NSPCC

Stop the violence

A guide to keeping children safe
The problem with violence

Violence now seems to play a bigger part in our lives than ever before. It is not just on the streets and on our screens, but in comics, magazines and even computer games. Although most children grow up in happy, loving families, there are some children at risk from violence in their own homes. Stopping bullying and making communities safe are also concerns for children and parents.

Growing up in this culture of violence can make children insecure and fearful from an early age. They can learn not to trust the adult world, and be less confident and assertive as they grow up. Children may also learn that violence and aggression are effective ways of communicating and getting what they want. They can learn violent behaviour as easily as they learn their ABC.

The way we bring up our children today will determine the kind of world they create for us in the future. That is why children and violence is a problem that concerns us all - whether we are parents or not.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) believes it is time for us all to take action. This booklet has been written to help, in particular, parents and carers to:

- be aware of the different kinds of violence that can affect children
- protect children from violent situations
- teach children positive ways of solving their problems, without being violent.

How much do you know about children and violence?

To find out, see how many of these questions you get right.

1. Very few children commit violent offences.

   [True or False?]

   True. Only about four young people in 1,000 (aged between 10 and 18) are found guilty of violent crimes. Children are much more likely to be the victims of violence.

2. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. Unless children are physically punished, they are likely to be aggressive or violent to others.

   [True or False?]

   False. There is evidence to suggest that harsh, humiliating discipline.

   including physical punishment, increases the risk of children behaving violently.

3. One in four primary school children are bullied at school.

   [True or False?]

   True. A study carried out on 7,000 pupils in Sheffield showed that 27% had been bullied during that term. Accurate statistics about bullying are hard to find because of the secrecy which surrounds it. Some estimates are much higher.

4. Men are more likely to be violent than women.

   [True or False?]

   True. Most violence is committed by men. This is probably more to do with 'macho' attitudes and some men's desire to appear 'tough and heroic', rather than any biological differences between the sexes.

5. Watching violence on TV or playing violent computer games will make children more violent.

   [True or False?]

   Not known. Even after 30 years of research, it is still not possible to prove if this is true. Most parents believe that seeing a lot of violence in the form of 'entertainment' is not good for children, and that it may even do some harm. Children tend to copy the behaviour they see, and can learn to accept it as normal. One survey showed that 80% of parents believe there is a link between screen violence and a rise in violent crime. The NSPCC believes this too.
Violence in the home

Physical abuse - hitting, kicking or deliberately hurting a child in any way - is still the most common type of reported child abuse. It has damaging, long-lasting effects, and causes the death of some of our children.

- Some studies show that more than one in four seven-year-olds are hit with an object, such as a belt or stick.
- Many thousands of children are put on child protection registers each year having suffered physical abuse.
- The sexual abuse of children also often includes violence.
- A child aged under five dies every week following abuse or neglect.
- The NSPCC Child Protection Hepline receives about 2,200 calls per year, where the main concern is the physical abuse of children.

All too often excuses are made by parents and carers to explain the injuries children suffer.

- "He tripped on the stairs."
- "She ran into a door."
- "He slipped in the bath."

Some parents try to make excuses for their violent behaviour.

- "I had one drink too many."
- "I just lose my temper."

There’s no excuse for child abuse.
Anywhere.
Ever.

What can you do?

Do everything you can to protect your child, but if your child is ever seriously hit, kicked or injured in any way, for whatever reason, make sure you seek medical attention. Whatever else is going through your mind, your child's health and safety are the main concern.

If you or your partner are ever seriously violent to a child in your care, or if you feel that you might be, you need to get some help and support as soon as possible. Contact an organisation such as the NSPCC for help, or one of the others listed on page 15 of this booklet.

Parents sometimes worry that their children will be taken from them. Removing the child from the family is a last resort. The NSPCC and social services work to prevent the abuse from continuing, but to keep the family together.

If you ever feel so stressed or angry that you think you might lose control and take it out on your child, here are some tips to help you cool down:

- Count to ten and take a deep breath. Give yourself and your child "time out".
- Talk to a friend or relative and tell them how you're feeling.
- Find a way to relax - exercise, listen to music, have a cup of tea, take a hot bath or whatever works for you.
- Remind yourself of the things that you love about your child and enjoy about being a parent.
- Humour can often take the heat out of a stressful situation. Try and see the funny side of things if you can.
- Give yourself time to unwind, and try to treat yourself every now and then.
Violence in the home

What can you do?

Ask for help. Being a parent is very demanding as well as rewarding. Don’t feel ashamed to get professional help for any personal problems that might be affecting your parenting. You may have been treated harshly or had a difficult time as a child. It isn’t always easy to break old patterns, but you deserve the support you need to make sure that your children don’t suffer in the same way. See Where to find help on page 15.

If you suspect a child is being treated violently, consider whether you can help the family in any way. If you know a child is in immediate danger, don’t hesitate to call the police, social services or the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline (0800 800 500).

Domestic violence

Reports of domestic violence have increased more than any other type of violent crime over the last 15 years.

For some children domestic violence leads, tragically, to their mother's death.

In at least half the cases of domestic violence, children are also suffering abuse.

Children need a warm, safe environment in order to grow up as caring, well-adjusted adults. Even if children are not themselves being abused, and many of them are, witnessing their mother or someone they love being hit, threatened or intimidated by another family member can be a damaging experience.

Children may experience stress-related illnesses. Some may be very afraid or angry, or lose all confidence. They may feel that they are somehow to blame for what is happening, and may become withdrawn or depressed. Others can react by becoming bullies or violent themselves.

Attitudes to domestic violence have changed. Domestic violence is not acceptable – ever. You have the right to be protected and to live in a safe environment with your children. Don’t be afraid to seek help.

What can you do?

You may not want to make an immediate decision about leaving the home or ending the relationship. But you should get advice about protecting yourself and your children.

Children are almost always aware of domestic violence going on, even if adults think it is hidden. Talk to your children about what they feel and encourage them to talk to you.

Parents living within a violent relationship may have difficulties giving children the nurturing they need. So if your partner is abusing you, seek help.

If you hear incidents of domestic violence in a neighbour's house, always call the police, and where children are involved call the 24-hour freephone NSPCC Child Protection Helpline (0800 800 500).
Violence in school

The incidence of bullying and other violent behaviour is becoming a serious problem in many schools throughout the country. Reports confirm that it is even happening among under-fives.

One helpline alone received 16,000 calls last year, and the numbers are growing.

• Bullying is deliberate and is intended to frighten or hurt. It can be either physical or psychological, inflicted by an individual or a group of children. It usually causes a lot of fear and misery, and should never be treated lightly.

• Some children have died at the hands of tormentors, and some have taken their own lives when the bullying became too much to bear.

• Bullies may use physical violence or psychological methods, such as name-calling or excluding their victim from the group. Both are equally hurtful and damaging, and must be taken equally seriously.

• Long-term research on victims shows that bullying causes real suffering, and that the damage to self-esteem and the risk of depression can be permanent.

• Bullies also need help to change their ways before they turn into violent adults.

What can you do?

• Take bullying and any other violence at school seriously.

• Talk to your children about what is happening at school and listen carefully to any worries they may have. Remind them that you are on their side and that you will always believe what they say.

• Encourage your school to develop a school behaviour policy, if it doesn’t already have one. Ask your child’s teacher or the Head Teacher about this. You may want to get some support from a friend or someone from your local community centre or advice centre, to take this step.

• Tell your child that it is not their fault.

• Help your child to find ways of dealing with bullying, perhaps by using a game, such as role play. Let your child play the bully and you play the part of the child, suggesting some good replies.

• Don’t encourage aggressive responses to bullying. This will probably only make things worse.

• If the problem persists, don’t ignore it. This gives the bully the signal to continue and that bullying is acceptable behaviour.

• Report the bullying to the school. Involve your child’s teacher and other parents in trying to find solutions.

• Build up your child’s self-confidence by concentrating on things that your child is good at, and giving lots of praise.

If your child is being bullied ...

If your child is a bully ...

• Make it clear to your child that bullying behaviour is unacceptable. Stress that you love him but you want the bullying to stop.

• Think about what could be making your child behave in this way. Is something happening at school or at home to make her unhappy?

• Is your child getting enough positive attention from you? Try to set aside some special time to spend together, perhaps doing some activity he chooses.

• Could your child be learning aggressive behaviour from you or another adult in your home or neighbourhood?

• Have you explained to your child how serious and harmful bullying is? Ask her to imagine how it feels to be bullied. Tell her how you would like her to behave, and reward with praise when she gets it right.