

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.

Through the Eyes of a Child: Did I do something wrong to make you lose control? Anger so strong or do you even know that when you come home I want to run and hide. The pain is so deep that I keep it inside. I’m not the same because of you, always afraid of what you’ll do. If only you could see yourself through my eyes you’d know why I’m dying inside. Sometimes I need a firm, but gentle hand. Someone who cares and understands that I am still learning but I just can’t take this abuse. From you, there is no excuse. I’m not the same because of you, always afraid of what you’ll do. If only you could see yourself through my eyes, you’d know why I’m dying inside. This is no way to live If you try to change I’ll try to forgive. *From CHANCE Changing How Adults Nurture Children’s Egos*

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

For Parents:

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.

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 and accept love

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

Pre-adolescence:

- 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 them 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*