

The Silent Victim

*Evelyn Dalenheim Russell
R.N.C. M.A. L.C.P.C.
Director of Women's and Girl's Health
YWCA of Lake County*

Children suffer in silence. Their pain, fear, confusion, shame and helplessness go unnoticed. The myths that if the children don't see the fighting, they won't be affected, or that school- work and academic achievement won't be affected, or that children out grow the trauma of domestic violence, are all untrue. Studies report a series of childhood problems associated with witnessing domestic violence.

Domestic Violence has become increasingly visible in our society and the public needs to pay attention. Domestic Violence is the most common and least reported crime. It tends to escalate in both frequency and in severity. Domestic violence has no social, ethnic, environmental or academic boundaries.

Domestic Violence is a pattern of coercion that can include repeated battering, injury, psychological abuse, sexual assault, mental intimidation and emotional abuse. Progressive social isolation and deprivation are a large part of the power and control issue. When we hear about domestic violence we mostly hear about the physical aspect, the bruising, black eyes, bleeding, broken noses and arms or legs, but rarely about the subtle intimidation. This can be equally as devastating. It isn't as violent but equally as effective in the issue of power and control. Domestic Violence isn't about poverty, stress, problems with the kids, unemployment or lack of communication.

In families where domestic violence is present, children witness the violence 90% of the time. Child abuse and neglect are 15 times more likely than in other families, and the risk of sexual abuse are 6.5 times greater. Half the men that batter their female partner also physically abuse their children. Children will act out the aggression that they see. 47% of the boys and 36% of the girls from violent homes will have behavior problems. Boys that witness their father battering their mother are more likely to become abusers themselves. Children from

violent homes compromise nearly 90% of juvenile offenders. Juveniles living in violent homes are 7 times more likely to attempt suicide, 24 times more likely to sexually assault a younger child, 76 times more likely to commit crimes against people and 50% more likely to abuse substances than their peers who have not witnessed domestic violence.

The after affects of witnessing domestic violence are far greater than we can imagine, low self-esteem, regressive behavior, being withdrawn, failure to thrive developmentally as an infant and toddler, and being socially/emotionally/physically neglected. Silent victims are confused with their parental identification. "How can I love Daddy, when he hits mommy?" This is the same man that takes the child to the park and buys ice cream, how can the child hate him? Children experience such a help-less-ness about the situation. Children also develop a certain sense of protectiveness around the victim, but with that is fear of retaliation for that protectiveness from the abuser. Some children will deny the violence is happening, Children also become suspicious regarding their safety, even after mom has secured alternate housing. There develops a trust issue with mom and her ability to keep herself and her children safe. How long will it last? This is the scary question children ask themselves.

Behavioral definitions of traumatized children:

Insults- criticism that injures, children replay this towards peers siblings and adults.

Rejection- actions or statements that create feelings of unworthiness.

Threats and accusations- statements intended to cause emotional or physical harm or loss.

Statements and behavior that distort reality, saying one thing and meaning or doing something else. Stating a good intention and not following through.

Disregarding, ignoring, neglecting, denying requests and needs. The message that is given is that you are not important.

Other traumatic events- destruction of property, sexual abuse, child witness of the rape of mom, and physical abuse experienced by both mother and child.

Children in violent homes never know what it is like to grow up where there needs are met, where positive emotions are openly expressed

and encouraged or where there is order and predictability. Violence leaves children in a constant state of uncertainty and instability. Children that are surrounded by violence in their home view the world as unpredictable, dangerous and chaotic. Children often take responsibility for the violence that is happening. They feel guilty i.e.: "if only I would have finished my home work this wouldn't have happened." Domestic violence effects children's ability to learn and problem solve. School performance suffers if the child is distracted {his mind is on last night's abuse} or if the child stays home to protect mom or care for mom. Learning disabilities are common in domestic violent homes. These children have a difficult time communicating and getting their needs met as they grow. Children who achieve in school, develop important reading, critical thinking/problem solving skills and communication skills, and are better able to cope with stressful/dangerous situations. Domestic violence effects a child's attitude, coping and emotional functioning. Academic achievement enhances the development of positive self-esteem and self- efficacy, which are important for emotional well being to achieve success. The relationship between violence and learning is significant because violence doesn't allow for developing thinking skills which are crucial for academic success, self-esteem, coping skills and over all resilience.

Domestic violence affects a child behaviorally. Boys externalize and exhibit hostility, aggression, and conduct problems, such as theft /vandalism. Girls internalize and become depressed, self-esteem is low {due to the helplessness of the situation}, their anxiety level is high, and they develop somatic {physical} complaints. They have insomnia and are withdrawn. Boys often feel that acting aggressively enhances their reputation and self-image.

Infant bonding and attachment are greatly affected. The lack of maternal availability is impacted when the mother is being battered. Emotional deprivation is a huge consequence. The battered individual can't meet the needs of her infant when living in fear and when attempting to recover after a battering incident. This leaves the baby rejected. A baby takes their cues from the parent figure, if they are sad, mad or glad the baby will pick this up and mirror the emotion that they see. It is the nurturing that a baby receives which is the key factor in their development. The care a baby gets has a dramatic and

long-term effect on how children develop and learn. Pleasant early experiences expand a child's capacity to learn. Love and support programs the brain to handle stress. Both quality of care and security of attachment affect a child's later capacity for empathy, emotional regulation and behavioral control. When mom is being battered she can't be there physically and emotionally for her child. Children become neglected because mom's focus is on the abuser how to appease him and control the level of violence. Victims become unresponsive to the needs of children due to their own fears. A mother, who must focus on survival or deal with her own depression and other problems, is not likely to be available for emotional support. Women being battered are less able to care for their children and are 8 times as likely to use physical punishment on their children. One reason for the physical punishment maybe that the victim is keeping the child "behaved" as to not trigger the abuser.

Toddlers are felt to be the most severely affected by domestic violence. Toddlers have the ability to start reasoning [cause and effect}. A direct consequence of witnessing domestic violence is the attitude a child develops concerning the use of violence and conflict resolution. The child develops either a passive attitude or an aggressive attitude instead of an assertive, constructive and effective attitude. With increased aggression in the home there is increased stress and distress for the child. Preschoolers are affected in their social cognitive development due to isolation from peers, not relating to the activities or interest of their age group. They are the children that are hard to engage in an activity, they have a "dark cloud" hanging over their little heads. Preschoolers have a hard time relating to adults. Some toddlers become actively involved in the conflict and then become physical victims of the violence {children step in to protect the battered individual}. Children will often focus on the safety of the mom and their own safety will be second. Girls frequently try to shield younger siblings and even delay their own future to stay home and protect their sibling. Preschoolers see themselves as the cause of the anger. Preschoolers mirror the anxiety level of their mom. These silent victims start to show aggression to their peers. Girls, usually become distressed. Harsh emotions threaten a child's sense of security. Children have difficulty distinguishing between warmth and anger because of the unpredictable emotions around them. Problematic behaviors show

up in childcare, such as, hitting, biting, being argumentative and not being able to socialize with others. A child's ability to problem solve and socialize are a big predictor of a successful secure adult. Some children of domestic violence will behaviorally regress, i.e.: if they were potty trained they will again wet themselves or regress to bed-wetting. They will also demonstrate poor eating and sleeping habits {fear of the dark}.

Older children will also display behavioral, social and emotional problems due to their exposure to domestic violence. These symptoms can include:

Low self-esteem/depression

Suicidal thoughts or acts

Anger/aggression

Running away

Drug/alcohol use

Early sexual activity/teen pregnancy

Violence prone

Poor school attendance/poor school performance

Poor social adaptability/difficulty forming meaningful relationships

Eating disorders

Male disrespect for females

Males can be violent to females

Girls feel it is ok to be hit

Problems with authority

There are many lasting effects of domestic violence that children carry with them into adulthood. Children from domestic violent homes show less skill in understanding how others feel and their ability to view a situation from another perspective is limited. Children from violent homes find it hard to be empathetic. Women are more depressed, have trauma related symptoms, low self-esteem, and lower social adjustment. Men carry with them trauma related symptoms {post traumatic stress}. These children learn to hit the people they love; that parents hit kids and that there is a moral rightness to use violence as a method of interaction. The violence in the home teaches children when all else fails, use violence to get what you want and that violence is a way to get rid of feelings, solve problems and win. Children grow up believing humiliation; disrespect

and being beat are all normal in a home. Older children have a tendency to identify with the aggressor and lose respect for the victim. Older children will be angry with mom for staying with the abuser and exposing the child to the violence

How can we help these silent victims? Recognize that children are affected and create safety. Domestic violence is traumatic whether you see it or hear it. Create a positive relationship with children and never underestimate the power of communication. Help a child put the responsibility of the violence on the right person and not allow them to put the responsibility on to them self. Isolation and shame are a big part of the stigma of domestic violence and children need help in relieving those feelings. There is loss and separation in domestic violent homes. The loss of the abusive parent needs to be dealt with.

As adults that care for and care about children, what can we do to prevent perpetuation of domestic violence in our children? We can model appropriate behaviors, like problem management, conflict resolution, and dealing with anger and stress. Show children how to deal with emotions without using violence. We can reduce exposure to violence and violent behavior {there is a segment of the brain that encodes violence and then replays the violence that was seen}. Children need lots of love, attention approval and acceptance. Children need predictability, consistent rules and discipline, as well as, structure and boundaries. Help a child develop a healthy self-image. Children need help to develop higher order thinking skills, empathy, impulse control, anger management, peaceful conflict resolution and assertive communication