

PARENTING A BABY 0 - 18 MONTHS WHO HAS WITNESSED DOMESTIC ABUSE

Your baby needs you. If you feel that you are unable to meet their needs because of the abuse or violence at home then it is important to ask for help sooner rather than later. There are agencies that will help you without judging you. You can speak with your women's aid worker, your midwife, your health visitor or your local safeguarding team. Please be aware that if there is significant risk of harm to your baby, all agencies that you disclose this to has a responsibility to seek further advice on your situation. They will try to do this with your permission; however, sometimes they may have to do this without your permission if it would increase the risk to you or your baby. If you suspect that your baby has been sexually abused then please contact the police.

West Mercia Women's Aid, supporting you and your children through Domestic Abuse



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This leaflet contains information on how to parent a baby who has witnessed domestic abuse and/or violence. It gives information on how the abuse may impact on your baby and some tips for how to help your baby recover from their experience.

Many parents worry that the impact of the abuse and/or violence will remain with their child throughout their lives and that their children will be influenced negatively by the abuse. This is not the case. In many situations, supporting your child through the abuse and talking to them about the abuse will help to get rid of any effects they may have.



West Mercia Women's Aid

PO Box 74
Hereford
HR4 9WB

www.westmerciawomensaid.org

24hr Helplines

0800 980 3331

(Worcestershire)

0800 783 1359

(Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin)

www.thehideout.org

Young Minds Parent Line

0800 018 2138

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Very young children and infants experience the world differently to adults. Babies are entirely dependent upon their adult caregivers. They very easily pick up the feelings and emotions of those around them and rely on their caregivers for their day to day living. Experiencing domestic abuse can cause babies to be afraid and anxious and they will become distressed. Babies can often be injured by the abusive party and are at the highest of harm through domestic abuse.

Infants and babies understand a lot of what is going on around them. Even in the womb they can experience distress due to their mother's distress. It is important for their future development that they feel secure and have healthy attachments to their parents and caregivers. It is important that babies are nurtured, well loved and cared for.

Managing your relationship with your baby can be difficult if you are experiencing domestic abuse and/or violence. You may think that your child has not been impacted by the abuse and that any anxiety or excessive distress is due to them being a difficult baby so it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of the abuse. Research shows that most children are aware of the abuse or violence even if they were not in the same room as the abuse and they can be affected by it. Early attachments to caregivers and feelings of security contribute to your baby's future development and their sense of self and self worth as they grow. These early years are very important to your baby's development, so it is important that you try to ensure that you overcome the impact of the abuse on your baby in a loving, protective and nurturing way.

You may find that your relationship with your baby has been affected by the abuse/violence. You may worry that your baby will cry and that the abusive parent will become angry with this. You may take steps to stop the abuse by placing your baby in another room or do all in your power to ensure they are quiet and don't fuss. These steps may immediately protect you and your child, but repeatedly doing this can have an impact on your baby's development. Your baby may become passive and may not develop speech and language at the expected rate for their ages. If they are kept in a cot in another room they may not develop the ability to walk or move around the same as other children.

HOW DO I BEGIN TO OVERCOME ANY EFFECTS WITH MY BABY?

Listen to your baby. Although they have not developed language they can still communicate with you through their behavior and expressions. If they have witnessed domestic abuse, they can show the following behaviors:

- ★ **They may be more fearful of new people**
- ★ **Loud noises may startle them more easily**
- ★ **They may not react around loud noise and conflict**
- ★ **They may be slower to develop speech, language and mobility**
- ★ **May become fretful**
- ★ **They may go off their food and not gain as much weight as they should**
- ★ **They may be passive and not seem as interested in their environment as they should**
- ★ **They may cry more than normal**
- ★ **They may get a sense that there will be no response or a negative response if they cry**
- ★ **They may appear more distressed generally**

The abusive parent may not allow you to parent your baby and may attempt to make you feel like an unfit mother. Remember, you are the person that knows your baby best and can care for them best. The attempts to make you feel like a bad mother are tactics, wrong and not true! The very early years in your infant's life are when they are developing senses, thoughts and responses to emotions. Domestic abuse can take its toll on the physical and emotional development of your baby, so it is important to acknowledge this potential early and respond to overcome any effects.

HOW CAN I HELP MY BABY?

The more loving and positive contact your baby has with you and other 'positively impacting' adults, the more resilient they will become to distress and anxiety and they will feel more secure.

- ★ **Give your baby time– this is very important, particularly where the abuse prevents you spending time with your baby**
- ★ **Hug your baby often and more so when there has been an incident of abuse or violence**
- ★ **Make sure that your baby spends as much time as possible in safe and peaceful environments**
- ★ **Stick to routines with your baby. It will give them a sense of security and predictability**
- ★ **Contact the police if you feel your ex has or is likely to harm your baby**