



### **Domestic Violence and Child Abuse**

- A survey of child abuse hospital records in the USA found that 45% of the mothers of abused children were also victims of domestic violence (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988).
- Bowker's study of over 1,000 women living in refuges found that 70% of the women with children said their partners had also been physically violent to the children (Bowker, 1988).
- Other studies reviewed by Hughes et al (1989) have found child abuse and woman abuse occurring together in 40-60% of cases.
- 1 in 3 child protection cases show a history of domestic violence to the mother (Hester & Pearson, 1998).
- Research sponsored by the National Children's Home in the UK found that in 25% of cases the male partner had also been violent to the children (NCH, 1994).
- A study of case files on 250 sexually abused children in care found that 39% of the children had lived with domestic violence (Farmer and Pollock, 1998).
- An overview of American research found that in 32% to 53% of families where women were physically beaten by their partners, the children were also physically abused by the perpetrator (Edleson, 1995).
- Domestic violence to the mother is frequently a major factor in the most difficult cases of child protection and child homicides (O'Hara, 1994)
- Domestic violence to the mother often begins during pregnancy or shortly after the birth of a child and can result in miscarriage, still birth, foetal stress and health problems in a child at birth (British Medical Association, 1998)
- Violent fathers often emotionally distance themselves from their children (Holden & Ritchie, 1991)

### **Witnessing Domestic Violence**

- Many children witness domestic violence and suffer emotional abuse as result. Almost all the children interviewed in a study of domestic violence in Canada were able to offer detailed accounts of violence that their mothers or fathers never realised the children had witnessed (Jaffe et al, 1990).
- In 90% of incidents involving domestic violence, the children are in the same or the next room (Hughes, 1992).
- The NCH study found 75% of mothers said their children had witnessed domestic violence, 33% had seen their mothers beaten up, almost two thirds (62%) overheard violent incidents (NCH, 1994).
- Children who may not directly witness physical violence to the mother will nonetheless often be exposed to other forms of violence or abuse directed at the mother (McGee, 2000)
- Children's responses to witnessing domestic violence vary according to a multitude of factors, including age, race, class, sex, stage of development, role in the family, relationship with parent(s), the availability of sources of support outside the immediate family situation (Saunders, 1995).



### **How Children Are Drawn Into The Abuse**

- Parents who abuse partners frequently try to implicate the children in the abuse by directly involving them – getting them to join in a physical assault – or by involving them in the emotional abuse, undermining and degradation of the mother, or by requiring they witness assaults (Hester and Radford, 1996)
- Children of all ages most often take some form of passive or active support to protect their mothers when witnessing domestic violence (Hester & Radford, 1996).
- Children of all ages phone the police for assistance and a number of research studies suggest that women often attribute their eventual escape to the emotional and practical support provided by their children (Hoff, 1990).
- Girls in particular seek to protect younger siblings during violent episodes and offer support or reassurance in the aftermath of violent behaviour (Jaffe et al 1990).
- The assumption of adult responsibilities can lead to children becoming ‘parental children’, which can be burdensome and may also prevent them from asking their mothers for help (Epstein & Keep, 1995)
- When they have contact with fathers after separation children may take on even greater responsibility to protect their mothers or siblings from violence or neglect (Hester & Radford, 1996).
- Contact after the parents’ separation presents children with particular difficulties as they are more likely to be drawn into the abuse by the father. Children may be used to relay messages and threats to the mother, they may be pumped for information on the mother’s movements and whereabouts, the father may abduct them or hold them hostage in order to force the mother’s return, they may be drawn into the father’s attempts to psychologically abuse and undermine the mother (Hester & Radford, 1996).
- Children may be drawn into colluding with the concealment of the abuse (Clever, Unell & Aldgate, 1999)

### **The Impact of Domestic Violence Upon Children**

- 91% of mothers interviewed in family centres in England said they felt the domestic violence they had experienced had a detrimental impact upon their children (NCH Action For Children, 1994)
- Children living with domestic violence have an increased risk of medical problems, including injuries (Moffitt & Caspi, 1998)
- Common difficulties among children who witness domestic violence include: increased levels of anxiety, psychosomatic illnesses including headaches, abdominal complaints, asthma, peptic ulcers, rheumatoid arthritis, stuttering, enuresis; sadness, withdrawal and fear; lower rating in social competence, particularly for boys; a reduction in understanding social situations including thoughts and feelings of people involved (Jaffe et al, 1990).
- More observable behavioural effects include: disobedience, destructiveness in younger boys (Wolfe et al., 1985); nervous, withdrawn and anxious demeanour in younger girls (Hughes, 1986); more difficult temperaments and more aggressive behaviour in both sexes (Holden and Ritchie, 1991); children running away from home (Jaffe et al 1990).
- 30% of children living in Canadian shelters were found to show symptoms of post traumatic stress (Peled, Jaffe & Edleson, 1995)



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- Children's health problems may go unrecognised because school absenteeism as a result of the domestic violence and residential insecurity which often results may mean school medicals are missed (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 1999)
- Boys are more likely to act out their distress with anti-social and aggressive behaviour, girls are more likely to internalise their worries and show symptoms of depression, anxiety and withdrawal (Bentovim & Williams, 1998)
- Children may be more likely to bully other children at school (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 1999)
- The abused parent may find it difficult to feel affection for children who have been implicated in the abuse. Mothers often express ambivalent feelings about children who have been conceived as a result of the father's sexual violence (Radford & Hester, 2001)
- Maternal stress exacerbates the difficulties for children but if the source of this stress is removed – i.e the ongoing domestic violence – there are no significant differences in the quality of parenting provided by previously battered and non-abused women (Holden and Richie, 1991)
- A study of 80 women and their children living in shelters in the USA found that the ex-partner's abuse of the mothers had a greater impact on the children's behavioural adjustment than did the mother's parenting stress. Abused mothers were no more likely than are non-abused mothers to abuse their children or to employ corporal punishment to discipline their children (Sullivan et al, 1999)
- Children may believe that what they do triggers or causes their parents' violence (Saunders, 1995)
- Children sometimes feel guilty if they do not come to the aid of their mother. This 'guilt' is often accompanied by self blame and feelings that they have in some way 'caused' their father to be violent (Saunders, 1995).
- Children may also feel angry towards their mother for not protecting herself or the children, as well as blaming her for causing the violence. Others may be so concerned about their mother's distress that they keep private their own grief (Saunders, 1995).
- Children's social networks, educational opportunities and life chances may be adversely effected by the financial and residential insecurity that frequently effects women and children living with or separating from violent partners (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 1999)
- Children may run away from home and become homeless as a result (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 1999)
- School may be a source of help for some children but others may may have their education impaired because the family problems preoccupy their thinking (Brandon & Lewis, 1996)
- Witnessing the abuse of mothers is associated with teenage boys taking an aggressive and abusive role in dating relationships (Moffitt, 1993)
- Children of battered women will not necessarily grow up to be batterers or victims of domestic violence themselves. No conclusive evidence exists to support the 'inter-generational transmission of violence' thesis or to show that there is a 'cycle of violence' (Mullender & Morley, 1994)

### **Resilient Children**

- Up to 65% of children seem to show no adverse effects resulting from living with the abuse However children's observable reactions may not tally with their emotional state and there has been little research on the longer term well being of 'resilient' children (Hughes & Graham – Barnham, 1999)
- Children's ability to cope with domestic violence and other adversity is linked to their age, gender and individual personality (Hester, Pearson & Harwin, 1998)



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- Research by Kashani, Rosenberg, et al, 1987, found 16.7% of 'well adjusted' adolescents within in a population survey had lived with domestic violence. These adolescents differed from their maladjusted peers in a number of respects. Their families had greater financial security. They were less likely to have moved home on a number of occasions. They had better social support systems and were more likely to describe their parents as 'caring'.
- A good social support system appears to play a crucial role for children coping with and overcoming domestic violence. The research suggests strongly that children who are 'stress-resilient' are more likely to have people to whom they can turn to for emotional support (Kashani & Allan, 1998).
- Self esteem also appears to be associated with children's resilience (Cleaver, Unell & Aldgate, 1999). Children with higher self esteem, e.g. children who excel at school, may focus upon their strengths and more easily escape from the effects of domestic violence.
- Having a range of strategies for coping with their difficulties has also been found to be significant (Rutter, 1985).

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