



Hi-Line's Help for Abused Spouses 800.219.7336 or 406.278.3342

CHILD WITNESS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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CHILD WITNESS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence affects every member of the family, including the children. Family violence creates a home environment where children live in constant fear. Children who witness family violence are affected in ways similar to children who are physically abused. They are often unable to establish nurturing bonds with either parent.

Children are at greater risk for abuse and neglect if they live in a violent home. Statistics show over 3 million children witness violence in their home each year. Those who see and hear violence in the home suffer physically and emotionally. They are also more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological and/or behavioral problems than those who do not witness abuse.

"Families under stress produce children under stress. If a spouse is being abused and there are children in the home, the children are affected by the abuse." (*Ackerman and Pickering, 1989*)

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CHILD WITNESS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Recent research indicates children who witness domestic violence show more anxiety, low self esteem, depression, anger and temperament problems than children who do not witness violence in the home

The trauma they experience can show up in emotional, behavioral, social and physical disturbances effect their development and can continue into adulthood.

Children who witness domestic violence in the home are being exposed to:

- control of family by one dominant member.
- abuse of a parent.
- isolation.
- the need to protect the "family secret".

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CHILD WITNESS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Children react to their environment in different ways and reactions can vary depending on the child's gender and age.

Some potential effects can look like:

- Emotional Grief for family and personal losses.
- Shame, guilt, and self blame.
- Confusion about conflicting feelings toward parents.
- Fear of abandonment, or expressing emotions, the unknown or personal injury.
- Anger.
- Depression and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.
- Embarrassment.
- Behavioral Acting out or withdrawing.
- Aggressive or passive.
- Refusing to go to school.
- Care taking; acting as a parent substitute.

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Some potential effects can look like (continued):

- Lying to avoid confrontation.
- Rigid defenses.
- Excessive attention seeking.
- Bedwetting and nightmares.
- Out of control behavior.
- Reduced intellectual competency.
- Manipulation, dependency, mood swings.
- Social Isolation from friends and relatives.
- Stormy relationships.
- Difficulty in trusting, especially adults.
- Poor anger management and problem solving skills.
- Excessive social involvement to avoid home.

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Some potential effects can look like (continued):

- Passivity with peers or bullying.
- Engaged in exploitative relationships as perpetrator or victim.
- Physical Somatic complaints, headaches and stomachaches.
- Nervous, anxious, short attention span.
- Tired and lethargic.
- Frequently ill.
- Poor personal hygiene.
- Regression in development.
- High risk play.
- Self abuse

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FOR PARENTS: HELPING YOUR CHILD HEAL

Nurturing children from abusive homes can bring healing to their lives. In giving needed love and care to children, it is important for a parent to reflect these essentials:

Trust and Respect

Acknowledge children's right to have their own feelings, friends, activities and opinions. Promote independence, allow for privacy and respect their feelings for the other parent. Believe in them.

Provide Emotional Security

Talk and act so children feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves. Be gentle. Be dependable.

Provide Physical Security

Provide healthy food, safe shelter and appropriate clothing. Teach personal hygiene and nutrition. Monitor safety. Maintain a family routine. Attend to wounds.

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FOR PARENTS: HELPING YOUR CHILD HEAL

Provide Discipline

Be consistent; ensure rules are appropriate to age and development of the child. Be clear about limits and expectations. Use discipline to give instruction, not to punish.

Give Time

Participate in your children's lives, in their activities, school, sports, special events, celebrations and friends. Include your children in your activities. Reveal who you are to your children.

Encourage and Support

- Be affirming.
- Encourage children to follow their interests.
- Let children disagree with you.
- Recognize improvement.
- Teach new skills.
- Let them make mistakes.

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FOR PARENTS: HELPING YOUR CHILD HEAL

Give Affection

Express verbal and physical affection. Be affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt.

Care for Yourself

Give yourself personal time. Keep yourself healthy. Maintain friendships. Accept love.

Safety Is for Children, Too

Create a page similar to yours where children can put important personal information they can print out and refer to in a crisis.

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Child witness of Domestic Abuse: Age-specific Indicators

Infants

- Basic need for attachment is disrupted.
- Routines around feeding/sleeping are disturbed.
- Injuries while "caught in the crossfire".
- Irritability or inconsolable crying.
- Frequent illness.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Diarrhea.
- Developmental delays.
- Lack of responsiveness

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Child witness of Domestic Abuse: Age-specific Indicators

Preschool

- Somatic or psychosomatic complaints.
Regression. Irritability. Fearful of being alone.
Extreme separation anxiety. Developmental delays. Sympathetic toward mother.

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Child witness of Domestic Abuse: Age-specific Indicators

Elementary Age

- Vacillate between being eager to please and being hostile.
- Verbal about home life.
- Developmental delays.
- Externalized behavior problems.
- Inadequate social skill development.
- Gender role modeling creates conflict/confusion.

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Child witness of Domestic Abuse: Age-specific Indicators

Preadolescence

- Behavior problems become more serious.
- Increased internalized behavior difficulties: depression, isolation, withdrawal.
- Emotional difficulties: shame, fear, confusion, rage.
- Poor social skills.
- Developmental delays.
- Protection of mother, sees her as "weak".
- Guarded/secretive about family.

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Child witness of Domestic Abuse: Age-specific Indicators

Adolescence

- Internalized and externalized behavior problems can become extreme and dangerous: drug/alcohol, truancy, gangs, sexual acting out, pregnancy, runaway, suicidal.
- Dating relationships may reflect violence learned or witnessed in the home.

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Working with Children

While we do not work directly with child in our program, these may be useful tips to pass on to their guardian.

- Trust is a major factor when working with children exposed to domestic violence.
- Children need a safe place with an adult they can trust to begin healing.
- When first working with a child, it is helpful to ask what makes her/him feel comfortable and uncomfortable with adults.
- Listen to children and provide them with space and respect.
- Let children know you care about them and there are adults interested in their opinions, thoughts and ideas.
- Use books on the subject to help open children up.
- Use art, music, drama, and play to help children express themselves.
- Refer children to professional counselors, as needed.
- Connect children to organizations in the community that work with youth, as appropriate.
- Help children develop age-appropriate and realistic safety plans.
- Tell them often that someone cares