

- Domestic violence

The impact of domestic abuse on children

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Children who witness domestic violence often suffer longterm effects that impede their ability to thrive. The elevated stress levels they experience as a result of violence in their home can negatively affect cognitive functioning by impairing normal brain development. These effects are noticeable, and vary according to the age of the child.

Young children may exhibit excessive irritability and emotional distress, sleep problems, fear of being alone, immature behaviour, problems with parent-child bonding, and delays in growth and language development. Preschool children who witness violence in the home may also regress, and exhibit behaviours of a much younger child like bedwetting, thumb sucking, increased crying.

Older children may experience anxiety, behavioural problems, problems forming friendships, and poor performance in school. They may also blame themselves for the violence and feel guilty. The stress and anxiety they feel can result in frequent headaches and stomach aches. Problems get more serious as the child becomes a teenager. Teenagers who have witnessed domestic violence are more likely to turn to alcohol and drug use. They are also at greater risk for obesity, anti-social behaviour, risky behaviour, juvenile pregnancy and attempted suicide. When the children who witness abuse become adults, they are more prone to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, diseases and pain, trouble with relationships, and holding a job.

The effects of abuse continue on into old age if help is not sought. As older adults they are more likely to suffer from depression and loneliness, financial problems, dependence issues and a shorter life span.

According to the 2006 report created jointly by UNICEF, The Body Shop International, and the Secretariat for the United Nations Secretary-general's Study on Violence against Children "children who witnessed domestic violence were fifteen times more likely to experience

physical or sexual abuse compared to the national average. They are also more likely continue the cycle of violence by becoming either victims or perpetrators of domestic violence. For example, a boy who sees his mother being abused is ten times more likely to abuse his partner as an adult. Similarly, a girl who grows up in a home where her father abuses her mother is six times more likely to be sexually abused than a girl who grows up in a nonabusive home.”

As you can see, witnessing abuse has long lasting harmful effects on children and their development. So much human potential is negatively impacted. Society as a whole loses something vital when we fail to protect these the most vulnerable. What can be done?

One way to attempt to combat this problem is to raise awareness because it may not be a well known fact just how badly witnessing violence in the home impacts a child’s future wellbeing. A public awareness campaign is a good place to start.

Improved support systems that protect children and adult victims is also vital. Women’s shelters are often full which means there is no safe place for an abused woman to go, so the cycle of violence continues in the home. More social housing options and social services are desperately needed, because many victims worry they will be unable support their children if they leave the family home.

Recent news reports in this province have highlighted how our social services are falling short and do not adequately address the need to protect our children. Too many are falling through the cracks because there are not enough workers, not enough resources. This is a serious problem because the sooner children receive help, the better their odds are for becoming a physically and mentally healthy adult.

What can we do as individuals? Family violence is often viewed as a taboo subject because of shame and fear, but talking about it can raise awareness. Also, we can all be positive role models by modelling empathy and compassion even when faced with people with different opinions. When we treat others with respect, children will learn to recognize violence in words and deeds and understand it is wrong.

Men’s voices are extremely important in the fight to end family violence. When a father or male role model states that violence against women and girls is wrong and explains what a healthy, safe and respectful relationship should look like, boys are most likely to listen.

Children are our future and the future will be brighter for our country if we work to heal those who have been impacted by violence. Healthy people make positive contributions to society and are less of a drain on public health and social service resources. Prevention saves money, but more importantly, it saves lives.