The Relationship between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

The cycle of violence

Children who are abused or neglected are more likely to become criminal offenders as adults. An American study from 1992 found that childhood abuse increased the odds of adult criminality by 40%. Victims of child sexual abuse are also at risk of becoming part of this cycle of violence. One expert estimates that 40% of individuals who use sexually abusive behaviours were sexually abused as children. Victims of child sexual abuse are 27.7 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution as adults than non-victims.

The vast majority of abusive parents have themselves been abused as children, but not all victims of abuse go on to abuse children. Previous victimization is not the cause of child abuse; rather, it is a significant contributing factor.

Victims of childhood abuse are at a greater risk of becoming individuals who use abusive behaviour. A study done for Correctional Services Canada found that 75% of abusive husbands came from violently abusive families. Case histories of abusive parents frequently reveal that as children they were made to feel unloved, unwanted, unappreciated, and unworthy. Their low self-worth often stems from a self-fulfilling prophecy initiated by their parents: because they were told they were "no good", maltreating parents tend to believe this and continue to exhibit behaviours which support that belief.

- High school students whose parents had been in violent relationships have a statistically higher rate of violence in their own relationships.
- Men who have witnessed their parents' domestic violence are three times more likely to abuse their own wives than children of non-violent parents.
- Boys who witness parental abuse during their childhood are at a higher risk of being physically aggressive in dating and marital relationships.
- Girls who witness maternal abuse may tolerate abuse as adults more than girls who do not.
- Children or youth who are violent with their peers may be acting out to exert power over other children, as they feel powerless at home.

Abusive environments harm children now and in the future

Sometimes people abused by their partners think their children don't know about the abuse, or that the abuse doesn't harm the children. But children are harmed, even if they are not directly abused. In fact, being exposed to anger and violence negatively affects a child's brain development.

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According to a 2005 study, brain scans show that children in abusive environments use much of their brain to watch out for danger, leaving less of their brain available for healthy growth and development. A 2003 study of post-traumatic stress and other disorders among children exposed to domestic violence found that this affects their physical, emotional, and mental development as well as their ability to form healthy relationships, even when the child isn't consciously aware of the violence in the home.

Children in a threatening environment may: feel anxious or panicky; have an increased heart rate; or be constantly watchful and attentive. As a result, they may find it hard to concentrate and have difficulty sleeping and learning.

Adult victims of family violence often think that abuse between adults in the home doesn't affect children, or that they can shield them from what's going on; this is not true. As long as children live in a threatening or abusive environment, the trauma will have an effect. However, the brain can heal over time if the child has a safe, predictable and loving place to live.

Children who grow up in abusive homes and become healthy adults

Children who grow up in unhealthy environments but become healthy adults often have several of the following three experiences.

1. The child understands: "This is not normal."
    a. At some point, the child is exposed to a healthy environment and healthy relationships between people. He realizes that others don't live the way he does.
    b. He becomes aware that what is happening in his home is violent. He learns that violence and abuse are not normal or acceptable, that it doesn't have to be that way.
2. A healthy role model takes an interest in the child.
    a. This person treats her with respect. This person believes the child is worthwhile and that her opinions and feelings matter.
    b. A healthy role model has high expectations of the child, believes in her, and demonstrates that belief through statements such as, "Of course you can"
    c. A healthy role model helps the child to believe that she can have a better life no matter what has happened in her family, and gives the child hope that a better life is possible.
3. The child has reasons to believe in himself, which generates hope.
    a. The child believes he is good at something.
    b. The child believes he can influence or control some parts of his life.

In your contact with all children and young people—those who appear to be safe and healthy and those who appear to be in high risk environments—you can make sure that:

- You treat them with courtesy and respect

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- You demonstrate healthy and respectful behaviour between adults
- You notice and acknowledge their strengths and gifts to them
- You help them to believe in themselves

Talking to young children when a parent is convicted of domestic violence

If a parent has been arrested, is on trial, or has been convicted in a matter of domestic violence, it is a time of crisis for the whole family. Rather than avoiding a dialogue with children about domestic violence, we can choose to help them understand difficult events in their lives. We owe it to them to give them honest answers that respect their developmental capacities. When answering questions about the criminal consequences of domestic violence, young children will benefit from the following guidelines.

- Connect the abuser's absence to children's concrete experiences and framework of understanding. For example, "Jail is like a time-out for adults." Children younger than four will be unable to think abstractly and thus need such concrete references.
- Differentiate consequences for adults from consequences for children. For example, "When adults make big (or serious) mistakes, they have to go to court. Children are still learning and have more chances."
- Tell them that when one person hurts other people, they have to be separated in order to keep people safe. Everyone, child and adult, has the right to a safe body.
- Keep it simple. Use short sentences and avoid elaborating. Try to answer only the question asked. Wait for the child to ask you for more information.

When we answer children's difficult questions honestly and appropriately, we respect their right to know the truth and we also validate their reality. Without this validation, they will integrate trauma into their world view in potentially detrimental ways. However, merely talking honestly to children about domestic violence is not enough. It is vital to refer children and parents to resources that will support them in their healing process and prevent the recurring cycle of violence in the future.

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