



Australian Association for
Infant Mental Health Inc.

Helping infants through trauma after family violence

Guidelines

November 2016

The first and most immediate priority after violence is to ensure that everyone is physically safe from danger¹. When physically safe it is possible to consider how to support infants to feel safe.

From the infant's perspective, when the adults whom infants depend on for safety and nurture are emotionally unavailable (due to fear, anxiety or depression) or frightening, they can suffer trauma and which has serious and long lasting consequences for their development².

Infants may respond to trauma in different ways including crying, withdrawal, regressing, failure to thrive, lack of responsiveness, clinging, temper tantrums and physical symptoms. Sometimes they show these signs of trauma intermittently.

An ongoing relationship with a nurturing, safe, responsive and predictable caregiver can hold the infant and enable healing to occur. The younger the child the more pivotal this is for their lifelong development.

If the infant's primary caregiver can be helped to be safe and responsive to the child every effort should be made to support this. If this is not possible then another caregiver who is able to provide the ongoing emotional support and care will need support to connect with and nurture the infant.

To feel emotionally safe, infants need a predictable world with the same kinds of care, routines, toys, clothes and food that they are used to. Although they may not yet understand specific words they have an exquisite capacity to understand your intention. Talk about what you are doing and why, even when they can't understand. Take things at the infant's pace. Separations from their main caregiver should be avoided as far as possible, especially overnight.

Be responsive. Watch for the infants' cues as to what is needed. Hold them when they are upset. Copy their sounds and gestures to show they have been heard, listen and respond to words of older infants. Follow their lead in what they want to do.

Stay with them through tantrums. Show them that there is an adult who will neither leave them nor become angry with them. Understand that their behaviour, whatever it is, is their way of showing their feelings.

It is in the context of supportive, nurturing relationships that infants can heal, learn to feel safe, regain trust and face the future with confidence.

Note: While these guidelines are for the care of infants, birth to three, all children subjected to family violence undergo trauma and need similar physical and emotional safety and care.

1. If you have immediate concerns for you or your child's safety call 000. If you need help with the next steps, or are a professional needing help in supporting a family where violence may be occurring to stay safe, call 1800 Respect. If you need help with finding trauma support services for an infant or child, contact your local family violence service, general practitioner or child and adolescent mental health service.

2. Harvard Centre for the Developing Child. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/> viewed 9/10/16