Coming Out of the Dark: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children & Youth and How to Help Promote Healing

Researchers from the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry estimate that between 4.5 million and 15 million children are exposed to physical violence in the home. Take into consideration that these numbers reflect only the incidents of domestic violence that have been reported.

What is Domestic Violence?

There are various definitions of domestic violence. The U.S. Department of Justice defines domestic violence as "A pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that one partner uses to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone." Verbal and emotional abuse in the home is more challenging to track but can be just as impactful. Domestic violence has a devastating effect on children and society.

There is often a cloud of secrecy surrounding domestic violence that engulfs the victim as well as the children who are witnesses. It isn't hard to imagine that the reported number of incidents is probably higher, especially for those children and youth who have been or are currently involved with the child welfare system. It can be challenging to know for sure if a child in your care has witnessed domestic violence. That cloud of secrecy is pervasive; a child may have been explicitly taught that what they saw is a normal way for partners to interact — or they may have simply absorbed it as normal through years of observation, never having been shown anything different. They might also be the "secret keepers" for their family and be taught to deny or minimize what they have witnessed. Sometimes, you might learn about the history of domestic violence from caseworkers or the child's case record. Being able to listen openly as a caregiver is essential for a child to share their experience and to build trust with you.

How Children and Youth are Affected

Children who are exposed to domestic violence can experience both short-term and long-term effects. Short-term effects may include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hypervigilance, and learning difficulties or behavior issues in school. Long-term effects may include higher dispositions for substance abuse and violence in future relationships. Children in a setting where there is domestic violence are at a higher risk of experiencing abuse and may act out with violence, as well.

Several factors influence the impact of domestic violence on children and youth, such as the type of

violence that is occurring, the age of the child, the frequency and/or intensity of abusive instances, if the child has been a victim of abuse, and the child's ability to cope. Children may experience a wide range of feelings about what they have seen or heard. They might feel helpless. They see or know what is happening but cannot get help. A child may feel guilty for being unable to prevent or "save" the victimized parent. A child may certainly feel afraid – for their victimized parent, siblings, or themselves.

You might notice that children who have come from a home where domestic violence has occurred may take on various roles within the family as a way to cope with their fears and emotions.

These roles may include:

- *Caretaker*—a child may become "parentified." This means that they take on the responsibility of caring for siblings. This can look like a child (often an older sibling) helping with homework, preparing meals, leading bedtime routines, etc. Very often, children continue to play this role, even after they leave the home where the abuse took place.
- *Friend to the victim and/or abuser*—a child may overhear or be specifically told the reasoning behind the abuse or be asked to keep family secrets. Or, they may be the sounding board for the victimized parent.
- *Abuser's partner*—a child may be put in a position to aid in the emotional or physical abuse of the victimized parent.
- *Perfect child*—a child may take on the persona of being the "perfect child," receiving good grades, doing chores, following directions, never causing problems, etc.
- *Scapegoat*—sometimes, the child is blamed for the family problems. For example, a child with special needs may become the scapegoat for the financial stress of the abuser, which "causes" them to victimize the child or another adult in the home.
- *Referee*—a child may try to keep the peace in the family as best they can.

Even after leaving the abusive environment, children may continue using these roles as a way to cope. For example, if the child overhears a disagreement between you and your significant other, they may insert themself in the conversation in an attempt to take the blame for why one of you–or both of you–are upset (scapegoat role). If you have other children in your home and one of them is being disciplined, the child who has experienced violence may step in to point out their accomplishments or accolades (perfect child role). Or, if you are caring for siblings who have experienced violence, you may see that one of the children consistently takes the lead to get the other ready for school or bed or insists upon serving the dinner plate to a sibling (caretaker role).

Helping the Child in Your Care Heal

A powerful way to help a child in your care who has witnessed domestic violence is to model healthy relationships and appropriate conflict resolution. Showing the child that there are safe, non-threatening ways to resolve disagreements is a good start to teaching a child that not all conflict is scary or hurtful. Another way to model appropriate ways to deal with conflict is to be aware of how you respond to

everyday frustrations. Perhaps you received poor customer service at the auto repair shop and are annoyed. Remember that the child in your care is watching and listening to you. Losing your temper and yelling is not an effective way to resolve the situation and will reinforce the idea that becoming aggressive is the only way to solve problems. Instead, try taking some deep breaths or counting to 10. Then, calmly attempt to work out your issues with the service provider or manager.

You may want to be especially mindful of possible situations or actions that might trigger the child in your care who has experienced or witnessed domestic violence. For example, the child may see the use of alcoholic beverages as a foreshadowing of domestic violence. Raised voices may also rouse anxiety because the child may associate them with an escalating situation. To that end, any argument or disagreement may be a trigger, as these may have been precursors to a violent situation in the child's past. Discussions about what is and isn't normal and acceptable when family members disagree in your home may need to be continually revisited with the child in your care.

A child coming from a home where they experienced domestic violence has learned that anger and violence are normal or to be expected from intimate relationships. The child may also believe that anger and violence are ways to express love, thus having a skewed understanding of what healthy love looks like and how to show it. This misunderstanding of love can carry over into other relationships, such as those with siblings, friends, or dating partners.

When the child in your care reaches dating age–or if you are already caring for a child at this age–continue to be vigilant about domestic violence or abuse. Youth who have grown up in a violent home or who witnessed domestic violence may have a higher tendency to become victims of abuse or take on an abusive role in dating relationships. Talking with youth about dating and the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships is essential.

Please note that the tips in this handout are not a substitute for professional help. You may want to seek support from a domestic violence competent therapist.

What you say and how you act are always essential to remember as a caregiver. A child familiar with domestic violence may be hypervigilant about a caregiver's tone of voice and body language and have a high ability to sense tension. As a caregiver, you cannot always know what is in a child's past, but being supportive and modeling healthy adult relationships can have a lasting impact well into a child's adult years. If you need additional support when caring for children or youth who have experienced a history of domestic violence, please know that the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to help.

Resources

From the Resource Library

- *A Terrible Thing Happened*, by Margaret Holmes
- *A Place for Starr*, by Howard Schor

Learn in the Champion Classrooms

- *Healing-Centered Engagement: The Power of Community and Connection | Champion Classrooms (Recorded Webinar)*
- *When Caring Hurts: Navigating Anxiety and Fear in Trauma-Informed Caregiving | Champion Classrooms (Recorded Webinar)*

Find Hope & Inspiration from No Matter What Families

- *Take Time to Recharge | No Matter What Families (Video)*

Additional Resources

- Hidden Victims: Children of Domestic Violence
- Effects of Domestic Violence on Children
- Sojourner Family Peace Center
- End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network-Domestic Violence
- Child Witness to Domestic Violence
- The Rainbow Project
- Domestic Abuse Information for Families | Wisconsin DCF
- Domestic Violence and Your Family | Wisconsin DCF (PDF)