

Family Violence Prevention Fund: The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Child abuse and domestic violence are linked in a number of important ways that have serious consequences for the safety of children. But with effective intervention and a coordinated response to child abuse and domestic violence, battered women advocates, child protective workers, judges and community members can help keep families safer.

* *Children can be injured as a direct result of domestic violence.* Batterers sometimes intentionally injure children in an effort to intimidate and control their adult partners. These assaults can include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of the children. Children are also injured - either intentionally or accidentally - during attacks on their mothers. Assaults on younger children may occur while the mother is holding the child. Injuries to older children often occur when an adolescent attempts to intervene in violent episodes.

* *There is a correlation between domestic violence and child abuse.* In a national survey of more than 6,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children

* *Children can be adversely affected by witnessing domestic violence.* Although many parents believe that they can hide domestic violence from their children, children living in these homes report differently. Research suggests that between 80 and 90 percent of these children are aware of the violence. Even if they do not see a beating, they hear the screams and see the bruises, broken bones, and abrasions sustained by their mothers.

* *Infants exposed to violence may not develop the attachments to their caretakers that are critical to their development; in extreme cases they may suffer from "failure to thrive."* Preschool children in violent homes may regress developmentally and suffer sleep disturbances, including nightmares. School-age children who witness violence may exhibit a range of problem behaviors including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers. Adolescents who have grown up in violent homes are at risk for recreating the abusive relationships they have seen.

* *While many children experience difficulties resulting from their exposure to violence, many children appear to cope with the experiences and show no fewer problems than comparison children.* This is likely because the level of violence in families and children's exposure to it vary greatly.

* *A growing body of evidence supports the need for early intervention when children show criminal propensities.* Research shows that early intervention efforts are proving effective in reducing criminal and delinquent behavior. The social factors that these early intervention efforts address are similar to those found to be associated with domestic violence and child abuse, and the contribution of family violence to later youth violence is well documented.