

WHAT IS FAMILY VIOLENCE?

"Family violence" is a term that includes the many different forms of abuse, mistreatment or neglect that adults or children may experience in their intimate, kinship or dependent relationships. As our understanding of the nature and extent of violence within intimate relationships and families improves, and our insight deepens, the definition of family violence continues to evolve.

During the past two decades, much public and professional attention has concentrated on family violence from the perspective of those who are victimized. In particular, the emphasis has been on:

- violence against women in intimate relationships or woman abuse including [spousal abuse](#), dating violence and other forms of violence against women
- [child abuse](#) including physical abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, neglect, and emotional abuse (including exposure to spousal abuse); and
- abuse of older adults.¹

There are many different forms of abuse, and a person may be subjected to more than one form.

Physical abuse may consist of just one incident or it may happen repeatedly. It includes:

- using physical force in a way that injures someone, or puts them at risk of being injured including beating, hitting, shaking, pushing, choking, biting, burning, kicking or assaulting with a weapon²
- rough handling
- confinement
- dangerous or harmful use of force or restraint
- female genital mutilation is another form of physical abuse.

Sexual abuse and exploitation includes:

- all forms of sexual assault, sexual harassment, or sexual exploitation³
- forcing a person to participate in any unwanted, unsafe or degrading sexual activity
- using ridicule or other tactics to try to denigrate, control or limit a person's sexuality or reproductive choices
- using a child for sexual purposes—including fondling, inviting, manipulating or forcing a child to engage in sexual activity or intercourse
- rape, sodomy or exhibitionism
- involving a child in prostitution or pornography.

Neglect is often chronic and it usually involves repeated incidents. It includes:

- failing to provide what a child or dependent adult requires for his or her physical, psychological or emotional development and well-being
- failing to provide or denying food, clothing, shelter, cleanliness, medical care, protection from harm, or a sense of being valued and loved.

Emotional abuse includes:

- harming a person's sense of self and putting them at risk of serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders
- attacking a person verbally - for example, by yelling, screaming, name calling, criticizing, threatening or intimidating

- using criticism, verbal threats, social isolation, intimidation or exploitation to dominate someone
- routinely making unreasonable demands
- criminally harassing or "stalking"⁴ - which may include threatening a person or their loved ones, damaging their possessions or harming their pets
- terrorizing a person
- exposing a child to family violence.

Economic or financial abuse includes:

- stealing from or defrauding someone⁵
- withholding money to buy food or medical treatment⁶
- manipulating or exploiting someone for financial gain
- denying access to financial resources
- preventing a person from working, or controlling their choice of occupation.

Spiritual abuse includes:

- preventing a person from engaging in their spiritual or religious practices
- using a person's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate or control them
- ridiculing or denigrating someone's beliefs.

An abuser may use a number of different tactics to gain access to a victim, exert power and control over the victim, and prevent the victim from telling anyone about the abuse or seeking support. Abused adults or children are often in a position of dependence on the person who is abusing them: they may be abused by, for example, a parent, sibling, other relative, caregiver, guardian, spouse, same-sex or dating partner. Abuse is a misuse of power and a violation of trust. The abuse may happen once, or it may involve various tactics and occur in a repeated and escalating pattern over a period of months or years. The abuse may change form over time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Other forms of abuse such as sibling abuse, parent abuse, and ritual abuse have also been explored.

² Assault and unlawful confinement are criminal offences in Canada.

³ Sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation are criminal offences in Canada.

⁴ Criminal harassment is a criminal offence in Canada.

⁵ Theft and fraud are criminal offences in Canada.

⁶ Withholding the necessities of life, such as money to buy food or medical treatment, is a criminal offence in Canada.