

Domestic Violence against Women and Children
By
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Domestic violence against women and children is a serious societal concern. Researchers have estimated that each year more than 10% of American women are the victims of domestic violence, and that three million American children are exposed to domestic violence. Research has shown that these children are also at risk of being battered by their abusive parent, and that boys who witness domestic violence are more likely to batter their own partners in adulthood.

Research and clinical experience have shown that batterers often display characteristics and attitudes marked by control, manipulation, a sense of entitlement, extreme selfishness, jealousy, a propensity to blame others, and a penchant for denying or minimizing the seriousness of their behavior and its consequences. Batterers tend to be unreliable partners in parenting and frequently hold unrealistic ideas of what constitutes appropriate parenting. In addition, they tend to be harshly critical of the other parent's weaknesses and shortcomings, while blind to their own deficiencies and limitations.

Some batterers take a lax or permissive approach to child rearing and leave this function to their spouse. Even though they disengage from the everyday demands of parenting, many batterers do not withhold judgment of the other parent's competence, and harshly criticize the other parent for any perceived shortcoming, regardless of how small or insignificant it may be. Other batterers display a harsh, rigid and authoritarian discipline style where they expect their spouse and children to immediately comply with their rules and meet their demands without question. Such parents typically have an inflated sense of their competence as parents and do not tolerate feedback that does not support this distorted image, or challenges their authority.

Parents who physically abuse their spouses provide very poor role models for children. Their behavior teaches that violence and aggression are legitimate methods to deal with conflict or get one's needs met. Moreover, battering a spouse undermines that parent's authority and teaches children that it is permissible to mistreat and disrespect a parent.

When a spouse is repeatedly physically abused, it is inevitable that the children will be exposed to this brutality, and its aftermath. Even when children do not directly witness violence or overhear it, they witness its effects on their battered parent and are usually frightened by its occurrence and frustrated over their inability to do anything about it. The ability of an abused parent to provide nurturing, supervision and guidance is often severely compromised, and this lack of support can be quite harmful to children. It should also be noted that men who batter their wives are more likely than non-batterers to physically abuse their children as well, and, the risk of abuse to children increases with the severity and frequency of violence toward the mother.

Parents who batter their children are often minimally involved in their children's lives and provide minimal nurturing compared to parents who do not physically abuse their children. Because of their rigidity and inflexibility, child-batterers frequently refuse to compromise on day-to-day issues or to subordinate their own immediate desires in order to satisfy the wants or needs of their children. Furthermore, parents who batter often reveal a striking lack of knowledge and understanding of their children, and have no genuine comprehension of the negative effects of their behavior on their children's physical health and emotional well-being.

Research has shown that exposure to domestic violence is extremely harmful and has adverse effects on children's normal development. Children who have been exposed to domestic violence are often more aggressive toward peers and display more behavior problems than children who have not. In addition, such children are less socially active, more worried about safety issues, and have more mental health problems, including higher rates of hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal, along with lower levels of academic achievement.

Boys who witness their father physically abuse their mother are at increased risk to abuse their girlfriends in adolescence and their partners in adulthood. Girls who witness domestic violence often believe that male violence is acceptable and they fail to take adequate steps to protect themselves when their boyfriends and husbands turn violent, blaming themselves for creating the situation which generates violence. They also tend to tolerate mean, demeaning and disrespectful behavior from boyfriends and husbands because they believe it is normal for males to act this way. Research has shown that girls who grow up in homes where domestic violence is prevalent are at increased risk to become the victim of abuse in adulthood.

This brief overview indicates the importance of teaching children that physical abuse, sexual abuse and other forms of violence are not to be tolerated, and that police, social service agencies and health professionals should be notified whenever there is any evidence that abuse has occurred.

References:

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