Forgotten Victims of Domestic Violence

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Domestic Violence

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SLAM! Their bedroom door suddenly shuts and I hear the lock turn. The next thing I hear as I pull my blanket around my ears is my mom’s scream. Dad has been drinking at home all day and was in a miserable mood for my mom when she came home from work. They did not speak a word to each other all night and as soon as dinner was over I went into my room expecting how the rest of the night would go. I can faintly hear my mom begging my dad to stop hitting her, but he just screams back, “Shut up bitch.” I want it to stop, but I’m only 12 years old. There’s nothing I can do.

There is no doubt that victims of domestic violence experience terrible trauma from the actions they endure from the people who are supposed to love and care about them. Another group of victims often forgotten are the children who witness the acts of violence within their family. Countless children whether infants, adolescents or any age in between have witnessed violent acts between parents, siblings and other family members. The effects on these forgotten victims from witnessing domestic abuse are wide spread and are just as important to address as the effects of abuse on the actual victim. Questions about children’s emotional and behavioral responses from witnessing violence have surfaced with mixed results from research conducted.

Studies have led to the estimation that there may be as many as 10 million teenagers exposed to domestic violence in their home each year. Considering the fact that teenagers are not the only children exposed to this violence the total number of children from infants to teenagers exposed jumps exponentially. “Adult-to-adult domestic violence is defined here as an act carried out with the intention, or
perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury” (Edleson, 1999, p. 844). A survey done by Straus questioning youth on their family dynamics and violence found that “about one in eight or 12.6% of the sample in question recalled such an incident, with 50% remembering their father hitting their mother, 19% recalling the reverse, and 31% recalling both hitting the other” (Edleson, 1999, p. 842). The prevalence of violence in the home with children present is unfortunate. A frequent question asked is whether the children witnessing domestic violence are more likely to become violent and have other problems themselves compared to children who are not exposed to this violence.

“Results from several studies suggest that as a result of witnessing domestic violence, boys experience externalized behavior problems (i.e. aggressiveness, disobedience), while girls are more likely to experience internalized problems (i.e. anxiety, depression)” (Davies, 2009, p. 492). It seems logical that if one witnesses acts of violence from an early age and into adulthood that they may exhibit these same behaviors. Growing up in an environment where Dad and Mom are fighting constantly and Dad hits Mom on a regular basis can make children think that it is normal. Once they realize that it is not normal for violence to be used they may either reject violent behavior or embrace it. Scott, a 13-year-old boy grew up in a household where domestic violence was a part of his everyday life. He would do what he could to shield his younger siblings from the violence but it was not always possible. “He thought when he was younger that domestic violence was acceptable, and he had been abusive to his mother” (Collis, 2013, p. 15). It was not until the police intervened in his home that he realized violent behavior was not acceptable.
The environment Scott grew up in led him to believe that violence is customary. He showed signs of violent behavior in his pre-teen years. Learning that violence is not customary made Scott stop himself from being violent toward others.

Violent behavior is not the only possible result from growing up around domestic violence. "Children who witness domestic violence can react by exhibiting trauma symptoms and be at a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder" (Davies, 2009, p. 492). Witnessing violence can be very traumatic when it involves family members whether it is just one time or if it occurs repeatedly. A child knowing that their father is violent toward their mother or vice versa may cause the child to become fearful for their victimized parent and fear of becoming a victim as well. Karl’s father was violent toward his mother while he was growing up. This took a huge toll on him emotionally and when he was only twelve years old his mother got him and his siblings away from his father. Karl's father was very violent and he and his siblings became extremely afraid of their father. His mother getting him and his siblings away from their father only caused Karl more stress. “Having been fearful of his father finding out where they live, he has accepted that there is a real danger of this happening through his father’s friends or his brother. He is also fully aware that he revealed too much to his father during a phone call, and that the repercussions of this were very difficult and caused considerable anxiety.” (Collis, 2013, p. 18) Being around constant domestic violence led Karl to feel endless fear and anxiety for when the next outburst of violence would occur.

Witnessing act of violence between parents takes a toll on the child and has an effect on their feelings toward their parents. Some children depending on age
and numerous other factors become scared, protective, frustrated and the list continues on. Terry grew up in a household where his mom and dad fought on a daily basis and he witnessed his mother's suffering at the hands of his father. At the young age of 13 Terry had no choice but to help his mother cope with extreme anxiety and other issues with mental health. The violence escalated to the point that Terry and his mom moved out of their home to escape the hostility. “Terry has remained close to him mother throughout the changes that have taken place. His loyalty is to her and his family who are sympathetic to her and her experiences.” (Collis, 2013, p. 16) He knows that getting her away from the violent situation she was in was the best move they could have made even though Terry is forced to take on the responsibility of helping take care of his mom. The emotional and mental toll all of the violence has taken on her causes her to become unresponsive at times. Terry is loyal to his mother but also, still cares about his father despite his volatile behavior. “A very important aspect for him as that a degree of sympathy is shown to his father, which he sees as undeserving” (Collis, 2013, p. 17). Regardless of the fact that one or both parents are violent it is difficult for a child to dismiss them. They are still their parent and most likely they will always love them to a degree.

The emotional and behavioral responses of children witnesses to domestic violence vary greatly. Depending on the amount of violence, how much violence was actually seen and heard, the parents relationship with their children as well as many other factors determine the damage done to these innocent children. “In general, the experts found that witnessing domestic violence is sometimes, but not always, harmful to children” (Weinstein, 2000). Although children are usually
aware of the violence that surrounds them, they respond in different ways. Some children become violent themselves while others dismiss it and do what they can to avoid it. What many researchers agree on is the fact that it is better for children to come forward about what they witness and talk about it with people who can help them deal with the emotional and behavior effects caused by witnessing domestic violence.
References:


http://www.nccpr.org/reports/nicholsonsummary.pdf