

## CHILD WITNESS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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There are many issues to be looked at in discussing Child Witness to Domestic Violence. For now, the effect on children of witnessing their mothers as battered women as evidenced in the literature will be addressed. Then two other issues that require a great deal of additional study and should be the topic for another discussion will be raised: the child rearing capacities of battered women, and, the effect on battered women of having children.

Child witness to domestic violence, the witnessing of abuse directed at their mothers, has been studied, at least to some degree, since the early 1980's.

Elbow (1982) was concerned that children in domestically violent homes would not have their developmental and emotional needs met. She felt that there was a symbiotic and ambivalent relationship between children and parents in this family that led to confused generational boundaries and role reversals. Using an Ericsonian model, she questions whether the children's sense of industry is undermined and their achievement of autonomy compromised. She hypothesizes that these children develop feelings of inadequacy and guilt and that their sense of basic trust is impaired.

Pfouts, Schopler and Henley (1982) studied 25 children who witnessed their mothers being abused. 53% acted out with parents, 60% with siblings, 30% with peers, 33% with teachers; 16% had appeared in juvenile court, 20% were labeled truant, 58% were below average or failing in school and caseworkers labelled 40% as anxious and 48% as depressed.

Hershom and Rosenbaum (1985) presented the results of a study of the eight to ten year old children of 45 women divided into three groups: those who were married and battered, not battered but in a marriage of marital discord, and those satisfactorily married. "Both marital violence and nonviolent marital discord were found to be related to behavioral and emotional problems in witnessing children."

Silvern and Kaersvang (1989), in a note to a case example of clinical work with children, looked at the diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. They avoided using the common term PTSD specifically in the case but noted that "...much of the discussion would be consistent with its use."

Hughes, Parkinson and Vargo studied 40 children who were both witnesses to the violence directed at their mothers and abused themselves. Their findings indicated that abused/witness children exhibited more distress than the control group on the measure used but the findings were inconclusive. Their discussion, however, points to fertile ground for further study, particularly in the area of differences related to the age and gender of the children.

Shephard's (1992) study of 26 children, 3 years and older, documented the "presence of child adjustment problems and the role of maternal psychological stress found in other studies of children of battered women."

Saunders (1994), reviewing the work of Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989), Hughes (1986), Jaffe, Wolf and Wilson (1990) and Rosenberg (1987) divided the problems of child witnesses into two groups (1) internalized problems such as withdrawn or anxious behavior and (2) externalized problems such as aggression and delinquency. He provides a synopsis of a number of studies and their findings: Jaffe, Wolf, Wilson and Zak (1986) found 3/4's of the children of battered women in their study exhibited clinically significant behavioral problems compared to 13% in the control group. Penfold (1982) and Westra and Martin (1981) described children as possibly developing hearing, speech and learning difficulties. Roy (1988) hypothesized that teenagers who had been or were witnesses of domestic violence might turn to alcohol and drug abuse. Rosenberg (1984) stated that such children do poorly on measures testing their understanding of social situations and thoughts and feelings of others. Jaffe et.al (1990) noted that these children are less able to deal with an emergency. And Kalmuss (1984) said that these male children would learn how to be abusive.

Any review of the studies cited will articulate problems with the research. Most notably the studies rarely used a random sample, often over-relied on self-report, and frequently were of too limited a number of subjects to offer results or insights that were generalizable. This is not to criticize their usefulness. Each study raises a line of inquiry that would be appropriate for a clinician to explore in her individual work case by case, and, each offers direction for further, and more rigorous study in the future. These contributions should not be overlooked.

This topic should not be left without briefly touching on the two issues identified at the beginning. First, the child rearing capacities of battered women. There exists an undetermined amount of clinical supposition that battered women are not good parents and are perhaps more punitive with their children than those who are not battered. Hershorn and Rosenbaum's 1985 research, cited in Saunders, demonstrates that battered women were no more "...prone to use harsh punishment" than women in "two control groups on a standardized measure of punitive child-rearing methods." (Saunders, 1994) That we have a covert belief that battered women need corrective intervention to be good parents is borne out in a finding in the recent work with 9 focus groups of women in battered women's shelters by Davis and Srinivasan. One complaint by the women was that they felt the shelter placed a greater emphasis on their parenting skills than on their issues of being battered in the first place. One woman said in effect that she came to the shelter not to learn to be a better parent but to learn not to be a battered woman. (Davis and Srinivasan, 1995)

The added danger to battered women, even after they flee, of having children, must also be addressed. Shepard (1992) noted the particular problems faced by battered women themselves when child visitation with the father was an issue. Shepard, quoting his own work in 1987 "found 60% of women reported ongoing psychological abuse in the form of threats and intimidation, often involving mutual children, after legal intervention and counseling had taken place." It is clear in the press, particularly from the coverage of the murders of battered women who have fled their abusers, that having children makes them vulnerable to being sought, and found, by the man they have left. In some cases, because of child custody issues, even when the

battering has been acknowledged and legally documented, visitation orders are enforced increasing the woman's exposure to danger.

These last two items are simply touched upon and not the least developed. They are raised because domestic violence cannot be addressed without talking about the women themselves, and not only about the effect the violence against them has on their children. While the latter is a truly important topic, it only exists in the context of women in domestic violence situations. If violence against women were ended, the effect it has upon their children would not have to be studied.

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