

The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Domestic violence affects every member of the family, including the children. Family violence creates a home environment where children live in constant fear.

Children who witness family violence are affected in ways similar to children who are physically abused. They are often unable to establish nurturing bonds with either parent. Children are at greater risk for abuse and neglect if they live in a violent home.

Statistics show that over 3 million children witness violence in their home each year. Those who see and hear violence in the home suffer physically and emotionally.

“Families under stress produce children under stress. If a spouse is being abused and there are children in the home, the children are affected by the abuse.” (*Ackerman and Pickering, 1989*)

DYNAMICS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ARE UNHEALTHY FOR CHILDREN:

- Control of family by one dominant member
- Abuse of a parent
- Isolation
- Protecting the “family secret”

Children react to their environment in different ways, and reactions can vary depending on the child’s gender and age.

Children exposed to family violence are more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological and or behavioral problems than those who are not. Recent research indicates that children who witness domestic violence show more anxiety, low self esteem, depression, anger and temperament problems than children who do not witness violence in the home. The trauma they experience can show up in emotional, behavioral, social and physical disturbances that effect their development and can continue into adulthood.

SOME POTENTIAL EFFECTS:

Emotional

- Grief for family and personal losses
- Shame, guilt, and self blame
- Confusion about conflicting feelings toward parents
- Fear of abandonment, or expressing emotions, the unknown or personal injury
- Anger
- Depression and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness
- Embarrassment

Behavioral

- Acting out or withdrawing.
- Aggressive or passive.
- Refusing to go to school.
- Care taking; acting as a parent substitute.
- Lying to avoid confrontation.
- Rigid defenses.
- Excessive attention seeking.
- Bedwetting and nightmares.
- Out of control behavior.
- Reduced intellectual competency.
- Manipulation, dependency, mood swings.

Social

- Isolation from friends and relatives.
- Stormy relationships.
- Difficulty in trusting, especially adults.
- Poor anger management and problem solving skills.
- Excessive social involvement to avoid home.
- Passivity with peers or bullying.
- Engaged in exploitative relationships as perpetrator or victim.

Physical

- Somatic complaints, headaches and stomachaches.
- Nervous, anxious, short attention span.
- Tired and lethargic.
- Frequently ill.
- Poor personal hygiene.
- Regression in development.
- High risk play.
- Self abuse.

GIVING CHILDREN LOVE AND CARE

Nurturing children from abusive homes can bring healing to their lives. In giving needed love and care to children, it is important for a parent to reflect these essentials:

Trust and Respect

Acknowledge children's right to have their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions. Promote independence, allow for privacy and respect their feelings for the other parent. Believe in them.

Provide Emotional Security

Talk and act so children feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves. Be gentle. Be dependable.

Provide Physical Security

Provide healthy food, safe shelter and appropriate clothing. Teach personal hygiene and nutrition. Monitor safety. Maintain a family routine. Attend to wounds.

Provide Discipline

Be consistent; ensure that rules are appropriate to age and development of the child. Be clear about limits and expectations. Use discipline to give instruction, not to punish.

Give Time

Participate in your children's lives, in their activities, school, sports, special events, celebrations and friends. Include your children in your activities. Reveal who you are to your children.

Encourage and Support

Be affirming. Encourage children to follow their interests. Let children disagree with you. Recognize improvement. Teach new skills. Let them make mistakes.

Give Affection

Express verbal and physical affection. Be affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt.

Care for Yourself

Give yourself personal time. Keep yourself healthy. Maintain friendships. Accept love.

Safety Is for Children, Too

CHILD VICTIM/WITNESS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Age-specific indicators

Infants

- Basic need for attachment is disrupted.
- Routines around feeding/sleeping are disturbed.
- Injuries while "caught in the crossfire".
- Irritability or inconsolable crying.

- Frequent illness.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Diarrhea.
- Developmental delays.
- Lack of responsiveness.

Preschool

- Somatic or psychosomatic complaints.
- Regression.
- Irritability.
- Fearful of being alone.
- Extreme separation anxiety.
- Developmental delays.
- Sympathetic toward mother.

Elementary Age

- Vacillate between being eager to please and being hostile.
- Verbal about home life.
- Developmental delays.
- Externalized behavior problems.
- Inadequate social skill development.
- Gender role modeling creates conflict/confusion.

Preadolescence

- Behavior problems become more serious.
- Increased internalized behavior difficulties: depression, isolation, withdrawal.
- Emotional difficulties: shame, fear, confusion, rage.
- Poor social skills.
- Developmental delays.
- Protection of mother, sees her as “weak”.
- Guarded/secretive about family.

Adolescence

- Internalized and externalized behavior problems can become extreme and dangerous: drug/ alcohol, truancy, gangs, sexual acting out, pregnancy, runaway, suicidal.
- Dating relationships may reflect violence learned or witnessed in the home.

From Boulder (CO) County Safehouse

WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Trust is a major factor when working with children exposed to domestic violence. Children need a safe place with an adult they can trust to begin healing.

- When first working with a child, it is helpful to ask what makes her/him feel comfortable and uncomfortable with adults.
- Listen to children and provide them with space and respect.
- Let children know you care about them, that there are adults interested in their opinions, thoughts and ideas.
- Use books on the subject to help open children up.
- Use art, music, drama, and play to help children express themselves.
- Refer children to professional counselors, as needed.
- Connect children to organizations in the community that work with youth, as appropriate.
- Help children develop age-appropriate and realistic safety plans.
- Tell them often that someone cares.

From the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence newsletter, spring 2000

STATISTICS

- Each year an estimated 3.3 million children are exposed to violence against their mothers or female caretakers by family members. (*American Psychological Association, Violence and the Family: Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, 1996*)
- Studies show that child abuse occurs in 30 to 60 percent of family violence cases that involve families with children. (*J.L. Edleson, "The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering." Violence Against Women, February, 1999.*)
- A survey of 6,000 American families found that 50 percent of men who assault their wives, also abuse their children. (*Pagelow, "The Forgotten Victims: Children of Domestic Violence," 1989*)
- Research shows that 80 to 90 percent of children living in homes where there is domestic violence are aware of the violence. (*Pagelow, "Effects of Domestic Violence on Children," Mediation Quarterly, 1990*)
- A number one predictor of child abuse is woman abuse. (*Stark and Flitcraft, "Women at Risk: A Feminist Perspective on Child Abuse," International Journal of Health Services, 1988*)
- The more severe the abuse of the mother, the worse the child abuse. (*Bowker, Arbitell, and McFerron, "On the Relationship Between Wife Beating and Child Abuse," Perspectives on Wife Abuse, 1988*)
- Some 80 percent of child fatalities within the family are attributable to fathers or father surrogates. (*Bergman, Larsen and Mueller, "Changing Spectrum of Serious Child Abuse," Pediatrics, 1986*)
- In families where the mother is assaulted by the father, daughters are at risk of sexual abuse 6.51 times greater than girls in non-abusive families. (*Bowker, Arbitell and McFerron, 1988*)

- A child's exposure to the father abusing the mother is the strongest risk factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next. (*American Psychological Association, Violence and the Family: Report of the APA Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, 1996*)
- Male children who witness the abuse of mothers by fathers are more likely to become men who batter in adulthood than those male children from homes free of violence. (*Rosenbaum and O'Leary, "Children: The Unintended Victims of Marital Violence," American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1981*)
- Older children are frequently assaulted when they intervene to defend or protect their mothers. (*Hilberman and Munson, "Sixty Battered Women," Victimology: An International Journal, 1977-78*)
- In a 36-month study of 146 children, ages 11-17 who came from homes where there was domestic violence, all sons over the age of 14 attempted to protect their mothers from attacks. Some 62 percent were injured in the process. (*Roy, 1988*)

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