

## The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

- “An alarming fact is that domestic violence has been found to be the single most common precursor to child death in the United States” (National Center for Children Exposed to Violence).
- “The child who witnesses abuse, either physical or verbal, is far more likely to abuse family members later in life” (“Symptoms of Emotional Damage,” n.d.).
- A wide array of studies reveal a significant overlap between domestic violence and child abuse, with most finding that *both* forms of abuse occur in 30-60% of violent families. (Journal of Family Psychology, 1998).
- Other studies have shown that domestic violence is a strong predictor of child abuse. There is a 5% risk of child abuse after one act of domestic violence. That rises to a 100% risk factor of child abuse after 50 acts of domestic violence. (Child Abuse & Neglect, 1996).
- Initial research investigating the attachment abilities of infants and young children that are exposed to domestic violence indicates that domestic violence may interfere with a child’s ability to form attachments, also called “the bonds of love between child and parents (Gewirtz & Edleson, n.d.).”
- Children exposed to domestic violence over time may experience impairments in the parts of the brain that help them to regulate their behavior, which is needed for a child to develop social skills. The development of good social skills leads to an experience of feeling connected to others, the ability to express empathy and feelings of social competence. (Gewirtz & Edleson, n.d.).
- Children who are exposed to domestic violence have been found to experience higher rates of emotional problems, which include more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, increased fearful behaviors, higher anxiety, increased depression, trauma symptoms, and temperament problems, when compared to children not exposed to violence (Gewirtz & Edleson, n.d.).
- Research indicates that children and teenagers exposed to recent violence in the home is significantly linked to attitudes that justify the child’s own use of violence against their siblings and peers. (Edleson, 1999).
- Children exposed to violence have impaired capabilities to learn from social, emotional and cognitive experiences, as the primary areas of the brain that are processing information are different from those of a child existing in a safe environment. The child who has been exposed to violence will be less effective at understanding and storing verbal information. “These difficulties with cognitive organization contribute to a more primitive, less mature style of problem solving – with aggression often being employed as a ‘tool’” (Perry, n.d., para. 45).
- Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, commit violence towards peers; attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes. In

addition, these children may exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which can be evidenced by bed wetting and nightmares, and can be at greater risk for developing allergies, asthma, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and flu (Family Violence Prevention Fund).

### The Impact of Parental Conflict on Children

- 40 – 50% of children exposed to high conflict in the home have been found to develop behavioral problems, do less well in school and have difficulty developing relationships with others. Girls have been shown to blame themselves, whereas boys have been identified as becoming withdrawn or aggressive (BBC News).
- Some research suggests that children of high conflict divorce are more likely to have difficulties in school, are “...more sexually active, more aggressive, more anxious, more withdrawn, less social, more depressed, and more likely to abuse substances and participate in delinquent acts than their peers from intact families” (Kirby & Dean, 2002). Kirby and Dean also indicated that “cooperative, mutually supportive, low conflict co-parenting relationships are advantageous for both children and adults.
- “Those who witness intense bitterness between their parents and are caught repeatedly in loyalty binds are at high risk for later emotional disturbance. Parental conflicts interrupt many of the critical tasks of psychological development. It changes the nature of the parent-child relationship, creates anxiety and distress, over-stimulates and frightens children, weakens parents’ protective capacity, and compromises identity formation” (Garrity & Baris, 1994, p. 26).
- Children of high conflict divorce, in particular boys who are caught in situations where verbal and physical aggression, overt hostility, and distrust are present, are two to four times more like to experience a serious disturbance in behaviors and emotions in comparison to the national norm (Johnston, 1994).
- The serious psychological difficulties that are associated with a child’s exposure to parental conflict can very likely persist into adulthood. As these children progress into adulthood, they experience self-identity issues, problems maintaining intimate relationships, don’t know how to constructively resolve conflict, and have an inability to successfully maintain their own marriages.(Garrity & Baris, 1994).
- Children who observe parental conflict, hostility and violent behavior are more likely to use abusive behaviors towards their significant others in both adolescence and adulthood. Additionally, these children have been shown to have higher rates of divorce in adulthood (Grych, 2005).
- One study indicated that the correlation between parental conflict and child maladjustment was almost twice that of the effect of the divorce on the child (Grych, 2005).
- Most researchers agree that “when divorced or never-married parents remain in long-term hostility, the simple persistence of the high conflict itself presents a

sharply increased risk for the child to eventually turn against one of the parents” (Neff & Cooper, 2004, p. 100).

- Studies have indicated that in high-conflict post-divorce families, approximately 40% of children between the ages of 7 and 14 have aligned with one parent. In addition, it has been demonstrated that a child’s alignment with one parent can be psychologically problematic for that child (Neff & Cooper, 2004).

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