



# How Do I Keep My Young Child Safe From an Abuser?

## Ten tips for keeping your infant or toddler safe from a parent who is a domestic abuser

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*“The court system acknowledged that my ex is a danger to me, an adult, by granting me a protective order. How can they then order my one-year-old—who is so young and helpless—to spend weekends with him, unsupervised?”*

– A protective mother, who was abused by her child’s father

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are unable to protect themselves, flee, seek help or describe their experiences adequately. At the same time, we know that young brains are affected by traumatic and stressful events. Young children feel distress from signals inside their bodies and from the outside world. Chronic distress sends stress hormones routinely coursing through children’s bodies. This early trauma marks their emotional brains and their bodies, even if they have no words yet to describe what they are experiencing.

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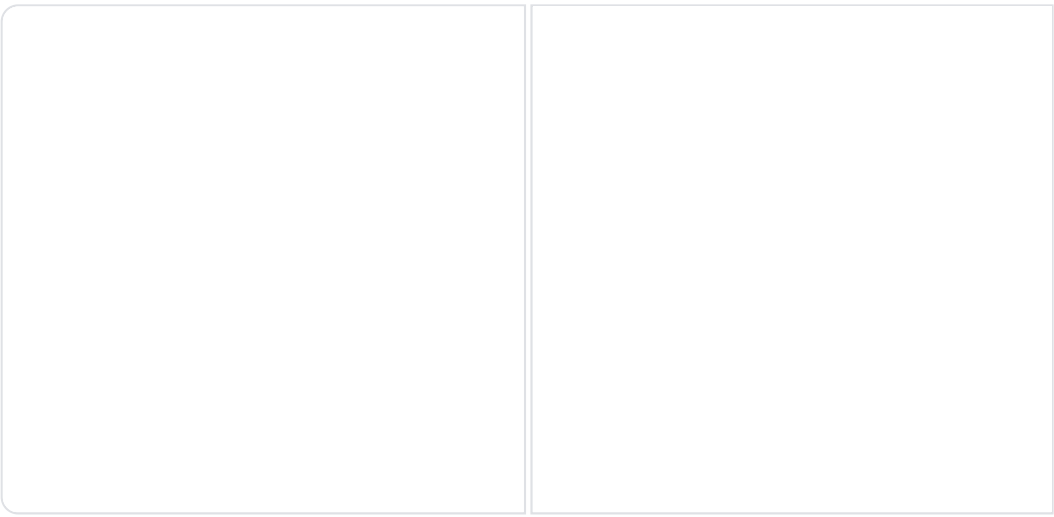
These early stressors may affect children throughout their lives, showing up as bodily pain and illness, anxiety and depression. Children who experience yelling and abuse or who are neglected may become difficult to soothe and chronically “on edge.” If young children are not held, cuddled, rocked and soothed, they may have disturbed relationships for years. People who suffer in their infancy may have difficulty with attachment. That is, they may struggle with becoming close to others.

Domestic abusers put children at risk for harm. What can parents do to protect their children from the other parent, if that parent is a domestic abuser? Below, 10 things to consider:

#### Ten Steps to Take to Keep Kids Safe

1. Protective orders. Try to get your young child included in any court orders that protect you from your abuser. States vary as to the criteria and procedures for this—whether your child can be included in your order of protection or whether the child must have a separate order. State laws also vary as to what proof you need to provide of the abuser’s risk to your child for this order to be granted. In some states, the burden of proof for a temporary order is slight, but the burden of proof for a long-term (permanent) order is much greater.

2. Let others know what is going on. On the one hand, you don’t want to be seen as “out to get” your ex or ruin their reputation. On the other, you need the adults in your child’s life—such as pediatricians, childcare providers and family members—to keep their eyes open for possible signs of trouble, to note these and even call child protective services if they believe your child has been abused or is at risk. You need them to alert you if they see anything amiss. One victim/survivor said, “We finally got out of the house because a childcare provider identified something that had happened to my child and reported it to CPS, prompting an investigation that opened a door for us to leave. But if I hadn’t let them know they should



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3. Safety planning. Speak to an advocate at your local domestic violence agency about ways you (and your child) can get out of the situation as safely as possible. Start planning even if you are not yet in a position to execute your plan.
4. Document everything. Keep a journal and make sure it is kept in a safe place. Keep photographs of bruises, holes in the wall, broken objects, etc. If you have received threatening texts or instant messages, or communications that acknowledge abuse, store these safely. If it is safe, text or email someone when something happens and ask them to store your message somewhere safe (these will be time-stamped). There are also apps and other digital tools that can help you document abuse.
5. Act swiftly, especially if your young child is at immediate risk. If the abuser hits or shakes the child, forces you to ignore the child's cries, forces you to neglect the child or gives your child medication to make them sleep, your child is at immediate risk. Reach out to emergency services or a domestic violence advocate as soon as possible.
6. Is it about money? Maybe the person who abused you has never taken an interest in the child but is suddenly fighting for 50/50 parenting time as a way to try to avoid having to pay child support. If you think this is the case, speak with your lawyer and see if you have options. A good lawyer who understands domestic abuse is key to your custody case.
7. Consider geographic alternatives. You absolutely do not want to be seen as moving your child to another city or state simply to deprive the other parent of access to the child. However, if your roots and family supports are in another state, or if the abuser recently moved you to a place where you are isolated, you may be able to make the case that you and your child will be better off living in a city or state closer to supportive people, even if that happens to be away from the abuser. According to Jason V. Owens, a Massachusetts attorney

partner abuse may help the fleeing parent keep custody of the child in the new state, depending on that state's laws. Being granted an order of protection further bolsters the case.

8. Consider child protective services. If you have reason to believe your child has been abused or is at risk for abuse, contact child protective services. It is scary for a lot of people to invite CPS into their lives. However, if you can demonstrate the ways in which the abuser puts the child at risk and the steps you are taking to protect that child, CPS may be able to work on your behalf and help you keep your child safe (such as removing the abuser from the home, helping you get independent housing, etc.). Reports from teachers or the pediatrician will be taken even more seriously by CPS than reports directly from you.

9. Build a team. You cannot protect your child alone. Ask your local domestic violence agency for referrals to a lawyer and to a therapist or counselor who understands domestic abuse. Make sure you have friends who are on your side but do not confide in friends that you and the abuser share—this might be too risky.

10. Try to let go of romanticized notions about what “family” means. We have dreams about how our lives, relationships and families are going to be. Sometimes, we cannot get what we dream. Rather, we must accept what we have. The most important thing you can do for your young child is achieve emotional and physical safety. You can have a beautiful and fulfilling family life even without the child's other parent. You cannot have a beautiful, fulfilling and safe family life at the side of someone who is abusive.

*Photo by Gift Habeshaw on Unsplash.*



