



**Preventing Domestic Violence**

*None in Three is funded by the European Union*

## **THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW - DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN**

*The devastating effects of domestic violence on women are well documented. Far less is known about the impact on children who witness a parent or caregiver being subjected to violence... children who are exposed to violence in the home may suffer a range of severe and lasting effects. Children who grow up in a violent home are more likely to be victims of child abuse. Those who are not direct victims have some of the same behavioural and psychological problems as children who are themselves physically abused. Children who are exposed to violence in the home may have difficulty learning and limited social skills, exhibit violent, risky or delinquent behaviour, or suffer from depression or severe anxiety. Children in the earliest years of life are particularly vulnerable: studies show that domestic violence is more prevalent in homes with younger children than those with older children (UNICEF, 2006)*

- There are serious methodological challenges in estimating the number of children affected by domestic violence. However, the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children (2006), reviewed existing studies on violence in the home in various countries and estimated that as many as 275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home. The number is staggering but actually is a conservative estimate as many countries do not collect such data, there are definitional difficulties in what constitutes violence and violence is in any case, underreported (UNICEF, 2006).
- There is a common link between domestic violence and child abuse. Among victims of child abuse, 40 per cent report domestic violence in the home (World Health Organization, 2002). This association has been confirmed in studies from around the world.
- Children are exposed to or experience domestic violence in many different ways and the effects of witnessing domestic violence will impact children in different ways depending upon the age and development stage of the child and individual resiliency factors. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that domestic violence poses a serious threat to children's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, particularly if the violence is chronic.

**The Effects of Domestic Violence** (the following is adapted from UNICEF 2006 and The Domestic Violence Roundtable, 2008).

- Witnessing domestic violence can mean being present and seeing actual incidents of physical/and or sexual violence, hearing threats or the noise of a mother being beaten or, observing the aftermath of violence such as blood, bruises, broken limbs, torn clothing, and damaged household items. Children who witness repeated acts of domestic violence often become highly attuned to the impending threat of violence, which can lead to severe psychological stress. This is evident from the excerpt below, which incidentally discussed the role of UK immigration policy in undermining some women's escape from violence:

*The mother of these children had lived for a very long time as a victim of her husband's violence, and so had mine. Bruised eyes, dark glasses, blood and broken bones were the physical manifestations of a psychological terror we lived with all the time, that he could and would erupt without notice or provocation – as children, we learned to creep about like Jack, silently so as not to waken this fearsome giant. The emotional tension was so intense that it was almost with a sense of relief we ran to hide when he did start to hit out, under beds, in cupboards or squashed thin against the wall, holding your breath to make yourself invisible. The relief quickly gave way to a pounding terror, as the sounds and sights of mum being punched and kicked pervaded the house – there was no way to hide from this (Watt and Jones, 2015, p133)*

- Children exposed to domestic violence become fearful and anxious. They are constantly watching and waiting for the next incident to occur. They never know what will trigger the abuse, and therefore, they can never relax and feel safe. Theirs is an unpredictable world. This unpredictability undermines their ability to develop trust and attachments. They are always worried for themselves, their mother, and their siblings.
- Children witnessing domestic violence often feel worthless and powerless and may think that somehow the abuse is their fault, thinking if they had not done or said a particular thing, the abuse would not have occurred.
- Children who are raised in violent homes are expected to keep the family secret, sometimes not even talking to each other about the abuse. They learn from a young age to disguise the abuse in their family, re-telling to the outside world, the explanation the parents concoct for the noise, the bruised eye or the broken arm. They feel humiliated and embarrassed and expend great emotional and psychological energy pretending that everything is fine.
- Children are often very ambivalent in their relationships with the parent who is abusive. On the one hand, they may love him or her but on the other, they are fearful of the parent and may hate them for the pain they inflict. They carry a great deal of anger towards the abusive parent, but unable to express it often project it on to their siblings or their mother for 'triggering the abuse'.
- Children of abuse feel isolated and vulnerable. They are starved for attention, affection and approval. Abused women who are mothers are often distraught and struggling to survive and may either not be emotionally present for her children or else may be unable to protect them. The father who is abusive often becomes a figure to be placated or to be made to feel in control. The child will often laugh when their father laughs, express happiness when he does or assume the façade that everything is fine for as long as the father does. This means that the father is not emotionally present for the child either and it is left to the child to work out the psychological or emotional needs of the parent.
- The emotional responses of children who witness domestic violence may include fear, guilt, shame, sleep disturbances, sadness, depression, and anger (at both the abuser for the violence and at the mother for being unable to prevent the violence). The child may internalise the effects of abuse and become withdrawn, timid and self-harming or alternatively, may externalise the effects and exhibit aggressive behaviour, such as bullying. Children from violent homes are up to three times more likely to be involved in fighting than children raised in non-violent homes. They are also more likely to experience physical or sexual abuse themselves while others may be injured while trying to intervene on behalf of their mother or a sibling.
- Physical responses may include psychosomatic problems and actual physical illnesses, bedwetting and there may be mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, cognitive disorders or

suicidal ideas. Children who witness violence may suffer from a loss of ability to concentrate, resulting in poor school performance and attendance. They may experience developmental delays in speech, motor or cognitive skills.

■ That children who witness domestic violence often suffer emotional and psychological trauma is evident from the vast body of research on the topic. Children whose mothers are abused are denied the kind of home life that fosters healthy development. Some studies suggest social development is also damaged. Some children lose the ability to feel empathy for others, others feel socially isolated and may be unable to make friends.

■ Children who grow up observing their mothers being abused, especially by their fathers, grow up with a role model of intimate relationships in which one person uses intimidation and violence over the other person to get their way. Because children have a natural tendency to identify with strength, they may ally themselves with the abuser and lose respect for their apparently helpless mother. Abusers typically play into this by putting the mother down in front of her children. Seeing their mothers treated with disrespect, teaches children that they also can disrespect women.

■ Children raised in abusive homes learn that violence is the way to resolve conflicts and problems. They may become socialised into believing that violence is a normal part of a relationship. Boys who witness their mothers' abuse are more likely to abuse their partners when they grow up than boys raised in nonviolent homes. It should be noted however that many children who witness violence, are so appalled by its effects that they would never be violent to a partner. Girls, raised in violent homes, may come to believe that females deserve to be beaten. Girls who have witnessed domestic violence may be more likely to seek out partners who are dominant, controlling or abusive.

■ The most significant predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence as adults is whether or not they were raised in a home where there was domestic violence. Research tells us that rates of domestic violence are higher among women whose husbands were abused as children or who saw their mothers being abused.

■ Children who have witnessed domestic violence have higher risks of alcohol/drug abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, and juvenile delinquency. Witnessing domestic violence is the largest predictor of juvenile delinquency and adult criminality. It is also the primary reason children run away from home.

**Download** UNICEF (2006) 'Behind Closed Doors, The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children' at this link: <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/BehindClosedDoors.pdf>

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