

Children are the Silent Victims of Domestic Violence and Chronic Community Violence by Joy D. Osofsky, Ph.D.

We should raise our children as we wish our grandchildren to be raised. Children who live in a violent home or a violent community learn to be violent. Although many people would like to believe that young children are not affected by exposure to violence, the facts reveal a different story. Even the youngest of children show some responses to violence exposure. These responses range from mild changes in behavior and affect in the most benign cases to outright post-traumatic stress responses in the most extreme situations.

Violence too graphic for television is routinely played out in real life in many homes. It is often difficult to protect children from violence that occurs in their own homes. The most recent estimates suggest that between 3 and 10 million children each year are exposed to domestic violence, and almost 1 million reports of child abuse and neglect are confirmed. Although parents may think their children are unaware of domestic violence, the children tell a different story. While it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics, it has been estimated that approximately 75% of children who live in homes where there is domestic violence know about the violence.

Exposure to chronic community violence also takes its toll, often resulting in an increase in behavior control problems or withdrawal, and, over time, a numbing to everyday exposure to violence. Indeed, violence and children's witnessing of violence have been characterized as a public health epidemic in the United States. Violence among youth ages 11-17, including murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, has increased 25% in the last decade. Homicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among males between 15 and 24 years of age, and the rate has more than doubled since 1950. It is even more startling that homicide has become the third leading cause of death for children between the ages of 5 and 14. A recent survey at a public hospital-based pediatric clinic in a major U.S. city found that one in every 10 children under the age of 6 reported having witnessed a shooting or stabbing. Half of these incidents occurred at home and half in the streets. Recent data obtained from approximately 300 children between 6 and 12 years of age indicate that school age children are victims and witnesses to significant amounts of violence. In one moderate sized city, 51% of 5th graders reported that they had been direct victims of violence. Ninety-one percent reported that they had personally witnessed some type of violence.

There is little doubt that such violence exposure has a great impact on how these children experience their world and how they behave and respond. Children exposed to chronic community or domestic violence are at increased risk of becoming violent themselves, without having had the opportunity earlier in their development to internalize a full understanding of the potential results and consequences of such violence.

In some areas of our inner cities, neighborhoods have become like war zones, with children carrying guns and other weapons to school in order to feel safe. Mothers teach their children to watch television lying beneath the window sills in order to avoid random bullets. Even in rural areas that seem tranquil and safe, children may not be totally protected from the random violence that appears to be happening with increased frequency in our society. Unfortunately, in our country, it has become relatively easy for even children to obtain guns if they want them. It should be recognized, however, that much of the violence occurring in neighborhoods is violence that has moved out of the homes and into the street, and children are the innocent, silent witnesses.

It is important to understand what the experience of exposure to violence may mean for a child. The impact will be influenced by the nature of the threat and the damage, the child's relationship with the victim or perpetrator, the severity and duration of the violence exposure, and its proximity to the child. While consistent prospective studies have not yet been done, clinical evidence suggests that different types of violence exposure affects children and families differently. In predicting negative developmental outcomes, it is probable that witnessing domestic violence among people the child knows, and exposure to chronic community violence on a regular basis will have the most significant effects on children.

What do Children Learn from Witnessing Domestic Violence?

- Violence is an appropriate way to resolve conflict
- Violence is part of family relationships
- The perpetrator of violence in intimate relationships often goes unpunished
- Violence is a way to control other people

(Adapted from *The Children of Domestic Violence*, a report by the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups and the Children's Working Group, 1995)

Children who are exposed to violence show reactions such as emotional distress, immature behavior, somatic complaints, and regression in toileting and language. In extreme cases, children may show symptoms similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in adults, such as repeated re-experiencing of the traumatic event, avoidance, numbing of responsiveness, hyper vigilance, and increased arousal. In school-age children, there is frequently an increase in externalizing (aggressive, delinquent) or internalizing (withdrawal and depression) behavior problems.

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Domestic violence may be particularly damaging for young children when they are exposed to assaults between people to whom they are emotionally attached. In such cases, symptoms such as nightmares, disorganized behavior, clinginess, and agitation are common. The child's vulnerability to domestic violence exposure may be compounded by the parent's own response to violence, as witness or victim. The parent-child relationship can be negatively affected when a mother must cope with the physical and mental health aspects of having been battered. She often fears for her own safety as well as that of her children. Parents realize that they may be unable to protect their children from violence, leaving them with feelings of frustration and helplessness. Some parents who are constantly fearful may have difficulty being emotionally available to their children. Other parents may become overprotective or, if extremely traumatized themselves, they may expect their children to protect them. Unfortunately, children raised by such parents may fail to develop the sense of basic trust and security that is the foundation of healthy emotional development. Because domestic violence most often affects mothers, the goal of ending violence against women has important implications for protecting children.

Public Policy Initiatives for Children Living with Domestic Violence

(from Children who Witness Domestic Violence: The Invisible Victims in *Social Policy Reports*, 1995, Vol IX, No. 3, pp. 1-16)

- Launch a national campaign to change attitudes toward domestic violence
- Foster prevention and intervention approaches that build on family and community strengths
- Provide education to parents, educators, law enforcement officials, and health and mental health professionals about 1) the effects of children's witnessing of domestic violence, and 2) alternative approaches to resolving conflict.
- Promote research that will 1) expand our understanding of domestic violence exposure and 2) contribute to the development of prevention and intervention strategies.

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LETTERS

I read with interest Rita Swan's Perspective "Religion-Based Medical Neglect and Corporal Punishment Must Not be Tolerated" (*APSAC Advisor*, Vol 11, n. 1). Although I agree with her that "first amendment guarantees for religious freedom do not include a right to harm or neglect children," how that is applied is far from clear. If Christian Scientists are not allowed to treat their children with prayer, what about naturopaths or herbal remedies (many doctors see naturopathy as quackery)? If all physical punishment is outlawed, what about restraint techniques such as SOLVE? Research on corporal punishment is mixed in its results. Some research is showing that limited corporal punishment is beneficial (note that this is not hitting the child until they "accept" their punishment). Finally, how much freedom does the state give families to raise the child according to the family's beliefs? Do we deny families the right to raise the child according to their standards? The California code is good as long as "specific danger to the physical or emotional safety of the child" is well-defined. If not, it could lead to the slippery slope that all beliefs other than my own are "emotionally unsafe" to the child and therefore demand state intervention.

Gary Rolph, MCS

I write in regard to Rita Swan's Perspective in the Spring 1998 issue of the *Advisor*. Ms. Swan appears to paint with a broad brush by advancing that any form of corporal punishment equates to abuse which should be soundly rejected by thinking child advocates, especially if it bears the appearance of religious-based beliefs. Thus her underlying proposition is that those of us who consider ourselves to be child advocates, parents, and Christians must choose between our professional responsibilities and our spiritual commitments to children's health and safety. Ms. Swan fails to account for the numerous state child abuse statutes which exclude the customary parental swat on the bottom that inflicts no abuse, but certainly turns the child's attention to reflect upon their behavior.

While Ms. Swan may want to believe that there is some vast Christian Right conspiracy to legalize abusive beatings to children, she provides scant basis for this: two books by authors Tomczak and Dobson. I have read Dobson's books and cannot find any quote that bears the remotest resemblance to the position Ms. Swan argues. Further, while some may also choose to believe that the fundamentalist-Christian Right movement is so pervasive as to merit such fear, there is no basis for believing that it has infected the state legislative process.

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