

The Impact of Family Violence on Children

The term *family violence* refers to violent or abusive behavior in the home directed toward one or more persons. It is estimated that 3 to 10 million children witness family violence each year. The National Woman Abuse Prevention Project reports that children are present in 41 to 55% of homes where police respond to domestic violence calls.

Victims of violence

Experts believe that 50-70% of men who abuse their partners also abuse children in the home. In homes with four or more children, the figure jumps to over 90%. The impact of physical violence directly aimed at a child is both obvious and measurable by injuries sustained.

According to the March of Dimes, battering during pregnancy is the leading cause of birth defects and infant mortality—more than the birth defects caused by all of the diseases for which people are routinely inoculated, *combined*.

Children are often unintentionally injured when furniture is overturned or objects are thrown. Older children are injured when they try to intervene and protect their mother or siblings. They become victims of violence by being caught in the crossfire.

Witnesses to violence

One-third of the children who witness violence in the home demonstrate significant behavior and/or emotional problems, including psychosomatic disorders, stuttering, anxiety, bed wetting, excessive crying and anger, and problems in school.

It is important to note that children can be adversely affected just by overhearing arguments, even when physical violence is not present.

If children do not see the violence take place, they will see the results—bruises, broken dishes or furniture, holes punched in walls—as well as hear the screams and sense the fear and tension in the home.

When children grow up experiencing or witnessing violence, they react in various ways, depending on age and gender. Some studies show that preschool boys are at risk for developing behavior problems and adolescent males who witness family violence are likely to use violence with their mothers during conflicts.

Although it appears that boys exhibit more overall problems due to witnessing spousal abuse, girls tend to exhibit low self-esteem and insecurity in relationships.

Internalizing

Some children react to family violence by internalizing their feelings which is manifested by depression and anxiety.

In young children, depression may take the form of sadness, poor appetite, chronic fatigue, withdrawal from friends, and low self-esteem.

Many older boys feel responsible for protecting their mother which causes anxiety problems. In extreme cases, a boy may feel such pressure that he sees only two options: suicide or homicide.

Of the boys between ages 11 and 20 who commit murder, 63% killed the man who was abusing their mother.

Externalizing

Aggressive, angry behavior is a common reaction to witnessing family violence. Many young people use anger and aggressive behavior to cope with their fear. Others use alcohol, drugs, sex, and food to numb their feelings.

It is not uncommon for an older child to threaten or abuse younger siblings to get what they want. They have learned their lesson well from the abuser who uses violence to get what he wants.

Sons may also become physically and verbally abusive toward their mother. If the husband is no longer living in the home, they may feel entitled to take his place as man of the house.

Post-Traumatic Stress

Children may relive violent episodes

through dreams or by watching family violence on TV. These flashes of memory can result in periods of insecurity, fear, and depression.

Some children blame themselves for the behavior of the abuser, and suffer undue guilt and shame. Others blame the victimized parent who didn't protect them or do something to stop the violence.

Long-term Effects

Boys who witness their father abuse their mother are more likely to repeat the pattern of abuse in their own homes because they learn that men have a right to beat women. This message is ingrained in boys at a young age so that it becomes a natural response to use force to "keep her in line."

Girls grow up believing that disrespect is normal, and they may either tolerate it from an abusive spouse or they may end up *being* an abusive spouse.

Psychological and Verbal Violence

Children who have experienced physical abuse often report they were more traumatized by the emotional and verbal abuse than the physical.

Unfortunately, this type of abuse (threatening, humiliating, name calling, yelling, rejecting) is not as measurable as a broken arm or a black eye, and must reach extreme levels before it is taken seriously by family members, health professionals, or the legal system.

Many professionals who have worked with family violence for years agree that psychological and verbal abuse can be more damaging than physical abuse. While research shows the devastating effects divorce has on children, it is time we take a closer look at the effects of family violence as well. This is the dilemma of the concerned mother who stays in an abusive relationship for the sake of the children. Which is worse for the children—staying in a violent home or being traumatized by divorce?

According to Dr. Richard Gelles, a leader in the study of domestic violence, the worst thing that can happen to children is to grow up in an abusive home.