

Caring for Children & Adolescents Following Domestic or Sexual Violence



If you are a parent or caregiver reading this because your child has experienced harm, you have already taken an important step by seeking help. Supporting a child through a painful experience can feel challenging, and you do not have to face it alone.

Children and adolescents who have experienced domestic or sexual violence must be protected from further harm. They need ongoing support as they recover physically and emotionally.

Cambodian law provides protections against domestic and sexual violence. This information can help parents, guardians, and other caregivers to support children following abuse.

**NO ONE SHOULD HAVE TO LIVE IN FEAR OF VIOLENCE.
SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE.**



For more information about legal, safety, and other support options for you and your child, contact **LICADHO** using the details below or visit the **Safety & Justice** website www.licadho-cambodia.org/safety-and-justice

STEP 1

Believe the Child or Adolescent

Domestic and sexual violence can happen to any child, regardless of their age or gender. Boys, girls, and gender diverse children who are infants, young children, or adolescents aged up to 18 years can all experience harm.

It can be difficult for a child to tell someone what happened, and it's rare for a child to lie about being abused. A child might share a lot of information or very little, and it is normal if their story is unclear or incomplete. It is crucial that you believe the child.



Children often stay silent for a long time because they:

- Feel scared, ashamed, or confused.
- Worry no one will believe them.
- Think the abuse was their fault.
- Do not understand the abuse was wrong.
- Were threatened, bribed, or manipulated by the perpetrator.
- Want to protect the perpetrator, especially if they are a family member, relative, boyfriend, or girlfriend.
- Want to protect their family's safety, reputation, or economic well-being.

A child's first disclosure is often the truth. If a child later changes their story or claims the abuse never happened, it doesn't mean they lied.

A CHILD MAY CHANGE THEIR STORY DUE TO:

- Pressure or a lack of support.
- Fear of what will happen next or changes in their life.
- Feeling responsible for any outcomes that followed the disclosure.
- A range of other reasons.

STEP 2

Respond & Act

How you respond when a child tells you about abuse or seeks your help is crucial for them to feel safe. Your reaction can determine whether they feel believed and protected, or whether they feel more scared and isolated.

A CALM, SUPPORTIVE RESPONSE MAKES IT MORE LIKELY THEY WILL TRUST YOU AND FEEL ABLE TO ASK FOR HELP IN FUTURE.

Stay calm. Avoid getting angry, blaming, or scolding.

Listen. Try to let them explain in their own words and avoid forcing them to speak.

Tell them that what happened was **not their fault** and they were right to tell you.

Immediately seek **medical care** for the child, even if they do not seem injured.

If it is safe, **preserve evidence**, such as chat messages, clothing, photos, videos, and witness details.

As soon as it is safe, **contact authorities and/or an NGO.** You can contact LICADHO with the details below.

Explain how you will keep them safe, their rights, and what to expect next. Avoid making promises you cannot keep, such as that you won't tell anyone if telling someone is needed to keep them safe.

Protect the child from further harm. Take all possible safe steps to ensure the perpetrator has no further contact with them.

STEP 3

Protect From Further Harm



Prioritise the child's safety and well-being, even if the perpetrator is someone you know or trusted. Ideally, the perpetrator should have no further contact with the child and should not be alone with another child.

Perpetrators are often someone known to the child, such as their family member, relative, boyfriend/girlfriend, neighbour, friend, peer, or someone else in their community.

Children and adolescents must be protected from further harm, even if doing so disrupts harmonious relationships or reputations within the family or community. In particular, children must never be made to marry the perpetrator following sexual violence.

CONSIDER IF THE OPTIONS BELOW ARE POSSIBLE:

OPTION 1

Ideally, the perpetrator should be removed from the child's home or community with the support of authorities, such as via a protection order or arrest/detention.

Consider if you and the child can safely move elsewhere. See LICADHO's Safety Tips (www.licadho-cambodia.org/safety-and-justice) if you are facing domestic violence and considering leaving. Children's well-being is higher in a safe home environment, even if that means their parents are separated.

OPTION 2

OPTION 3

If the above options are not immediately possible, carefully consider if the child can live in another safe home environment, such as with a trusted relative.

Institutional care should only be considered if a safe family environment is not available. A safe shelter or other institution may be temporarily necessary for the child's safety.

OPTION 4

STEP 4

Understand Behaviour Change

Experiencing violence or abuse can have long and complex impacts on a child's health, well-being, and development, even when they are no longer at-risk of further harm. Children can similarly be deeply impacted by witnessing domestic violence.

It is normal for children to experience diverse emotions and behaviour changes following abuse. It is also normal if you do not notice any changes. Understanding that their response is normal can help you to show compassion and patience.

A CHILD OR ADOLESCENT MIGHT:

- Seem sad, tired, numb, afraid, or withdrawn.
- Be angry, aggressive, or destructive.
- Have difficulty following their regular schedule, studying, doing chores, concentrating, or remembering things.
- Change their eating, sleep, or hygiene habits; have nightmares or wet the bed.
- Be scared or avoidant of certain situations, places, people, or things.
- Be more active than usual, such as being jumpy, fidgeting, or trying to stay busy.
- Want more or less of your attention and affection.
- Avoid socialising or have more conflict with others.
- Feel unwell, such as having stomach-aches or headaches.

STEP 5

Provide Long-Term Care

Experiencing violence can have long-term impacts on children and adolescents. Your ongoing support can help them physically and emotionally recover.

DO:

- ✓ Show **compassion** and **patience** for their feelings and behaviours.
- ✓ Provide **emotional support** by checking in with them, listening when they want to share, asking what they need to feel safe, and reassuring them that their feelings are valid.
- ✓ Maintain **regular and predictable routines** (meals, school, bedtimes, chores, etc.); spend time doing activities with them that they enjoy.
- ✓ **Ask what types of physical contact** they feel comfortable with. Even physical touch that is typically considered caring or playful (hugs, kisses, tickling, picking up, etc.) by someone they are close to can make a child feel unsafe.
- ✓ **Explain** to the child what they should expect during interactions with medical providers, authorities, or the courts. An NGO can help do this.
- ✓ If possible, provide a **home environment** where they feel safe, comfortable, and cared for.



AVOID:

- ✗ Use of **violence, punishment, or blame**.
- ✗ **Unnecessarily asking** questions or repeatedly speaking near them about the incident in detail.
- ✗ **Pressuring** them to talk; children shouldn't be unnecessarily asked questions or made to share information with people in their life or community who do not need to know.

Contact

The Cambodian League for the Promotion & Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO):
012 536 300 or 015 553 855

For more information and resources, visit the **Safety & Justice** website
www.licadho-cambodia.org/safety-and-justice

