

Domestic Violence & Children

Children are the young victims of domestic wars.

Domestic Violence touches everyone in families where it exists. It is a devastating social problem that impacts on every segment of the population. It is responsible for dysfunction in every aspect of life achievement and potential, has medical and mental adverse outcomes, engenders violence, financial abuse and loss, homelessness, substance abuse and suicide of children who have witnessed and lived with domestic abuse and violence.

Living in an environment of domestic violence is a fertile training ground for behaviour of children both at the time and into the future. It has been found that children who live with violence frequently experience the same reactions as do children living in a war zone, or surviving traumatic natural disasters such as fire, earthquakes or cyclones (Anthony, 1988). They are profoundly affected by domestic violence and suffer greatly as a result, both as children and as adults.

Their memories and experiences of childhood are painful and distressing, not happy and carefree. Sadly the violence may not stop when the victim moves away, it follows, and children often become the primary focus of abuse – especially once the victim is removed from the control of the perpetrator.

Children who witness family violence (i.e. hear, see, and comprehend the effects) are just as profoundly affected as are children who are actual victims (Mathias, Mertin, & Murray, 1995). Children who have suffered or witnessed violence may also become abusive to their parent in frustration, anger or because they believe such behaviour is normal and acceptable.

Research both in Australia and overseas suggests that while all children who witness domestic violence are significantly traumatized, infants, toddlers and adolescents are the groups most affected (Blanchard, 1993). While infants and toddlers have the greatest difficulty adjusting to domestic violence it has been found that adolescents also suffer greatly. The Burdekin Report on Youth Homelessness (1989) cited family violence as a leading cause for adolescents leaving home.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Babies	Pre School	Pre Adolescence	Adolescence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive crying • anxiety • irritability • eating and sleeping difficulties • failure to thrive • reactive to loud noises • wary of new people • delayed mobility • very demanding or very passive. 	<p><i>Lack the cognitive maturity to understand the meaning of the abuse they observe. Unable to express their feelings verbally so emotions are often expressed through behaviour.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clinging • eating and sleeping difficulties • concentration problems • emotional distress • immature behaviour (age inappropriate) • insecurities • self-blame, guilt, shame, worry and anxiety • inability to play constructively • aggressive behaviour • physical complaints • adjustment problems, for example difficulty moving from kinder to school • Symptoms similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in adults, including re-experiencing of events, fearfulness, numbing and increased arousal, reduced ability to empathize with other people. 	<p><i>Deeper understand of intentions behind violent behaviour so may blame themselves for not preventing it. May also express symptoms akin to PTSD.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have more ability to externalise (aggression, delinquency) and internalise emotions (withdrawal, anxiety) • repressed anger and confusion • limited tolerance and poor impulse control (or NEVER losing control through fear of consequences) • conflict avoidance, over compliant behaviour • deficits in social skills, loss of interest in social activities, withdrawal or avoidance of peer relations, reduced social competence • low self esteem • rebelliousness, defiant behaviour, temper tantrums, irritability • cruelty to pets • physical abuse of others • deficits in basic coping or over-developed coping skills (eg. care for siblings, home, parent, alcohol or drugs abuse) • Overall functioning, attitudes, social competence and school performance are often negatively affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At risk of academic failure, school drop out • substance abuse • difficulty trusting adults • controlling or manipulative behaviour • homelessness • eating disorders • higher risk of engaging in delinquent/violent behaviour as adults • depression, suicidal ideation or self-harming behaviour • perfectionism – terrified to make a mistake or of failing the abuser • blame themselves for marriage break-up • quick to attach to any ‘friendly’ adult.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Parenting

In families where there is violence occurring, families may exhibit high levels of tension, volatile expressions of anger, a lack of appropriate problem solving and a real sense of physical danger for family members (Pressman 1984; Riggs, O'Leary, & Brelin, 1990).

Violence may also occur in apparently highly functioning families where the presentation of a perfect family completely disguises the reality of the violence from others, and the family is caught between two worlds – the external face, and the internal face, which is not necessarily always bad, tense, and violent, and where the sense of danger is denied.

Ways in which parenting may be effected include:

- preoccupation with parental conflict which obstructs adequate attention being paid to needs of the child
- an environment which is deficient in the positive and nurturing responses which promote healthy development of children
- inability to concentrate, adversely affecting memory
- substance or alcohol abuse
- withdrawal and avoidance
- over compensation
- abusing their children in an attempt to control their behaviour in order to prevent their partner from becoming annoyed
- denial, unwillingness, or ignorance about the serious impact of the violence on the children

The perpetrator of violence towards the mother may also abuse the children (physically, emotionally, financially, sexually, and/or socially). Children learn to recognise the threat in the way a person drives into the yard, closes a door, raises an eyebrow, breathes, the look on a face, a tone of voice – each is a clear warning of imminent threat.