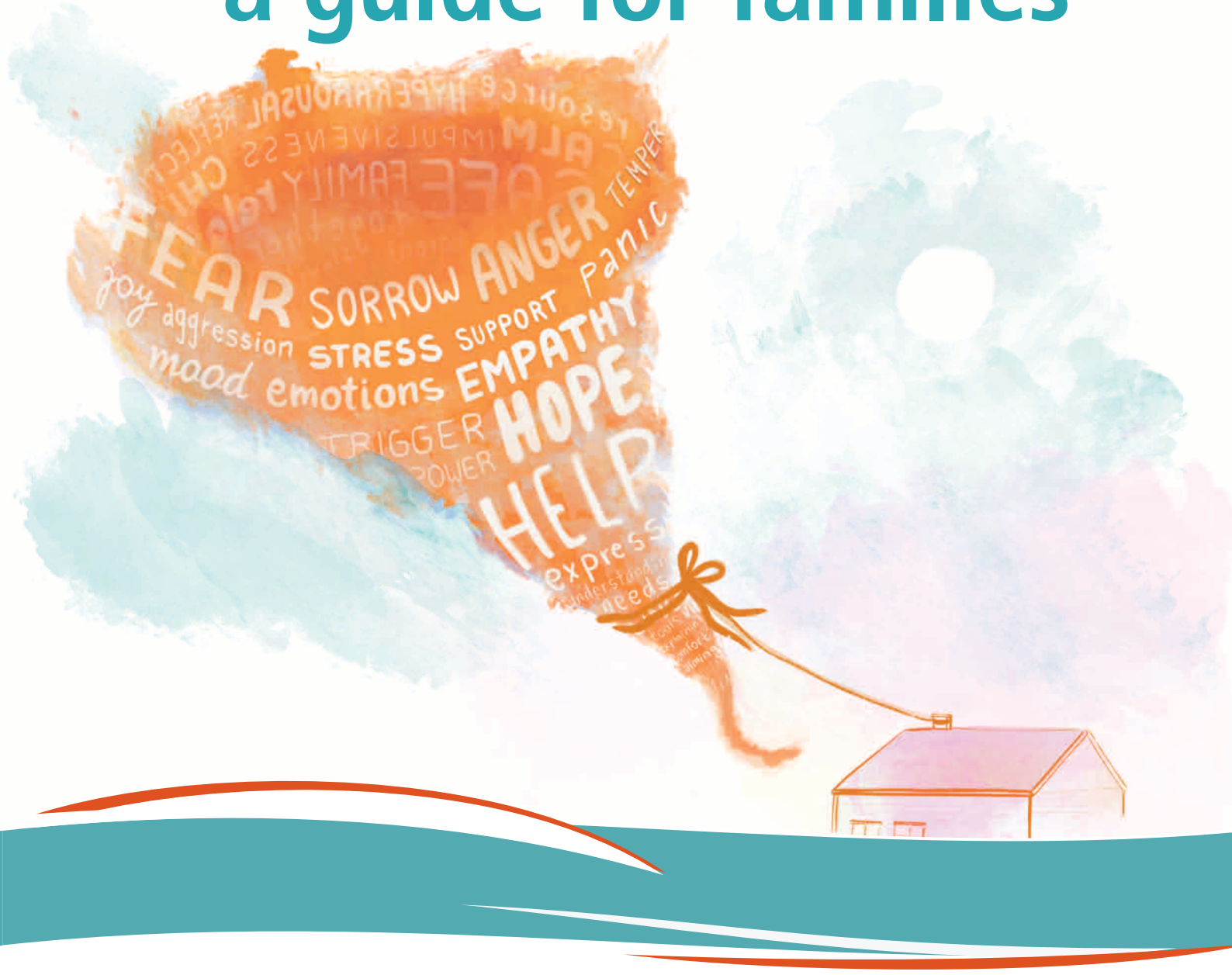


When a Child is Violent – a guide for families



When a Child is Violent – a guide for families

Tukena Foundation, 2025

When a Child is Violent – the project 2020–2022

Team of authors: Kirsi Kauppila, Hanna Rautiainen,
Riikka Seppälä, Anne Tiainen, Markku Vellas and Vesa Vilppola

Translation: Tmi Kirsi Lammi

Illustrations: Jonna Markkula

Layout: Jaakko Bashmakov / Pic Design

Print: PK-Paino Oy, 2025

ISBN: 978-952-7292-84-6 (printed)

ISBN: 978-952-7292-85-3 (published online)





For the reader

When a Child is Violent – a guide for you

When a Child is Violent – the project (2020–2022) was carried out by the Tukena Foundation and Settlement Tampere. In the project, we looked for solutions for families in which a child or young person under 25 years of age, having special support needs, was behaving violently towards other family members.

During the project, we found that the violent behaviour of children or young people with special support needs is often linked to stress, insufficient problem-solving skills, and difficulties with emotional regulation. Other underlying factors may include communication issues or loneliness. Parents who were subjected to violence described their feelings of guilt, hopelessness and not knowing what to do. The violent behaviour of their children made them feel fear and shame. The parents' fear was often linked to a feeling of insecurity regarding themselves and the siblings.

It is extremely important to speak about the violence committed by children or young people. Recognising violence is the first step towards solving the problem. When families have the

**“Violence is a strong word,
provoking emotions and challenging
our understanding.”**

courage to speak about the violence, they can receive support and guidance from professionals. If a child's violent behaviour is not recognised or taken seriously, the situation may continue or get worse. Recognising the violence can also help the child.

Violence committed by children and young people towards their parents is still a difficult topic that is rarely spoken about. Speaking about the phenomenon helps reduce shame and efforts to hide the problem, and it encourages families to seek help. It also helps communities and society to better understand how to support families with a child or young person who behaves violently.

Violent behaviour by children and young people towards their parents is both physically and

mentally challenging for the parents. Parents need to be given sufficient support and guidance to deal with these situations.

When a Child is Violent – a guide for families was written for parents. It offers practical support and improves professionals' understanding of the daily life of the families. The guide includes tips for the whole family to support a smooth everyday life that works just for them.

The fact that you are reading this shows that you have courage and hope for a future free of violence.

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide!



**Setlementti
Tampere**

Table of contents

- 7 **In the shadow of violence – what does it mean?**
 - 7 Violence committed by a child – breaking the taboo
 - 7 Differences between violence and challenging behaviour
 - 8 The difficulty of speaking about violence
 - 9 Factors leading to violence
-

- 13 **Under the surface – stress as a cause of violent behaviour**
 - 13 Recognising and regulating stress
 - 15 Tips for detecting stress proactively
 - 17 How can you help your child to understand?
 - 18 A stress profile as a tool for daily life
 - 21 How the child can relax and calm down
 - 23 How the adult can calm down
-

- 29 **How violence impacts the family**
 - 29 Parents' experiences of violent situations in daily life
 - 30 How violence impacts the arousal level
 - 32 Threatening situations
 - 35 How violence impacts the child
-

- 39 **This too shall pass, and we will manage together**
 - 39 How to act in a violent situation
 - 41 How to discuss the violent situation afterwards
-

- 45 **When to seek outside help – how to identify the right moment**

- 49 **Steps towards a daily life that works for you**
 - 49 Mercyfulness and self-compassion as a resource in parenting
 - 51 Self-compassion skills are concrete skills that can be practiced
-

- 55 **Hope as a resource**
 - 55 Hope as a resource in families facing violence
 - 55 Hope as the fundamental force of life
 - 56 The link between hope and despair
 - 58 The mission of hope
-

- 63 **Finally**
 - 63 You will be all right
 - 63 The work on the theme of When a Child is Violent will continue
 - 64 Definitions of violence
 - 64 Do not remain silent about violence!
-

- 65 **References**
-



In the shadow of violence – what does it mean?

Violence committed by a child – breaking the taboo

The stories of the parents we met during the When a Child is Violent project were very similar. The parents described feelings of shame, guilt, fatigue, anxiety and even anger caused by the violence committed by their children. In their daily lives, they had worries and fears and were suffering from sleeping problems and various somatic symptoms. A child's violent behaviour always concerns the whole family, and our society does not really have a shared language to talk about it.

Almost without exception, the parents participating in the project had experienced problems getting help and felt that the service system was unable to recognise and respond to the diverse challenges faced by special needs families. When parents are already struggling to cope with their stressful daily lives and, when seeking help, find services unresponsive, it understandably takes a heavy toll on their resources and capacity to carry on. This guide aims not only to offer practical support to parents but also to improve professionals' understanding

of the daily lives of the families.

Recognising violent behaviour and calling it violence can help both parents and professionals to better understand the effects of violence. In this guide, the focus is on violence committed by children in its various forms, with the aim of improving our understanding of the factors leading to violence. It also proposes means to anticipate violent situations, to act in the situations, and to deal with them afterwards in a way that supports the well-being of the entire family.

Differences between violence and challenging behaviour

Violence committed by children – what are we talking about? At the moment, the concept of children's challenging behaviour keeps coming up in many different contexts. The term 'challenging behaviour' is useful in describing, for example, a child's undesirable or norm-breaking behaviour. From the point of view of violence prevention work, the use of this term has its challenges.

We should distinguish between violent behaviour and challenging behaviour. It is particularly

important to recognise the phenomenon and the perpetrator. Therefore, we will first take a look at the terminology and how it is used.

Challenging behaviour often refers to behaviour that is inappropriate to the situation in which it occurs. Challenging behaviour may cause harm to the person themselves, other people or property. It may also be viewed from the perspective of whether the behaviour in question is just inappropriate and incompatible with norms, or harmful or dangerous. It is important to keep in mind that behind challenging behaviour, we almost always find elevated stress levels and mental overload.

An example of challenging behaviour:

A child runs and screams loudly inside the house and pours a drink from a bottle onto the floor. The child is unable to listen to verbal instructions from the parent and is defiant.

The term 'challenging behaviour' is often also thought to comprise behaviours that fit the definition of violence. In practice, violence may include, for example, beating, kicking, scratching, pushing, spitting, etc. People may avoid using the word 'violence' in order not to stigmatise, especially when speaking about vulnerable persons. From the point of view of violence prevention, it is important to call things by their correct names. Speaking about violence does not label anyone as a violent person, it is the behaviour that is considered violent.

An example of violent behaviour: A child runs and screams loudly inside the house and throws a drink bottle towards the parent. The child is unable to listen to verbal instructions from the parent and threatens to hit if the parent comes closer. The parent must intervene, and the child scratches and kicks.

THINGS FOR PARENTS TO CONSIDER

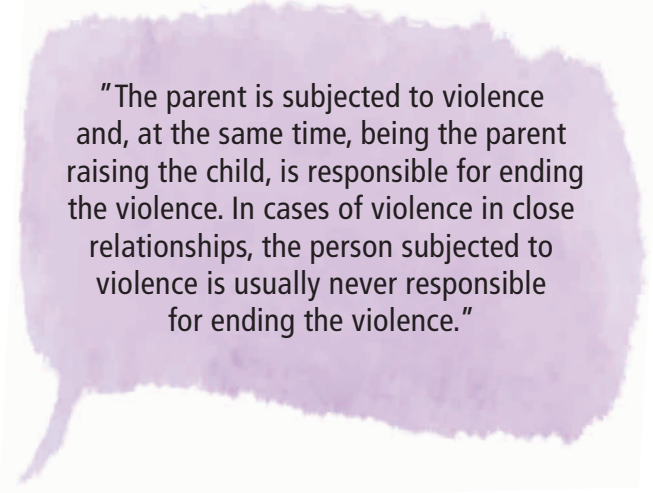
- Do you use the word 'challenging' at a general level to describe your child's violent behaviour?
- What kind of feelings and thoughts do you have about using the words 'challenging' and 'violence'?
- How would you like professionals to relate to using the words 'challenging' and 'violence'?
- How could you bring up your child's violent behaviour when discussing with a professional?
- Is there anything that may prevent you from speaking directly about violence?

The difficulty of speaking about violence

Bringing up the topic of violence is difficult for many parents, and it may be hard to express your experiences in words. This may be because you fear that your parenting is put into question, and you may have feelings of guilt and shame. Many parents are also afraid of the consequences it may have for the child and the family if violence is spoken about.

Violence committed by children towards their parents or siblings is one of the least recognised and studied forms of violence in close relationships. In the service system, the main focus is often on giving individual support to the violent child or young person, as well as on supporting the parenting skills of the parent. The ways in which being subjected to violence impacts the parent and siblings as individuals, unfortunately, often receive no attention. This is linked to a unique and, to say the least, paradoxical phenomenon: the parent is subjected to violence and, at the same time, as the parent raising the child, is responsible for ending the violence. In cases of violence in close relationships, the person subjected to violence is usually never responsible for ending the violence, but the relationship between a child and a parent is an exception to this rule. This makes the situation more challenging, adds to the feeling of shame and makes speaking about it more difficult.

For other people, such as family and friends or professionals, it may also be difficult to bring the



"The parent is subjected to violence and, at the same time, being the parent raising the child, is responsible for ending the violence. In cases of violence in close relationships, the person subjected to violence is usually never responsible for ending the violence."

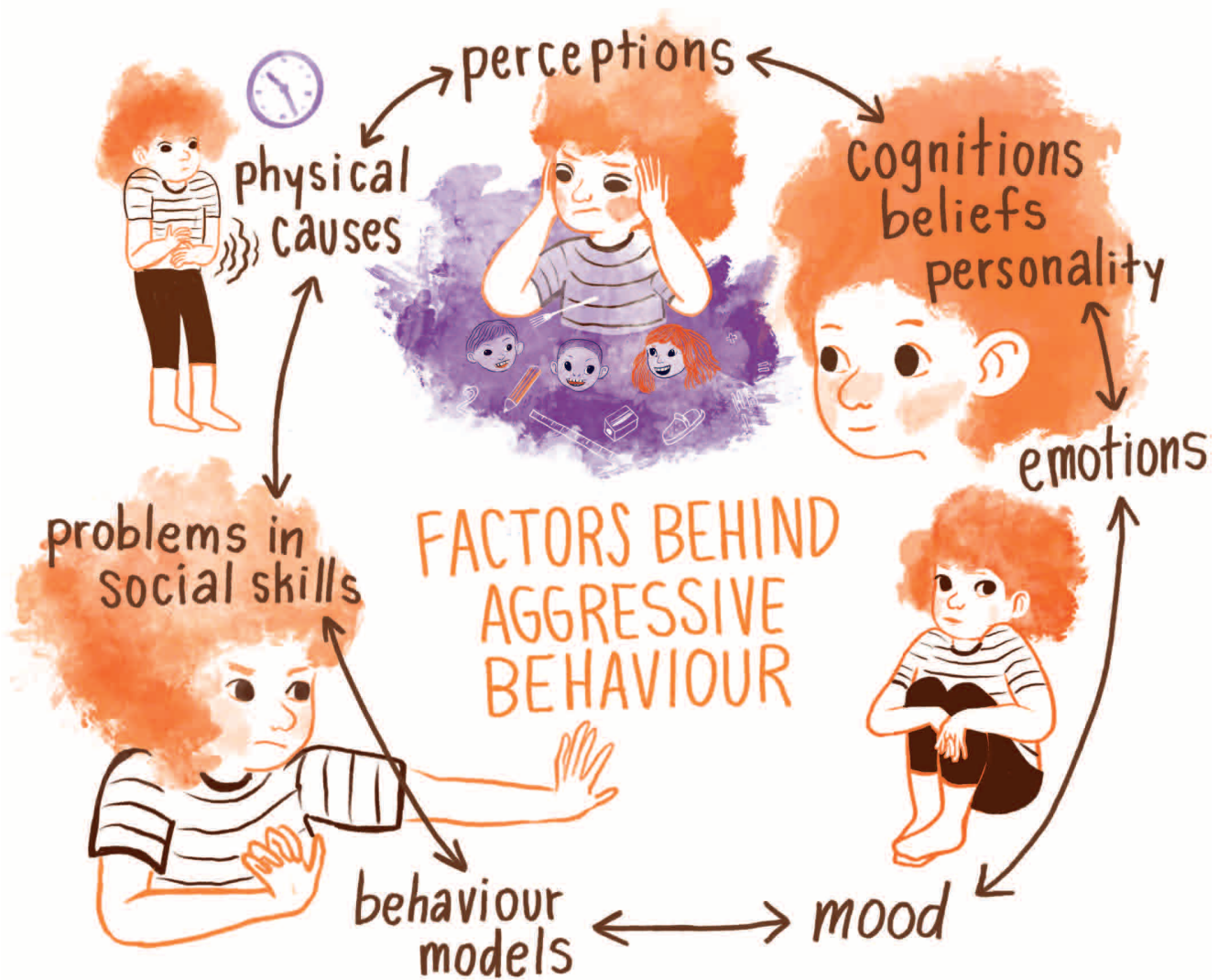
topic of violence into discussion or to listen to the parent's experiences of being subjected to violence. The topic may become a taboo, when other people don't know how to relate to it or to speak about it.

People react in different ways when faced with topics that are difficult for them. They may, for example, try to avoid and silence the topic, downplay or scandalise the matter, or have difficulties believing it is true. If a person has never experienced violence, dealing with violence may be very difficult and may even cause anxiety.

If parents are faced with negative reactions when speaking about violence, this may enhance their feeling that it is a forbidden topic. It is important to keep in mind that if parents find it difficult to speak about violence, they are less likely able to cope with it.

Factors leading to violence

Being subjected to violence almost invariably causes a lot of shame in a person, and this is also true of parents who are subjected to violence. In addition, they also feel shame, because they don't know how to end the violence. It is crucial that professionals are able to guide parents in the correct way to handle a violent child – to anticipate situations and to identify factors that increase the risk of violence, keeping in mind the well-being of the whole family. This calls for a profound professional skill in identifying the underlying causes of violent



behaviour: for example, the child's physical needs, cognitive factors, learned behaviour models, neuropsychiatric features, or challenges in communication and self-expression.

Potential factors that increase the risk of a child's violent behaviour:

- the child's feeling of being underestimated or oppressed
- the child is not heard, listened to or understood
- challenges in expressing one's thoughts and wishes
- the child does not understand other people, the



Under the surface – stress as a cause of violent behaviour

Recognising and regulating stress

When discussing violence committed by a child or young person, it is important to identify the underlying causes of the behaviour and to take a holistic view of the child's life and stress factors. Violence may be a symptom of the child's ill-being or insecure attachment, or an effort to vent their traumatic experiences and, for example, the feeling of being neglected. Visible violent behaviour may also be a consequence of communication issues, the child's neuropsychiatric features or neurological specificities, or simply overload. These two different scenarios – a child subjected to violence and insecure attachment, and a child reacting to other factors – should be recognised and kept separate.

There are a lot of stress factors in children's lives affecting their arousal level as well as learning and co-operation skills. Stress is not always bad. It also improves coping skills but only when it exceeds the child's previous skill level by just a very narrow margin and has a limited duration. Problems arise when the child experiences stress that is too much for them, considering the amount of help they get from their environment. This may happen in many

everyday environments: at home, in day care, at school, in leisure time, when shopping, visiting, participating in hobby activities, or even spending time with friends. Excessive and persistent stress may lead to violent behaviour by the child or young person – this is a desperate way of trying to cope in a chaotic situation.

Stress may be caused by, for example, issues with perception and executive function, sensory overload from the environment, changes in daily routines, or transfers from one place to another, or if the child or young person does not understand what is expected of them. Spoken information may not be understood, and the child needs to be supported with alternative and augmentative communication methods. Open learning environments, noisy spaces, large groups, fast-changing situations, a school world which requires high self-direction, and frequent changes in the professional team around the child or young person are likely to increase their stress level.

STRESSFUL FACTORS INCLUDE BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

- Sensory hyper- and hyposensitivity
- Issues with executive function
- Difficulty perceiving situations as a whole
- Unprecedented changes in ordinary daily routines
- Unclear situations where the children or adolescents don't understand what is expected of them
- Difficulty perceiving cause and effect
- Feeling lonely and left out
- Feelings of shame and of being different

The stress-regulating parts of the brains of children and young people are still developing, and they need adult guidance in order to sort out their emotions and restore their well-being to a good level. When children or young people experience stress that is too much for them to cope with, considering the level of help available, they find it difficult to act in a positive manner. However, this idea is easily overshadowed by many other signals, and behaviour resulting from stress may be misinterpreted as defiance or resistance.

It is important to bear in mind that all actions, including the seemingly irrational behaviours of children and young people, always have a purpose. Children and young people don't behave badly on purpose, they may just be incapable of functioning

"It is important to bear in mind that all actions, including the seemingly irrational behaviours of children and young people, always have a purpose. Children and young people don't behave badly on purpose, they may just be incapable of functioning in an appropriate way in a given moment."

in an appropriate way in a given moment. Situations in which children feel at a loss and have too much stress are often unbearable for them. For example, a chaotic or very strong sensory experience may arouse involuntary physiological defence mechanisms – fight, flee or freeze – which may lead them to an extended state of hyper- or hypoarousal. They may first become restless or aggressive or try to get away from the situation, or they may get stuck in their thoughts or withdraw into their inner world. All actions are rooted in the nervous system and the reactions it regulates; they are non-conscious decisions that cannot be reasonably explained at the moment.

Parents and professionals will greatly benefit from learning to understand each child and young person's individual ways of getting stressed, the factors that impair their functioning and the ways in which they communicate about these factors. This will allow adults to offer children suitable ways to calm themselves and restore their lost functioning. At best, this will prevent situations from getting stuck and exploding into a fight, with negative consequences for the whole family.

Tips for detecting stress proactively

1. Observe the child's movements and body language.
2. Notice a restless / wandering gaze.
3. Recognise the tone of voice that indicates stress.
4. Pay attention to short sentences and gestures.

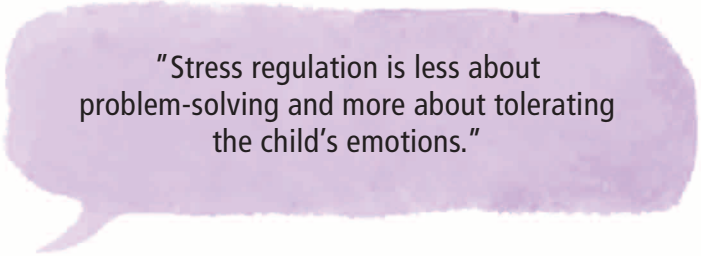
It is also important for adults in day care and school to be aware of the stress factors affecting the child, as well as of the ways in which the child is able to calm down. The most typical ways to support the child in calming down include, but are not limited to, allowing the child to be in a quiet room as well as offering aids for sensory regulation, hearing protection, or various tactile objects that help to soothe the senses and regulate the level of arousal. When considering the different methods available, it is important to keep in mind the individual needs of each child. What works for one child does not necessarily work for another. It must be kept in mind that, for example, different anti-stress balls, rubber bands or seat cushions available for stress regulation may offer excellent support for concentration for some children and young people, while others may feel ashamed of using them. It is also important to listen to what is helpful for each individual child or young person and how they wish to be helped.

Stress regulation involves concrete practical actions to support the child in regulating stress and to increase the flexibility of the environment. It also involves a conscious modification of adult attitudes. In order to recognise and regulate stress factors, adults must pause to scrutinise the

preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes underlying their thinking and actions. This means that they should reassess their approach if, in their interaction with the child, they have thoughts like:

- ... all other kids your age can do it
- ... why is this so difficult
- ... nothing ever works with you
- ... why are you acting so strangely
- ... what's the matter with you, that was nothing
- ... just get on with it
- ... you just need to focus
- ... it's just a matter of wanting to do it
- ... this is easy, anyone can do it

In other words, stress regulation involves recognising your own bodily reactions and thinking patterns, consciously 'clearing' your mind of ideas on how things should be, and seeing what the child needs right now and what would help the child in this situation.



"Stress regulation is less about problem-solving and more about tolerating the child's emotions."

METHODS OF ENCOUNTERING AND SUPPORTING A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON WHO IS EASILY STRESSED:

- See the individual differences underlying the stress – hunger, tiredness, being misunderstood.
 - Adjust your expectations to a suitable level – pay attention to the level of arousal and to the child's executive function skills.
 - Keep in mind that even nice things may be stressful – observe and listen to the child carefully, assume nothing.
 - Remember that the child wants to do their best and succeed – everyone wants to succeed.
 - Make the necessary adjustments to the environment at home, in day care and at school – create an environment where success is possible.
 - Make daily life more predictable – repetition and clarity add to security.
 - Give clear instructions and make your expectations clear – the shorter, the better.
 - Pay attention to sensory regulation – adapt and adjust.
 - Offer support for social situations – verbalise, repeat and ask what would be helpful right now.
 - Help the child regulate their emotions – set an example by regulating yours.
 - Take into consideration the child's inner world – emotions, thoughts, interpretations, experiences, understanding of themselves and their strengths.
- käsitys itsestä ja omista vahvuuksista.

QUESTIONS TO HELP DETERMINE THE CHILD'S STRESS LEVEL AND DAILY FUNCTIONING:

- In what kind of situations does the child or young person have challenging or violent behaviour?
- What kind of potential factors/situations/emotions/physical reactions can you identify that cause challenging or violent behaviour? Are they repeated from one situation to the next?
 - What is the message the child or young person is trying to communicate with their behaviour? Does your child have enough ways to express themselves and their needs, thoughts and emotions?
 - What are the ways in which you can support your child's interaction and communication for the child to understand others and for others to understand the child as well as possible?

How can you help your child to understand?

Regardless of diagnosis or support needs, all children benefit from visualising speech: adults can reinforce their message by speaking clearly, varying the tone of their voice, and by using gaze, gestures or pictures, for example. The adult should engage in joint attention with the child and put things into words: in other words, verbalise situations and events. The adult should speak in a clear and sufficiently simple language. It's a good idea to ask one question at a time and verify that the child has understood correctly.

If the child's ability to observe and interpret the environment is deficient or their early development is delayed, the child will need special support with interaction. Communication issues may be congenital and linked to, for example, cerebral palsy, learning disability, the autism spectrum or a developmental language disorder. Powerful emotions may also impact a child's ability to understand messages or to express themselves.

When needed, children can express their thoughts by pointing and answering questions with a yes / no / I don't know. Writing or drawing can help both parties to clarify their expressions and to receive messages from each other. Pictures can also be used to support communication. Even if a child primarily communicates by speaking, the use of pictures helps them understand things and make sense of the context. Structuring the day or a new situation by dividing it into smaller parts with the help of pictures or drawings, for example, makes things clearer and supports understanding.

Alternative and augmentative communication methods include:

- pictures, communication binder
- objects
- activity, modelling of activity
- baby sign and gestures
- writing and drawing
- social stories, cartoons
- technical aids, applications and software

Checklist for parents:

- Learning and mastering communication methods may take time.
- Practice them together in peaceful situations.
- Don't criticise yourself.
- Find out about possibilities for the child and the whole family to receive rehabilitation, instruction and aids for communication.

Focus on clarity and use alternative means of communication:

- give stepwise instructions with the help of pictures or social stories
- communicate one thing at a time
- give structure – before, now, next
- use cards with yes / no / I don't know
- drawing
- nodding
- touching
- other individualised methods, baby sign and communication software

Interaction and communication in threatening situations

- Anticipation: talk about things when everyone is calm. Help the child regulate and let them

vent about stress in acceptable ways that you have agreed on.

- You can only help others calm down if you are calm yourself. During a fight or flight reaction, it may be difficult to calm down. Identify your own methods of calming down and use them.
- Give your undivided attention if needed. Listen. When necessary, try to establish the reason causing the aggression.
- If you speak, do so clearly and in short sentences. Use alternative communication methods when needed. Take into account individual preferences: tolerance of eye contact, tolerance of touch, distance.
- Praise the child for calming down.

Things for parents to consider

- Does your child have enough ways to express themselves and their thoughts and feelings?
- What are the ways in which you can support your child's interaction and communication, so the child can understand others and others can understand the child as well as possible?

A stress profile as a tool for daily life

Venting to cope with stress and parental emotions – an example, described with the help of the Stress Profile tool (page 19).

Tip: In your adult role, you can also complete your own stress profile to increase your understanding of yourself in different everyday situations. Also, consider the benefits of completing a stress profile as well as any challenges related to its use. Take your time to analyse your thoughts on the tool as

well as to determine the best ways to use it for supporting a smoother daily life and reinforcing your own resources.

The Stress Profile tool, developed by *Meri Lähteenoksa*, helps identify things that improve or impair a child's functioning. This is a practical everyday tool that only takes 15 minutes to complete. It's a quick way to obtain valuable information about how the child experiences and expresses stress and how you can protect the child from overload and help them recover from stress. The stress profile helps identify the self-regulation skills that are the most helpful for each individual child. It's a good idea to also complete stress profiles for the other family members. Completing a stress profile may be a pleasant moment in the middle of your daily life.

How to use the Stress Profile:

You only need paper and a pen. Divide the sheet of paper into three lines and three columns, making a total of 9 squares.

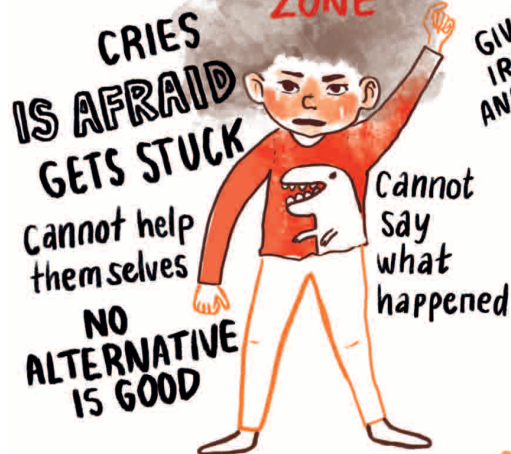
The bottom line is for the green light.

You can draw a happy face on the left side. On the bottom line, describe what the person is like at their best. In the bottom right-hand corner, write what the person needs in order to stay in the green zone. In the brain, this corresponds to a situation in which the innermost areas of the brain can rest while a lot of activity is going on in the cortex.

The middle line is for the yellow light.

In the left-most square, draw a tired face. At this

WHEN THE CHILD IS IN THE RED ZONE



WHEN THE CHILD IS IN THE YELLOW ZONE



WHEN THE CHILD IS IN THE GREEN ZONE



WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

- Unclear instructions
- Oral-only instructions
- Functioning in a group
 - Physical contact (sports, queuing)
 - Being laughed at
 - Noises (cafeteria)
 - Even pleasant things

point, the preconditions for learning and self-control have become weaker. In the middle square, on the middle line, list signs indicating, for the person and others, that the person is growing tired (memory failing, difficult to focus, sensory issues increasing, moves restlessly, stares, gets stuck, etc.). In the right-hand square, list ways of helping the person to get back to the green zone. These are anticipatory self-regulation methods suitable for children. Parents can remind them of these

WHAT RESTORES FUNCTIONING?

- Being alone with a secure adult
- A mini break on your own
- A toy of your own
- Tasks which allow a personal output
- Foot massage
- Explaining things with the help of pictures and drawings

methods, or they can use them independently.

The top line is for the red light.

The defence reaction has started. Special action is needed to restore learning ability and impulse control. On the left, draw two pictures of faces: an angry one and one which has withdrawn into itself. In the middle square, write how the person can recognise entering the red zone and how others can notice it (swears, throws objects,

attacks others, tries to leave the situation, runs away, withdraws into oneself, etc.). In the right-hand square, write ways of helping the person return to the green zone. These are also self-regulation methods that the child should ideally be able to use independently or with guidance by a parent.

The Stress Profile provides important information. The Stress Profile offers important information that can be used to prevent challenging situations and proactively reduce everyday problems. Studying the Stress Profile is a good way to quickly obtain valuable information that makes coping with everyday problems easier. You will find out what stresses your child, what you can do to reduce stress and how to help the child recover.

Benefits of using the Stress Profile

1. You can distinguish between the child's personality and the child's stress reaction.

A child who is easily stressed and susceptible to stress may receive a lot of negative attention because of their behaviour. This may lead to a distorted image of the self, where the image of the child shrinks to only comprise the stress reactions. Sometimes, when life is very stressful, we develop thoughts that say someone ALWAYS acts a certain way. Using a stress profile improves our ability to make more realistic observations of one another.

2. Your understanding increases and your daily life becomes more balanced.

The stress profile helps establish a neutral shared

language in the family, promoting interaction, reducing misunderstandings and preventing conflicts. Together, you will learn to recognise the circumstances causing stress for each member of the family and learn how to support one another.

3. You will find it easier to cope with everyday problems.

You learn to anticipate problems and, on the other hand, get advice on how to deal with the issues that arise. In the beginning, it may be challenging to identify the things needed for feeling good and ways to achieve them. Through practice, however, you will learn to recognise them better. You can redefine the methods you listed as many times as you want. This will give you more control of everyday issues.

4. It is also suitable for use in day care and school.

The stress profile is also an excellent tool for other adults around the child, such as day care staff or school teachers. Parents can include the stress profile tool as a part of parent-child-staff meetings and collect observations from both the parents and the staff members. At the same time, other educators get to know your child better and learn how to best help your child to continue learning and functioning.

5. You will learn to observe your own level of stress.

Active use of the stress profile will also help you monitor the stress level of your own brain and steer your life in a more peaceful direction, towards a more balanced daily life.

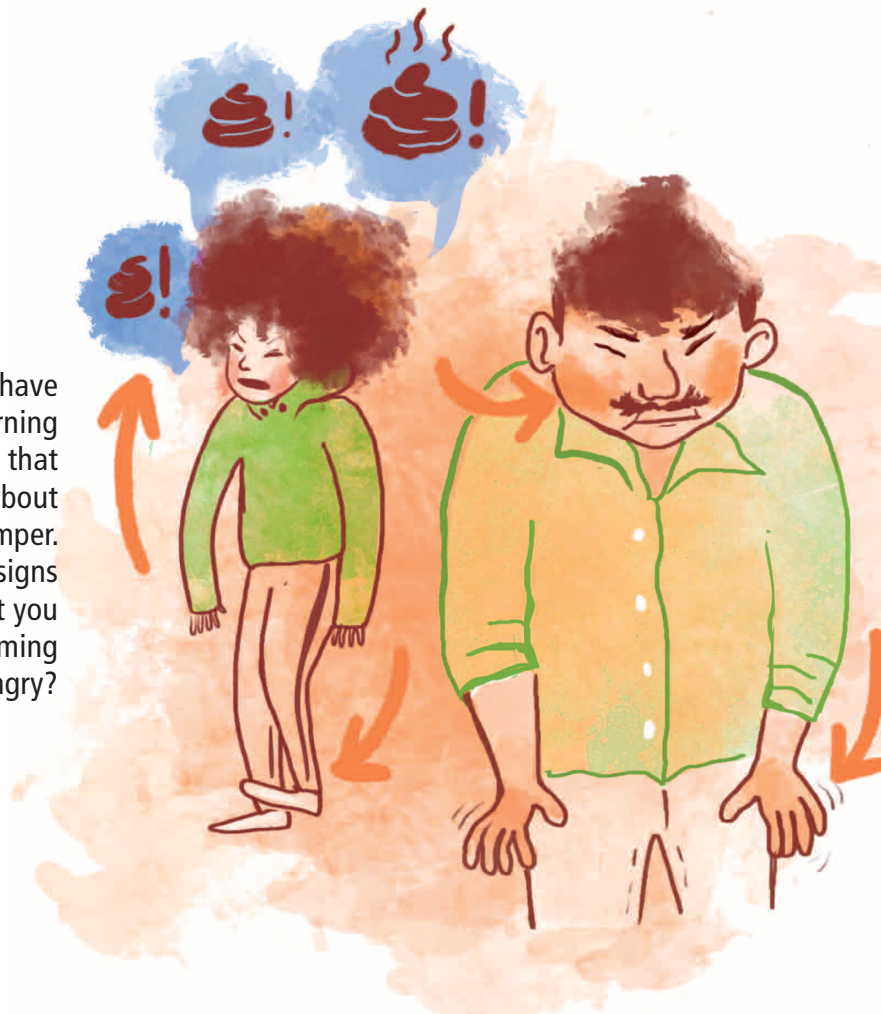
Tips for building a spot for calming down:

- Build it together with the child.
- It may be located in the child's room or in the family's shared rooms.
- It could be a large cushion or a beanbag, it could have a roof, or it could be a hut.

- You can choose colours that the child finds soothing or decorate it with pictures the child likes.
- The space should "look like" the child and it should be something the child likes.
- You can include pleasant objects, such as a calming glitter jar.

How to recognise anger

We all have physical warning signs indicating that the person is about to lose their temper. What are the signs showing that you are becoming angry?



Discuss what could be a suitable spot for calming down for each member of the family. What other ways do your family members have to calm down?



How can I help a child or young person after a violent situation?

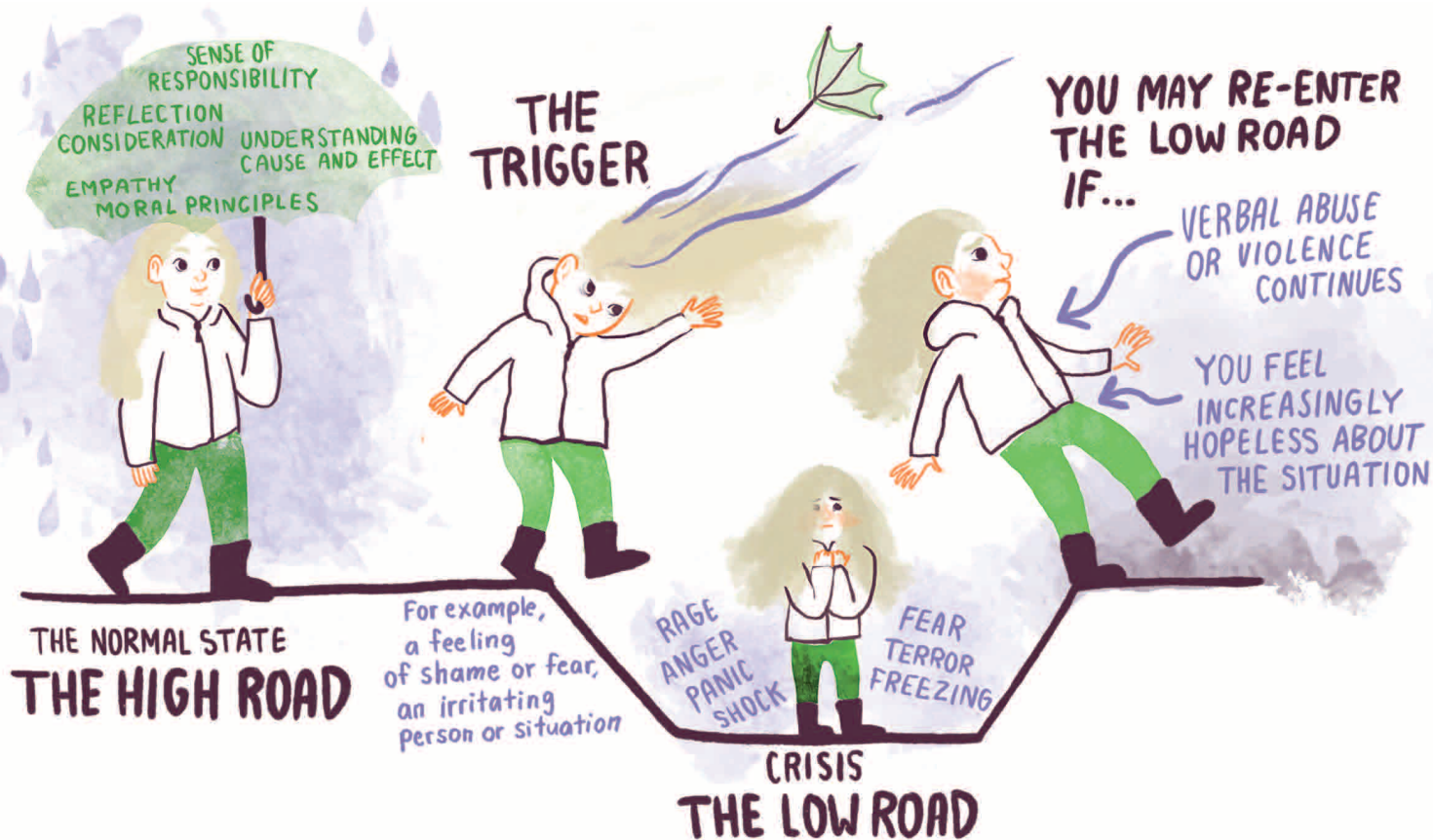
- I can calm myself down and create a safe space for the child to express emotions.
- I can ask what the child/young person needs right now.
- I can help find words to say when solving problems.
- I can offer help for regulating emotions.
- I can help them see that the situation is stressful and that it's fine to be irritated and tired.
- I can give them permission to feel bad.
- I can offer comfort.

How the adult can calm down

Calming down yourself – how to remain calm?

“When the situation calms down, it takes 20 minutes for adrenaline to leave the body.”

The aggressive or violent behaviour of a child causes feelings of anger and frustration in parents, and it may naturally be challenging to cope with these feelings. This is more than understandable, since we are only human. By consciously practicing



THE HIGH ROAD AND THE LOW ROAD OF THE BRAIN

The risk of heading down the low road of the brain increases if you have earlier experiences of being subjected to violence. If a threat of violence occurs frequently, the likelihood of entering the low road increases. It becomes a natural but harmful coping mechanism, breaking the positive connection. Other factors which increase the risk of sinking into a low-road state include, for example, the person's genetic makeup, as well as stress, fatigue, feeling of disappointment,

intoxicants and low blood sugar.

It is also possible to practice controlling aggression just like controlling other emotions. It is important to learn to recognise everyone's individual signs that predict a transition into the low road. The earlier you spot these signs, the easier it is to control your anger and remain calm in challenging day-to-day situations with a child or young person who behaves violently. Signs of entering the low road may include abusive inner speech, increasing heartbeat, quickening breath, increasing muscle

tension, gnashing of teeth, a pressing sensation in the head or breast, or clenching the fists.

Stop for a moment to reflect

- What kind of signs can you identify in yourself as a parent and in your children in the context of a transition into the low road? How about you who are reading this guide as a professional?

Once you have identified the signs of entering the low road, it's time to try the first exercises aiming to calm down the situation. The purpose of these exercises is to help you think more clearly and prevent situations from escalating.

Take a step backwards.

A little movement gives you more personal space. The closer you are to the person who is provoking you, the more likely it is that the situation gets worse. You can also turn slightly sideways to calm down both the other person and yourself.

Breathe deeply and calmly.

Deep breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth helps calm down your superficial breathing, quickened by adrenaline, as well as slows down your heartbeat. This also impacts the intensity of other physiological sensations and gives you more time to think before impulsive reactions that you will later regret.

Count quietly backwards in your mind.

Counting aims to steer your attention away from angry thoughts and alleviate the feeling of internal chaos. Counting also calms down your own

emotional reaction, giving way to logical thinking.

Positive images.

You can distance yourself from a conflict by imagining a situation that feels pleasant. A positive image may also make the triggering event seem less important. It can also help you see the underlying causes of the child's or young person's threatening behaviour as well as encounter them with empathy, applying methods that calm down the emotional reactions of both of you.

CHECKLIST TO SUPPORT CALMING DOWN

WHAT I CAN DO WHEN I FEEL I CANNOT COPE WITH MY EMOTIONS:

- I can breathe.
- I can verbalise emotions to reduce their intensity.
- I can clench my fists to help my self-regulation.
- I can ask a person close to me to take responsibility for the situation.
- I can remind myself that this feeling, too, will pass.
- I can go away from the situation and take a time-out if possible.
- I can be more merciful towards myself.
- I can give myself permission to feel all kinds of emotions.
- I can forgive my imperfections.

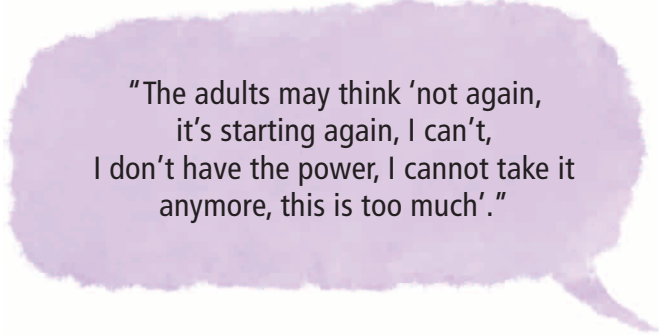


How violence impacts the family

Parents' experiences of violent situations in daily life

Violence will always necessarily affect the atmosphere at home and the interaction between all members of the family. Parents may feel completely at a loss in their parenting, and they may be ashamed of not being able to help their child. If parents have differing opinions on how to raise a child, this may also be challenging. Parents also often feel guilty and fear that siblings will also be subjected to violence. They may feel powerless and incapable of protecting the siblings from violence and its effects.

Sometimes situations escalate quickly despite careful anticipation and planning. It is stressful for the whole family when a child flies into a rage and violence follows. When the signs of danger are present and the situation starts to escalate – and nothing helps that theoretically could help – parents may start feeling desperate. The adults may think 'not again, it's starting again, I can't, I don't have the power, I cannot take it anymore, this is too much'



"The adults may think 'not again, it's starting again, I can't, I don't have the power, I cannot take it anymore, this is too much'."

It may also be that the adults have differing views of the causes and background of the situation, and parents are driven to blame each other. They may have differing views of the child's functioning in the moment. One may think that the child needs more boundaries, discipline and sanctions. The other parent wants to understand that the child is tired and that the earlier situations during the day and the gradual accumulation of stimuli play a role in the situation. It's important to recognise that a child's violent behaviour is always a challenge to the relationship between the parents and concerns the whole family. Adults may also find it difficult to control their own emotions when the child is raging – naturally, the same primitive reactions also concern adults.

PARENTS WHO ARE SUBJECTED TO VIOLENCE

- Violence committed by the child is targeted at the parent, while the parent is also responsible for ending the violence.
- Personal memories of trauma are activated.
- Guilt and shame.
- Hopelessness.
- Feeling at a loss.
- Fear.
- Countering violence with violence.

“A child or young person who behaves violently shakes up the whole family. Emotional memories are activated in difficult moments and impact the emotional climate of the whole family.”

Parenting a violent child may take up so much time and energy that no time is left over for the other children in the family. Siblings may hide their negative feelings caused by violence under a facade of nice and competent behaviour, and they may also feel shame. Sometimes siblings, even as bystanders, may also feel anxious when their parents lose their temper and yell. They may also feel upset when they witness their parents being subjected to violence committed by their

sibling. Such situations are always challenging and concern every member of the family, either directly or indirectly, always leaving mental scars. It's also very important to offer siblings an opportunity to talk about their experiences without feeling fear or shame. Parents can set an example through their own behaviour and show that it is possible to talk about violence and the shame it causes, without anyone being broken.

How violence impacts the arousal level

Violence committed by a child impacts the whole family in many ways. Experiencing violence, or living under the threat of violence, is reflected in the parents' resources and arousal level in many ways.

It is normal that your arousal level varies during the day. This allows you to function appropriately in different situations. When you are doing something interesting and activating, your arousal level increases, while during rest or sleep it decreases. For such variation to be possible and beneficial, you must feel safe. The threat of violence in your daily life breaks the feeling of safety and may even completely paralyse your functioning. Many parents of children with special support needs say their daily life is like walking on broken glass, in a continuous state of alertness. This means that your body is constantly alert, constantly in a fight or flight mode, which is taxing both mentally and physically.



WINDOW OF TOLERANCE: HYPERAROUSAL AND HYPOAROUSAL

Extended hyperarousal, continuous alertness and readiness to anticipate everyday situations may manifest itself in parents as anxiety, sleeping problems, fears, anger, reservedness or impulsiveness. Even in safe and peaceful circumstances, the physical stress reaction may stay on, the excessive beating of the heart may

continue, and the body may feel tense. Often these physical and psychological reactions themselves begin to cause fear.

Extended hypoarousal may lead to a contrary experience. You may feel numb, paralysed and lacking strength. Many parents also describe powerful feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, inferiority and powerlessness. This is a state of extreme emotional stress which

will unavoidably be reflected in the parent's psychological well-being and stamina.

It is possible to learn to regulate intolerable variations in arousal levels. The first step is learning to recognise when your level of arousal changes and which signs indicate that this is happening. Exercises to be done in a state of hyperarousal should aim to calm you down. Such exercises include various breathing techniques to calm down the nervous system, tightening and relaxing your muscles, grounding yourself in the present moment, or redirecting your attention to something else. An example of the latter is to redirect your attention from your wildly beating heart to the sensation of resting your feet firmly on the floor.

Exercises to be done in a state of hypoarousal should aim to activate the body and mind and to balance the nervous system. Suitable exercises include observing the environment with the different senses, moving your body in different ways, from a tiny movement of the foot to shaking your entire body, as well as tightening and relaxing your muscles in a controlled way.

Remember: The purpose of the exercises intended for regulating your arousal level is to reduce the effects of violence on your well-being. It's important to keep in mind that these exercises can only be done when there is no immediate threat of violence.

METHODS OF REGULATING THE LEVEL OF AROUSAL AND OF BALANCING THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

- breathing techniques
- alternating between the tightening and relaxing of muscles
- mindfulness and focus on the present moment
- conscious redirecting of attention

We should keep in mind that the limits of the tolerance of arousal vary between people, depending on everyone's individual temperament and bodily responsiveness to stimuli. In addition, life experiences have a major impact on everyone's individual tolerance and flexibility of the mind. Long-term overwhelming experiences and, for example, extended stress, which is common in families, naturally weaken the ability to regulate one's arousal level.

Threatening situations

What happens in practice in a threatening situation?

Threatening situations in your daily life heighten your arousal level and prepare you for fight or flight, for asking for help or freezing on the spot. Everyone has a unique way of reacting, depending on the situation and context. If the methods listed above do not lead to desired results in the situation, your arousal level may drop so much that



AROUSAL WINDOW

When a person is subjected to violence or a threat of violence for an extended period of time, their ability to regulate their arousal level is reduced at the same time as their tolerance for hyper- and hypoarousal is reduced. As a result, increasingly small signs, observations or interpretations of danger activate variations in arousal up to intolerable levels. A rustle, a rattle, a loud comment or a child's sudden movement may cause

a quick physical reaction and a flow of fear in the body. A state of alertness is then immediately activated, hugely consuming the parent's resources. Many parents who have been subjected to violence by their children live in a constant state of hyper- or hypoarousal, because their window of tolerance has been reduced.

Things for parents to consider.

Stop for a moment and think of a situation in which you felt a threat of violence.

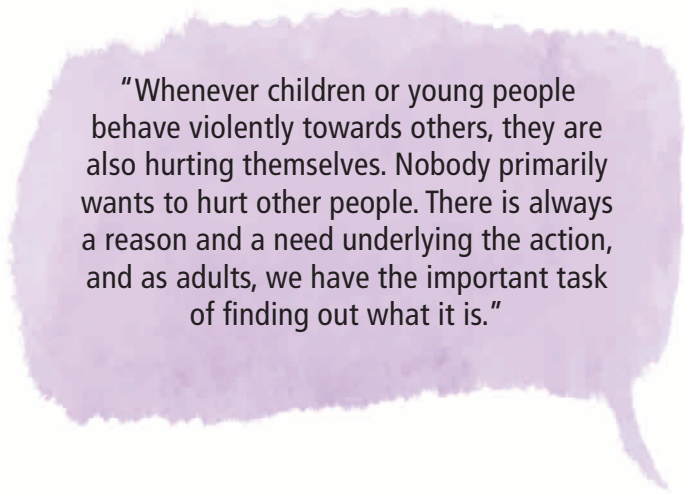
- What happened in that situation?
- Who was involved?
- What did you feel in your body?
- What did you think?
- How did you act?
- What was your level of arousal?
- What helped you calm down?

If you are reading this as a professional, you can pause to observe your encounter with a parent who has been subjected to violence by their child.

- How can you bring violent situations into discussion in a manner that inspires trust?
- What observations can you make?
- What questions do you ask?
- How do you speak soothingly to the parent?
- How do you show your support to the parent?
- What is the best way to help the parent in their situation?

How violence impacts the child

When encountering a child or young person who behaves violently, it is important to pause and look under the surface of the behaviour. It's important to keep in mind that whenever children or young people behave violently towards others, they are also hurting themselves. Nobody wants to hurt other people on purpose. There is always a reason and a need underlying the action, and as adults, it is our job to find out what it is.



“Whenever children or young people behave violently towards others, they are also hurting themselves. Nobody primarily wants to hurt other people. There is always a reason and a need underlying the action, and as adults, we have the important task of finding out what it is.”

Effects, fundamental causes and forms of violence in children and young people

Things to reflect on:

Does the child display trauma behaviour and/or have special features that could play a role?

- For example, are there concentration problems and restlessness that often become apparent in daily life? The child may be restless and find it difficult to carry out tasks that require concentration. At school or in day care, this may reveal itself as disturbing, potentially violent behaviour towards others, or as restless wandering about or being very noisy. The same things may also be an indication of the child's hidden special needs, or a sign of, for example, neuropsychiatric special features, a sensitivity to stress, problems with attention regulation, or perception issues, that are released in undesirable ways.

- If a child clings to the parent or is reluctant to

part with the parent when, for example, the child is dropped off in day care, it may seem like the child is seeking a lot of attention and security from the parent. The child may also find it difficult to leave home for day care or school in the mornings, or may be excessively worried about the parent. Such behaviour may also be related to the challenges experienced by a child on the autism spectrum in transitions, or the child's general resistance to change or being nervous about going to day care and/or school, or the stress caused by unexpected changes of routines or persons around the child.

- Developmental regression or functioning below the age-appropriate level may be clear symptoms of the child's trauma behaviour. At the same time, they may also represent a typical development for a child with special support needs. Every child and young person develops at their own pace, often differently and slower than same-age peers.
- Violent behaviour towards self or others. Positive attitudes towards violence may indicate that the child has been subjected to violence, but they may also be a consequence of the child's feeling of not being heard or understood. It may also be related to slower-than-normal development of self-regulation and emotional regulation skills, as well as to non-standard, patronising or oppressive attitudes towards the child or young person.
- If a child is feeling dejected, is withdrawn and isolated or withdrawing from social relations or things that used to bring joy, such as hobbies, it may be a sign of having violent experiences.

This may also be an indication of communication issues or excessive stress accumulating at school or in day care, or the environment's inability to adapt to the child's needs. This causes stress that the child or young person is taking out in age-typical means that help calm down their nervous system.

- Somatic symptoms: stomach ache, headache, vague body pains with no apparent reason. Such symptoms may be related to trauma or be a consequence of an extended stress reaction and overload leading to hyperarousal, which is consuming the child's physical resources



This too shall pass, and we will manage together

How to act in a violent situation

It is difficult to give straightforward instructions on how to act in a violent situation, because each situation is different. It is also one thing to talk about violence with a 7-year-old first-grader and a completely different thing to talk about it with a 17-year-old youngster, who already has the physical strength of an adult. Violence committed by a child is always extremely stressful for parents. The situation also varies depending on whether the adult is able to control and restrict the child's actions or whether the parent fears for both their own and the child's safety.

How well situations can be anticipated and how it is possible to act in the violent situation itself, depends on the age, size, emotional state and arousal level of the child, as well as on the emotional state and resources of the parent and their understanding of the situation and its causes, the place where the situation is happening, as well as the parent's assessment of the level of danger for their own or other people's safety.

When violent situations are discussed, the matter can be analysed on at least two levels: how to act

in violent situations in general (including not only the situation itself but also the moments before the situation escalates and the moments after calming down) and how to act at the moment when the violence is taking place, in order to protect yourself and the child.

When the situation is not actively going on, it is easier to consider it logically: to reflect on the causes leading to the events, to look at how the adult and the child acted in the situation, and to think of helpful strategies for future situations. When the situation is ongoing, and the threat of violence is actively present, it often happens that reason gives way to emotions in all parties. In the middle of a violent situation, the first thing to do is to try and calm yourself down – children mirror their parents' emotional reactions and may, with the help of co-regulation, succeed in taking control of their emotions and calming themselves down.

For one child, touching or talking may help in calming down, while for another, these will only escalate the situation. In the same way, with one child, it is possible to discuss verbally, while another is completely unable to communicate when agitated. This is why it's important to learn

what works for your child. At the same time, however, we should keep in mind that sometimes situations evolve in such a way that no amount of knowledge or tools are enough right there and then. If, as an adult, you perceive a risk that the situation may escalate and lead to serious violence, keep in mind the general instructions on how to act in a violent situation.

How to act in a violent situation

- Try to keep calm.
- Focus on breathing calmly.
- Keep in mind that you can only help others calm down when you are calm yourself.
- Take a few steps back and keep a safe distance.
- Pay attention to your own posture.
- Keep your hands visible, but make sure your arms are not defensively crossed over your chest.
- Speak slowly and calmly.
- If you feel that the situation is dangerous, walk away.
- Call someone who is close to you and ask for help.
- Call the emergency number 112 if you cannot calm the situation. If there are other children in the family, teach them how to act in an emergency and how to call the emergency number.

Other methods of calming down and co-regulation include adjusting **your own posture** (do not cross your arms defensively over your chest), staying in **full view** (do not speak from the side, because the field of vision is limited to a narrow area), slowing down your speech and **reducing the number of words** (only some 6% of verbal communication is

heard), or keeping a **distance**, if necessary (take a step backwards).

Stop for a moment to reflect

- Think about a situation in your daily life in which there was violence committed by your child.
- Think about the factors that led to the situation escalating. What kind of things can you identify?
- What was helpful in the situations and what did not work as expected?
- How could you anticipate and predict violent situations in the future?

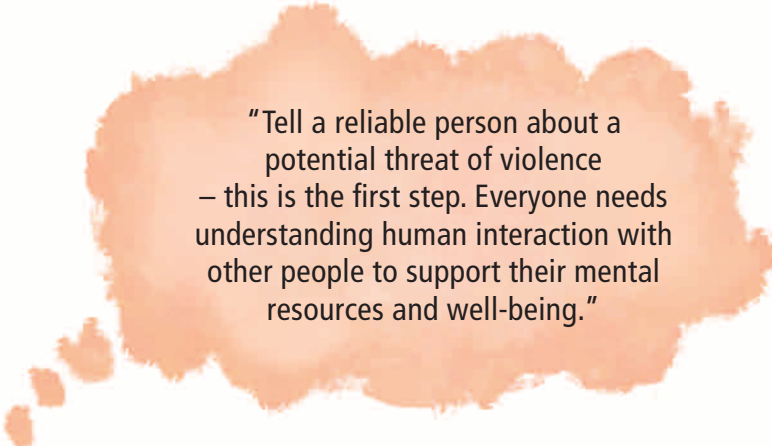
EXERCISE:

Preparing a safety plan is part of anticipating the situations.

A safety plan is a roadmap prepared in advance for situations which involve a risk of being subjected to violence. Having a safety plan in place helps you act when the situation is already escalating, and it is difficult to think clearly. It's important to discuss the safety plan together with family members, such as siblings, and make sure they are able to act according to the plan if the need arises.

Safety plan

- What are the signs that tell you that the situation is taking a violent turn? Observe things like a quickening of breath, a clenching of fists, or gestures and facial expressions.
- Is there a safe place in your home where you can escape if needed?
- Is there a safe place for the siblings and instructions on how to go there?
- Keep your phone easily available.



“Tell a reliable person about a potential threat of violence – this is the first step. Everyone needs understanding human interaction with other people to support their mental resources and well-being.”

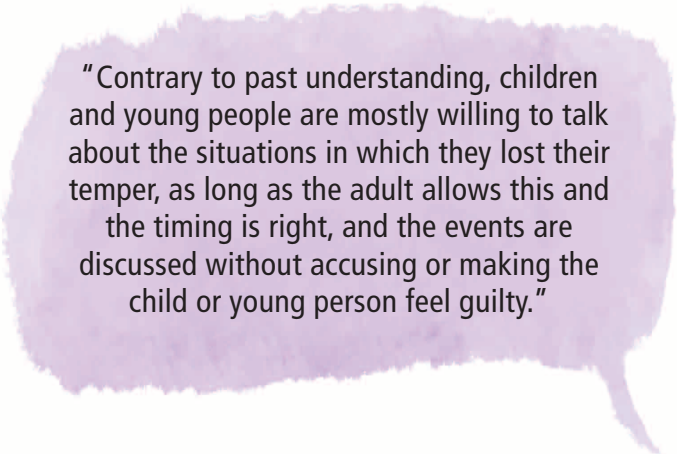
How to discuss the violent situation afterwards

It would be unrealistic to expect that problematic situations never occur or that we can always perfectly regulate our emotions. We are human, therefore we are also imperfect and make mistakes. Everyone loses their temper sometimes. So do children, especially sensitive children who are easily stressed and perceive the world intensively.

Various conflicts and emotional agitation are a normal part of human life. It's important to learn how to prevent situations from escalating, and, when situations do happen, how to discuss them and deal with them safely in good cooperation.

Even if a situation does not evolve from verbal threats to physical restriction – which is always to be hoped for – children and young people will remember that adults lost their temper, which is also often a shameful experience. It may feel scary when adults lose their temper. Children need

help from adults to deal with the situation and to verbalise the emotions caused by the situation. Contrary to past understanding, children and young people are mostly willing to talk about the situations as long as the adult allows this and the timing is right, and the events are discussed without accusing or making the child or young person feel guilty.



“Contrary to past understanding, children and young people are mostly willing to talk about the situations in which they lost their temper, as long as the adult allows this and the timing is right, and the events are discussed without accusing or making the child or young person feel guilty.”

As adults, we should keep in mind that children's concept of time is still very much different from that of adults: young children often live in the moment and may find it difficult to recall events from previous days. School-aged children are already able to recall events from a few days back and discuss them afterwards.

When situations quickly escalate, and emotions take over, it's a good idea to first take a timeout. In the beginning, it is enough that the adult states the reasons why the child got angry. It's also important to give positive feedback, for example, by thanking the child for calming down.

Otherwise, it is best to leave the matter for the moment and come back to it later when both parties have calmed down sufficiently. Immediately after losing their temper, children, just like adults, have what is called an after-feeling in their bodies, which may prevent logical thinking and taking the other person's perspective. Therefore, it is useful to let the situation settle sufficiently before taking it up for discussion.

Children describe their negative experiences in situations when they lose their temper. These situations cause feelings of sadness, anger, fear or shame. According to research, it is fundamentally important to deal with the situation afterwards. The child's age and developmental level must be taken into consideration. It is a sensitive topic, so it is not always possible or advisable to cover the situations in minute detail, but the aim is to help the child come to terms with their behaviour and emotions. Adults also learn from the situations, and they often have reason to scrutinise their own actions. Adults also stand as models for children on ways to act; and whether we want it or not, children learn from our example.

It is important that situations involving violence are dealt with afterwards, so that children are not left with a false understanding of the reasons that led to them losing their temper. This is also reflected

confrontation
**LOSING THEIR
TEMPER**

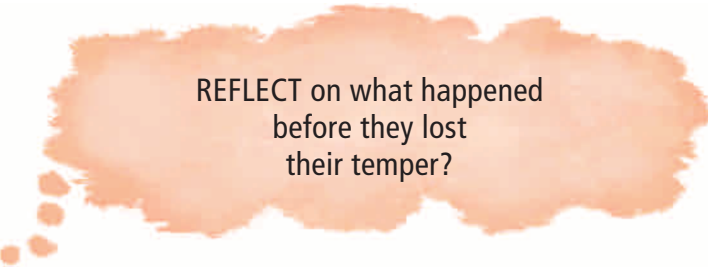
soothing
after-feeling



in children's understanding of themselves and reinforces their self-esteem and positive self-image.

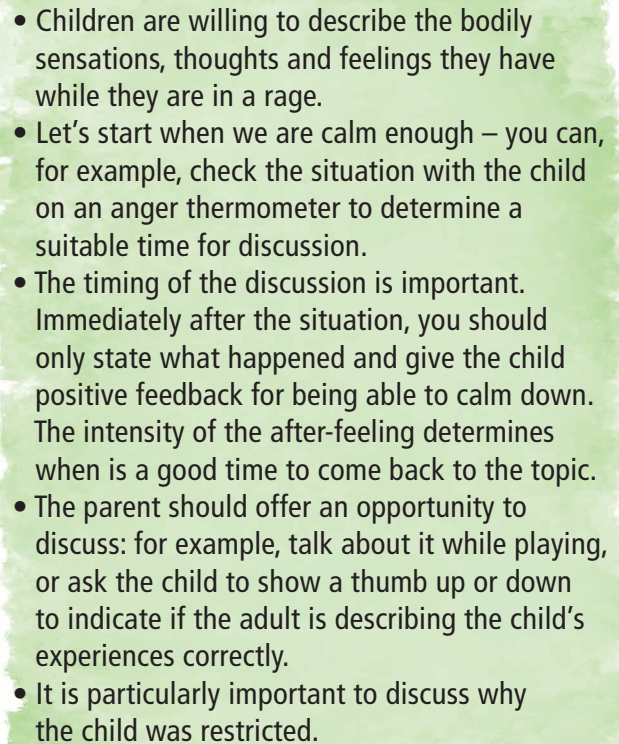
PROGRESSION OF SITUATIONS WHEN SOMEONE LOSES THEIR TEMPER

Confrontation refers to the point in interaction where the child and adult disagree on something or the child does not comply with the instructions given by the adult. This phase is often followed by the child losing their temper, which may take many forms, ranging from verbal yelling to throwing of objects, kicking and hitting others.



REFLECT on what happened
before they lost
their temper?

In the **soothing** phase, the situation has passed and the worst rage has settled. The child may still be defiant and snappish but no longer yells or tries to hurt anyone. This is a critical phase: the adult should not start sorting out the situation but should take into consideration the last phase, the after-feeling. The after-feeling may remain in the bodies of both the child and the adult for a long time after the situation. At this point, it is best to just briefly say that the child's behaviour was not appropriate but also give the child feedback for calming down.

- 
- Children are willing to describe the bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings they have while they are in a rage.
 - Let's start when we are calm enough – you can, for example, check the situation with the child on an anger thermometer to determine a suitable time for discussion.
 - The timing of the discussion is important. Immediately after the situation, you should only state what happened and give the child positive feedback for being able to calm down. The intensity of the after-feeling determines when is a good time to come back to the topic.
 - The parent should offer an opportunity to discuss: for example, talk about it while playing, or ask the child to show a thumb up or down to indicate if the adult is describing the child's experiences correctly.
 - It is particularly important to discuss why the child was restricted.

NOTES



When to seek outside help – how to identify the right moment?

You should seek help outside the family if the child repeatedly behaves violently at home or if the child's behaviour causes problems with friends, at school or in leisure activities.

The most important indicator for seeking help is the parent's own feeling that help is needed. This may mean, for example, fatigue, anxiety or challenges in controlling one's own emotions. If the parent has had traumatic experiences of violence in childhood or in a relationship, it may impact their ability to deal with their child's aggression or violent behaviour. Even minor aggression that, to an outsider, seems quite insignificant, or the threat of such aggression may cause significant symptoms in a traumatised parent and impair their functioning.

This feeling is unique to each individual. Parents also typically delay seeking help until their concern about the safety of the child or the siblings simply becomes too intense. Parents may feel ashamed, because they cannot manage their child, or they may fear judgment from professionals. This is quite human and understandable. It is natural that parents want to solve their everyday problems themselves. In this guide, we want to encourage

parents to speak out about the family's situation as early as possible. We also hope that when they do, they are met by professionals who have the skill to encounter the parents with their heart and give them support without passing judgment.

It should be kept in mind that people experience and feel things differently and that parents' own earlier experiences of being subjected to violence or any other trauma will have a crucial impact on the parents' well-being and coping. Their child's violent behaviour, or a threat of violence at home, may activate earlier traumatic memories and cause symptoms in the parents. If there is violence in the home, and the family also has other children, it is important to be aware of the potential effects of violence on their well-being. Speaking out about violence in the family almost invariably causes feelings of great shame in parents. It is important to recognise that shame can be tamed by facing it and talking about it in a safe and confidential encounter with an understanding professional or a person close to you.

THINGS FOR PARENTS TO CONSIDER:

- What do I need for myself so that I can speak out about my family's situation?
- Who would I feel safe enough to talk to?
- What could I ask the other party to take into consideration in the discussion?
- How can I help myself when talking makes me nervous?
- How can I prepare myself for a situation that feels difficult?

THINGS FOR PROFESSIONALS TO CONSIDER:

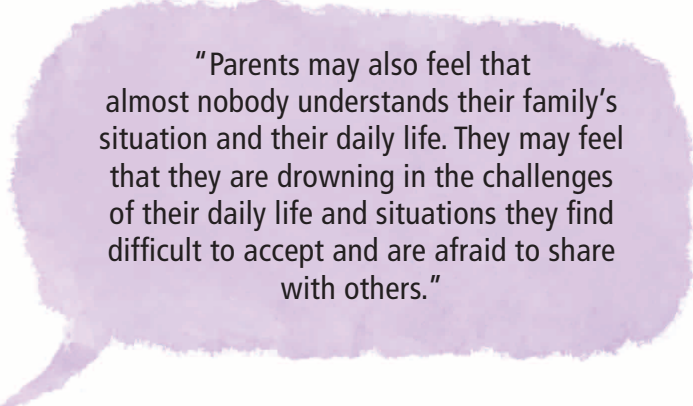
- How can I establish a safe space for parents to share their experiences?
- How can I show that I listen and care?
- How can I maintain a good connection?
- How do I control my own emotions?
- How can I be present in the moment for the other person?





Steps towards a daily life that works for you

Mercifulness and self-compassion as a resource in parenting



“Parents may also feel that almost nobody understands their family’s situation and their daily life. They may feel that they are drowning in the challenges of their daily life and situations they find difficult to accept and are afraid to share with others.”

A daily life involving repeated violent situations in the family is extremely stressful and tiring for parents. The situations leave a strong emotional trace, bring a lot of emotional stress and consume the parents’ resources in many ways. Parents are responsible for the safety and well-being of the whole family, and are often left completely on their own with all the responsibilities. For parents, the situation may seem highly unfair and unreasonable, especially if they have not found the help they need in the complex system of services and benefits.

Sometimes parents may simply feel that there are so many things to do and such a lot of advice and tips from outsiders that don’t seem to work. They may feel that they have already tried everything, and no well-meaning piece of advice seems to work with a child whose actions and reactions do not fit the norm. Parents may also feel that almost nobody understands their family’s situation and their daily life. They may feel that they are drowning in the challenges of their daily life and situations they find difficult to accept and are afraid to share with others.

Research reveals that parents of children with special support needs are often stretching the limits of their resources and suffer from prolonged fatigue. They also face a lack of understanding from their environment, which increases their feelings of anxiety and shame. Mercifulness and self-compassion are needed in all these situations to support parents in their daily lives calling for special powers.

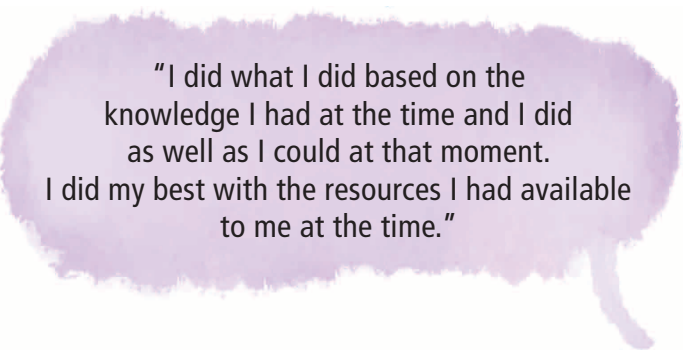
Stop for a moment to reflect

- What does self-compassion mean to you?
- In what situations did you last feel you needed self-compassion?
- In what ways can you be merciful towards yourself?

Self-compassion is one of the core skills to reinforce parents' well-being and resources, and it is available for everyone. In families where children behave violently, the emotional load is high and daily life may be filled with various stressors. In the middle of their challenging lives, parents may receive criticism from their environment and feel puzzled and insufficient in their parenting and their thoughts and feelings. When tired and faced with contradictory daily pressures, you may feel ashamed of your reactions and, for example, your negative thoughts about your own child.

Parents often say they feel deeply guilty for choices they made and ways in which they acted when they did not know everything they understood later – often through a lot of trial and error – about the special needs of their child. Guilt may follow them every day regardless of how hard they try and even though they are doing their best with the skills, knowledge and resources they have at the moment.

Self-compassion may sound like this:



"I did what I did based on the knowledge I had at the time and I did as well as I could at that moment. I did my best with the resources I had available to me at the time."

According to research, self-compassion is extremely helpful in many difficult moments and in coping with them.

WHAT SELF-COMPASSION MEANS TO PEOPLE:

- "A good life"
- "Not having to be better than anyone else"
- "Permission to be imperfect"
- "Authenticity"
- "Letting go of comparisons"
- "It's enough to do my best"

What is self-compassion?

The words for self-compassion have their origin in Latin: *pati cum*, to suffer with. However, suffering with ourselves is often not our natural first reaction when something goes wrong or when

we are faced with a child's violent behaviour, for example. What do we do instead? When we face danger, either mental or physical, our natural fight or flight mode is activated, often manifested as an attack towards ourselves: we reproach, blame and criticise ourselves. This is fully understandable; it is our human effort to minimise danger and/or protect ourselves from it. But it does not help us function as parents and families. Learning self-compassion instead is useful for everyone.

Self-compassion skills are concrete skills that can be practiced

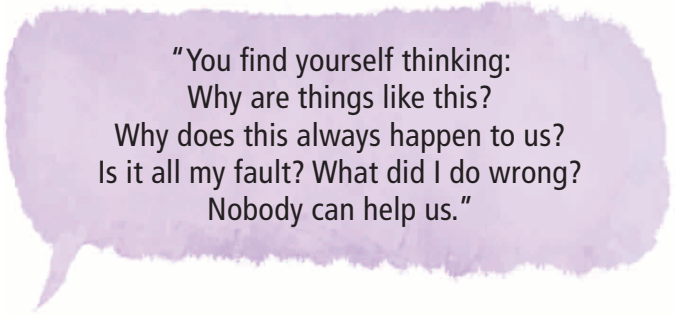
Mindfulness: We reflect on our experiences consciously and neutrally. We don't belittle or exaggerate nor act immediately in the middle of a powerful emotional reaction.

Kindness towards oneself: We speak kind and encouraging words to ourselves. For example: "I have survived it before." It is perfectly normal to feel anxious in the heat of the moment, but it does not mean that I am a bad parent or that I act wrongly as a parent. When we stop and listen to ourselves as parents and show compassion and gentleness towards ourselves, we are more likely to hear how we feel, what we need and what we can do for ourselves.

Shared humanity: I am not alone! Being able to feel our emotions, without avoiding them or trying to hide from them. Understanding and trusting that other parents have gone through the same thing, that there are others who face equally difficult situations and survive them.

How could self-compassion skills look in your daily life?

In its simplest form, our approach to our parenting and the tough moments in our daily lives involves accepting that every human being and every parent goes through suffering and faces challenging situations in their lives. It also involves understanding that it is possible to cope with even the most challenging emotions and situations, that it is possible to survive them and that others, too, have survived. In practice, you have to pause and scrutinise your emotions when your children are behaving violently towards their siblings or towards you as their parent. You find yourself thinking: why are things like this? Why does this always happen to us? Is it all my fault? What did I do wrong? Nobody can help us.



"You find yourself thinking:
Why are things like this?
Why does this always happen to us?
Is it all my fault? What did I do wrong?
Nobody can help us."

It is human to think this way, and these thoughts are more likely to arise when we are feeling tired, stressed and hopeless. When we are tired, we also often give in to catastrophising and start comparing ourselves and our families to others. We compare ourselves to, for example, people whose circumstances are completely different

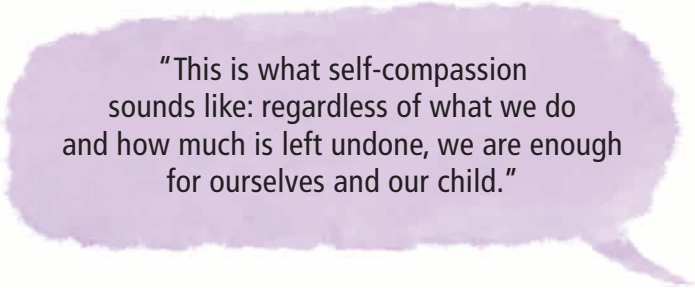
and whose lives seem to be so easy without the challenges of special support needs. We may also feel that we are completely on our own with our challenges. Such thinking may make us isolate ourselves and withdraw from social contact. But if we have the courage to scan our thoughts, take a step outside ourselves and look at the situation with the eyes of a friend, so to speak, we will understand that we are doing our best with the resources we have at the moment, and that it's enough.

Self-compassionate thinking in such difficult moments could mean, for example, that we register our thoughts and are able to review their power in relation to ourselves and choose how to finally act in the situation.

When life takes a particularly difficult turn, self-compassion literally carries us through the storm. Self-compassion also has several significant benefits: it supports our mental health, protects us from depression, helps us cope with misfortune, reinforces our immunity system and our ability to positively connect with our children and the people around us. It also alleviates stress and, for example, helps us regulate our emotional reactions. Self-compassion is directly observable in, for example, how our thoughts impact our emotions, mood, body and breathing. "I have to," "I'm worse than others," "Now I should..." and other stern, self-critical thoughts make our bodies more alert and increase muscle tension. Breathing becomes more superficial and cortisol production is accelerated. When we speak gently to ourselves and show compassion towards ourselves and feel

we are allowed to be who we are, our breathing becomes deeper and easier and the whole body calms down and relaxes.

Self-compassion in the middle of challenges allows us to not act impulsively and out of fear. Self-compassion, or treating ourselves like a friend, gives us the mental bandwidth to work for a change – to defend our children, seek ways to help them, fight to get help for them, identify the approaches and reactions in ourselves and in our families that are not bringing us forward. In practice, self-compassion gives us the resources to learn to do things differently, in ways that work for us.



"This is what self-compassion sounds like: regardless of what we do and how much is left undone, we are enough for ourselves and our child."

Exercise:

3 steps towards mercifulness

How you can show self-compassion in practice:

- 1.** Reflect on your expectations on yourself as a parent and how reasonable they are in your situation. Where do these expectations come from? Whose voice can you hear in them? Do they come from the outside or from within yourself? Which principles are important for you to keep? Which rules could you be more flexible about?

What are your expectations for a good daily life that works for your family?

2. Pay attention to what kind of a voice is speaking inside you! Does it reproach and criticise you? Or is it gentle, approving and compassionate? Whose voice is it that you hear? If the voice is critical, consider why you are meaner towards yourself than, say, towards a good friend. Are you trying to force yourself to perform better? How well is it working?

3. Put your hand on your heart: it activates your parasympathetic nervous system, increases the production of oxytocin, calms your mind, and gives you time to think about what you need the most right now and what would best help your family.

“Self-compassion skills are the superpower we have in our pocket.”

Except for ourselves, compassion is a gift for our loved ones. A big part of our brain is wired to recognise and interpret the emotions of other people. In practice, the way we feel about ourselves is reflected to others around us through the mirror neurons in our brain. When we let go of comparing ourselves to others and blaming ourselves, and stop fighting our own insufficiency, our children also start doing better in the end.

Self-compassion is the nicest thing you can do for yourself and your loved ones.

DID YOU KNOW:

Cortisol is a hormone that is important for the body. Its main purpose is to maintain energy levels during demanding efforts or stress.

The more positively we look at ourselves, and the less we criticise ourselves as parents, the lower our cortisol levels are and the greater the range of variation of our heartbeat, which is considered as a sign of high resilience.

Those who look at themselves with self-compassion find it easier to recover even from stressful situations.



Hope as a resource

Hope as a resource in families facing violence

“Hope is a state of mind, a kind of promise that we can expect good things to happen in the future despite our current challenges.”

Our daily life with special needs parenting is rewarding but, at times, also tiring. Challenging situations with the child and facing a constant threat of violence are a heavy burden for anyone. In the middle of a stressful life, and in difficult moments, hope is an important resource supporting and protecting the family. Hope means having options and being able to influence how things develop.

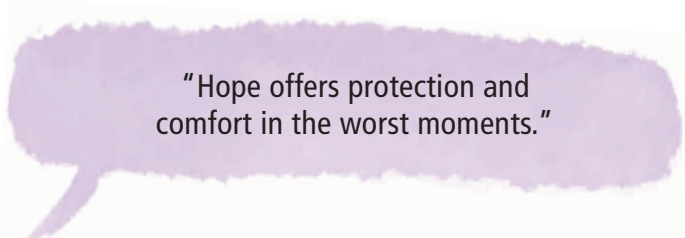
- What does hope mean to you today?
- What does hope mean to your child today?
- What gives you hope for the future, and who can help you?

Hope as the fundamental force of life

Hope is a fundamental force of life: the idea that even in the middle of a stressful life and challenges, life can be decent and good, and challenges can be overcome. Hope also means trusting that even when we don't know what to do, we can find new solutions, and even if the challenges right now seem enormous, there will be different days and better times. Hope means trusting that no situation lasts forever. If we want to describe hope in one word, the word could be 'opportunity'. Hope is an orientation into the future that promises possibilities of, faith in, and perspectives of good in ourselves, in our parenting, in life and in other people. Hope is an understanding and a deep feeling that we can have control of building a good life.

“Hope is an orientation into the future that promises possibilities of, faith in, and perspectives of good in ourselves, in our parenting, in life and in other people.”

In concrete terms, keeping up hope helps us make positive decisions and choices to support the well-being of the whole family. When we feel that we can influence our situation and expect good things to happen in the future, we consciously work to also reinforce the good things at this moment. Therefore, hope is directly reflected in actions and habits, and the more hopeful we feel, the more positive those actions and habits become. When we have hope, we also have the ability to carry on through the most difficult times, understanding that difficult times are a part of human life. A high level of hope has been found to correlate with a low level of emotional fatigue. This is why hope is so important: it can offer protection and comfort in the worst moments but it can also empower us and help us see the good things.



“Hope offers protection and comfort in the worst moments.”

Hope is also linked to the flexibility of the mind, in other words the ability to bend and adjust to changing circumstances and emotions that families with children inevitably face, despite careful planning and thorough anticipation. Life will unavoidably interfere with our plans every now and then. Families whose daily lives require special powers have to take into account a lot of factors that cannot be controlled but are still an inherent part of their lives. It is not possible, either, to always optimise a child’s stress levels so that

challenging behaviours or violent situations would never occur. Sometimes we may feel like there is nothing else in our lives than balancing from one crisis to another, and despair is a familiar feeling. A crisis is a situation in which we surprisingly find ourselves, not knowing what is going to happen. A crisis is a state in which our learned skills do not work, and indeed, that is what special needs parenting often is like. If a crisis is extended, for example, because help is not readily available, and the family’s overriding experience is that their daily life is a fight for survival, it may be hard to keep up hope.

The link between hope and despair

Feelings of failure, of being at a loss as a parent in violent situations, and the feeling of not being listened to by professionals in the service system may cause extreme powerlessness and despair for parents. It is important to link the feelings of failure and powerlessness, because when we feel powerless, we are the most dangerous for ourselves and others. Powerlessness leads to fear and despair. Hopelessness also involves thoughts and feelings of being unable to influence the situation, being at the mercy of others, not having a supportive connection to others, or being unable to manage as a parent.

The feeling of powerlessness that comes with failure often starts with introspection: “I could have” or “I should have”. Our fear grows as we believe that there’s a door that has been closed on us forever. A total feeling of powerlessness finally

anatomy of hope

WHAT BRINGS HOPE:

- Predictability and future perspectives
 - Timely help
- A feeling of inclusion and being able to influence
 - A feeling of equality
- Being seen, heard and listened to
- Sharing emotions in a safe context

benefits of hope:

- A positive impact on mental health
- Support in uncertainty
- Reinforces the feeling of togetherness
- Creates a positive circle
 - Maintains agency
 - Increases flexibility
- Helps adjust to things you cannot change
- Reinforces the ability to function and influence
- Helps us be merciful about our own helplessness and needs

WHAT TAKES AWAY HOPE:

- Uncertainty and worry about the future
 - Help is difficult to find
 - A lack of influence
- A feeling of not being listened to or understood
 - Belittling and invalidating
 - Hidden emotions and shame
- Overload and extended stress

leads to despair. Despair is a mental state. It is a belief that tomorrow will be exactly like today.

The mission of hope

Hope, on the other hand, works the other way, allowing us to do the following: influence our own lives and that of others, reinforce our agency, promote each other's healing, infect each other with hope and give support in moments of despair. Hope does not eliminate despair, but it enters into dialogue with it.

When we feel able to influence our lives, ourselves, our parenting and our relationships, we reinforce hope and agency. Contrary to what is often thought, hope does not equal passive waiting, naivety or powerful feelings. Hope is a way of thinking that can be learned. Hope is a conscious thinking process that involves putting up with despair, pursuing goals and orienting towards the future, and that is primarily manifested in action. Hope is a state based on the experience that people who have hope have both the will and the way to achieve what they want.

Hope is created when we can set goals, when we have the stamina and persistence needed to achieve those goals and when we believe in our ability to take action. Hope is also learned. Children learn it from their parents, if the parents know how to set boundaries, are consistent and offer the children their support.

Exercise:

5 steps to keep up hope in your daily life

- 1.** Establish hope by setting realistic goals, and define the direction in which you are heading as a family – see what is essential and what is the most important right now.
- 2.** Cherish hope in your daily life – create an action plan to achieve your goals and list the actions that take you towards the desired future.
- 3.** Identify the roles of hope – what are the different roles in life (friend, parent, spouse, employee, colleague, volunteer, caregiver) in which you feel hopeful and experience success – reinforce the good things and try to add more of them into your daily life whenever you can.
- 4.** Recognise your thoughts and try not to fear the worst – focus your thoughts consciously on this moment and on the future, and think about the opportunities.
- 5.** Connect with your peers, share your experiences, listen to the stories of others, do not remain alone.

Exercise:

Recognise what a long way you have already travelled and what you have already survived

Stop for a moment to look at the journey you have travelled so far and recognise the things you have already survived as a family.

Write down or reflect:

1. What have your difficulties taught you about your own and your family's strengths?
2. What are the valuable things you have learned about your loved ones?
3. What can you do if you experience difficult times in the future?
4. What are the things you must take care of to also survive in the future?
5. What activities and ways of being and thinking give you strength?
6. Who can you help?



THE HOPE AND SAFETY TOOL

The Hope and Safety Tool can be used by children and young people to reflect on the following:

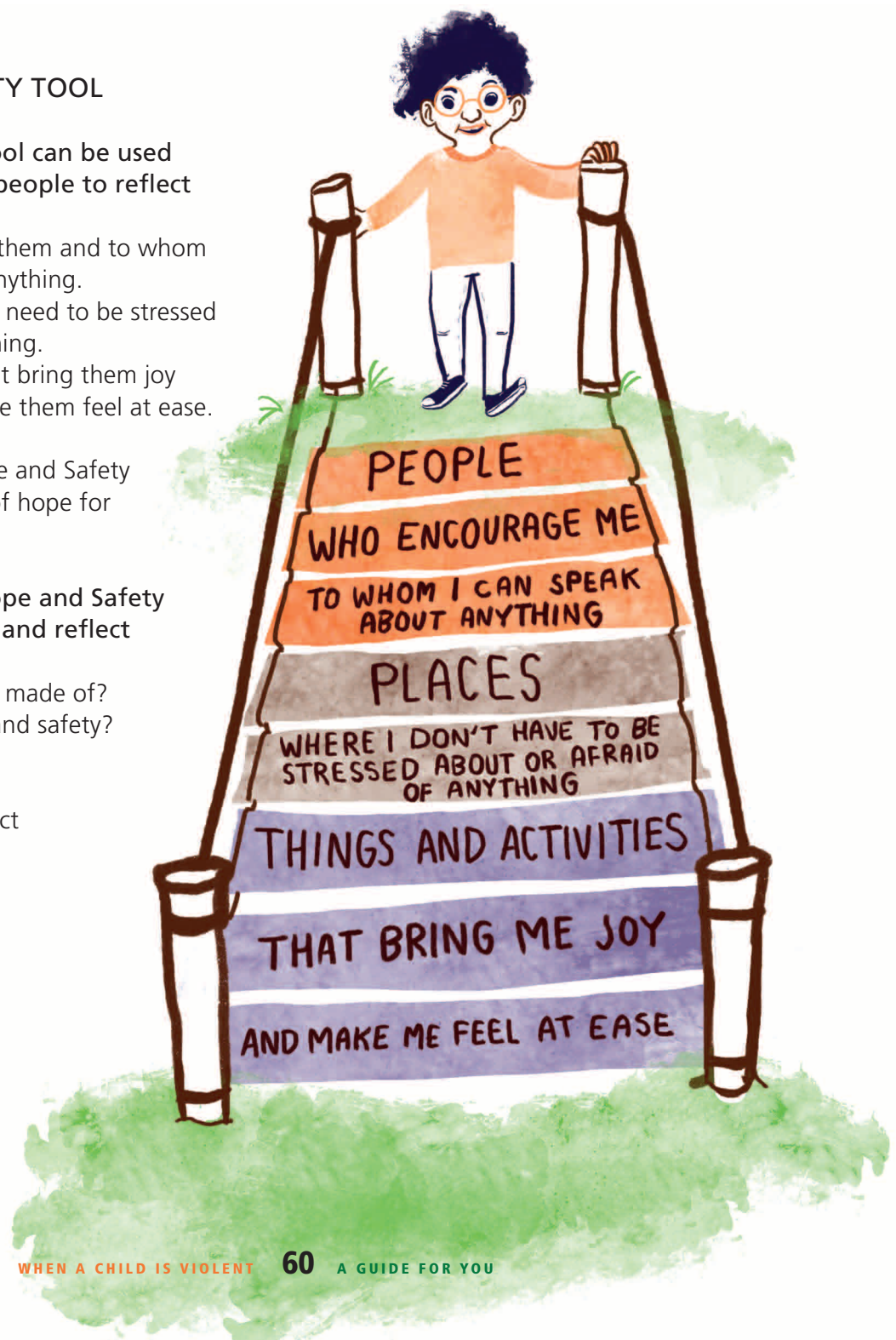
- People who encourage them and to whom they can speak about anything.
- Places where they don't need to be stressed about or afraid of anything.
- Things and activities that bring them joy and happiness and make them feel at ease.

You can also use the Hope and Safety Tool to draw a roadmap of hope for the future for your family.

You can also use the Hope and Safety Tool as a family to stop and reflect on the following:

- What is your well-being made of?
- What brings you hope and safety?

You will be all right.
Have the courage to expect good things in the future.





Finally

You will be all right

We hope that you have found this guide useful and that it has given you and your family tips for setting up a smooth daily life that works for you. Many things discussed in the guide are profound matters that go to the core of what it is to be human. These things have to be identified, broken down into suitable bits, internalised and put into practice little by little, as we go about living our lives. Perhaps we should think about reflecting on the perspectives explained in this guide and applying its tools to our daily lives as a life-long journey. It may never be completed, but every day we have an opportunity to do just a little bit better than we did the day before. So please be patient and, above all, merciful with yourself. The very fact that you are holding this guide shows that you are a dedicated and loving parent and that you are good the way you are, here and now, with all the imperfections that are essentially human.

The work on the theme of When a Child is Violent will continue

The work on the theme of When a Child is Violent will continue as a part of the services provided

by Settlement Tampere to people suffering from violence. The service is free of charge and provides accessible professional support for families in which a child or young person behaves violently towards other members of the family. In acute situations, families receive short-term crisis support aiming to stabilise the situation of the parents and the family. The work on When a Child is Violent is designed to support families to find ways and means to prevent their child's violent behaviour. The work is based on methods used in violence prevention and crisis work.

- Individual appointments for parents and siblings
- Family appointments and peer support groups for parents
- Anger management groups for children and young people over 12 years of age

Remember that you are not alone and that help is available. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Further information
on the Settlement Tampere website:
www.perhevakivalta.fi/kun-lapsi-satuttaa-tyo

Definitions of violence (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare)

Violence in a close relationship. Violence in a close relationship refers to violence in situations where the perpetrator or the victim are or have been in a close relationship with each other. Such violence often happens within households and typically remains hidden. Violence in a close relationship may be directed towards a present or former partner, child, parent, close relative or other close person. Typically, everyone close to the victim is subjected to the effects of violence.

Domestic violence. Domestic violence means violence committed by one member of a family against another.

Physical violence. Physical violence may include pushing, beating, kicking, hair pulling, hitting the head, strangling, scratching, tearing, shaking, using a firearm or edged weapon, or threatening with physical violence.

Psychological abuse. Psychological abuse means, for example, subjugation, criticising, name-calling, scorn, controlling, restricting a person's social contacts, severe jealousy, isolating, destroying a person's belongings, harming of pets, or threatening to do any of this. Threatening to, for example, commit suicide is also a form of psychological abuse.

Instrumental violence. Psychological abuse that takes the form of deliberately harming a person's loved ones or belongings to achieve a goal.

Instrumental violence may involve, for example, destroying a person's belongings or harming their pets with the aim of causing suffering to or controlling the activities of the person targeted or limiting their possibilities to function.

DO NOT REMAIN SILENT ABOUT VIOLENCE

- Don't remain alone: Speak about your experiences to a friend, a relative, some other reliable person or a professional.
- Find information: Information about violence and about the possibilities to find help is available to both victims and perpetrators online, on helpline numbers and from professionals and authorities.
- Seek help: You can get help, advice, guidance and support from your own well-being services county or municipality as well as from regional and national services. Local authorities, health care services, NGOs and schools, among others, are appropriate places to seek help.

References

Printed sources

- AART – Adapted Aggression Replacement Training: Sosiaalisen kyvykkyyden harjoitusmenetelmä, K. Gundersen, T. Olsen, J. Finne, B. Stromgren & B. Dalefold (2018) (Norwegian original: AART – en metode for trening i sosial kompetanse)
- AART – Adapted Aggression Replacement Training: Ryhmäharjoitusmenetelmä aggressiivisesti käyttäytyville nuorille, B. Glick & J. Gibbs (2011). (English original: Aggression Replacement Training: a comprehensive intervention for aggressive youth)
- Brainstorm – Nuoruuden aivomyrskyn voima ja merkitys, D. Siegel (2019). (English original: Brainstorm. The power and purpose of the teenage brain)
- Family TIES: Vuorovaikutustaitojen harjoitteluohjelma aggressiivisesti käyttäytyvien nuorten perheille, R. Calame & K. Parker (2013). (English original: Family TIES)
- Let's Talk About Shame cards – towards a feeling of being seen. The box contains 93 different cards that help you identify thoughts related to moments of shame and face your emotions in challenging situations. R. Seppälä, H. Rautiainen, V. Vilppola & M. Vellas (2022).
- Itsemyötätunto, K. Neff (2020). (English original: Self-compassion)
- Kiukkukirja: Aggressiokasvattajan käsikirja – vauvasta kouluikään, R. Cacciatore (2018)
- Lempeän kasvattajan opas, T. Trogen (2022)
- Mitä sä rageet? – Lapsen ja nuoren tunnetaitojen tukeminen, A-M. Jääskinen (2017)
- Nouse vahvempuna – Vaikeuksien kautta voittoon, B. Brown (2020). (English original: Rising strong)
- Näe sydämellä, K. Saukkola & T. Laane (2017)
- Nähkää Meidät – Miten vastata erityisperheiden hätähuutoon, U. Särkikangas & R. Seppälä (2022)
- Perheväkivaltaa kokeneet lapset toiminnan kehittäjinä, A. Tiainen, R. Kalliomeri, T. Muukkonen & H. Tulensalo (2020)
- Positiivinen kasvatusta, T. Trogen (2020)
- Rauhoita ja Rohkaise, A. Tommola & S. Häkkinen (2017)
- Sensorimotorinen psykoterapia – Keinoja trauman ja kiintymyssuhdevaurioiden hoitoon, P. Ogden & J. Fisher (2016). (English original: Sensorimotor psychotherapy)
- Traumaperäisen dissosiaatiohäiriön vakauttaminen, S. Boon, K. Steele & O. Haart (2011). (English original: Coping with trauma-related dissociation)
- Tukea Arkeen! Keinoja lasten ja nuorten emotionaalisten, sosiaalisten ja käyttäytymisen taitojen tukemiseksi, P. Karjalainen, P. Pihlaja, N. Koskenalho, O. Palosaari & P. Kouvonen (2022)
- Tulistuva lapsi, R. Greene (2006). (English original: The explosive child)
- Vireystilan säätely ja aistipulmat, M. Poskiparta (2022)

Electronic sources

- Aggression omahoito-ohjelma, Mielenterveystalo: [Aggression tunteen omahoito \(mielenterveystalo.fi\)](https://mielenterveystalo.fi)
- Erityislasten vanhempiinsa kohdistama väkivalta ja siitä selviytyminen vanhempiensa kokemana. M. Salonen (2018). Master's thesis: [Erityislasten vanhempiinsa kohdistama väkivalta ja siitä selviytyminen vanhempien kokemana \(ulapland.fi\)](https://ulapland.fi)
- Kohti tasapainoista arkea, Erityisvoimia.fi: [Lapsen haastava käyttäytyminen | Erityisvoimia.fi](https://erityisvoimia.fi)
- Kun lapsi satuttaa – Kielteisten tunteiden vaikutus perheen voimavaroihin vanhempien kokemana (When a child is violent – The impact of negative emotions on family resources as experienced by parents), S. Dyster & M. Miettinen (2023). Theseus: <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-202302122299>
- Kun lapsi satuttaa – Minkälaista apua erityistä tukea tarvitsevien lasten vanhemmat kaipaavat, kun lapsi on väkivaltainen (When the Child Hurts – What kind of help or support parents need when their child is violent), T. Hänninen (2019). Theseus: <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:amk-2019120123789>
- Lapsi lyö – toimi näin! Lapsenkasvatus.fi: [Lapsi lyö – toimi näin! – Lapsenkasvatus](https://lapsenkasvatus.fi)
- Pakkotoimet lastenpsykiatrisessa osastohoidossa – Rajoittamismenetelminä eristys- ja kiinnipitotilanteet (Coercive measures in child psychiatric inpatient

care: seclusions and manual restraints), K. Kauppila (2019). Doctoral dissertation: <https://erepo.uef.fi/handle/123456789/22056?locale-attribute=fi>

- Sitä, mitä ei näe, ei ole olemassa! NÄE NEPSY: [Näe nepsy \(naenepsy.fi\)](https://naenepsy.fi)
- Stressiprofiili, M. Lähteenoksa: <https://erityisvoimia.fi/nain-teet-stressiprofiilin/>
- Toivontielleä – askeleita kohti omanlaista hyvää, R. Seppälä. <https://www.riikkaseppala.fi/>
- Tukea arkeen, Honkalampi: [Materiaalipankki – Honkalampi-säätiö](https://honkalampi-saatiö.fi)
- Tukea kommunikointiin (2023), Kehitysvammaisten Tukiliitto: [Tukea kommunikointiin | Tukiliitto](https://tukiliitto.fi)
- Turvasuunnitelma väkivaltilanteeseen tai sen uhkaan kotona: [Turvasuunnitelma väkivaltilanteeseen – Rikosuhripäivystys \(riku.fi\)](https://riku.fi)
- Turvasuunnitelmat: [Turvasuunnitelmat – Nettiturvakoti](https://nettiturvakoti.fi)
- Vuorovaikutus ja kommunikointi kuuluvat kaikille: www.papunet.net / [Vireystilan säätely – Papunet](https://vireystilan.saately.fi)
- Väkivallan muodot, THL (2022) [Väkivallan muodot – THL](https://thl.fi)
- Väkivaltakäsitteiden sanasto, THL (1/2020): [Väkivaltakäsitteiden sanasto \(julkari.fi\)](https://julkari.fi)

To be seen, heard and understood

Violence carried out by children and young people with special support needs towards their parents continues to be a difficult topic that is rarely spoken about.

Speaking about this phenomenon helps reduce the shame it causes as well as the need to hide the problem, and encourages families to seek help.

It also helps society to better understand how to support families with a child or young person who behaves violently.

When a Child is Violent – a guide for families was written for parents. It offers practical support and increases the understanding of professionals about the daily lives of families. It includes tips for the whole family to support a smooth everyday life that works for them.

The fact that you are reading this guide shows that you have courage and hope for a future free of violence.



Tukena