

SOME POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF ABUSE ON CHILDREN

The most important thing to remember is that children are ALWAYS affected when there is abuse in the home, even if they do not observe or experience it personally. At a minimum, children pick up on the tension inherent in a situation where abuse is occurring.

SOME MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND ABUSE IN THE HOME:

- If the children don't see or experience the abuse, they have no feelings about it and are not affected by it
...in fact, simply witnessing 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 "protect" their children by not talking honestly and openly about the abuse that is occurring
...e.g. why it actually happens, how it affects others, what it means, who is really responsible
- Children are resilient and will recover from the effects of coming from an abusive home on their own
...i.e. the mistaken notion that they don't need any help from "outsiders"

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

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

THE EXTENT OF THE EMOTIONAL DAMAGE DEPENDS ON:

- The frequency, severity, and duration of the abuse that occurs
- Whether abuse is directed toward the child him/herself
...although even simply observing abuse in the home can have profound and damaging effects on children
- How the child interprets the experience
...e.g. does the child see his/her mother as the "problem" if she is being abused by their father?
- What kinds of survival skills the child has developed and uses
...e.g. is the child able to use his/her fear and uncertainty to push him/herself to achieve in school and connect with others in the community?
- How much family or outside emotional support is available to the child
...i.e. is there a significant connection with other adults who can provide nurturance and affirmation and/or who can help the child understand what is happening in his or her home
...e.g. relatives, neighbors, teachers, counselors, coaches, friends, friends' parents

WHAT CHILDREN CAN LEARN WHEN THERE IS ABUSE IN THE HOME:

- That experiencing and expressing anger is the same as being controlling, disrespectful, abusive, and violent
- That it's okay to hurt and hit others in order to control people and situations and to feel powerful and “in charge”
- That men and boys are moody, uncaring, cruel, controlling, intimidating, and aggressive
- That women, girls, and children are weak, powerless, passive, ineffectual, and are “good targets” and scapegoats for stress, frustration, and anger
- That someone needs to be blamed and punished whenever they have strong feelings about an issue that arises or when someone makes a mistake
- That, somehow, they as children are responsible for and cause the abuse
...i.e. **believing that it is actually their fault that the abuse is occurring**
- That it is a child’s job to protect or comfort their mother or their siblings which can lead to unhealthy caretaking behaviors as they grow older
- That being indirect and manipulative rather than being direct and assertive is a better (and safer) way to try to get what you want
- That being passive, submissive, and withdrawn is the easier way to “get by” in life
- That there are no other families like theirs and they need to 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
- That they are powerless and incompetent themselves which leads to low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence and self-respect, and a sense of inadequacy because they are not able to affect or stop the abuse that is going on around them
- That other people can’t be trusted
...i.e. **if you can’t trust your parents to create a safe environment, who can you really trust?**
- That the world around them is a hostile, frightening, and unsafe place
...i.e. **the families where we grow up give us a sense of what to expect from the outside world**

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

- **Children’s reactions ALWAYS have some purpose and meaning to them**
...Think about and look for what their reactions and behaviors might mean to the child
...i.e. **there are many reasons these reactions may occur but living in an abusive household can be one of them**
- **BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS**
...Acting out
...temper tantrums, running away, abusing pets or younger siblings, skipping school, rebelling against parental or other adult authority, swearing and cussing, smoking, using alcohol or drugs, eating disorders, cutting themselves; fighting with parents/peers/siblings

...Withdrawing

...continually watching TV or playing computer games, frequent daydreaming at school and home

...Overachieving or underachieving

...obsessively seeking to be “the best” in everything they do

... lacking motivation to do much; quitting activities and losing interest in friends they formerly enjoyed; having difficulty concentrating/focusing and being successful in school and life activities

...School refusal

...crying or balking about even going to school

...perhaps because they think they can “protect” an abused parent by staying home from school

...Unhealthy caretaking behaviors with others

...attempting to fill adult nurturing roles: comforting their mother after an abusive incident, becoming a parent’s confidant(e)

...Being aggressive or passive

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

...being easily victimized or bullied by others

...Having very rigid defenses

...becoming blaming, argumentative, defensive, reactive, oppositional

...Sleeping difficulties

...bedwetting, experiencing nightmares and night terrors

...Continually seeking or demanding attention

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

...Rebelling

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

• EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

...Guilt

...seeing themselves as responsible for the violence, especially when abuse or violence is related in some way to parenting or discipline issues (e.g. arguments between their parents about discipline of the children)

...Shame

...believing that abuse doesn’t happen in anyone else's home

...seeing themselves and their family as flawed and defective

...Fear

...about expressing their feelings openly and honestly

...about doing something “wrong” and “getting dad mad” at them

...about what might happen if dad starts to escalate

...about what will happen to them if their parents get a divorce

...Anger

...about their father being abusive

...about mom “putting up with the abuse” and “not doing something to stop it from happening”

...Confusion/Ambivalence

...having feelings of love and hate for both parents simultaneously

...Depression

...feeling helpless, hopeless, and powerless about being unable to do anything about the abuse that is occurring in their home

...losing a sense of excitement, the ability to have fun, a sense of joy and passion about their activities and lives

...Burdened/overwhelmed

...especially when taking on inappropriate roles in the family like trying to intervene in their parents' fights

...Grief

...about the loss of a carefree childhood

...about what they want their parents and family to be

...Anxiety

...nervousness/hypervigilance (e.g. continually being "on edge" and "on guard")

• PHYSICAL REACTIONS

...Often having physical complaints

...headaches, stomach aches, nervous coughs or tics

...Appearing restless/"jittery"/"hyperactive"

...Being tired/lethargic

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

...Neglecting personal hygiene

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

...Often being ill with colds and the flu

...Lack of reaction to physical pain

...Regression in developmental tasks

...reverting to soiling their pants or "baby talk" when older

• SOCIAL REACTIONS

...Being isolated or a loner

...having no or few friends or having great difficulty making friends

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

...e.g. staying away from home as much as possible to avoid the tension and fighting

...Having relationships that start with great intensity and then end abruptly

...Having difficulty trusting and being close to others

...Having poor communication and conflict resolution skills

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

...Being a "bully" or a "doormat"

...becoming aggressive and picking on, teasing, ridiculing, or fighting other children

...allowing others to tease and ridicule them without being willing to stand up for themselves

...Demanding continual attention