



The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Domestic Violence affects every member of the family, including 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 and 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, depending on the child's gender and age. Children exposed to family violence are more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological and 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.

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 her/him 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.

Potential effects of children exposed to violence:

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 hopelessness 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.
- Engages in exploitive 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.

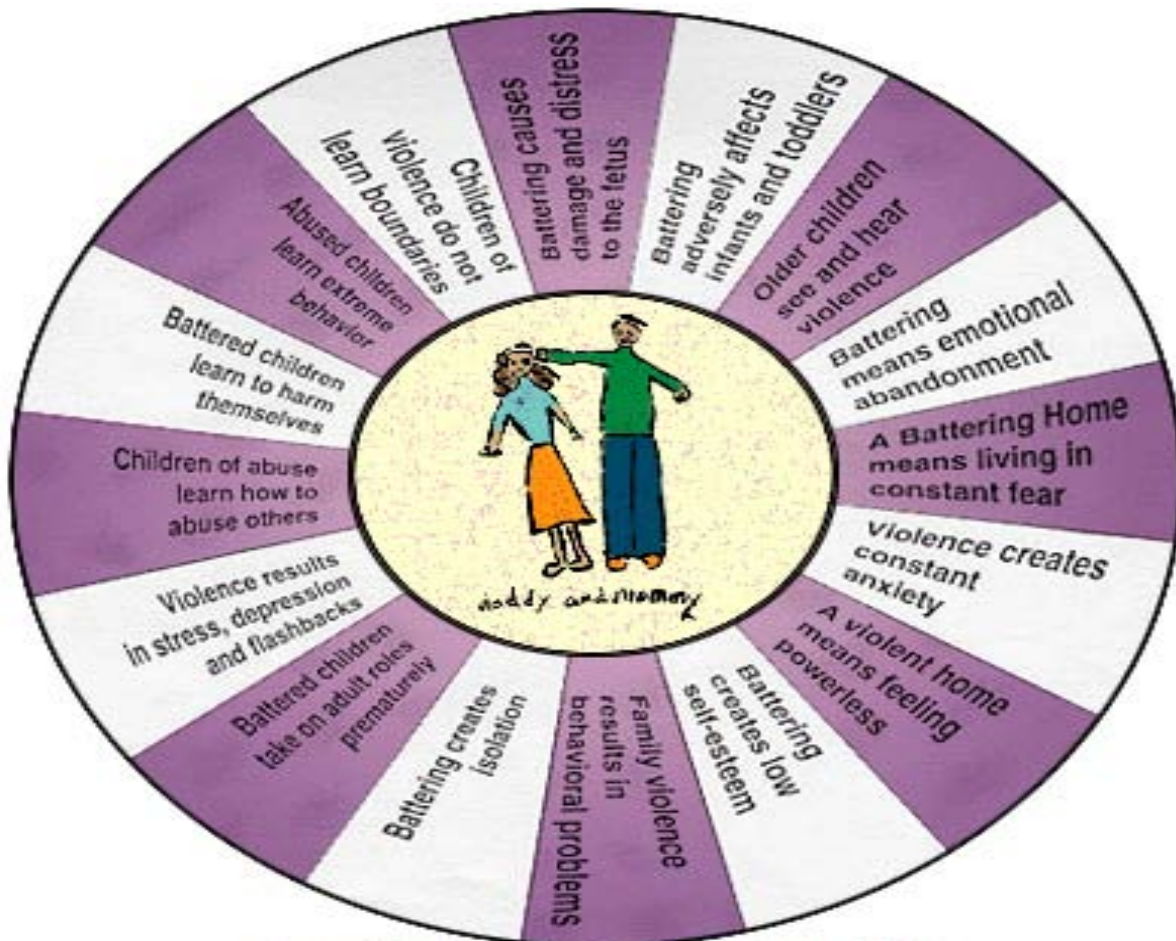
Domestic Violence is a learned behavior. It is learned through: Observation, Culture, Family, Community (peers, school, etc.) and Experiences



HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Tell your child s/he is not the cause of the violence
- Teach your child that s/he cannot control the violence
- Support your child after the violence has occurred
- Inform your child that s/he is not responsible for making the family happy
- Encourage your child to talk about the violence
- Have your children talk with a trained counselor about the domestic violence
- Reassure your child that s/he is loved and is an important person
- Accept your child's feelings and reactions related to the domestic violence
- Reassure your child that his/her feelings are OK
- Encourage your children to participate in activities that will divert his/her attention from the domestic violence (ex. Playing a musical instrument, sports, games, reading, writing, listening to relaxing music)
- Teach your child age-appropriate relaxation techniques
- Have your child write poems, stories, letters, or keep a diary/journal that describes his/her thoughts and feelings about domestic violence
- Encourage your child to join social organizations to enhance his/her feelings of belonging and self esteem
- Reassure your child that s/he can choose not to be violence when s/he grows up

Children Who Witness Domestic Violence



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