

Children and infants' programs

In Australia, one child in four witnesses family violence. Children living in a violent home are at a greater risk of suffering violence directly and can be used to manipulate one partner against the other. Exposure to family violence can affect every aspect of children's lives. However, with a safe environment and the right support, children can recover from the trauma of family violence.

Emerge is one of two family violence refuges in Victoria that has a specific mental health program for infants and children which is run through its refuge, crisis and outreach services. The program is funded wholly by the community and through philanthropic grants.

Our approach is governed by the philosophy that the needs of the child are equal to the needs of the mother. The program is underpinned by the ethos of giving children and infants the opportunity to play and communicate in a safe and respectful environment free from abuse.

Our dedicated children's case managers work closely with children who have experienced family violence to help ensure they are safe and have access to the local services, such as local schools, to address the children's health, medical and education needs. Every infant and child supported by Emerge receives a tailored safety plan.

Babies and infants

Emerge's work in infant well-being is influenced by the work of Australian expert Dr Wendy Bunston, author of *"Refuge for babies in crisis. How crisis accommodation services can assist infants and their mothers affected by family violence."*

Our focus with babies and infants is to rebuild the relationship with their mothers. We do this in two ways: one to one assistance for mothers and infants who may find it difficult to be part of a group, as well as therapeutic group work. One of our pioneering programs is the Peek-A-Boo Club™, a mental health program for infants who have experienced family violence. Emerge have been offering this program since 2013. The program is infant led in approach incorporating arts therapy that focuses on the relationship between the mother and the infant, which is a fundamental starting point for the healing process to begin.

Arts therapy

Emerge offers infant and child arts therapy programs where our art therapists address the emotional well-being of the children through a mix of arts, play and therapeutic counselling.

Strong emphasis is placed on creative play sessions which are informal and child-led. Emphasis is also placed on protective behaviour strategies which assists children in getting in touch with their feelings, recognise safe and unsafe feelings and develop protective behaviours and develop safety networks.

The therapists assist children to express their feelings and fears and become more confident and skilled in solving problems as well as asking for help when they need it. Their work with mothers is focused on helping them enjoy playing with their children, understand their children's worries and feelings, developing open communication, and increasing their listening skills.

Among our programs focused on child well-being is **TRAK Forward**. Developed by Emerge, Anglicare and Stepping Up, TRAK is a long term, therapeutic program that provides women and children the option of support for up to one year. All participants have access to a Therapeutic Recovery Worker as well as the option of participation in a group program that is best suited to them.

These group work programs include: Peek-A-Boo Club™ (for infants aged 0-3 and their mothers), 'Beyond the Violence' group (for children aged 0-18 and their mothers) and parent and child counselling which is one-one-one or family therapy work (for children aged 4 – 18 and their mothers).

Children and family violence

According to Victoria's *Family Violence Protection Act 2008*, family violence includes behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear, witness or otherwise be exposed to the effects of family violence.

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Over 400,000 women in Australia had experienced violence by a partner during pregnancy, according to a national 2015 survey.

In the same survey, close to 750,000 women said they had children in their care when they experienced violence by a former partner they lived with.

When are children affected by domestic and family violence?

Children are affected by violence and abuse if they:

- Witness or hear the violence against their parent, guardian or carer, or see their fear
- Have to hide or run from abuse because they are afraid
- Have to constantly watch themselves around an abuser to try to prevent outbursts
- Have to comfort, clean up or take extra responsibilities for siblings, their parent or primary carer or others in the home following violence
- Are victimised for supporting their parent or primary carer
- Are encouraged to join in with abuse or contempt for their parent, guardian or carer
- Cannot be cared for properly due to the abuse, or because the abuse is causing poor mental health and exhaustion for their parent or primary carer
- Experience poor bonding with their parent or primary carer as infants because of domestic or family violence
- Are abused themselves – people who abuse their partners or ex-partners often abuse their children as well
- Are forced to have ongoing contact with someone who scares them or whose presence reminds them of times when they have been traumatised (that is, the person acts as a 'trauma trigger')

The impacts of domestic and family violence on children

Living with domestic and family violence is a distressing experience for children. The effects can be traumatising, ongoing and long-lasting. They can build up over time and impact on every aspect of children's lives, including health, development and wellbeing.