

Children Witnessing Domestic Violence

Domestic violence affects every member of the family, including the children. Statistics show that over 3 million children witness violence in their home each year. Raising children in a violent world is challenging. Women use extreme and brave means to protect their children from abusive partners. Research shows that non-abusing parents are often the strongest protective factor in the lives of children who witness domestic violence. However, children, too, may be physically, emotionally, verbally, or sexually abused and/or neglected. Witnessing violence can affect every aspect of a child's life, growth, and development, but when properly identified and addressed, the effects of domestic violence on children can be mitigated.

Emotional reactions of children who witness domestic violence

Children see or hear more than we are aware and children often express difficult emotions with actions instead of words. There are several general reactions that children from violent homes are likely to show. The same emotional reaction can be acted out differently according to the child's age.

Feeling responsible for the abuse:

A child might think, "if I had been a good girl/boy Daddy wouldn't have hit Mommy."

Constant anxiety:

Even when things are calm, one never knows when the next fight will start.

Guilt for not stopping the abuse:

Children also experience guilt over the good feelings they have about the abuser.

Grief:

Children who are separated from the abuser are in the process of grieving over the loss. Children may also grieve over losing the lifestyle and positive image of the abuser they had before the violence began.

Ambivalence:

Not knowing how one feels or having two opposite emotions at the same time is very difficult for children. A child who says, "I don't know how I feel about it," may not be hedging but rather is confused about feelings.

Fear of abandonment:

Children removed from one parent as a result of violent acts may have strong fears that the other parent could also leave them or die. Thus, a child may refuse to leave the mother, even for short time periods.

Need for excessive adult attention:

This need can be especially troublesome for mothers who are trying to deal with their own pain and decisions.

Fear of physical harm to themselves:

A significant percentage of witnessing children are also abused. They may worry that the abuser will find them and abduct or harm them or that the abuser will be angry and retaliate when they return home.

Embarrassment:

Especially for older children, sensitivity to the stigma of spouse abuse may result in shame.

Worry about the future:

The uncertainty within their daily lives may make children feel that life will continue to be unpredictable.

Often the most powerful tool to help children feel safe is a supportive, helpful adult.

Responding to Children Living with Domestic Violence

- What do they do/where do they go when the fighting happens? Help them think of a safe place
- Be sure they know it's not safe to try to stop the fighting, even though they might want to
- Ask if they have access to a phone and do they know about 911? Ask if they feel safe calling 911 if needed. If not, ask whom can they call or what they can do instead?
- Tell them it's not their fault
- Try not to pass judgment on the abuser - kids often love the person who's doing the hurting
- It may help to ask if the person doing the hurting does it to anyone else in the family
- Ask if there is someone they can talk to about the problem if they need to, such as a teacher, the other parent, a caregiver, counselor, etc.
- Tell them they are not alone
- Give permission to tell their story
- Give simple, clear expectations about the violence
- Give children daily reminders that they are lovable, competent and important.
- Have rules and routines so children can know what will come next
- Teach alternatives to violence
- Build self-esteem

Be a role model for children by resolving interactions in respectful and non-violent ways.

Battered Women's Project**24-hour hotline****1-800-439-2323 / out of state 207-769-8251**