Jenn McIntosh, Carmel O'Brien and the APS Public Interest Team.

¹ Due to the well-recognised gendered nature of family violence, and the much higher incidence of male perpetrators and female victims, the victim is more often referred to here as the child's mother and the perpetrator as being male or the father. However it is also acknowledged that both men and women can use violence towards a family member, and that family violence can occur in same-sex relationships.



- Emotional safety also means considering and taking measures to minimise your children's ongoing exposure to emotional abuse from the parent that you have separated from. This can be a significant issue if your children have ongoing contact with a perpetrator who is still trying to continue to exert control or power over you via your child. See the section below on managing contact and access issues for tips on how to manage these situations.

Repair and rebuild safe and secure emotional bonds with your child

Family violence often stops parents from being able to parent in the ways they want to (because of the violence itself and/or its impacts). Perpetrators of violence can also create fear in children and disrupt the emotional bond between the child and the other parent.

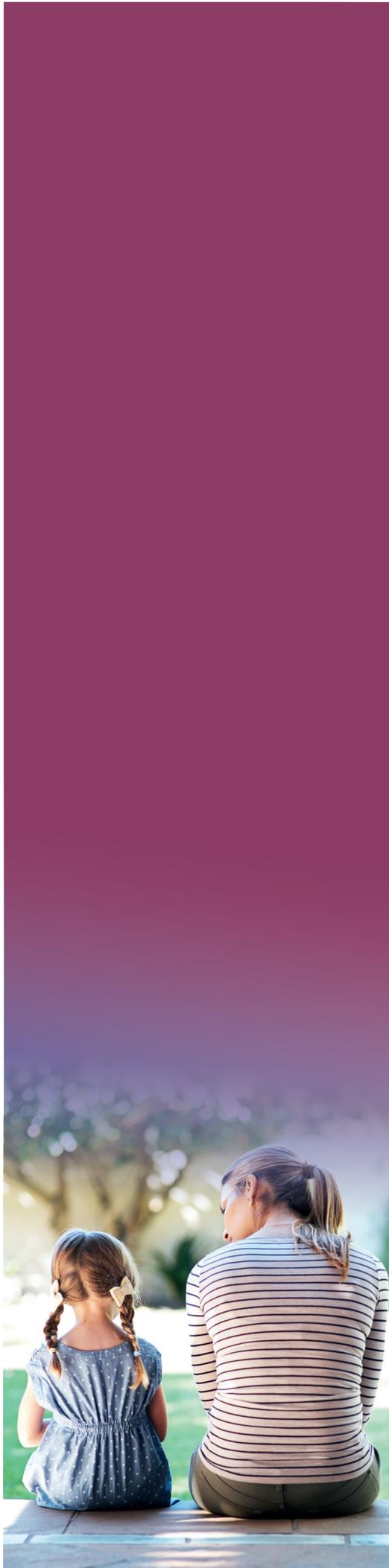
After separation, and once you have been able to put protective measures in place to help increase your and your children's immediate safety, it is time to start to repair and rebuild your relationship with your child. Even if the other parent continues to exert control following separation (e.g. via parenting or financial arrangements), you can still work towards restoring trust with your children.

- Nurture your child with warm and loving parenting.
- Pay attention when they speak to you. Look at them and put away distractions as often as possible, so that you don't miss this chance for connection.
- Show interest in what they are interested in or concerned with, even if it seems trivial to you, because this builds your relationship.
- Convey the message "I love you and accept you" as much as you can. Avoid criticising your child.
- Greet your child with warmth and a smile when you see them again after an absence like at school or childcare, or time with the other parent. Show them you are pleased to see them.
- Provide safe and comforting touch, like cuddling your children or putting your arm around them when near them.
- Make time to play with them. Being playful and having fun in your relationship helps your child to feel worthwhile, safe and valued.
- Notice children doing something you think is kind or helpful or positive, and let them know with a smile, or a gesture, or by saying something like 'I like what you did'.

Develop routines, stability and predictability

Families who have been living with violence often experience a lot of instability with unpredictable situations and disrupted routines. Instability can be very unsettling for children, who need to know where their boundaries are in order to feel safe. You can help your children to understand that their world is now more predictable and safe by establishing routines throughout the week or when they are in your care.

- Reintroduce daily and weekly routines, for example around mealtimes, bedtime, and weekends, getting ready for childcare/school, and the afternoons when everyone returns home.
- Try to make your routines at roughly the same time each day and let your children know clearly what will occur at these times.



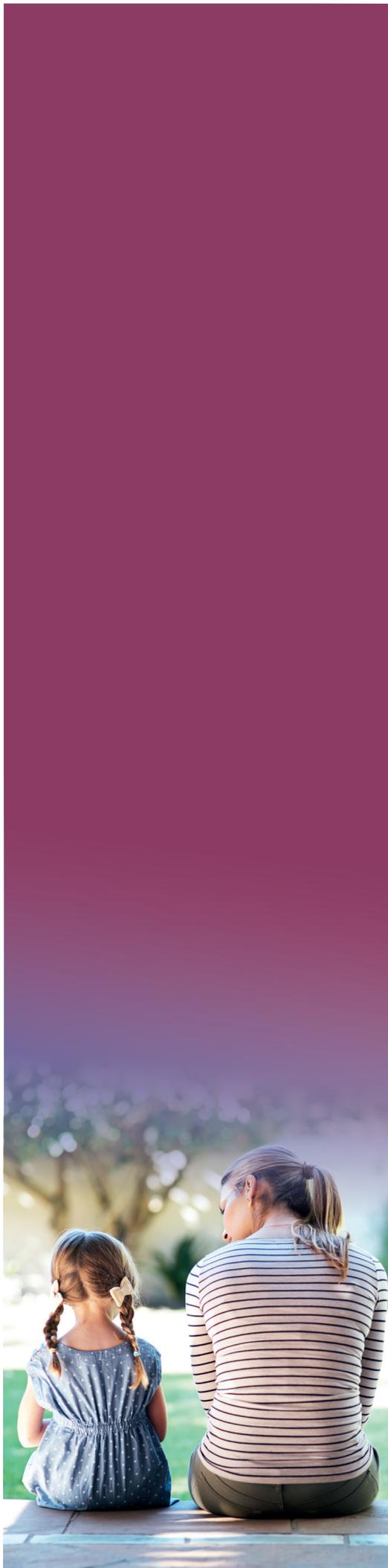
Help children find positive ways of coping with strong feelings

It is normal for children to have strong feelings like grief, anger and sadness when their parents separate and these may be even stronger after experiencing family violence. They might show these feelings in a variety of ways, like crying, being more clingy than usual, throwing tantrums, being aggressive towards others, blaming one or other parent, having sleep problems, or being disobedient. For many children who have been exposed to family violence prior to or during the separation process, expressing these feelings and showing these behaviours can be a sign that they are finally feeling safe enough to let their feelings be known.

- Try to imagine what might be going on for your child that is underlying their behaviour, e.g., feelings of shame, anger, sadness, or fear. Check your hunches out. For example, you could try saying “I wonder if you are feeling very sad that you can’t see Daddy at the moment?” Let them know that you understand that they feel this way.
- Provide your child with opportunities to express their feelings.
- Help children and teenagers to put words to feelings.
- Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them.
- Let them know that crying is fine when they need to.
- Try to notice and comment on the positive ways you see your child behaving (e.g., sharing with siblings, helping with jobs), and pay less attention to other negative behaviours (unless it’s unsafe to do so). Children will often show you more of the behaviours that you pay the most attention to, even if the attention is negative and involves them getting into trouble.
- Maintain rules and boundaries around what behaviour is acceptable, because your consistency will help your children feel more secure.
- Acknowledge to yourself that your child’s expression of distress can be an extra challenge to manage, at a time when you are also trying to manage your own needs, as well as your family’s safety, housing, and possible financial and legal matters.
- Seek help if you feel you have run out of options, or nothing is working for you e.g., try to find a parenting group, family support worker, or counselling to help you with your parenting. There are also groups in some places for children who have been exposed to family violence. Or consider arranging some specialist family violence counselling for your child.
- Tell them that (from now on) violence is not the way to solve problems in the family. This includes avoiding yelling, abusing, name calling, smacking and threatening.
- Create new family rules and role model appropriate ways of resolving conflict without violence. Help them to use words to work out solutions to problems.

Seek your own support

It can be difficult to find enough energy for parenting during this period, especially when you may be feeling traumatised, and perhaps also experiencing post-separation family violence, at the same times as trying to rebuild your life. So finding people to support you through this period is very important. A lot of women and children experience family violence, so there are many people who



understand and care about what happens to you and your family and who can provide valuable support to help you cope. The better you are coping, the better your children will cope. Your healing is very important to your children.

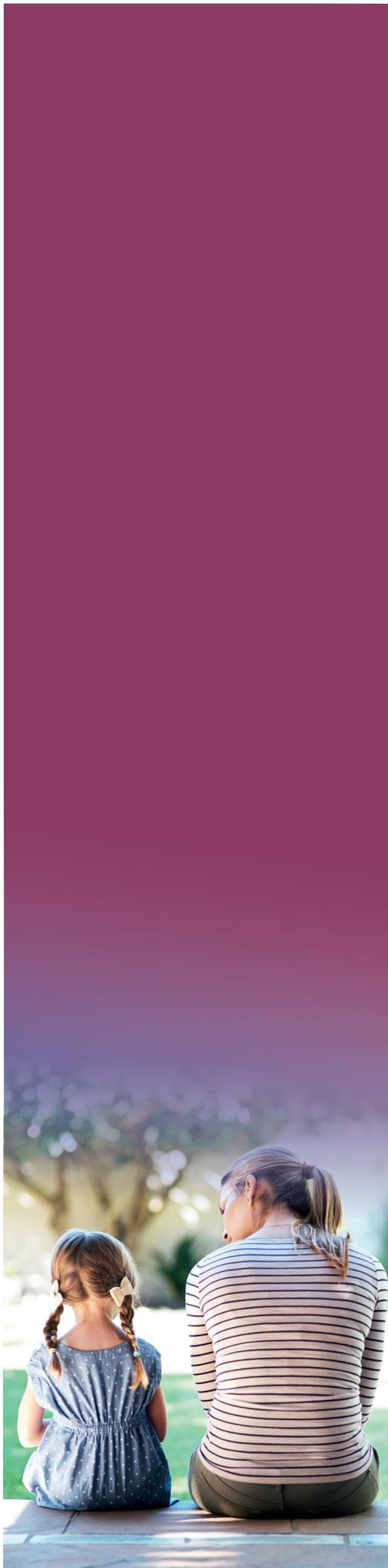
- Find other adults to provide you with emotional support. This protects your children from feeling as though they are responsible for you, which can be overwhelming for them.
- Remember that support can be available from a variety of sources e.g. from (adult) family members, friends, specialist family violence services, relevant community organisations, police, legal support and mental health professionals.
- Support groups (either online or offline) provide an opportunity to share experiences and stories with others who have had similar experiences, and some community programs can provide volunteers to support you post-separation (e.g., Doncare Angels).

Make time for difficult conversations with your children

Be prepared for some difficult conversations with your children about the separation and what has happened.

It can be difficult to know what to say to a child who asks about the abusive parent. The best strategy is to be matter-of-fact about the separation, provide children with simple messages about safety, and try to stay non-judgmental about the other parent, at the same time as being clear that their behaviour was unacceptable. This frees your children from having to take sides and reduces the amount of conflict in their lives. Being non-judgmental also gives your children an opportunity to talk about the other parent with you without feeling uncomfortable.

- Avoid talking in front of children (or in their hearing) about their other parent in a negative way, or about the impact of the violence on yourself. This can overwhelm children, continue to threaten their sense of safety, and make them feel that they have to choose between their parents.
- Your children are likely to see you feeling sad, angry or upset at times. Tell your children that you love them and that the way you are feeling is not about them. Reassure them that things will get better.
- Talk with your children about their feelings and thoughts and keep the focus on their experience, not your own.
- Let them know, however, that the violent behaviour was not okay. Relate this to your own rules, and/or childcare or school rules, about respecting others and not using our bodies and words to hurt others.
- Explain to children that using violence is always a choice and there are always alternatives for solving problems. The perpetrator parent made a bad choice.
- If relevant, explain that other people (e.g., police, judge, lawyers, child protection worker, other support agencies) got involved because what the other parent did was not okay.
- It is common in family violence for children to have experienced the perpetrating parent threatening self-harm or attempting suicide, or engaging in drug/alcohol abuse, and for children to feel worried and responsible for the well-being of their other parent. It can be important to reassure the child that the parent is a grown up and they can get help from other adults/services if they need it.



Teach your child skills to help them express their feelings and keep themselves safe

- Teach children how to name and talk about their feelings so that they are better equipped to tell you or others about their needs.
- Remind them that “Nothing is so awful that we can’t talk with someone about it.”
- Teach them protective behaviours. For example, help them learn to listen to their body and to trust their feelings and instincts. Ask the child what happens in their body when they feel worried or unsafe, or get an “uh oh” feeling. These are warnings signs they can use to take action.
- Develop a network of other trustworthy adults that your children know and are comfortable with, whom they can contact if they need help.
- Make sure your children know what they can do if they are worried or feel unsafe. Role play this so that your child has a good idea of how they can get help from someone they know, and provide the necessary means for them to carry out their plan, like phone numbers. Help them to remember the important numbers, or write them down for the child.

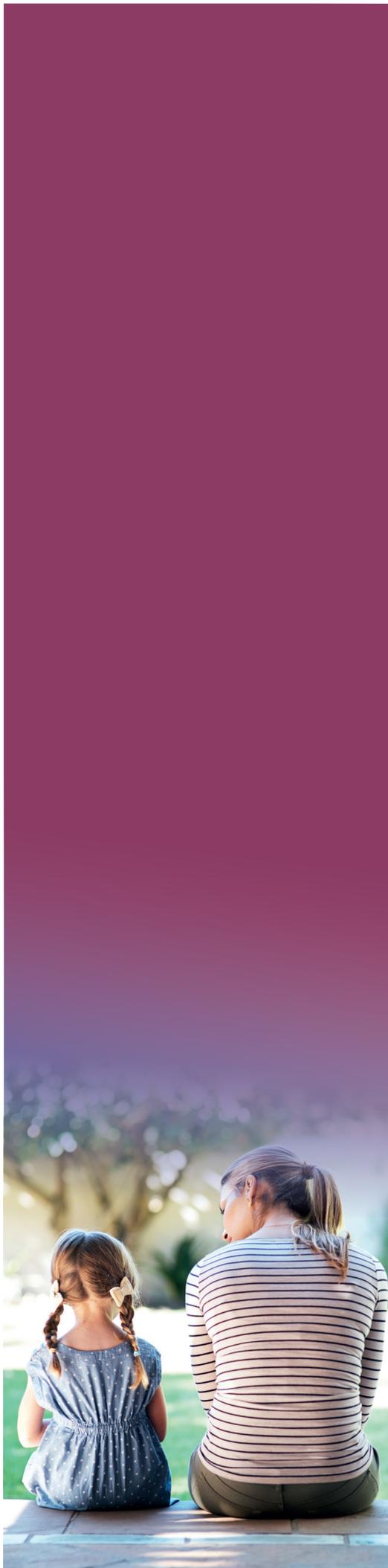
Manage contact and access issues with children

Managing the contact between children and a parent who has used violence against you or the child can be traumatic and difficult in the context of family violence. Setting up contact or shared care arrangements can be stressful for everyone involved and there may be legal arrangements to be considered. Victims of family violence should particularly seek legal advice prior to formalising any parenting agreements, and should contact a specialist family violence service for support to navigate informal contact arrangements, mediation and legal pathways. Safety is paramount. Make sure any assessment of the children’s safety considers both their physical and emotional/psychological safety.

After the separation, children are often very confused, scared and sad. They will often want to see the other parent when circumstances are too unsafe or unpredictable for this to be managed. Children can feel they have to choose (and sometimes are made to choose) between one parent or the other. Some violent fathers can try to continue to abuse and control their ex-partner through contact/access with their children, by denigrating or putting down the other parent to the child, passing on hurtful or threatening messages to their ex-partner via the child, or threatening to hurt themselves, all of which can be very distressing to the children. Some perpetrators of violence can also sometimes directly abuse their child as a way of controlling and frightening their ex-partner.

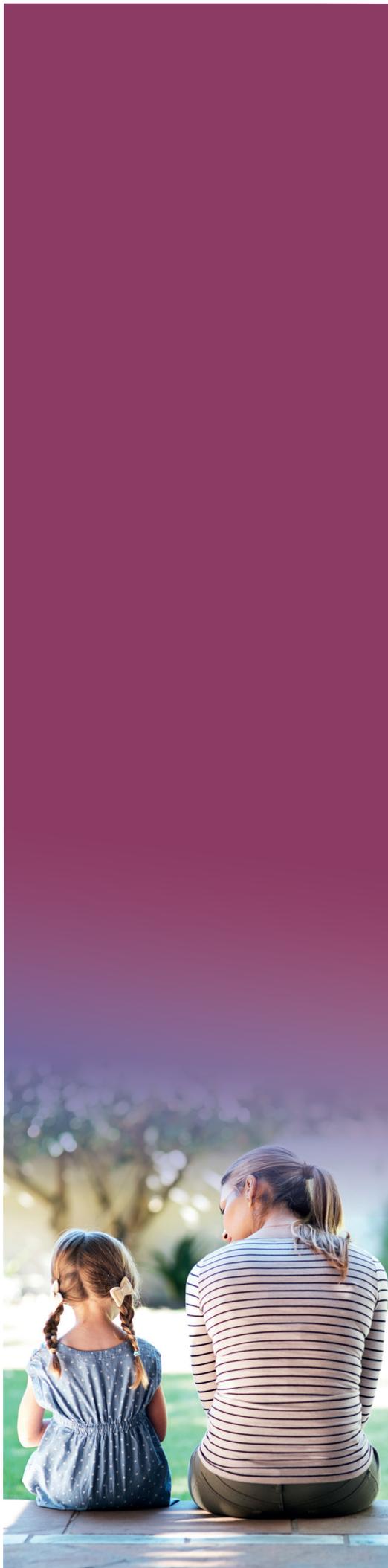
For mothers, managing contact with their violent ex-partner can be re-traumatising, and they can also feel powerless to protect their children from further harm and hurt. Here are some tips which will go some way to make such contact more manageable.

It is important that contact visits do not start until there is a parenting agreement which has been put together between the parents and an objective outsider such as a mediator or a lawyer. Explain to your child that other people outside the family (e.g. judge, lawyers, child protection services etc.) have helped make these arrangements and they are designed to keep them safe while they are with the other parent. If the contact is not court-ordered, then tell the child that you and their other parent have worked out a plan for them.



When parents are seen to be working together children feel safer and do not feel that they have to take sides.

- Begin with email or phone contact between the children and their father whilst waiting for the parenting agreement to be put together. However, you will need to monitor these calls and stop them if you see any evidence of ongoing manipulation or abuse.
- If you have concerns about the safety of your child in the other parent's care, consider supervised contact arrangements. Contact child protection, the police, or a lawyer if you have concerns that your children are being hurt during contact that has been set up through a parenting agreement or the Family Court.
- Plan for contact not to go as they were planned. Perpetrators of violence will often use inconsistency and unreliability as a way to continue their control over the family, and may often cancel plans that have been made. Help your child to cope with this:
 - Let your child know that you understand how sad/confused/angry etc. they might be feeling because of the change of plans.
 - Have an alternative plan for what you and the children can do together if the planned contact does not go ahead.
 - Be matter-of-fact about the change of plans, e.g., "Dad can't have you this weekend, so you and I are going to play instead". Saying something like this puts the responsibility for the change of plans with the parent who changed them, but in a non-judgmental way, and also provides the children with a positive coping strategy.
 - Try not to react negatively to a child who is blaming you for what their other parent has not done, e.g., "It is all your fault that Daddy hasn't got any money to come and see us!" Remember that your children may just be parroting what they have already been told by your ex-partner, or they may be saying this because they are distressed and confused.
- Follow any court orders or parenting agreement arrangements that you have already agreed to unless there are significant safety concerns for the child. Do not agree to changes that your ex-partner demands as this can be another way of him trying to control you. Only consider requests for changes if there has been a long period of arrangements going to plan, and if your child is coping well.
- Plan for the time after the visit is over and your child returns to you. Keep things low key and calm, focus on resuming the usual family routines to help restore your child's sense of safety on their return. It may take children several days to settle after a visit – remember they are trying to learn to work within two different homes and often two sets of family rules – be patient and just support and encourage them.
- Don't ask children about what they did when they were with the other parent. They may have been told not to tell you and/or they may feel that telling you (especially if they had fun) will look as if they are being disloyal to you. They will talk when they are ready if they have something important to share.
- Make changeovers safe for your child and yourself:
 - Try to be calm and reasonable with your ex-partner so that your child feels safe about going to the other parent and leaving you.



- Do not respond to any efforts from your ex-partner to make you angry or feel controlled. This is not a place to try to get some justice.
- If you feel unsafe with your ex-partner, try to organise for a neutral third party to do the changeover for you so that there are limited opportunities for further abuse, or have changeovers in a neutral public place where there are other people around.

Stay positive!

- Don't despair – most children manage the separation experience in the longer term, especially when they feel safer than they did when their parents were together.
- Children are often more resilient than we give them credit for.
- Remind children (and tell yourself) that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' definition of a family and that families come in all shapes and sizes.
- Go easy on yourself – parenting on your own can often mean parenting under pressure. When you have less time in your life, and especially if you still feel unsafe, you tend to have less patience. Remember that you are facing a unique challenge of parenting after violence – parenting after both you and your child have had a difficult time is not an easy job.
- It is time to seek help if you are finding it difficult to keep your cool or are using discipline too harshly.

Where to get help

- APS Psychologists. To talk to an APS psychologist, ask your GP for a referral, phone the APS Find a Psychologist service on 1800 333 497, or go to the APS website: www.findapsychologist.org.au
- **Relationships Australia** provides relationship support services for individuals, families and communities to help build positive and respectful relationships. They have also developed a useful guide for women on how to stay safe during and after separation.
- Council of Single Mothers website: <http://csmc.org.au/>
- For single or separated Dads: <https://mensline.org.au/tips-and-tools/parenting-tips-separated-dads/>
- No To Violence: <http://www.ntv.org.au/get-help/behaviour-causing-problems/>
- If you are afraid of your ex-partner or are experiencing family violence, contact 1800RESPECT for counselling and advice. <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>
- **If you are in immediate danger** call 000 and ask for police assistance.

References

- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Great Britain: Allen Lane.
- Powell, O., & Morrison, K (2017). Practice Commentary: Therapeutically supporting children to recover from the impact of family violence. *Children Australia*. Vol 42(3), pp 137- 141.
- Siegel, D.J., & Bryson, T.P. (2014). *No-drama discipline: The whole-brain way to calm the chaos and nurture your child's developing mind*. New York: Bantam.