



## **Children Exposed to Family Violence**

Exposure to family violence has a dramatic effect on children. In fact, children exposed to family violence can be affected as much as the individual experiencing the violence. Some parents hope that if their children do not see the violence, it will not harm them. Others think they can protect their children from the impact of the violence. But family violence harms children even if they are not consciously aware of the violence or if they are in a different room when it happens.

### **Exposure to family violence can affect a child's:**

- Brain development, which in turn affects every aspect of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development
- Emotional well-being
- Increased anxiety and fear often have long-term effects
- Ability to learn
- Ability to connect with other people and make friends. Relationships are learned from observing others
- Children exposed to family violence are more likely to be bullies or be bullied. They are also at greater risk of growing up to be abusive to others, to be abused or both. If a parent stays in an abusive situation, children learn there are few or no consequences for violent behaviour
- Children may grow up to abuse their partners or others, and may accept violence in relationships because they consider violence to be a normal part of a relationship.

### **Signs and Symptoms - Children who are in environments where family violence occurs may:**

- Act aggressively or bully others
- Withdraw from social activities
- Take little or no interest in their surroundings
- Find loud noises or loud voices unusually startling
- Be fearful or wary of people's reactions
- Have unexplained bruises or injuries
- Run away from home repeatedly.

### **Personal Resiliency**

We have physical needs like safety, food, and shelter and needs such as love and a sense of belonging. We also need to be treated with respect, to have a sense of control over lives - to find life meaningful, and to feel that we have accomplished something worthwhile. Not all kids get their needs fulfilled. They may grow up in abusive or neglectful families, or in life-threatening environments. They are labeled "at-risk" kids. It's true that some of them will never realize their abilities. They feel defeated when they fail at school, get involved in crime or substance abuse, become parents at an early age, or are just unable to keep a job or a home. They are unable to find the resources they need to live. It's also true that most "at-risk" kids succeed in spite of setbacks. They become caring, capable, contributing members of society. Resiliency is the ability that we all have to overcome difficult life circumstances. Every child has the potential to be resilient. They can learn to solve problems, understand their circumstances, have good relationships with other people, be responsible for their actions, find humour in their

troubles, and seize opportunities to be creative and change the world around them. They can learn to believe in themselves, in a brighter future, and in the basic goodness of the world.

The factors that help us become resilient people are:

- Having caring and positive relationships in our lives
- Having high expectations placed on us
- Having the opportunity to contribute and participate in our families, schools, and communities

When children have these three conditions present in their lives, they are more likely to develop the traits that make them able to overcome adversity. When people have hardship in their lives, they try to find some way of coping. Some choose unhealthy ways of coping, which may include gambling or using alcohol and other drugs. If we can provide kids with a sense of confidence and self worth, we can help to prevent the onset of such problems. People need to know that they can rely on their abilities and their strengths to see them through the good and bad times. The prevention of addictions includes strategies such as social support, challenging expectations, and chances for meaningful involvement.

**These are some of the skills that you may have, if you are resilient:**

- Perceptiveness - You understand people and situations and are able to question what is happening in your family, school, or community
- Service - You give of yourself to others, or to a cause that you believe in
- Independence - You can separate yourself from your family troubles, and are confident that you can make your own way in the world
- Optimism - You have hope for a bright future for yourself and the world
- Connection - You can seek out support from others and form caring and positive relationships
- Self-motivation - You have the drive to fulfill your dreams and goals
- Creativity - You can express your experiences in a constructive and creative ways
- Spirituality - You have faith in something greater than yourself
- Sense of humour - You can see the funny side of life and circumstances
- Morality – you consult your own conscience (your sense of right and wrong) in making decisions.

For more information on resiliency please visit: Alberta Human Services: <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/abuse-bullying/15783.html>

**Information on this web page was adapted from the following sources:**

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ACWS - Alberta Council of Women's Shelters

Alberta Children and Youth Services Website- Children Exposed to Family Violence <http://www.child.alberta.ca/home/1008.cfm>.