

SOME POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF ABUSE ON CHILDREN

The most important idea to keep in mind to is that children are **ALWAYS** affected when there is abuse in the home, even if they do not observe or experience it themselves. At a minimum, children pick up on the tension, stress, and anxiety inherent in a situation where controlling and abusive behavior is occurring.

SOME MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND ABUSE OCCURRING IN THE HOME:

- If the children don't have the abuse directed at them, then they are not even aware that it is occurring and they have no feelings about it and are not really affected by what is going on
...in fact, simply witnessing or hearing abuse and violence can have significant damaging and traumatic effects; children still feel the tension and stress in the household and this influences who they are and how they relate to the world around them.
- Parents should work hard to "protect" their children from the reality of the situation by not talking honestly and openly about the control and abuse that is occurring
...e.g. why it actually happens, how it affects others, what it means, who is really responsible for the abusive behavior
- Children are resilient and will recover from the effects of coming from an abusive home "all on their own"
...i.e. the mistaken notion that children don't need any help from their parents, other adults, and "outsiders"

IN FACT. NONE OF THE ABOVE MYTHS IS TRUE

- Generally, it is the parents' guilt and shame that keep them from directly addressing the abuse and its effect on their children, which often keeps the parents from seeking help for their children (and, often, for themselves as well)

THE REALITY IS THAT CHILDREN ARE LEFT CONFUSED, ANXIOUS, DEPRESSED, FRIGHTENED, ANGRY, AND IN EMOTIONAL TURMOIL BY ABUSE THAT OCCURS IN THEIR HOME

- Despite the fact that children are astute observers of events going on around them in the family (in fact, they are constantly watching), children are generally poor interpreters of what has happened and have great difficulty "making sense" of the situation, e.g.
...why the abuse is occurring
...who is actually responsible for the abusive behavior that is being perpetrated in their family

THE EXTENT OF THE EMOTIONAL DAMAGE TO THE CHILD DEPENDS UPON:

- The frequency, severity, and duration of the abuse that is occurring
- Whether abuse is directed toward the child himself/herself
 - ...although even simply observing or hearing abuse in the home can have profound, damaging, and long-lasting effects on children**
- How the child tries to interpret and “make sense” of the experience (although, as previously mentioned, interpretation is a difficult task for a child due to limited cognitive abilities when they are young)
 - ...e.g. does the child see his/her mother as the “problem” if she is being abused by their father?**
- How the children have learned to cope and survive with the stress of living in an abusive home
 - ...e.g. are children able to use their fear and uncertainty to push themselves to achieve in school and connect with others in the community or do the children simply “give up” and become “lost” (to themselves and others)?**
- How much extended family or outside emotional support is available to the children to talk about and work through their feelings about the abuse and violence that is occurring in the family
 - ...i.e. is the child willing to reach out and open up to others and is there a significant connection with other caring adults who can provide emotional support, nurturance, encouragement and affirmation and/or who can help the child truly understand what is happening in his or her home?**
 - ...e.g. relatives, neighbors, teachers, counselors, coaches, friends, friends’ parents**

WHAT CHILDREN CAN LEARN ABOUT THEMSELVES AND OTHERS WHEN THERE IS ABUSE IN THE HOME:

- That experiencing and expressing anger is the same as being controlling, disrespectful, abusive, and even violent
 - ...children frequently learn from this that anger is “not okay” because, when anger is experienced and expressed, other people get badly hurt**
 - ...thus, children fail to learn respectful ways to express their anger to others and instead “act out” their anger in a disrespectful and abusive manner or become passive, trying to avoid anger altogether by “stuffing” it or pretending it is not there**
- That it’s alright to hurt and even “become physical” with others in order to control people and situations going on around them
 - ...to express their anger and frustration**
 - ...to force someone else to meet their needs**
 - ... to feel strong, powerful, “important,” and “okay” about themselves**
 - ...to get what they want when they want it**
 - ...to control how other people think, feel, and act**
 - ...to control situations that are occurring around them**
- That men and boys are moody, uncaring, cruel, controlling, intimidating, aggressive, and “out of control”

- That women, girls, and children are weak, powerless, passive, ineffectual, and are good “targets and scapegoats” for stress, frustration, anger, and for verbal and physical aggression that they may wish to direct at others
- That, somehow, they as children are responsible for and cause the abuse that is happening around them
 - ...i.e. believing that it is actually their fault that the abuse is occurring (e.g. when they see their parents arguing about discipline or parenting issues)
- That it is a child’s job to protect or comfort their mother or their siblings which can lead to unhealthy adult caretaking roles as children and codependent behaviors with others as they grow older
- That being indirect and manipulative rather than being direct, open, and assertive is a better (and much safer) way to try to get what you want in relationships and in living your life
- That being passive, submissive, and withdrawn is an easier way to “get by” in life
- That there are no other families like their own, especially given the models on television and in the movies (e.g. *The Cosby Show*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Leave It To Beaver*) and that they and others in their family are “bad” and that they should feel ashamed of their family and themselves
- That they need to put a great deal of energy into keeping the family “secret” from others outside the home since their family is so flawed and different from everyone else’s family
 - ...this is an important place where the toxic shame cycle begins
- That they are worthless, powerless, and incompetent themselves which leads to low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence and self-respect, and a profound sense of inadequacy because they are not able to affect or stop the abuse that is going on around them
- That other people really can’t be trusted
 - ...they are often aware of their dad’s promises to stop being abusive but see that he never actually follows through with this commitment
 - ...i.e. if you can’t trust your parents to create a safe living environment for you, who can you actually ever trust in your life?
- That, when they have strong feelings about something or when others make mistakes, it is crucial to blame someone and find a “scapegoat” and then punish them harshly
- That the world around them is a hostile, frightening, and unsafe place
 - ...i.e. the families where we grow up give us a very real sense of what to expect from the larger outside world

SOME SPECIFIC EFFECTS THAT MAY OCCUR WITH CHILDREN WHO ARE GROWING UP IN A HOME WHERE ABUSE IS PRESENT

- **Children’s reactions always have some purpose and meaning behind them**
 - ...Think about and look for what their reactions and behaviors might possibly mean (i.e. what they are actually trying to tell you)

...There are many reasons these reactions that follow may occur but living in an household where abuse is happening can be one of them

- Children with symptoms like those listed below are generally attempting to relieve the stress in the family and the anxiety, depression, confusion, fear, anger, and the other uncomfortable feelings they are experiencing as a result of being and living in a toxic and abusive environment

- **BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS**

...”Acting out”

...having temper tantrums, being aggressive or violent with siblings, peers, parents, teachers, or pets and other animals; running away (trying to get away from an abusive home may actually be a sign of strength, i.e. an attempt to escape an intolerable situation); skipping school; rebelling against parental or other adult authority; swearing and cursing; using name-calling and put-downs; smoking; using alcohol or drugs; eating disorders; cutting themselves; continually arguing and fighting with parents, peers, or siblings

...Withdrawing and isolating themselves from others

...continually watching TV or playing computer or video games; constantly being on the internet via their tablet, computer or cell phone; purposely staying away from home as much as possible; “holing up” in his or her bedroom and avoiding communal spaces at home; frequent daydreaming at school and at home

...Overachieving or underachieving in school and in life

...obsessively seeking to be “the best” in everything they try to do; constantly working hard, staying “busy,” and being successful and productive at all times

... lacking motivation to do much at all; quitting activities and losing interest in friends they formerly enjoyed; having difficulty concentrating/focusing and being successful in school and life activities; giving up/acting “defeated” and having a “who cares” or “who gives a damn” attitude

...School refusal

...throwing temper tantrums or crying, or balking about even going to school

...perhaps because they think they can “protect” an abused parent by staying home from school (thinking “*if I’m there, the abuse won’t happen*”)

...Unhealthy caretaking behaviors with others

...attempting to fill adult and parental roles in the family (e.g. comforting their mother or their siblings after an abusive incident; becoming a parent’s confidant(e) or “surrogate spouse”

...Becoming aggressive or passive in their own lives

...teasing, ridiculing, demeaning, fighting with or bullying other children

...being timid and easily victimized or bullied by others and fearful about “standing up for themselves”

...Having very rigid “defenses”

...being sarcastic, blaming, argumentative, defensive, reactive, impulsive, oppositional, and continually justifying and minimizing their problematic behaviors

...Sleeping difficulties

...bedwetting; experiencing nightmares and “night terrors;” not wanting to sleep by themselves or in their own room

...Continually needing, seeking, or demanding attention from their parents or others

...becoming overly self-centered, self-absorbed, and overly needy

...Being rebellious and oppositional

...being unwilling to accept or respond positively to parental or other adult authority, structure, limits, and discipline

• EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

...Guilt

...seeing themselves as responsible for the abuse and violence, especially when abuse or violence is related in some way to parenting or discipline issues (e.g. if abuse or violence occurs related to arguments between their parents about discipline, parenting, or the child’s behavior)

...Shame

...believing that abuse and violence don’t happen in anyone else’s home
...seeing themselves and their family as significantly flawed and defective

...Fear

...about expressing their feelings openly and honestly with others (especially their anger)
...about doing something “wrong” and “getting dad mad” at them
...about their mother or their siblings being hurt or injured
...about what might happen if dad starts to escalate in a particular situation
...about living in a hostile, scary, and depressing world
...about what will happen to them if their parents separate or get a divorce
...about the “unknowns” in the future (“*what will my life be like if our family breaks up?*”)

...Anger

...about their father being abusive and the lack of stability and security in the family
...about their mother “putting up with the abuse” and “not doing anything to stop it from happening” to her and to them
...about their mother not protecting the child and his/her siblings

...Confusion and Ambivalence

...having feelings of love and hate for both parents at the same time

...Depression

...feeling helpless, hopeless, and powerless about being unable to do anything about the abuse that is occurring around them
...losing a sense of zest and excitement, the ability to have fun and be playful, a sense of joy and passion about their activities and their lives

...Burdened/overwhelmed

...especially when taking on inappropriate roles in the family like trying to intervene in their parents' fights when they are happening or trying to comfort their mother or their siblings after an abusive or violent incident

...Sadness and grief

...about the loss of a happy and carefree childhood

...about the loss of dreams related to what they wanted their parents and family to be

...Anxiety

...nervousness/hypervigilance

...e.g. continually having to be "on edge" and "on guard" due to the belief that "something might happen" or "erupt" around them at any moment

• PHYSICAL REACTIONS

...Often having somatic and physical complaints

...headaches, stomach aches, nervous coughs or tics, mysterious aches and pains

...Appearing restless, "jittery," and continually "on the move" with a short attention span (may appear "hyperactive")

...Being tired, lethargic, and lacking energy

...may appear "lazy," "unmotivated," and "uncooperative" to parents and others

...Neglecting personal hygiene

...not taking care of themselves (e.g. having resistance to grooming, bathing, toothbrushing)

...Often being physically sick with colds and other illnesses

...A lack of reaction to physical pain

...Regression in developmental tasks

...reverting to soiling their pants, bedwetting, or "baby talk" when older (when this was not an issue previously)

• SOCIAL REACTIONS

...Becoming isolated, withdrawn, or a "loner"

...having no or few friends or having great difficulty making friends and connecting with other children

...spending an inordinate amount of time by themselves or doing solitary activities

...Being over-involved with friends and outside activities

...e.g. trying to stay away from home as much as possible to avoid the tension, anxiety, and conflict that is continually present there

...Having relationships with peers that start with great intensity and then, for no apparent reason, end abruptly

...Having difficulty trusting and being emotionally close to others

...Having poor communication and conflict resolution skills

...Being unwilling to share (e.g. toys/games) or compromise with others

...Becoming a “bully” or a “doormat” in their interactions with other children

...seeking power and control over others and becoming aggressive and picking on, teasing, ridiculing, bullying, or fighting with other children

...becoming passive and allowing others to tease and ridicule them or dominate and control them without being willing or able to stand up for themselves or talk to someone else about what is happening in this part of their lives

...Demanding continual attention from peers, parents, and others