

The Child Witness of Domestic Violence

Studies have shown that witnessing domestic violence has the same effect on children as if they were being abused themselves. Aside from directly witnessing the violence, they can witness it indirectly by hearing screaming, crying, things breaking, etc. Even if the child was not present during the violence, they may witness the aftermath, seeing the victim crying and bruised or severely injured, the damage to the household, etc. While there is still more research that needs to be done, the following are commonly observed in children who have come from homes with domestic violence.

▪AGGRESSIVE ACTING OUT OR WITHDRAWAL▪

Children may learn that using violence is a way of getting what they want, and is a normal way of resolving conflict. Children may feel better about themselves when they control and put-down others, and can practice these skills by bullying siblings or other children. Children may withdraw from others, a possible sign of depression and feelings of helplessness. Children may have difficulty trusting and establishing close relationships with others.

▪DIFFICULTY SLEEPING/VIVID NIGHTMARES▪

Children may have nightmares of assaults they've seen, heard, or imagined, potentially a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Bedtime becomes a frightening thought when the child knows what likely awaits. There may be a lot of difficulty getting child to sleep at night, or to sleep through the night without frequent waking.

▪SEPARATION ANXIETY▪

Fear of harm coming to the victim can cause the child to cling to the battered parent beyond what is normal for most children their age.

▪REGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS▪

Children may return to wetting the bed, thumb sucking, drinking from a bottle, etc. as a way of comforting themselves or returning to a time before they remember the violence.

▪FEELINGS OF SELF-BLAME▪

Children may see their behaviors as a cause of the violence - that it's their fault.

▪FEELINGS OF HELPLESSNESS AND GUILT▪

For not being able to do anything to stop the violence and/or for loving the batterer.

▪DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING/ANXIETY▪

Anxiety regarding the violence - unsure when next episode of violence will occur.

Child may be regularly in a highly aroused state of "fight or flight"/hypervigilance and hyperactivity, another potential symptom of PTSD. If not properly screened, or if violence not disclosed, symptoms of trauma may be misdiagnosed as symptoms of ADHD.

▪PARENTIFICATION OF CHILD▪

Child may take on adult roles because the victim is unable to function, to protect/care for siblings, as a way of trying to keep the abuser from battering, or because batterer expects child to take on such roles.

▪POOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCE OR OVER-ACHIEVING IN SCHOOL▪

Child may be unable to concentrate or to function in a school setting. The child may try to be perfect in everything so as not to "set off" the abuser.

▪STRESS-RELATED PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS▪

Child may suffer from stomach aches, ulcers, headaches, rashes.

Different Ways Children Witness Domestic Violence

- seeing a physical/verbal/sexual assault
- hearing a physical/verbal/sexual assault
- being awakened by an assault
- being ripped out of mother's arms
- having toys broken
- being born prematurely
- causing mother to have a miscarriage
- being in mother's arms while she is being assaulted
- being thrown or shaken
- trying to stop an assault
- being interrogated by the perpetrator about victim's activities
- being held hostage by the perpetrator
- being abducted by the perpetrator
- physically intervening during an assault
- calling the police
- running to neighbors for help
- being used as a spy against mom
- being encouraged to physically or verbally attack mother or siblings
- watching the family pet be hurt or killed
- being physically or sexually abused to control mother
- unrealistic expectations of what child is capable of doing
- after an assault, fear that mother is dead
- during an assault, fear that mother is being killed by abuser