



Domestic Violence's Effect on Children

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Child Exposure to Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence is defined as “a pattern of abusive behavior in a relationship, where one intimate partner uses violence to gain and/or maintain power and control over another” (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2011). Though this term is defined within an intimate partner relationship, domestic violence also affects children in these relationships. Children who live amidst violence are more likely to hear and see it directly, or indirectly, and/or to witness evidence of the aftermath (i.e., broken furniture, injured family members, etc.). They can also become caught in the crossfire between perpetrators and victims.

Child Exposure to Violence Versus Child Abuse

The lack of a common distinction between children exposed to domestic violence and children who suffer from child abuse make defining the problem difficult (Overlien, 2010). Child abuse is “the recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or [] presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Child Welfare

Information Gateway, 2016). Yet, children who witness domestic violence may not be victims of it. This is where the inherent confusion between child abuse and children exposed to domestic violence lies: though a child who lives in a domestically violent home may not be a direct victim of the abuse, children who live in domestically violent homes are 15 times more likely to suffer from child abuse than children who live in nonviolent homes (Volpe, J.S., 1996).

The difference and link between the two definitions is inherently confusing. However, the adverse effects of childhood exposure to and being a direct victim of domestic violence are similar in the damage they cause.

How Children Are Impacted

When children witness and/or are subject to domestic violence, they are:

- Two times more likely to internalize behaviors (i.e., depression, cutting and eating disorders) (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009). Children exposed are also 50 percent more likely to abuse substances (Martin, 2007).
- Two times more likely to externalize behaviors

(i.e., physical aggression, vandalism, theft, defiance and bullying) (Martinez-Torteya et. al., 2009). Children exposed to violence are 74 percent more likely to commit a violent crime (Martin, 2007).

- More likely to have damaged coping skills that negatively affect their emotional intelligence, because children exposed to violence react more intensely to conflict than children who are not exposed to violence (Overlien, 2010).
- Three times more likely to carry on the cycle of abuse, because “growing up with domestic violence is the most significant predictor of whether or not someone will be engaged in domestic violence later in life” (Martin, 2007).

These behaviors and risks are far-reaching and can often lead to health problems later in life.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

From 1995 to 1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente interviewed over 17,000 people about their previous childhood experiences and current health conditions and behaviors (ACEs, 2016). The ACEs found that the more adverse experiences a child was exposed to, such as physical abuse, a parent who was imprisoned, and/or emotional neglect, the more likely the child would develop health problems, specifically those that are leading causes of death in adults.

Therefore, adults exposed to domestic violence as children, whether they and/or a close relative were the victim, are more likely to have a mental illness, engage in risky behaviors, contract a communicable and/or noncommunicable disease (i.e., STDs and diabetes), and/or have a reduced quality of life. In fact, adults exposed to domestic violence as children often die earlier than adults who were not exposed to domestic violence.

US Children Effected Annually

It is difficult to determine the exact number of children exposed to domestic violence annually as the number can vary depending upon the source used. Multiple sources list the number of children exposed to domestic violence in the United States between 3.3 and 10 million annually (McAllister Groves, 2016). However, UNICEF's and The Body Shop's "Stop Violence in the Home" campaign, cited by many of the references in this fact sheet, estimates those numbers are between 339,000 to 2.7 million children (Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children, 2006). These numbers are not broken down beyond total estimates because tracking children exposed to domestic violence is harder than tracking child abuse.

Child abuse statistics, however, are usually compiled from calls made to law enforcement and protective service agencies, and are broken down beyond totals. As previously stated, children who live in domestically violent homes are 15 times more likely to suffer from child abuse. Therefore, national child abuse statistics have been included in this fact sheet to help illustrate the impact of domestic violence exposure on children in the United States.

National Statistics

The following estimates are taken from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' 2015 Child Maltreatment Report, indicating the number of the children exposed to domestic violence in all 50 states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico:

- Children ages 0-5 are the most vulnerable to violence, with children younger than 1 having the highest rate of victimization.
- Perpetrators are almost equally likely to be men or women, with women abusing children slightly more often than men at 54 percent.
- 1,670 children died of abuse in 2015, and four-fifths of the deaths involved at least one parent.
- The most common form of abuse is neglect.
- Over 50 percent of all abusers are a relative of the child.

Nevada Statistics

- 909 girls under 18 were served by domestic and sexual violence services in 2016 (2016 Statewide Domestic Violence Services Statistics).
- 168 boys under 18 were served by domestic and sexual violence services in 2016 (2016 Statewide Domestic Violence Services Statistics).
- 1,826 children were served by the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Children's Alliance in 2016 (NCA Statistics - Statistical Report 2016: State: Nevada).

- However, Nevada Child Protective Services offices received 32,974 new referrals in 2016 alone (CPS Reports and Investigations in Nevada FY2016).

What Encourages Resilience?

The upside to the pervasive, negative effects of domestic violence exposure on children is their resilience in the face of adversity. Children can learn to become resilient with the help of trusted adults invested in their well-being. Resilience is defined as "the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress" (Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers, 2017). Factors that contribute to resilience in children include "personal strength, emotion regulation, prosocial skills, secure attachment, and appreciation of life" (Howell et. al., 2014). In other words, children who are more outgoing and even tempered; who can more easily self-soothe uncomfortable emotions; and who have strong bonds with a parent, family members and/or other support systems; can overcome adversity more adeptly than children who do not have these safeguards. These safeguards are key, as children's resilience can be damaged when their most important, protective relationships are characterized by violence.

For example, a violent father abusing the mother of his children can no longer be trusted by either because he has betrayed his commitment to protect his family. In turn, the mother's ability to protect her children can come into question, despite her efforts to do so, because she cannot defend herself

from her husband. It then becomes difficult for children to attach to or trust either parent, and therefore, to trust others in general, isolating them and hindering their ability to build strong, protective relationships outside their families.

Though some children have persevered through violence alone and become healthy members of their communities, they achieve resilience far more easily when they have a trusted adult model the behavior for them. **Research shows children simply need one healthy relationship to build resilience** (*InBrief: What is Resilience?*, 2017).

According to Ann S. Masten, Professor of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, resilience is not a trait children are born with. Resilience is a muscle that must be exercised to become stronger (Martinez-Torteya et. al., 2009). Helping children gain social and emotional skills can bolster their ability to adapt to challenging situations.

How Youth Workers Can Help

As three-fifths of child abuse and neglect cases were reported by professionals who worked with children in 2015 (such as teachers, juvenile probation officers, social services staff, etc.), those who work with youth are in a unique position to recognize, and report violence affecting children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). They come in contact with children more than any other community members outside their own homes. Because of their proximity to children, these workers not only have the opportunity recognize and

report violence these children face, they also have the opportunity to become, or help facilitate, those healthy relationships children need to build resilience.

Ways Those Who Work With Youth Build Resilience

Children who are the most resilient in the face of trauma often have one strong relationship with an adult who invests in their well-being. According to the Search Institute, a global nonprofit focused on studying the factors that help kids succeed in life, those who work with youth can help children build resilience by following the “Developmental Relationships Framework”:

Developmental Relationships Framework

Expressing Care: Workers must first show children they care and are invested in their well-being. Having the curiosity to ask children about themselves is a great start.

Challenging Growth: Workers must also push children to grow. This requires the worker to identify children’s strengths and encourage them to pursue their goals.

Providing Support: Workers can connect children to the right resources to pursue their goals (i.e., encouraging them to try out for the basketball team if they have a skill for shooting hoops). Workers must also hold children accountable to work on these strengths, as well as on their weaknesses.

Sharing Power: While workers must be available to guide children when needed, they must also respect children’s agency in their learning and decision-making. This reinforces the worker’s role as a mentor and guide, rather than as a babysitter.

Expanding Possibilities: Workers can connect children to resources that allow them to pursue their goals by exposing them to other “qualified, capable adults” who care about them, such as through an extracurricular club, an after-school program, a church group, a supportive foster family, or anyone who can fulfill the child’s need for support (Developmental Relationships Framework, 2017).

In fact, connecting children with groups based around exercise, mindfulness or volunteering has been shown to strengthen connections in the brain related to resilience (Young, K., 2017).

*Paraphrased from *Search Institute’s* 2017 Developmental Relationships Framework

When youth workers develop relationships with the children they serve, they not only gain the opportunity to positively impact children, but understand how children are negatively affected by domestic violence, and how to prevent them from hiding what’s happening, and isolating themselves from the very help they need.

Conclusion

Children don’t have to be victims of domestic violence to suffer from it. Simply witnessing violence (seeing or hearing it) can damage a child’s ability to connect with and trust others, preventing them from building the crucial relationships they need to succeed to their fullest potential. Those who work with youth have the opportunity and responsibility to recognize when children are isolating themselves or acting out, and to respond in order to connect them with the resources they need to build resilience and move on with their lives.

Domestic violence can profoundly affect

children, but if they are able to acquire and learn resilience and coping skills, it doesn’t have to define them.

For more information on ways to help children exposed to domestic violence in the United States and Nevada, contact:

National Children’s Alliance:
202.548.0090

Nevada Department of Health and
Human Services Division of Child &
Family Services:
800.992.5757

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