



## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN

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Violence begets violence. Male children who grow up in violent homes are much more likely to become abusive husbands or partners. The existence of domestic violence in a family has a tremendous effect on the children. At CASA, some battered women naively tell us that their children do not know about the violence. Yet, when we speak to their children we find that children who are old enough to talk can usually describe their parent's violence in graphic detail. Some children find it easier to tell us about the violence through their drawings and artwork. Even babies "tell" us about the violence with symptoms of "failure to thrive syndrome". Children hear the violence, they witness its effects and they experience the stress of living in fear that one parent will be hurt or killed by the other. They feel guilty and responsible.

"Children develop a sense of trust in the world from the relationship with their early caretakers. The child learns from trusting in others to incorporate feelings of trust and safety inside him/herself... Because of power imbalances, victims often feel obliged to submit. Children in particular may come to identify with the abuser." (*Diagnostic and Treatment Guidelines on Mental Health Effects of Family Violence*, American Medical Assoc. 1995)

Since children learn by mimicking the behavior of the significant adults in their lives, very young children learn that the use or threat of violence is immediate, effective behavior in getting what they want. Daycare providers and grade school teachers may recognize these anti-social behaviors in some small children, especially boys, towards other children and even authority figures. Some of these children have already learned that women are not worthy of respect. At the same time, in spite of the abuse they and their mothers have experienced, the child may still feel ambivalent about leaving their father or male parent-figure.

Children in violent homes often experience physical reactions such as headaches and stomachaches. Very young children also experience bedwetting, stuttering, insomnia and separation anxiety. Grade school children have problems with concentration and focus. Older children, especially males, act out using aggressive behavior. Older girls are more likely to experience health problems. Both sexes feel guilty about not being able to stop the domestic violence. At least half of children experience physical abuse themselves, often when they try to protect one parent from the other. The majority of teenage boys who commit a homicide were defending their mothers from an abusive husband or boyfriend.

For the uninitiated, the solution seems obvious: victims should simply leave the person who is abusing them! Unfortunately children do not have the choice to leave their parents, even abusive parents. Choices for adult victims are not always that simple, either. Leaving an abuser who maintains absolute power and control over the family, may significantly increase the danger. The realities of finances, housing, child care and employment are daunting. She may be completely isolated because family members, service providers and authority figures have failed to provide adequate assistance or refused to recognize the victim's dilemma.

Things that can be done to help domestic violence victims and their children:

- Listen! You may be the first person she has told who has believed her story
- Offer a crisis line number (CASA's 24-hour crisis line is 727-895-4912. The statewide number is 1-800-500-1119.)
- Help with a safety plan. For children: teach them to dial 911, teach them to hide in a closet or under a bed, teach them to go next door to a friend for help, older children may want to call CASA. For adults: tell a trusted friend or family member, call CASA, make extra copies of car keys, make copies of driver's license and birth certificate, make copies of prescriptions and take medications for self and children, save some extra money, decide where you can go and how you can get there, call 911.
- Call 911
- Ask direct questions in private when a friend or family member has an obvious injury. (Did someone do that to you? Tell me what happened? Can I help you?)
- Offer to go with her or transport her to a support group.
- Remain open to the victim even when she does not do anything you suggest.

One of the most important ways you can help domestic violence victims is to become involved with CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse). CASA is a full service domestic violence center serving Pinellas County. CASA provides emergency shelter for domestic violence victims and their children, 24-hour crisis line, counseling, advocacy, information and referrals, substance abuse counseling, children's programs, youth programs in the schools, community support groups, and referrals for batterer's intervention programs, community education, workshops and training. CASA is a non-profit organization which depends upon volunteers and financial donations from the community.

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