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The Impact of Abuse on Children Who Witness Domestic Violence

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Overview

- Definition of DV
- How many children are exposed to DV
- How many of those children are PA
- How children respond to DV
- Factors that affect their response
- Effects on the brain
- Effects of DV on children of different ages
- Resources

Definition of Domestic Violence

- Intimate Partner Violence can include:
  - Physical violence
  - Sexual violence
  - Threats of physical or sexual violence
  - Emotional abuse
    - Threatening partner or loved ones
    - Harming partner's sense of self-worth
    - Stalking
    - Name-calling
    - Intimidation

How Many Children are Exposed to DV

- Approximately 15.5 million American children (ages 0-17) live in dual-parent families in which some form of intimate partner violence occurred at least once in the previous year
  - This is almost 30% of the total number of children in the U.S. living in married or cohabiting opposite-sex households
- The majority of children who are exposed to DV are under the age of 8

The Ways Children Can Be Exposed to DV

- Seeing the DV
  - 90% of children in DV homes state they witnessed their father beat their mother on at least 1 occasion
- Hearing the DV
  - Children can be traumatized by overhearing beatings
- Being told about the DV
- Seeing the aftermath of the abuse
- Physical Abuse of Child

Physical Abuse of Child by IPV abuser

- 30 to 60% of IPV abusers also abuse children in the household
- Children in DV homes are abused or neglected at a rate of 15 times higher than other children
- 75% of battered women report their children have also been PA or SA by their partners

Physical Abuse of Child by Abused Mothers

- Abused mothers were twice as likely to PA their children than non-abused mothers
- Mothers are 8 times more likely to hurt their children when they were being battered than when they were safe from violence
- Male batterers abuse their children twice as often as battered women

Children at Higher Risk

- Children were more likely to be PA when they tried to stop the DV
- Older children and female children were most at risk for PA by the father
- Daughters of battered women were 6.5 times more likely to be SA than were girls from nonviolent families
- The severity of the abuse to the woman was directly linked to the severity of abuse to the child

Effects of DV on Children

- Children exposed to DV had significantly higher rates of:
  - **Emotional problems**
    - Anxiety
    - Depression
    - Symptoms of Trauma
  - **Behavioral problems**
    - More aggressive & antisocial behaviors

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

- PTSD – anxiety disorder that can develop in response to a severe trauma
  - Intrusive thoughts of trauma (such as nightmares, flashbacks)
  - Avoidance of reminders of trauma
  - Symptoms of increased arousal:
    - Sleep difficulties
    - Irritability / outbursts of anger
    - Difficulty concentrating

Symptoms of PTSD in Children Exposed to DV

- Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children
- Witnessing DV was significantly associated with high scores on scales:
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Intrusion
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Arousal
  - Posttraumatic Stress-Avoidance
  - Posttraumatic Stress Total

Long-Term Effects of DV

- DV is associated with greater rates of:
  - Antisocial behavior
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness
  - Adverse health outcomes in adulthood

Factors that Affect the Child's Response

- May affect the intensity and severity of child's response:
  - Chronicity and severity of abuse
  - Proximity of child to the violence
  - Poverty
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness
  - Other stressors

Protective Factors

- Child's temperament
- Parental attunement
- Access to safe spaces such as churches
- Child's relationship to other caring adults

What Children May Feel During DV

- Children are good observers, but poor interpreters
- They don't understand situations the same way adults would
- Children may feel:
  - Confusion
  - Fear
  - Guilt
  - Anger
  - Frustration
  - Stomachaches
  - Worry

What Children May Think

- Some try hard to stay out of the way
  - "Will I get in trouble?"
  - "Will I get yelled at?"
  - "Will get hit?" "Will I die?"
- Some children feel responsible for starting the "fight"
  - Blame themselves for any negative consequences such as injury, arrest, incarceration, parent leaving family
  - Some hope for rescue, perhaps by superheroes
- Some children blame their mother
- May dread father's arrest
- May fear their own arrest

"Little Ears, Little Eyes: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children As They Grow"

Children's Misunderstandings

- The man and woman are equal parties in what appears to be a "fight"
- "It's my fault they are fighting"
- If there is no blood or other signs of injury, Mommy is not hurt
- If Mommy is not crying, she is not upset
- Once the "fight" stops, everything goes back to normal
- "If I try really hard to be good, they won't fight again"

What Teens May Think or Feel

- **Sadness** – Why is this happening again?
- **Confusion** – Why doesn't Mom just kick him out?
- **Frustration** – I have problems too, but no one seems to care
- **Isolation** – I can't talk to anyone about this
- **Guilt** – I could have done something to prevent this

What Teens May Think or Feel

- **Fear** – He might turn on me next or hurt me
- **Anxiety** – Is this what my future relationships will be like?
- **Embarrassment** – Other families don't do this. The neighbors will hear
- **Resignation** – This is never going to stop
- **Vengeful** – I wish he would die or get hit by a bus

What Teens May Think or Feel

- **Worthlessness** – If they really cared about me, they would stop this
- **Helplessness** – There is nothing I can do to help my mom
- **Responsibility** – I have to protect my younger siblings from this situation
- **Anger** – Why does Mom let him treat her so badly?

What Teens May Think or Feel

- **Worry** – I don't want to move so I hope Mom puts up with it
- **Panic** – How will we afford to eat if Mom leaves him?

What Children May Be Doing

- Hiding
- Praying
- Wrapping pillows around their ears
- Humming
- Clutching teddy bears
- Hugging pets
- Wearing headphones & turning up the music
- Pretending they are somewhere else
- Protecting younger siblings
- Trying to intervene in the "fight" playing peacemaker

After the DV

- Will it happen again?
- Hypersensitive to cues
- Watching for triggers such as beer bottles
- Listening for raised voices or swearing

How DV Can Affect Child's Relationships

- Lack of a good father & positive male role model.
- Possible harm to the mother/child bond
- Isolation from helpful sources of support
- Unhealthy family roles

How DV Can Affect Child's Beliefs

- May adopt some of the rationalizations for the abuse
- May believe that victimization is inevitable or normal
- No longer sees the world as a safe and predictable place
- Can develop negative core beliefs about themselves

Effects on Fetuses

- Most important aspects of brain development occur before birth
- High levels of stress in the mother produce high levels of the hormone cortisol, which can lead to later mental health problems in the child
- In utero studies show that the fetus of a pregnant woman who is exposed to violence has different brain patterns by 5 months gestation than a pregnant woman in a safe relationship

Effects on Early Brain Development

- Neurons and synapses form during the first 3 years.
- Neglect & abuse:
  - alter production of brain chemicals and hormones, which affect parts of the brain that regulate fear & anxiety
  - can lead to abnormalities in the brain that affect mood & ability to regulate mood
- Neglected or abused children have patterns of abnormal brain development due to continued exposure to trauma
- Children exposed to high levels of DV had IQs that were 8 points lower than unexposed children

Long-term Effects on the Body

- Reminders of past abuse automatically activate neurobiological responses
  - Increased blood flow to parts of brain related to intense emotions
  - Decreased flow to parts of brain that inhibit emotions & facilitate communicating in words
- Trauma survivors may react in irrational ways
  - May automatically engage in physical actions that were appropriate at time of trauma, but not now
  - May blow up in response to minor provocations
  - May freeze when frustrated
  - May become helpless in face of trivial challenges

Greater Effect on Young Children

- Young children (ages 3 to 5) exposed to DV exhibited significantly greater problems than older children
- Young children who were also PA showed the greater problems than those just exposed to DV

Effects on Preschool-Age Children

- Most children who witnessed DV had behavioral problems in the clinical range
  - 74% of boys
  - 60% of girls
- Increased symptoms of trauma and dissociation
- Less empathic than other preschoolers
- Restricted problem-solving ability if the mother was depressed

More Effects on Preschool-Age Children

- Withdrawal
- Anxiety
- Problems relating to other children
- Delayed toilet training

Effects on School-Aged Children

- Higher rates of:
  - Developmental problems
  - Behavioral problems
  - Low self-esteem
  - Difficulties in school
  - Problems in relationships
    - Heightened fear and worry about those in the home
    - Difficulty establishing friendships outside the home

Effects on School-Aged Children

- Bedwetting
- Running Away
- Depression
- Early interest in drugs and alcohol
- School problems
- Sexual activity
- Becoming an overachiever

Effects of DV on Teens

- School and social problems
- Shame and embarrassment about his/her family
- Sexual activity/promiscuity
- Tendency to get serious in relationships too early in order to escape home
- Truancy
- Depression/Suicide
- Substance abuse
- Becoming abusive

Long-Term Effects

- Daughters of abused mother are more likely to become targets of batterers, as violence was "normalized" in their childhood home
- Children of abused mothers are:
  - 6 times more likely to commit suicide
  - 50% more likely to use drugs/alcohol
  - More likely to end up homeless

More Long Term Effects

- Children who were exposed to abuse of their mothers were more likely to engage in a variety of antisocial & criminal activities as adults
- 60% of juvenile males serving long-term sentences were incarcerated due to killing their mother's abusive partners
- Boys who witness DV are twice as likely to abuse their own partners & children when they become adults

Intervention Programs

- Reduced children's self-blame for the DV
- Improved children's response to anger
- Improved social skills
- Improved emotional regulation
- Reduced emotional & behavioral problems
- Greatest improvements when both mothers and children received the intervention

Resources

- Family Violence Prevention Fund www.endabuse.org
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network www.nctsnet.org
- National Center for Children Exposed to Violence www.nccev.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence www.ncadv.org
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center www.nsvrc.org
- Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute www.traumacenter.org