

Information Sheet

What Is Violence Against Children?

Violence and abuse are best understood as a pattern of behaviour intended to establish power and maintain control over individuals. The roots of all forms of violence are founded in the many types of inequality which continue to exist and grow in our society¹. Violence against children is a reflection of an imbalance of power between victim and abuser and is often times characterized by a betrayal of trust.

Violence and abuse against children may occur only once, it may involve various tactics of subtle manipulation or it may occur frequently while escalating over a period of months or years. In any form, violence and abuse profoundly affect a child's safety, health and well-being.

Children in Newfoundland and Labrador experience physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual and cultural violence, as well as verbal and financial or material abuse and neglect.

Physical Violence

Physical violence against a child occurs when someone uses a part of their body or an object to harm a child or control a child's actions. Physical violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- pushing or shoving;
- pinning or holding a child down;
- confinement;
- pinching;
- hair-pulling;
- punching;
- arm twisting;
- kicking;
- biting;
- strangling;
- choking;
- burning;
- overmedication;
- assault with an object or weapon;
- threats with an object or weapon;
- stabbing;
- murder.

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence against a child occurs when someone forces a child to take part in sexual activity when they do not want to. Sexual violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- touching a child in a sexual manner against their will (i.e. kissing, grabbing, fondling);
- forced sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal);
- forcing a child to perform sexual acts they find degrading, confusing or painful;
- use of a weapon to make a child comply with a sexual act;
- beating sexual parts of a child's body;
- exhibitionism (need to expose body parts to others);
- humiliating, criticizing or trying to control a child's sexuality;
- exposure to AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections;
- forced abortion or sterilization;
- forced prostitution;
- sexual exploitation;
- invitation to sexual touching.

Emotional Violence

Emotional violence against a child occurs when someone says or does something to make a child feel stupid or worthless. Emotional violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- exposing a child to family violence;
- name calling;
- constant criticism;
- blaming all family problems on a child;
- humiliating or belittling a child in front of others;
- using silent treatment;
- confinement to the home;
- not allowing a child to have contact with certain family and friends;
- destroying possessions;
- threats;
- jealousy;
- intimidation;
- threatening to commit suicide.

Psychological Violence

Psychological violence against a child occurs when someone uses threats and causes fear in a child to gain control. Psychological violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- threats of violence;
- threats of abandonment;
- destruction of a child's personal property;
- social isolation from a child's family and friends;
- confinement to the home;
- verbal aggression;

- constant humiliation.

Spiritual Violence

Spiritual violence against a child occurs when someone uses a child's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate, or control them. Spiritual violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- trying to prevent a child from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs;
- making fun of a child's religious or spiritual beliefs;
- using your/their religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate or control a child;
- forcing a religious or spiritual practice or ritual on a child.

Cultural Violence

Cultural violence against a child occurs when a child is harmed as a result of practices condoned by their culture, religion or tradition. Cultural violence includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- child rape - marriage;
- female circumcision;
- sexual slavery;
- honour crimes.

Verbal Violence

Verbal abuse against a child occurs when someone uses language, whether spoken or written, to cause a child harm. Verbal abuse includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- constant criticism;
- cursing;
- name calling;
- repeated insults;
- recalling a child's past mistakes;
- expressing negative expectations;
- instilling negative attitudes, beliefs, values in a child;
- expressing distrust;
- threats of violence against a child or other family members.

Financial or Material Abuse

Financial abuse against a child occurs when someone controls a child's financial or material resources to the extent that harm is the ultimate outcome. Financial and material abuse includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- withholding financial support in an attempt to control and manipulate a child;
- destruction of a child's personal property;
- denying a child access to basic needs such as food and health care;

- illegally using a child's money, assets or property.

Neglect

Neglect of a child occurs when someone has the responsibility to provide care or assistance to a child but does not. Neglect includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- not providing needed medication, food, shelter or clean clothing;
- failure to provide emotional attention to a child when they are hurt, ill, frightened or upset;
- criminal negligence causing bodily harm.

Hidden Nature of Violence Against Children

According to Statistics Canada 2008 population estimates and projections there are approximately 76,300 children under the age of 15 residing within Newfoundland and Labrador². Decades of qualitative and quantitative research in the field of violence indicates that less than 10% of all crime victims report their victimization to police. Due to the intensified vulnerability and dependability of children, the percentage of child victims who actually report their victimization may indeed be much lower.

All children, regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, cultural identity, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation or ability, may be vulnerable to violence³. Unfortunately, violence against children often remains hidden.

Reasons why violence against children may remain hidden include, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- ❖ manipulation, coercion and threats utilized by abuser against child to prevent child from reporting violence and abuse;
- ❖ inability to communicate what has happened;
- ❖ fear of being ignored, misunderstood, or not believed;
- ❖ fear of retaliation from abuser;
- ❖ fear that they or the abuser will be removed from the home;
- ❖ fear of abandonment;
- ❖ feeling of responsibility for violence and abuse;
- ❖ feeling of shame over what has happened.

Prevalence of Violence Against Children in Canada⁴

The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003 (CIS-2003) is a nation-wide study, completed every five years, that contributes to a greater understanding of the occurrence of reported child maltreatment in Canada. The CIS-2003 provides information on the occurrence of five categories of child maltreatment: neglect; exposure to domestic violence; physical abuse; emotional maltreatment; sexual abuse. All information and data below reflects substantiated cases of maltreatment in Canada, excluding Quebec.

Neglect

- ❖ In 2003, neglect was the most common form of primary maltreatment (30,366 cases) in Canada.
- ❖ The total number of primary or secondary investigations involving neglect in Canada was 35,843.
- ❖ The most prevalent forms of primary or secondary investigations of neglect in Canada include the following:
 - Failure to supervise (physical) = 14,543 (41%);
 - Physical neglect = 13, 098 (37%);
 - Abandonment = 4,708 (13%);
 - Educational neglect = 3,188 (9%);
 - Medical neglect = 2,347 (7%);
 - Failure to supervise (sexual) = 1,643 (5%);
 - Permitting criminal behaviour = 1,001 (3%);
 - Failure to provide psychological treatment = 854 (2%).*
- ❖ Perpetrators by primary category of abuse:
 - Biological mothers = 83%;
 - Biological fathers = 36%;
 - Fathers/stepfathers = 45%.**

Exposure to Domestic Violence

- ❖ In 2003, exposure to domestic violence was the second most common form of primary maltreatment (29,370 cases) in Canada.
- ❖ The total number of primary or secondary investigations of exposure to domestic violence in Canada was 35,116.

* Total percentages do not equal 100% as some cases of maltreatment involve multiple forms of maltreatment.

** Total percentages do not equal 100% as maltreatment may involve multiple perpetrators.

- ❖ Perpetrators by primary category of abuse:
 - Biological fathers/stepfathers = 88%;
 - Mothers/stepmothers = 28%.^{*}

Physical Abuse

- ❖ In 2003, physical abuse was the third most common form of primary maltreatment (25,257 cases) in Canada.
- ❖ The total number of primary or secondary investigations of physical abuse in Canada was 27,436.
- ❖ The most prevalent forms of primary or secondary investigations of physical abuse in Canada include the following:
 - Hit with hand = 12,775 (47%);
 - Shake, push, grab, throw = 6,733 (25%);
 - Hit with object = 5,930 (22%);
 - Other physical abuse = 3,631 (13%);
 - Punch, kick, bite = 2,419 (9%).
- ❖ Perpetrators by primary category of abuse (two parent family):
 - Fathers = 67%;
 - Mothers = 51%;
 - Other relatives = 4%.^{*}

Emotional Maltreatment

- ❖ In 2003, emotional maltreatment was the fourth most common form of primary maltreatment (15,369 cases) in Canada.
- ❖ The total number of primary or secondary investigations of emotional maltreatment in Canada was 24,035.
- ❖ The most prevalent forms of primary or secondary investigations of emotional maltreatment in Canada include the following:
 - Emotional abuse = 17,555 (73%);
 - Emotional neglect = 6,094 (25%);
 - Exposure to non-intimate violence = 1,616 (7%).^{**}

^{*} Total percentages do not equal 100% as maltreatment may involve multiple perpetrators.

^{**} Total percentages do not equal 100% as some cases of maltreatment involve multiple forms of maltreatment.

- ❖ Perpetrators by primary category of abuse:

- Biological mothers/stepmothers = 66%;
- Biological fathers/stepfathers = 56%.^{*}

Sexual Abuse

- ❖ In 2003, sexual abuse was the fifth most common form of primary maltreatment (2,935 cases) in Canada.
- ❖ The total number of primary or secondary investigations of sexual abuse in Canada was 3,203.
- ❖ The most prevalent forms of primary or secondary investigations of sexual abuse in Canada include the following:
 - Fondling = 2,177 (68%);
 - Oral sex = 436 (14%);
 - Penetration = 355 (11%);
 - Exploitation = 290 (9%);
 - Sexual talk = 281 (9%);
 - Exhibitionism = 251 (8%);
 - Attempted penetration = 144 (4%).^{**}
- ❖ Perpetrators by primary category of abuse:
 - Non-parental relatives = 35%;
 - Children's friends or peers = 15%;
 - Stepfathers = 13%;
 - Biological fathers = 9%;
 - Other acquaintances = 9%;
 - Boyfriends/girlfriends of parents = 5%;
 - Biological mothers = 5%.^{*}

^{*} Total percentages do not equal 100% as maltreatment may involve multiple perpetrators.

^{**} Total percentages do not equal 100% as some cases of maltreatment involve multiple forms of maltreatment.

Prevalence of Violence Against Children in Newfoundland and Labrador

Statistical information concerning the prevalence of violence against children in Newfoundland and Labrador is limited. Three main sources of statistical information which help provide insight into the severity and occurrence of violence against children include Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC) data, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) data, and the Transition Home Survey (THS).

Reported Crimes Against Children Under the Age of 12 in RNC Jurisdictions throughout Newfoundland and Labrador⁵

Between 2006 and 2009, the most frequently reported crimes against children under the age of 12 in RNC jurisdictions were:

- ❖ **Assault Level 1 (173 incidents)**

Approximately 64% of these reported incidents were perpetrated against male children.

- ❖ **Sexual Assault (59 incidents)**

Approximately 14% of all sexual assaults reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children under the age of 12. 73% of these reported incidents were perpetrated against female children.

- ❖ **Assault Level 2 (21 incidents)**

Approximately 86% of these reported incidents were perpetrated against male children.

- ❖ **Uttering Threats (20 incidents)**

Slightly more of these reported cases of uttering threats were perpetrated against male children than female children (55% versus 45% respectively).

- ❖ **Other Sex Crimes (14 incidents)**

Approximately 64% of all crimes that fall under the category of other sex crimes that were reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children. 73% of these reported incidents were perpetrated against female children.

Other interesting trends emerging from RNC crime statistics between 2006 and 2009 include the following:

- ❖ Between 2006 and 2009 there were 12 reported cases of indecent acts in RNC jurisdictions. Half (50%) of these acts were perpetrated against children under the age of 12. 83% of the reported acts perpetrated against children under the age of 12 were perpetrated against female children.
- ❖ Between 2006 and 2009 there was one case of murder 2nd degree perpetrated against a male child under the age of 12 in an RNC jurisdiction.

Reported Crimes Against Children and Youth Under the Age of 18 in RCMP Jurisdictions throughout Newfoundland and Labrador⁶

Between 2006 and 2009, the most frequently reported violent crimes against children and youth under the age of 18 in RCMP jurisdictions were:

- ❖ **Assault (1989 incidents)**

Approximately 25% of all assaults reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children and youth. Slightly more of these reported cases of assault were perpetrated against male children and youth than female children and youth (56% versus 44% respectively).

- ❖ **Sexual Assault (583 incidents)**

Approximately 60% of all sexual assaults reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children and youth. 82% of these reported cases of sexual assault were perpetrated against female children and youth.

- ❖ **Uttering Threats Against Persons (457 incidents)**

Approximately 22% of all cases of uttering threats against persons reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children and youth. There is no obvious gender difference in this particular crime category.

- ❖ **Assault with Weapon Causing Bodily Harm (363 incidents)**

Approximately 23% of all cases of assault with weapon causing bodily harm reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children and youth. 69% of these reported cases were perpetrated against male children and youth.

- ❖ **Criminal Harassment (43 incidents)**

Approximately 15% of all cases of criminal harassment reported to police between 2006 and 2009 were perpetrated against children and youth. 65% of these reported cases were perpetrated against female children and youth.

Between 2006 and 2009, the most frequently reported violent crimes against children and youth under the age of 16 in RCMP jurisdictions were:

- ❖ **Sexual Interference (106 incidents)**

Approximately 75% of reported cases of sexual interference were perpetrated against female children and youth.

- ❖ **Invitation to Sexual Touching (43 incidents)**

Approximately 58% of reported cases of invitation to sexual touching were perpetrated against female children and youth.

Other interesting trends emerging from RCMP crime statistics between 2006 and 2009 include the following:

- ❖ Although a small overall number of reported cases of aggravated assaults occurred during this time frame (68 incidents), approximately 10% of these incidents were committed against children and youth. 57% of these cases were committed against female children and youth.
- ❖ A relatively small overall number of reported incidents of discharging an air gun or air pistol with intent (5 incidents) occurred between 2006 and 2009. 80% of these incidents were committed against children and youth. 75% of the reported incidents committed against children and youth were committed against female children under the age of 18.
- ❖ Between 2006 and 2009 there were a total of 10 incidents of criminal negligence causing bodily harm reported to police. 50% of these incidents were perpetrated against children and youth. ALL of the reported incidents perpetrated against children and youth were perpetrated against female children under the age of 18.

Transition Home Survey 2007/2008⁷

- ❖ During 2007-2008, there were 101,019 admissions of women (61,690) and dependent children (37,902) to shelters throughout Canada.
- ❖ During 2007-2008, there were 1,107 admissions of women (706) and dependent children (401) to shelters in Newfoundland and Labrador.
- ❖ Over half (56%) of women fleeing abusive situations in Newfoundland and Labrador were admitted to shelters with their children. 59% of these children were under the age of 10.

Recognizing Violence Against Children

Experiencing violence of any kind can have a devastating impact on a child's overall cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. In order to be able to effectively prevent violence against children it is important to have an in-depth understanding of the indicators of violence experienced by children. Below are some, but certainly not all, of the indicators of physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, neglect, and exposure to family violence commonly experienced by children who have been victimized.

Indicators of Physical Violence^{8,9}

- ❖ Unexplained bruises, broken bones, burns, bite marks;
- ❖ Noticeable absence from school accompanied by fading bruises;
- ❖ Refusal to discuss visible injuries;
- ❖ Appears to be frightened in the presence of caregiver or particular people;
- ❖ Frequently runs away from home;
- ❖ Child discloses physical violence.

Indicators of Sexual Violence^{8,9}

- ❖ Child exhibits difficulty sitting, walking, or swallowing;
- ❖ Reports bedwetting or nightmares;
- ❖ Noticeable change in child's appetite;
- ❖ Child exhibits sudden unusual or inappropriate sexual behaviour;
- ❖ Undergarments that are bloody;
- ❖ Exhibits a lack of trust in individuals;
- ❖ Sudden changes in child's personality;
- ❖ Child discloses sexual violence.

Indicators of Emotional Violence^{8,9}

- ❖ Child exhibits extremes in behaviour;
- ❖ Child is delayed in physical or emotional development;
- ❖ Child often complains of headaches, nausea, or stomach aches for no obvious reason;
- ❖ Child exhibits frustration when performing tasks and often criticizes their performance;
- ❖ Child has attempted suicide;
- ❖ Child discloses emotional violence.

Indicators of Neglect^{8,9}

- ❖ Noticeable unexplained absence from school;
- ❖ Child engages in illegitimate activity to obtain the basic necessities of life;
- ❖ Lack of appropriate clothing;
- ❖ Lack of needed medical and/or dental care;
- ❖ Child is dirty or unwashed;
- ❖ Severe diaper rash;
- ❖ Child appears to have very little energy;
- ❖ Child discloses neglect.

Indicators of Exposure to Family Violence¹⁰

- ❖ Behavioural symptoms -- child exhibits aggression, depression, anger, anxiety or a combination of these behavioural problems;
- ❖ Social symptoms -- challenges in creating and maintaining relationships or friendships, potential isolation and marginalization, trust and attachment issues;
- ❖ Psychological symptoms -- child exhibits physical effects in the body such as anxiety, stress, sleep disorders, and other common symptoms often associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);
- ❖ School-related symptoms -- difficulties with school structure, performance issues, absenteeism, poor peer relations;
- ❖ Child discloses occurrence of family violence.

Research indicates that in terms of the long-term impacts of exposure to family violence, gender differences do indeed exist:

- ❖ Females may:
 - develop self-destructive behaviours (turn inward);
 - suffer further abuse at the hands of boyfriends and male partners later in life;
 - try having a baby as a means to have someone who will love them.

- ❖ Males may:
 - express this pain outward;
 - be violent toward others;
 - be aggressive;
 - become abusive in their own dating relationships.

¹Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. (2006). *Taking Action Against Violence 2006-2012*. St. John's, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

² Statistics Canada. (2009). *Population by Sex and Age Group, by Province and Territory (Number, Both Sexes)*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.

³ Department of Justice Canada. (2009). *Child Abuse: A Fact Sheet from the Department of Justice Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice Canada.

⁴ All information in this section adapted from:

Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Felstiner, C., Black, T., Tonmyr, L., Blackstock, C., Barter, K., Turcotte, D., Cloutier, R. (2005). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2003: Major Findings*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

⁵ All information in this subsection adapted from:

Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. (2009). *Victim Age/Gender Analysis, 2006-2009*. St. John's, NL: RNC.

⁶ All information in this subsection adapted from:

Royal Canadian Mounted Police. (2009). *RCMP Violent Crime Statistics – 2006 to 2009*. St. John's, NL: RCMP.

⁷ All information in this subsection adapted from:

Statistics Canada. (2009). *Transition Homes in Canada: National, Provincial and Territorial Fact Sheets 2007/2008*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Industry.

⁸ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2007). *Recognizing Child Abuse and Neglect: Signs and Symptoms*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare Information Gateway.

⁹ BOOST. (2009). *Information Sheet #4 Possible Indicators of Child Abuse & of Exposure to Family Violence*. Toronto, ON: BOOST.

¹⁰ All information in this section adapted from:

Muzychka, M. (2008). *Learning What They Live: The Impact of Witnessing Family Violence on Infants, Children, and Adolescents*. St. John's, NL: Women's Policy Office, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.