

Child empathy role play

Requires: two trainers/facilitators; space for group participants to sit on floor with eyes closed; either an open door for trainers to role play outside or a table or something else in the room to play behind.

Note: you are trying to demonstrate to participants what it might feel like for a child to hear their father abusing their mum. If you can do this through a partly open doorway, that's best – but for many venues, you can't do this without disturbing others. If this is the case, perform with your backs to the group, so that they don't hear quite as well as they would otherwise, behind a chair or table to give you the idea of different rooms.

Set up: ask group to sit on floor and make selves comfortable. Ask them to close eyes. Also turn off light. Say if someone really can't manage to keep eyes closed (some may feel very vulnerable) they can look at the floor, but not at the trainers/facilitators.

You (mum and dad – choose your names) are going to start having an argument about Billy, your child of 8, who has been in trouble at school. Dad has come home from work in a bad mood and has found a note from school about this – mum has been trying to keep this from him. Dad says he wants to get Billy out of bed to "sort it out". Mum says to leave it – that she has sorted it.

There should be some swearing, some raising of dad's voice and mum trying to get him to be quiet not very successfully. It should be just loud enough for the participants to hear most of what's being said and to get sense of fear. Argument includes comments about mum's crap parenting, kids behaving badly, she can't control them. Why is she keeping secrets from him etc. She can answer back with some comments of her own – she isn't just meek and mild, but is also doing her best to keep him from making too much noise and waking up the kids.

This argument ends with "dad" hitting "mum" (you will need to slap a hand against a suitable surface to make the sound effect). Mum sobs audibly.

Break the scene with each other – make sure are both ok. Let the participants sit thinking, as you quietly come back into the room, turn the light on and gently ask them to open their eyes and see you are both OK.

You want to ask for feedback – what did this feel like? What did they want to do? What does this make them think about their own children hearing abuse? What do they think children who have lived with domestic violence might think about their dad? What might help them?

Take time and care – they may have experienced abuse as children and this might bring back memories. Don't allow this to be used as an excuse – but do make sure anyone who needs it knows where to get further help to deal with past experiences.