

THE IMPACT OF EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The *Eight Stages of Development*, created by Erik Erikson (1956), is a widely used and universally accepted model explaining the developmental tasks involved in the social and emotional development of children that continues into adulthood.² Each developmental stage includes a major crisis that the individual must resolve in order to move to the next stage as a socially and emotionally healthy individual. If crises are not overcome, pathology or developmental difficulty may result. The five stages of development included below are: Infancy, Early Childhood, Play Age, School Age, and Adolescence. Erikson's model also includes three stages (Young Adulthood, Middle Adulthood, and Later Adulthood) that are not covered in this document due to the focus on *childhood* exposure to domestic violence.

Exposure to domestic violence at any age can create delays in the accomplishment of important developmental tasks.⁷ However, there are several outside factors that mitigate the impact of childhood exposure including:

- The severity and duration of trauma,¹¹
- Developmental maturity (how far along the child is in his or her personality development when the trauma occurs),^{8, 11}
- Temperament,¹¹
- Personality make-up
- Cognitive and emotional capacity,^{7, 9}
- Achievement,⁷
- Self-esteem
- Characteristic coping style,^{5, 7}
- Parental interpretations or expressions of parental distress,¹⁰
- Availability of support,⁵ and
- Age.⁸

In addition, children in shelters may have higher levels of trauma symptomology given the added stressors of moving suddenly, being separated from family, friends, school, and community, and the often chaotic experience of shelter life.⁶

The charts below provide bulleted lists describing the potential signs or symptoms of trauma that may result from childhood exposure to domestic violence. The information is organized based on Erikson's first five stages of human development, listing the general impact, specific signs and symptoms, and how exposure may be experienced by children at each stage.

Infancy: Developmental crisis of Trust vs. Mistrust produces hope or withdrawal in children (0-2 years of age)

Early Childhood: Developmental crisis of Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt produces will or compulsion in children (2-3 1/2 years of age)

Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence in Infants and Young Children

General Impact	- Disorganized attachment patterns ¹¹
Specific Signs/Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uncertainty about the reliability and predictability of others¹¹ - Poorly modulated affect and impulse control, including aggression against self and others¹¹ - Delayed startle reflex⁸ - Sleep disturbances^{3,7} - Increased/excessive irritability^{3,7,9} - Regression in toileting and language⁹ - Fear of being alone^{3,7,9} - Temper tantrums and clinging⁹ - Passive, quiet, easily alarmed, and less secure about being provided with protection⁸ - Strong startle reactions and aggressive outbursts^{3,8}
Children's Perspectives	- Feelings of being responsible for the traumatic event ⁹

Play Age: Developmental crisis of Initiative vs. Guilt produces purpose or inhibition in children (3 1/2-5 years of age)

Exposure to Domestic Violence in Play Age Children

General Impact	- Insecurity and unpredictable responses to stimuli
Specific Signs/Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of capacity for emotional self-regulation¹¹ - Repetitive play with traumatic themes – same topics are concretely and constantly repeated with no modification over time^{6,8,11} - Frightening dreams/nightmares^{4,6,11} - Reoccurring waking memories⁴ - Trauma-specific reenactment^{4,6,11} - Talking about the violent event⁶ - Upset reactions in response to memory triggers⁶ - Hypervigilance⁶ - New separation anxiety^{3,6} - Argumentative⁶ - Hyperactivity⁶ - Sleep disturbances⁴ - Fears certain animals, situations, or places⁶
Children's Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feelings of helplessness and passivity⁸ - Feel threatened by separation from parents/caretakers⁸ - Have difficulty managing intense physical and emotional reactions⁸ - Become upset hearing cries of distress from parent/caretaker⁸

School Age: Developmental crisis of Industry vs. Inferiority produces competence or inertia in children (5-12 years of age)

Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence in School Age Children

General Impact	- Fear and guilt coupled with a wide range of emotional reactions due to intrusive images and thoughts ⁸
Specific Signs/Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of capacity for emotional self-regulation - move back and forth between shy or withdrawn behavior and unusually aggressive behavior^{1, 8, 11} - Lack of motivation to master their environment⁷ - Intense fears of recurrence⁸ - Distorted perceptions of self⁴ - Avoidance of situations that may or may not appear to be related to the trauma⁴ - Inhibited social competence¹ - Depressive symptoms¹ - Sleep disturbances⁴ - Preoccupations with words or symbols that may be directly or indirectly related to the trauma⁴ - Greater likelihood of seeing the intentions of others as hostile³ - School problems/Learning Problems/School Phobia – unable to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information^{1, 3, 11} - Difficulty with orientation in time and space¹¹
Children’s Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have ability to judge the seriousness of a threat and think about protective actions and imagine actions they wish they could take (usually do not see themselves as able to counter a serious danger directly)⁸ - May have feelings of failure, shame, or guilt because of inability to protect mom⁸ - Scared of the speeding up of their emotions and physical reactions⁸

Adolescence: Developmental crisis of Identity vs. Confusion produces fidelity or repudiation in teens (13-20 years of age)

Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence in Adolescents

General Impact	- Posttraumatic stress reactions similar to those in adults ⁸
Specific Signs/Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of capacity for emotional self-regulation¹¹ - Personal isolation⁸ - Angry, combative reactions^{4, 7} - Distorted perceptions of self⁴ - Self-harming behaviors – fascination with death, injury, or scars that serve as reminders of trauma⁸ - Self-medication - alcohol or drug abuse^{8, 7} - Distrust, suspiciousness, and problems with intimacy¹¹ - Sleep disturbances⁴ - Reckless behavior OR extreme avoidant behavior⁸ - School problems – academic failure, school truancy, and dropout⁷
Children’s Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Able to actively judge and address dangers on their own⁸ - More exposure to dangerous situations⁸ - Thoughts of revenge⁸ - Make decisions about whether to and how to intervene, and about using violence to counter violence⁸ - May have feelings of guilt about actions that may have made the situation worse⁸ - Struggle over issues of irresponsibility, malevolence, and human accountability⁸

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