

Domestic Violence and Its Effect on Children

Intimate partner violence, or domestic violence, is a problem not often discussed in families. National statistics suggest that upward towards a third of all women and ten percent of all men fall victim to some sort of intimate partner violence during the course of their relationship. Recent studies have shown that violent acts are initiated at similar rates by men and women, but that male initiated violence is far more severe and more likely to result in serious injury, or death than is female initiated violence.

The rate of violence in families going through divorces is even higher than the national average. Parents report some type of domestic violence in almost 65 % of families who were going through a custody dispute. In the same study, it was noted that over fifty percent of the children witness the violence between their parents. Given the extremely negative effect that this is likely to have on children's future adjustment, it is worth exploring this area even further.

Domestic violence may be physical, psychological, sexual or financial. Acts of physical violence include slapping, shoving, kicking, biting, throwing things, choking and using weapons. Psychological or emotional abuse includes such acts as cursing, using demeaning comments, isolating behavior, threats, stalking and inducing fear in any way. Unwanted, forced sexual acts using physical and non-physical coercion are forms of domestic violence. Finally, utilizing financial power through the withholding of money or information is also a means of perpetrating violence.

For many years the prevailing view was that all types of domestic violence are the same. *Battering, or intimate terrorism*, is the act of coercively controlling another person for the sole purpose of exerting one's power over that person. This form of domestic violence is the most commonly studied type of violence. This particular type of domestic violence is most commonly perpetrated by men, with women being the primary victims. It is marked by an ongoing pattern of coercion which is meant to induce fear in the victim. The violence often escalates after the victimized partner leaves a relationship. Therefore, great care must be taken in how and when a person decides to separate from this type of abusive spouse. The departing spouse should have a "safety plan" for herself and the children when considering leaving a marriage in which there has been intimate terrorism.

There are other types of domestic violence that occur in relationships. One type is *common couple, or situational violence*. In some relationships, the partners are not particularly good at resolving conflicts and resort to some type of violence when they fight. The violence is as likely to be started by the woman as by the man and it is not related to a pattern of coercive control by either partner. Although the violence is not usually as harmful, whenever there is violence there is the chance for injury. More often than not, these individuals need to learn more appropriate ways of dealing with conflict. Also, following a marital separation, the violence usually stops, rather than increases.

Two other types of domestic violence are worth noting. *Violent resistance* is violence that one person uses to defend themselves against violence perpetrated by the other partner. The defending party is not an aggressor and does not initiate violence, but is willing to defend themselves by whatever means is necessary. Depending upon the intent of the initiating partner, this type of violence can become very dangerous. In *separation initiated violence*, an individual's first acts of violence occur during a marital separation. These actions are caused by the stress of the separation and there is usually no history of any prior violent actions. Additionally, the violence ends once the separation is completed. The violence is usually minor, i.e. pushing or shoving at the time of leaving a house, and is not typically a cause of significant injury.

No act of violence against another individual should be justified as acceptable, but it is important to differentiate these different types of violence in order to plan appropriate treatments, or custody arrangements for children who are involved in these families.

There is no question that exposure to domestic violence has an extremely negative impact on children of all ages. Infants and toddlers exhibit increased irritability, increased sleep disturbances, developmental regressions and emotional distress after exposure to their parents' violence. School aged children show signs of depression and anxiety, increased aggressive behavior and sleep disturbances, and problems in their concentration and attention if they have been exposed to parental violence. Finally, adolescents show a high level of aggression and acting out behavior, increased behavior problems in all settings and poorer school performance and achievement following exposure to domestic violence.

When there is an overlap between exposure to domestic violence and abuse or neglect of the child, there is a significant increase in symptoms of depression, oppositional defiant disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Finally, it has been demonstrated that children who have been exposed to domestic violence experience increased psychological distress, lowered self-esteem and poorer adult relationships later in their life. Thus, the impact of domestic violence on children has both short-term and long-term negative impacts.

There are multiple factors that may increase a child's ability to cope with the violence that surrounds them. If the child has a strong relationship with a competent, caring adult, especially a parent, their resilience is increased. Additionally, children who have average to above average intelligence, good interpersonal skills and have a safe haven within the community tend to be more protected from the negative impact of the violence they experience.

Our first job as adults is to protect children from violence and abuse, regardless of from where it comes. It is imperative to protect not only the children but any victim, including the parent who is the object of the violence of another person. These parents need to be empowered to make decisions that are in their and their children's best interests. Finally, perpetrators of violence need to be held responsible for their actions, or take responsibility for their actions.

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Once protection has been insured, custodial arrangements with parents who have a history of violence can be considered. Depending upon the type of violence that existed, i.e. intimate terrorism, common couple violence or separation instigated violence, an appropriate custodial arrangement that insures safety for all, but especially that eliminates the children's exposure to violence can be designed. Each situation must be considered individually so that the appropriate arrangement can be found for the long-term best interests of the child.

If you feel that you are a victim of domestic violence, talk to your therapist about it, contact the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (717) 545-6400 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800) 799-SAFE (7233) today.

Submitted by Arnold Shienvold, Ph.D.

References and Resources

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Groups at Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

New Elementary Group !

There will be a social skills group starting on Monday, September 29, 2008 for children in grades Kindergarten through third grade. The group will meet from 6 to 7pm. Melinda Eash, M.S. will be facilitating the group and be joined by Tracy Richards, LCSW in November as co-therapist. The group will focus on teaching social behaviors that are expected in a variety of settings. This will include perspective taking, appropriate expression of feelings, and self regulation. We will be tailoring group activities to the needs of the group members. We will also be meeting with parents some time after the group starts to address how we can best provide support and feedback to parents, as well as receive their ongoing input.

Adult Transition Group

Jim Eash, LCSW is leading a group on Monday nights from 6 to 7pm to assist young adults (ages 18 to 25) in making the transition to adulthood.

Adolescent Group

Shanen Turk-Geller, LCSW and Kasey Shienvold, Psy.D. co-lead this group for teenagers on Mondays from 6:30 to 8pm

Social Skills for High School Students

Melinda Eash, M.S. leads this group on Thursday evenings from 6 to 7 pm. The focus is on helping adolescents in high school with neurodevelopment problems improve their ability to meet the social expectations in all environments, independently.

Groups for Middle School students.

Currently there are two groups for students in grades 5th through 8th grade. They both meet on Tuesday evenings from 6 to 7pm. Both groups address, social skills, self-esteem, communication skills, problems, and appropriate expression of feelings. Each group has a different emphasis. For more information contact Melinda Eash, M.S.

If you want information about any group contact the therapist for that group at 540-1313.

