

YOU & YOUR SCHOOL-AGE CHILD



for
Women

Elementary school children, ages 6 to 12, can understand right and wrong, cause and effect. Academic and social success at school has a big impact on their self-concept. They will make friends and plan social activities for themselves. Toward the end of elementary school, many will be thinking about how they are thought of by members of the opposite sex. They start to identify more with the same-sex parent and are now keenly aware of differences between males and females in our society.

These things are typical of children as they grow from ages 6 to 12. Which changes do you see in your child?

- able to think and talk about his emotions and how he feels
- being able to understand how other people feel, not just himself
- wants everything and everyone to be fair
- considers the reason for a behaviour, not just what happens
- everything is a contest: he has to have the best and be better than his friends at sports, etc.
- being popular with friends is important
- doing well in school is important and if he does not do well, he blames himself

Each child is unique. Pick six words to describe your child's personality to someone who does not know him or her (e.g., energetic, curious, friendly, honest, sensitive, athletic)

When a school-age child sees violence at home, he may feel and think things like this...

- he may be concerned for his mother's safety and any consequences for his father (e.g., arrest)
- he may understand that his mother remains upset even after the violent incident ends
- he may recognize one person in a "fight" as the aggressor and one as the victim
- he will accept reasons for violence that seem plausible (e.g., alcohol, job stress)
- the intent of a "fight" is as important as how the "fight" turned out
- the fairness of a "fight" is very important
- he will notice any differences between what he saw happen and how others describe it later
- he may blame himself for the violence if he hears himself talked about during the fight
- he may blame himself for the violence if he believes he could have prevented it (e.g., by cleaning up)
- he may feel that arrest or incarceration are not fair consequences for his father

What your child may be feeling now...

- guilt** – guilt if he blames himself for bad things such as the violence and any divorce
- concern** – concern seeing Mommy sad and upset

- grief** – grief over missing Daddy, and maybe relatives on Daddy's side of the family
– grief over missing old house/apartment, old friends, toys and possessions left behind
- confusion** – confusion about why one beloved parent would hurt another beloved parent
- worry** – worry over what the future holds for the family

These feelings and beliefs are all normal reactions to an abnormal situation. How do you think your child is feeling and thinking now?

What you may be feeling about your child...

- resentful** ...if he wants things you cannot give him
- hurt** ...if he is disrespectful or withdraws from you
- concern** ...if you worry the violence has damaged him or caused bad behaviour
- guilt** ...if you regret that he does not have a responsible and loving father
- frustration** ...if he seems to have “forgotten” about the violence or maltreatment

Explaining the violence to your child

A child of this age will still see a “fight” between Mommy and Daddy but can recognize when the fight is not fair, as when Daddy is bigger than Mommy. Explain the violence in terms of rules. For example, “there is a law, a very serious rule, that people cannot hit others. This is a good rule. It keeps everyone safe. Daddy knows this rule. He must learn to live with people and not break this rule.” Why does Daddy break this rule? Children of this age may need to explain a father's violence using external factors such as substance abuse, a bad childhood, or current stressors (e.g., financial worries). The alternative is to believe that the parent is trying to be cruel and hurtful on purpose. Explaining the violence in this way may help children manage the confusion and ambivalence they feel after seeing one parent hurt the other. As they get older, they can adopt a more complex understanding of causes, motives and consequences.

How to help your child

- tell him and show him you love him and will take care of him
- help him believe the violence and separation were not his fault
- let him know you are there to talk when he is ready, but do not force him to talk
- let him know it is okay to talk about his father
- take responsibility for the decision to leave (if you and your partner have separated)
- don't rely on him for emotional support: seek out friends, family or professionals for that
- reassure him that you are okay
- do not express your anger at his father in front of him
- do not say he is “like his dad”
- help him learn to meet his wants without intimidating or threatening others
- find activities he can do with his friends (e.g., soccer)
- spend some “fun time” together (homework and chores do not count)
- help him succeed at school, make sure his schooling does not take a back seat to family troubles
- limit (or eliminate) the amount of television and movies with violence and violent themes
- take care of yourself – he needs you.