



Domestic Violence and Children

A Community Response

◆ What makes the healthy difference for child witnesses?

RESILIENCY

The impact of domestic violence on child witnesses depends on the resiliency of the child. Not all children who witness will show signs of maladaptive adjustment.

◆ What determines the impact of domestic violence on children?

- Social competence
- Intelligence
- High self-esteem
- Outgoing temperament
- Strong peer & sibling relationships
- Supportive relationship with an adult, oftentimes with the mother who is being abused

Additional factors to help assess the impact on children:

- **Nature of the violence** Children who witness frequent and severe forms of violence or fail to observe their caretakers resolving conflict may undergo more distress than children who witness fewer incidences of physical violence and experience positive interactions between their caretakers.
- **Coping strategies and skills** Children with poor coping skills are more likely to experience problems than children with strong coping skills and supportive social networks.
- **Age of the child** Younger children appear to exhibit higher levels of emotional and psychological distress than older children.

- **Elapsed time since exposure** Children often have heightened levels of anxiety and fear immediately after a violent event. Fewer effects are seen in children as more time passes after the violent event.
- **Gender** In general, boys exhibit more “externalized” behaviors while girls exhibit more “internalized” behaviors.
- **Presence of child physical or sexual abuse** Children who witness domestic violence and are physically abused are at greater risk for increased levels of emotional and psychological maladjustment than children who only witness violence and are not abused.

◆ Risks

The US Advisory Board on Child Abuse suggests that domestic violence may be the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in the country (www.endabuse.org).

A recent study found that school-age children who witness violence exhibit a range of problem behaviors including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers (www.endabuse.org).

Young children, because of their dependence, are particularly vulnerable to threats aimed at their mothers, particularly when the source of those threats is another caregiver, i.e., father or boyfriend (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2004).

Children who witness domestic violence are at an increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder. Symptoms may include: inability to sleep through the night, bed-wetting, temper tantrums and social withdrawal (ABA, 2005).

◆ Possible problem areas for child witnesses of domestic violence

Behavioral, social, and emotional problems:

- Anger
- Depression
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Oppositional behavior
- Higher levels of aggression
- Poor peer/social/sibling relationships

Long-term problems:

- Higher level of adult depression
- Higher level of trauma symptoms
- Increased tolerance for violence

Cognitive and attitudinal problems:

- Lower cognitive functioning
- Poor school performance
- Lack of conflict managing skills
- Pro-violence attitudes
- Belief in rigid gender stereotypes
- Limited problem-solving skills

Statistics

8.8 million children witness domestic violence in the home each year in the US (Kilpatrick, Dean & Saunders, B., 1997).

It is estimated that up to 20% of pregnant women experience violence at the hands of their intimate partners during pregnancy (Parsons, L., Goodwin, M.M., & Peterson, R., 2000).

Slightly more than half of female victims of domestic violence live in households with children under the age of twelve (DOJ, 1998).

It is estimated that almost 50% of men who abuse their intimate partners also abuse their children (Strauss, M., Gelles, R., & Smith, C., 1990).

Child custody and visitation arrangements often provide a context for abusive men to continue to control and victimize women and their children (Bancroft, L. & Silverman, J.G., 2000).

What can childcare providers do?

- Provide a nurturing environment.
- Create predictability through childcare routines.
- Develop strategies to support children's adjustment in the childcare program.
- Provide support to parents and information about community resources.

◆ Ways to support a child's disclosure

- Allow the child to tell his/her story.
- Reassure the child.
- Do not pressure the child to talk.
- Do not criticize or speak negatively about the batterer.
- Do not make commitments to the child that you cannot honor.
- Follow the child's lead.
- The child may choose to disclose because changes in circumstances have challenged the child's typical coping skills.
- The child may feel strained. Responding supportively to children making disclosures increases their sense of security and their willingness to share in the future.

◆ When a parent is a victim of domestic violence

- Find a safe time and place to talk to the parent.
- Share your concerns about the child's behavior.
- Be supportive and provide information about community resources.
- Encourage the parent to contact the local domestic violence program for support and help with planning for his/her safety.
- Reassure the parent that you will not speak with the alleged abuser about the violence.
- Determine whether you have a reporting obligation.

◆ A Community Response to Domestic Violence

Four Principles

1. Reducing harm to children and women
2. Strengthening the relationship between mothers and children
3. Keeping children safe by keeping mothers safe
4. Holding offenders accountable for stopping abusive behavior

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