



CHILDREN & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

"Families under stress produce children under stress. If a spouse is being abused and there are children in the home, the children are affected by the abuse. Moreover, spouse abuse is a form of child abuse. Hurting someone the child loves also hurts the child."

From Abused No More: Recovery for Women in Abusive or Co-dependent Relationships, R. Ackerman & S. Pickering

In recent years, many studies have been done and much has been written about the impact of domestic violence on children. What we are learning is that domestic violence begins affecting children at all stages of development, even before birth.

Domestic violence causes more birth defects than accidents and illnesses combined. In one study, 30% of battered women were battered during pregnancy (Illinois Coalition on Domestic Violence). Babies in violent households often experience symptoms of emotional distress, sleep disturbances and separation anxiety, sometimes leading to aggression as toddlers.

All children who live in homes where domestic abuse is occurring are affected by this experience. Each child will be affected differently based on the following factors:

- Their understanding of the experience (influenced by their age).
- How they have learned to survive and cope with the stress created by domestic abuse.
- The availability of support through friends, relatives and adults in their life.
- Their ability to accept support and assistance from adults.

The effect of family violence on children can be seen in many different ways. Each individual child will show some of the following symptoms, and possibly display different effects at different times.

Emotional: Children from violent homes may ...

- Feel guilty for the abuse and for not stopping it.
- Grieve for family and personal losses.
- Have conflicting feelings toward the parents.
- Experience fear of abandonment, the unknown, or of personal injury.
- Feel angry about the violence and chaos in their lives.
- Become depressed, feeling helpless and powerless.
- Be embarrassed about events and dynamics at home.



Perceptual: Children from violent homes may ...

- Believe that they, the child, are responsible for the violence.
- Blame others for their own behavior.
- Believe that it is acceptable to hit people to get what they want, to express anger, to feel powerful, or to get others to meet their needs.
- Not ask for what they need, let alone what they want.
- Not trust others.
- Feel that anger is bad, because people get hurt.
- Believe in very rigid stereotypes about being a man, woman, husband, or wife.

Behavioral: Children from violent homes may ...

- Become an over achiever or underachiever.
- Refuse to go to school.
- Show more concern for others than for self.
- Become exceptionally aggressive or passive.
- Wet the bed or have nightmares.
- Seek excessive attention.
- Demonstrate “out of control” behavior.

Social: Children from violent homes may ...

- Be isolated from friends and relatives.
- Have relationships that are frequently stormy, start intensely and end abruptly.
- Have poor conflict resolution and anger management skills.
- Become excessively involved in social activities (to avoid home life).
- Be passive with peers, or bully peers.
- Engage in exploitative relationships either as a perpetrator or victim.
- Play with peers in an exceedingly rough manner.

Physical: Children from violent homes may ...

- Complain about headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- Seem anxious and have a short attention span (may be misdiagnosed as ADHD).
- Be tired or lethargic.
- Regress in developmental tasks (depending on age).
- Seem desensitized to pain.
- Engage in high-risk play and activities.
- Abuse or mutilate themselves.



QUIZ FOR PARENTS

1. Do you have concerns about the way you or your partner relates to your children?
2. Do you have any concerns about your partner's sexual behavior toward the children? Is there fondling, unwanted touching or kissing? Does he expose the children to pornography (either directly or indirectly)?
3. Does your partner terrorize or scare the children, drive recklessly with them in the car, or drink and drive?
4. Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill your children, in an effort to scare or punish you, or to prevent you from leaving?
5. Has your partner hit your children with belts, straps, or other objects that have left marks, bruises, welts or other injuries?
6. Can you describe any assaults against YOU by your partner that the children witnessed? What did the children see or hear during the assault? What did they experience afterward (e.g., seeing their mother's injuries, or the house torn apart)? What were the children's reactions?
7. Can you describe any assaults against YOU by your partner in which the children were caught in the middle (e.g., you were holding a child in your arms) or in which the children intervened? What happened?
8. Has your partner ever threatened to kidnap your child or failed to return the child to your care?
9. Do you ever feel unable to protect your children because of your partner's threats or assaults against you or them?
10. Has the domestic violence changed your relationship with your children in any way?
11. Have any of the children threatened or harmed you or others in the family?
12. Are any of the children having behavioral problems at home or at school that other people are complaining about? Are any of the children dealing with their anger differently or in disturbing ways?
13. Are any of the children displaying any of the following symptoms listed above?

If you find yourself answering YES to any of these questions, it is important that you protect your children. Talk to a counselor, a religious leader, or trusted friend about how to help your child. In Alameda County, there is FREE counseling available to children living in households where domestic violence occurs. For more information, contact ACCESS at 800-491-9099.