

SOME POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE ON CHILDREN

The most important idea to keep in mind 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 abuse is occurring.

SOME MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND ABUSE IN THE HOME:

- If the children don't see or experience the abuse directly themselves, then they are not aware that it is occurring, they have no feelings about it and are not really affected by it
...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 "protect" their children from the reality of the situation by not talking honestly and openly about the abuse that is occurring in their home
...e.g. why it actually happens, how it affects others, what it means, who is really responsible for 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, assistance, or emotional support from "outsiders"

IN FACT, NONE OF THE ABOVE MYTHS IS TRUE

- Generally, it is the parents' own guilt and shame that keep them from addressing the abuse and its effect on their children and keep the parents from seeking help for their children to assist them in understanding and moving on from the effects of the abuse

THE REALITY IS THAT CHILDREN ARE LEFT CONFUSED, FRIGHTENED, ANGRY, AND IN EMOTIONAL TURMOIL BY ABUSE THAT OCCURS IN THE 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 when abuse is present, 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 or herself
 - ...although even simply observing or hearing abuse in the home can have a profound and damaging impact 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 their limited cognitive abilities)
 - ...e.g. does the child see his/her mother as the “problem” if she is being abused by their father (i.e. the idea that their mother “makes” their father become abusive with her because of what she says and does)?**
- How the children have learned to cope and survive with the stress of living in an abusive home
 - ...e.g. is the child able to use his or her fear and uncertainty to push him/herself to achieve in school and connect with others in the community?**
- How much extended family or outside emotional support is available to the children so that they can talk about and work through their feelings about the abuse and violence in their 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, and affirmation and/or who can help the child understand what is happening in his or her home?**
 - ...e.g. relatives, neighbors, teachers, friends, friends’ parents, counselors, coaches**

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

- That experiencing and expressing anger is the same thing as being controlling, disrespectful, abusive, and violent
 - ...children frequently learn from this that anger is “not okay” because, when anger is experienced and expressed, other people get hurt**
 - ...thus, children fail to learn respectful ways to express their anger to others and instead may have a tendency to “act out” their anger in a disrespectful and abusive manner or become passive, trying to avoid feeling anger altogether**
- That it’s alright to hurt and even “become physical” with others in order to deal with their anger and control other people and situations around them that they don’t like
 - ...to express their anger and frustration**
 - ...to force someone else to meet their wants and 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 occurring around them**
- That men and boys are moody, uncaring, cruel, controlling, intimidating, aggressive, and “completely out of control”

- That women, girls, and children are weak, powerless, passive, ineffectual, and are “good targets and scapegoats” for the stress, frustration, and anger that others experience
- 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 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 they want in their relationships and in their lives
- 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 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, defective, and “different” from everyone else’s family and others will judge and demean them for this
 - ...this is an important place where the shame cycle begins to take hold in the child’s life
- 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 and self-doubt because they are not able to affect or stop the abuse that is going on around them
- That other people can’t really be trusted
 - ...they are often aware of their dad’s promises to stop being abusive but see that he never actually does this
 - ...i.e. if you can’t trust your parents to create a safe and nurturing environment for you, who can you actually trust in your life?
- That, when they have strong feelings about something or when others make mistakes, it is crucial to blame someone, 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 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 to them (i.e. what they are trying to say to you)
 - ...there are many reasons these reactions that follow may occur but living in an abusive household can be one of them

- Children with symptoms like those listed below are generally attempting to relieve the stress in the family and the confusion, fear, sadness, anger, and other emotions they are experiencing as a result of living in an 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, cursing, using name-calling and put-downs; smoking; using alcohol or drugs; eating disorders; cutting themselves; arguing and fighting with parents, peers, or siblings

- ...Withdrawing

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

- ...Overachieving or underachieving

- ...obsessively seeking to be “the best” in everything they try to do; constantly working hard, staying “busy,” and being successful and productive
 - ... lacking motivation to do much at all; quitting activities and losing interest in friends they formerly enjoyed; having difficulty concentrating/focusing and being unsuccessful 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 to themselves “*if I’m there, it 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 a “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, 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 rooms

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

...becoming overly self-centered, self-absorbed, dependent, and “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 abusive behavior occurs related to arguments between their parents about discipline, parenting, or the child’s behavior)

...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 with others (especially their anger)
...about doing something “wrong” and “getting dad mad” at them
...about their mother or the kids themselves being injured
...about what might happen if dad even starts to escalate in a particular situation
...about living in a negative, hostile, 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 my parents are no longer together?*”)

...Anger

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

...Confusion and Ambivalence

...having feelings of love and hate for both parents at the same time
...not understanding why this is happening to them and their family

...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, and 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 when they are happening or trying to comfort and console their mother or their siblings

...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 their family to be

...Anxiety

...nervousness/hypervigilance/agitation

...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, and toothbrushing)

...Often being physically ill with colds and the flu

...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 for them)

• **SOCIAL REACTIONS**

...Being isolated, withdrawn, or a “loner”

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

...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 and conflict that is present there

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

...Becoming a “bully” or a “doormat”

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

...becoming passive and allowing others to tease and ridicule them or to 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 area

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