Preventing and Responding to Children’s Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence

Emma Howarth
What is children’s exposure to intimate partner violence?

Children’s exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs when a child is aware of abusive or threatening behaviours involving one or more of their caregivers or parents as victims.

It is a form of child maltreatment.

Violence between caregivers, on whom a child relies for protection and comfort, is extremely stressful for a child. It increases the risk of having psychological, social, emotional, and behavioural problems.

Children can be exposed to IPV in many ways and they do not need to directly see or overhear IPV occurring to be impacted by its presence in their lives.
In Canada, over 1/3 of child maltreatment investigations are specific to exposure to intimate partner violence.\(^1\)

Intimate partner violence costs Canadians almost $7.4 billion per year.\(^2\)

---

Why is it important to care?

Children exposed to intimate partner violence are 2 to 4 times more likely to exhibit

- mental health problems
- externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression)
- trauma symptoms
- internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression)

The impact of violence on the development of a child’s brain is particularly concerning. Young children who are frequently exposed may have difficulty establishing trusting relationships necessary for their development.³

To avoid or reduce the distress and difficulties associated with exposure to intimate partner violence among caregivers, the following programs and interventions have demonstrated some effectiveness to date.

**Interventions targeting families experiencing or at risk of child maltreatment** (e.g., home visits via existing health services, health clinics, stand-alone interventions, parenting programs, group-based delivery in community settings or workplaces, child-parent psychotherapy or Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for children)

**Educational and skills-based programs to prevent adolescent victimization** (dating violence) that are delivered in multiple settings, which are longer in duration, and involve key adults in adolescents’ lives (e.g., teachers, community leaders)

**Advocacy interventions aimed at adult victims** (mostly women) to prevent recurrence of intimate partner violence
What can you do as a family service provider?

Be alert to warning signs

Suggested best practice is to be alert to the warning signs that a child may be exposed to intimate partner violence.

What might be these signs?4

- aggression
- anxiety
- depression
- difficulties with peers
- academic problems
- inappropriate attitudes about use of violence as a means of resolving conflict
- increased use of violence in interacting with others
- concern about safety of parent(s)

Develop your knowledge

Participation in training programs5 aimed at improving the response of professionals to children who have experienced intimate partner violence may improve participants knowledge, attitudes and clinical competence.

What should these training programs address?4

- direct effects of exposure to intimate partner violence (e.g., helping children learn to cope with the stressors associated with family violence)
- indirect effects via disruptions in parenting (e.g., helping parents provide consistent nurturance and discipline, despite disruptions caused by violence)
- multiple social influences that increase or decrease risk among children exposed to intimate partner violence

---


Let’s work **together**

Children’s exposure to intimate partner violence is a significant public health problem.

There is an urgent need for evidence-based approaches to know what works, for whom and under what circumstances and thus limit the negative consequences of intimate partner violence on children.
The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development has produced a complete chapter on the issue of child maltreatment of children aged 0 to 5 years.

This chapter includes:

- a synthesis of the experts’ articles
- articles written by judiciously selected internationally renowned experts
- resources developed for parents and practitioners

Consult our chapter on child maltreatment
www.child-encyclopedia.com/maltreatment-child
Bridging Knowledge to Decision Making

The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development is the leading resource of the best and most up-to-date knowledge available on the development of young children (0-5).

encyclopedia.on Early Childhood Development

child-encyclopedia.com