

Witnessing Violence Harms Children

By Mychelle Moroit

Jeremy, a bright five-year-old boy staying in a domestic violence shelter, recalled detail by detail the night his father abused his mother. "Then he pushed her down and then he hurt her stomach. I was so scared I hid in my closet and prayed."

Jeremy's mother, Anita, had tears streaming down her face as her son shared what he remembered. Anita later said that she did not think that Jeremy even knew what had happened that night. "He was upstairs, asleep in his room," she recalled. "I can't believe he knows exactly what happened!"

Jeremy is one of thousands of children who witness a violent incident between their parents or guardians each year. Like Jeremy, these children are traumatized by the violence they witness and experience detrimental effects on their development and emotional well being, similar to those seen in children who have suffered direct physical abuse.

Some common effects seen in children who have experienced domestic violence are:

- Decreased sense of security
- Fear and anxiety and difficulty concentrating (often resembling hyperactivity)
- Nightmares, difficulty sleeping
- Perfectionistic tendencies (A+ student, quiet, popular, everything appears perfect in their life) maintaining an image that nothing is wrong in the family or attempts to maintain peace in the family / won't "rock the boat".
- Grief and a sense of loss
- Loss of trust and increased guardedness
- Anger and aggression
- Depression and withdrawal
- Disrupted attachment (difficulty connecting to others or clingy; poor boundaries)
- Sense of isolation

Research demonstrates that children who have witnessed or have been exposed to domestic violence often exhibit symptoms related to PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Many of the children who have experienced domestic violence have attempted to intervene either physically or by calling 911. That is a scary situation for a child. The behaviors the children learn in order to survive in this environment are the behaviors that make it difficult for them to get along in the world outside their homes, such as school.

Intervention is important for these children. They need an opportunity to work through their experiences, to know that they are not alone, and to understand that they did not cause the violence. This healing is delayed when the children are unable to feel safe due to continued disruptions in their lives as is so often seen in families trying to escape violence.

Victims and their children are often faced with many challenges when escaping domestic violence, such as; financial stress, fear of the violence escalating, changing

schools, navigating the court system, moving, and leaving friends and belongings behind. These challenges can leave them feeling frustrated, confused and worried.

Children who have experienced domestic violence have to cope with an enormous level of anxiety. Many of them worry about what will happen to the abuser (if that person is a parent or guardian) when they leave, they may feel like they have abandoned that person. They might also feel abandoned themselves. The children may have been told that it was the victim's fault, creating a feeling of insecurity and distrust for the victim who is trying to keep them safe by leaving or having the abuser leave. They may want to be like the abuser so that they will not feel vulnerable like the victim. They may feel frustrated and angry about all of the changes going on in their lives. It is common knowledge that divorce itself can be difficult for children, but children in families with domestic violence are dealing with violence, anxiety, and trauma as well as the divorce or separation.

Providing counseling to a child who has witnessed domestic violence is challenging. Counselors need to understand the complex family relationships and emotional impact that are involved with domestic violence. Children who have witnessed family violence do not want people outside the family to know what has happened. They will take drastic steps to protect their parents, even the abusive parent, making processing the trauma more difficult. They need long term, supportive counseling. Their parents need legal representation from lawyers who understand the dynamics of domestic violence. The children need someone to advocate for them and make sure that their needs are being met through each system; schools, legal courts, churches, etc. They need support throughout their communities, caring individuals to listen to them...who will believe their stories, and take a stand against domestic violence. Every member of a community can do something to help stop the abuse that so greatly impacts the children.

What can we each do to help end domestic violence?

- Educate yourself about domestic violence
- Invite a domestic violence agency to speak at your work, church, PTA, etc.
- If a child tells you that their parents are fighting, listen, believe them, and connect that child to supportive intervention
- Do not blame the victim for the abuse or for not stopping the abuse
- Encourage boys to express their feelings and that they do not have to be "tough"
- Empower girls to be strong and independent
- Support programs that provide services to the victim and the children
- Support programs that provide intervention for the abusive partner
- Volunteer for a domestic violence children's program. It is a great way to learn more about domestic violence and you will be helping while you learn
- Ask the media to highlight domestic violence and its impact on children as an important community issue
- Work to change legislation that negatively impacts child witnesses of domestic
- Encourage conversations about violence and the impact it has on children and the entire community.