

Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

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Myth: Children are not affected by Domestic Violence if they are not physically injured.

Millions of American families live with the pain and terror caused by Domestic Violence. These alarming numbers lead to endless discussions about the effects on the survivor as well as the responsibility of the perpetrator. However, the life-altering impacts on children being raised in violent environments is often lost in the debate. Many people believe that children who routinely watch their mothers being battered can emerge unscathed if they are not abused directly. This belief is not true. If our children are to heal from these traumas, we as a society must move beyond denial and into a place where these issues can be addressed realistically.

Masked by resilience

By nature, some children are resilient. This outward appearance helps perpetuate the myth that they are not affected by violence in their homes. The surface behavior of these children may seem appropriate for their individual maturity levels. However, they often harbor considerable underlying feelings of fear, confusion, hurt, anger, and conflicted loyalties toward the people they have been taught to love, honor, and respect. Children learn to cope with traumatic issues in their own unique ways. Unfortunately, some of these coping skills may lead to self-harm, engaging in risky behaviors, problems in school, drug and alcohol use.

The result of being raised in a home with a batterer may be apparent immediately or may lie dormant until later in life when it manifests itself as:

- Depression
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Inability to develop healthy relationships
- Addiction
- Controlling and/or violent behaviors
- Suicide ideation and attempts

Some children may be aggressive, have low tolerance for frustration, become easily discouraged or upset, or be overly involved in school and civic activities to minimize the time they spend at home. Others may reject school and have truancy problems because they want to be home protecting or caring for the abused family member, which is usually mom.

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An unhealthy education

If children are like sponges, absorbing attitudes, belief systems, and behaviors from the environment, then they learn destructive information and incorporate it as part of their world view. Children living with a batterer unfortunately learn that:

- It is okay to hurt others and there are no consequences for their actions.
- The person with the most power wins.
- It is acceptable to use violence to resolve conflicts.

A legacy of violence

Most people who are violent towards their partners, report that they were primary or secondary victims of Domestic Violence as a child. National statistics reveal that a woman is more likely to be injured in her home by a family member, usually a partner, than in any other place or by any other means. Batterers directly and indirectly interfere with parenting by undermining, overruling, ridiculing, telling lies to the children, and preventing appropriate caregiving. Severely stressful situations result in limited energy to provide engagement and attention to children. As a result, these children need stress free bonding time for healthy development.

How can you help?

It is essential that children receive help dealing with the realities of their perpetrators' behaviors. Unfortunately, many victims hide the violence out of fear, shame, love, loyalty, lack of options, and not being believed. Survivors need space, understanding, and compassion to discuss Domestic Violence issues openly and honestly.

If you know someone who is living with Domestic Violence, you can help by doing the following:

- Take time to listen, believe them, and stay confidential.
- Encourage conversations about safety planning.
- Suggest the development of a support system, which can include trusted family, friends, elders, and community members.
- Provide information about local advocacy programs and support groups.
- Make them feel welcome at Traditional activities and community events.
- Assist with child care and model nurturing behaviors.
- Respect their choices and tell them the violence is not their fault.
- Be patient.

Given in a non-judgmental way to both primary and secondary victims, your support can help decrease the isolation they suffer. It can also help build an atmosphere in which children can openly express the painful feelings they are experiencing as a result of Domestic Violence.