

## WEEK 20, DV AND CHILDREN, HANDOUT A

# EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

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## Children and Youth Exposed to Domestic Violence

All children and youth who live with domestic violence are affected by the experience. The nature and extent of the effects vary greatly. Some children are severely traumatized while others are able to cope well, and go on to live healthy, productive lives.

Children are not just eye witnesses to domestic violence. They are actively involved in trying to understand the abuse, predict when it will happen, protect themselves, their mother or their siblings and worrying about the consequences. Fear and secrecy dominate family relationships, and survival becomes the primary goal of non-abusing family members. The focus on making it through each day may leave little room for fun and relaxation, meeting basic needs or planning for the future.

## Children are exposed to domestic violence in many different ways:

- Seeing a parent threatened, demeaned or assaulted.
- Being in the middle of an assault by accident, because the abuser intends it, or because the child tries to intervene
- Overhearing conflict and physical assault.
- Seeing the aftermath, such as a parent's injuries and trauma reactions
- Living in a household dominated by tension and fear
- Being raised by parents whose ability to care for them is compromised by domestic violence
- Being used and manipulated by the abuser to hurt the battered parent
- Suffering the consequences of economic abuse

## Effects of exposure to domestic violence can include:

- Believing the abuse is their fault
- Turning against mother or father or having ambivalent feelings about both parents
- Feeling that they are alone, that there is no one who understands them
- Being afraid to talk about the abuse or express their feelings

- Developing negative core beliefs about themselves and others
- Developing unhealthy coping and survival reactions, such as mental health or behavior problems
- Believing that the world is a dangerous and unpredictable place
- Being isolated from people who might find out about the abuse or offer help

### **Children and youth also learn lessons such as:**

- Violence and coercion are normal and justifiable.
- Abusive tactics are effective ways of getting what you want.
- There are two ways to solve problems: aggression and passivity.
- Victims are responsible for what happens to them.
- People who hurt others don't face consequences for their actions.
- It's OK to blame problems on someone else.
- People who are supposed to take care of you cannot always be trusted.
- Women are not worthy of respect, or Men are weak.

### **Teenagers (13–18 years)**

Older children may exhibit the most behavioral changes as a result of exposure to violence. Depending on their circumstances, teenagers may:

- Talk about the event all the time or deny that it happened
- Refuse to follow rules or talk back with greater frequency
- Complain of being tired all the time
- Engage in risky behaviors
- Sleep more or less than usual
- Increase aggressive behaviors
- Want to be alone, not even wanting to spend time with friends
- Experience frequent nightmares
- Use drugs or alcohol, run away from home, or get into trouble with the law

Witnessing domestic violence can have negative effects on children's development. Exposure to domestic violence, like other toxic stressors, can interfere with a child's healthy brain development. This can lead to altered stress response, difficulty paying attention, hyper-startle response, and other problems. The potential symptoms childhood exposure to domestic violence can be characterized as externalized or internalized symptoms. Externalized symptoms are more visible and often manifest as behavioral problems. Internalized symptoms are less visible and more likely to be characterized as mental health problems.



Externalized symptoms of children's exposure to domestic violence include:

- Aggression
- Lower social competence, including less empathy with others
- Lower verbal, cognitive and motor abilities
- Restlessness, impulsivity and difficulty concentrating
- Behavioral and academic difficulties in school
- Immaturity, delays in development and regression to earlier developmental stages

Internalized symptoms of children's exposure to domestic violence include:

- Depression, anxiety and hyper-vigilance
- Fearful, withdrawn and inhibited behavior
- Lower self esteem
- Shame and feeling responsible for the abuse
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Long term effects of exposure to domestic violence include a higher risk for alcohol and drug abuse, sexual acting out, running away, and suicide. Boys who grow up with domestic abuse are more likely to abuse their intimate partners, and girls are less likely to seek help if they become victims in their adult relationships.

Adapted from the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence and reprinted with their permission.

**Week 20: Handout B**  
**SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO HAVE WITNESSED DV**

Millions of children see, hear and sense domestic violence. Even if they are not physically present, they are aware of the violence. How children react to and cope with witnessing violence may depend on their developmental level, coping skills, age, access to resources, and the existence of support persons in their lives. Researchers have found that many children may show resilience to the violence by learning to cope with it in a number of constructive ways.

**Factors that assist a child in developing resilience:**

- Healthy relationships with others
- Well-developed problem-solving skills
- A strong sense of self-worth
- Stable belief system sense of purpose and future

**Healthy ways that children may cope with domestic violence:**

- Talking with a safe adult
- Excelling in school
- Reaching out within the community
- Getting involved with after school/extra-curricular activities

**Talking with Your Child about the Violence:**

Be honest with your child about what is happening. Children are aware of the violence more than you might think. Respecting their knowledge will increase their trust in you.

- 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 children open 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

-Mid-Valley Women's Crisis Service. *Domestic Violence Packet*. V2.0 2/2003.

## **Giving Children Love and Care**

Nurturing children from violent homes can bring healing to their lives. In giving needed love and care to children, it is important for a parent to reflect these essentials:

- Trust and Respect
  - Acknowledge children's right to have their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions. Promote independence, allow for privacy and respect their feelings for the other parent. Believe in them.
- Provide Emotional Security
  - Talk and act so children feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves. Be gentle. Be dependable.
- Provide Physical Security
  - Provide healthy food, safe shelter and appropriate clothing. Teach personal hygiene and nutrition. Monitor safety. Maintain a family routine. Attend to wounds.
- Provide Discipline
  - Be consistent; ensure that rules are appropriate to age and development of the child. Be clear about limits and expectations. Use discipline to give instruction, not to punish.
- Give Time
  - Participate in your children's lives, in their activities, school, sports, special events, celebrations and friends. Include your children in your activities. Reveal who you are to your children.
- Encourage and Support
  - Be affirming. Encourage children to follow their interests. Let children disagree with you. Recognize improvement. Teach new skills. Let them make mistakes.
- Give Affection
  - Express verbal and physical affection. Be affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt.
- Care for Yourself
  - Give yourself personal time. Keep yourself healthy. Maintain friendships. Accept love.

*A free resource with lots of suggestions for supporting children effected by Domestic Violence can be found at The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org) under the topic Children and Domestic Violence. More information can also be found at Futures without Violence website.*

*If you are not able to safely access a computer and would like a copy of the NCTSN resource, please ask your group facilitator.*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Week 20: Handout C</b> <b>CHILDREN'S BILL OF RIGHTS</b></p>
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- You have the right **TO BE** yourself.
- You have the right **TO CHOOSE** your friends.
- You have the right **TO WALK AWAY** from those friends if you need to.
- You have the right **TO ASK** for help.
- You have the right **TO MAKE** your own decisions.
- You have the right **TO SHARE** your feelings with others.
- You have the right **TO THINK** good thoughts about yourself and others.
- You have the right **TO EXPECT** a better way of life if you need it.
- You have the right **TO DISLIKE** someone's behavior (parents included).
- You have the right **TO ENJOY** your childhood.
- You have the right **TO PUT** yourself first.
- You have the right **TO TAKE CHARGE** of your own life in positive, healthy ways.
- You have the right **TO LEARN HOW** to take care of yourself.
- You have the right **TO FEEL** whatever you're feelings.
- You have the right **TO GROW** at your own pace.
- You have the right **TO ACCEPT** that there is an alcohol or drug problem in your home.
- You have the right **TO LEARN** how to laugh and be kind to yourself.
- You have the right **TO FEEL** good about yourself.
- You have the right **TO LIKE** yourself.
- You have the right **TO LOVE** yourself.