As a child care provider, it is likely that you are in contact with children who have been exposed to family violence in their home. Children’s exposure to family violence is the most common form of emotional maltreatment representing 58 per cent of proven cases in Canada¹.

As a child care provider, here are five facts you need to know about children exposed to family violence:

1) More children under five live in a household where domestic violence occurs, than any other age category².

2) Being in a home where violence is occurring can cause serious anxiety for children. The earlier they experience anxiety, the more likely it will last and affect their future behaviour³ and the more likely they will act aggressively with other children⁴.

3) If the violence at home continues, children can develop symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder⁵. Key signs of this disorder include intense fear or helplessness, outbursts of anger, and difficulty sleeping.

4) Exposure to domestic violence during the early years affects a child’s brain development, as well as every developmental process the child experiences. This occurs even when the child is not consciously aware of violence in the home.

5) 85 per cent of a child’s core brain structures are developed by the time a child is three years old. This development will lay the foundation for every level of development in the child’s life, including the ability to form emotionally healthy relationships⁶. Exposure to family violence is linked to compromised brain development and lower I.Q. measures.⁷

What are some of the signs that a child may be exposed to violence in the home?

Fear and anxiety may limit infants’ and toddlers’ ability to play and explore. They could learn about aggression through what they have seen at home. Loud noises or visual images linked to violence can be distressing. Parents may not be able to consistently respond to a child’s needs, negatively affecting the parent-child bond.

Preschoolers may learn unhealthy ways to express anger and other emotions. They may be confused by mixed messages they receive at home (e.g. what I see compared to what I am told). Instability at home may cause the preschooler to become more dependent upon caregivers. They may even regress to behaviours they had as a young toddler.⁸

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