

Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

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ABSTRACT

Violence can never be domestic. Violence in any shape or place has a huge impact on everyone who witnesses it and that impact is horrendous and stays throughout the life. The effect of it on children is dreadful as they are too fragile to understand the complexity of relationship. Children are not even aware what is acceptable and what is not, they can't differentiate right from wrong. When they see violence in their home they feel that since it's happening in their home and by their own parents whom they consider as their role model then it should be right thing and something acceptable. Making children accept violence can only lead to a barbaric society. Home is a place where everyone seeks safety and security but if that place shelters violence, one becomes clueless about finding a niche which could safeguard them. Domestic violence causes emotional and psychological trauma among children because of living in a household that is dominated by tension and fear. As children grow up in an environment which is emotionally and physically unsafe, insecure, repressing and unpredictable, they are forced to worry about the future. Children deserve a carefree and happy surrounding but under the shadow of domestic violence all they get is anxiety, uncertainty as a result of which they take up the role of protector and tend to protect themselves and their siblings. There is a little time left for fun, relaxation or planning for the future as getting through each day becomes the main objective. Children exposed to domestic violence are more at risk of other forms of maltreatment like physical abuse and neglect as parents who are violent at each other are at higher risk of physically abusing their own children. Early intervention is one of the best ways to counteract the effect of witnessing the abuse. Counselling from professionals at their school can help the children who have witnessed domestic violence. By introducing children to loving and supportive adult who could encourage them could bring possibilities of bright future. Finding ways to discipline the children that do not involve hitting, name-calling, yelling or any form of verbally aggressive behavior is equally important. Every child deserves a safe and secure home and loving parents and it is the responsibility of the society to provide one for them for the betterment of the country and healthy future.

Domestic and family violence is often visualized as the adult being the victim of it and it indeed is true. Most often it is abusive and intimidating behavior by a man towards a woman but what we generally miss out in such scenario is that even children experience domestic violence and this disturbs their physical and emotional health and well-being. Effect of witnessing domestic violence is horrendous on children. The home no longer remains home if one of the parent is abusing the other parent and it plays a catastrophic role on the physical and psychological development of children. Instead of being surrounded by love and care they are blanketed by horror and terror which becomes a part of their personality as well. They often grow up as an adult who are violent towards others as they have grown up in an environment where violence was acceptable. These children don't even consider violence as wrong as throughout their life they have seen their parent practicing it. Infants and young children are especially at risk. Mother-child relationship is often attacked by the perpetrators and children are used in committing violence. It is seen in many cases that the abuser provokes the innocent child to abuse others in order to have a partner in crime. As children are gullible they don't understand that it is not a right thing to do and as their own parent are teaching it they are misguided in

considering violence as fun. Even during parent's separation children are at risk from the effect of violence as they experience significant risks in shared parenting arrangement when the arrangement involves substantial shared time with the violent parent. More than two decades of international research shows that infants, children and adolescents experience serious negative psychological, emotional, social and developmental impacts to their well-being from the traumatic ongoing experiences of domestic violence.

The physical effect of domestic violence on children starts as early as, when they are fetus in their mother's womb. It results in low infant birth weight, premature delivery, excessive bleeding and sometimes fetal death due to mother's physical trauma and emotional stress and anxiety as a result of physical violence. The baby who is not even physically present suffers from the physical violence which shows how tremendous is the impact of domestic violence. Infants who are present in the home where domestic violence occurs often fall victim to being "caught in the cross fire". Infants are extremely attached to their mother and when they see her being attacked, they often jump in to the scene in order to protect her. Many times they are hit intentionally or unintentionally by the abuser. Anger has no

eyes, it makes a person blind and an angry person is capable of causing permanent injury to anyone who comes on the way of their rage, even if it is their own flesh and blood. In such situation infants are seriously harmed physically and psychologically. As their parent is suffering from abuse, infants might suffer physical injuries from unintentional trauma. It might leave a life-long scar in their memory of childhood. Environment of abuse affects the infants most as the child's brain is not fully developed. Infants might become inconsolable and irritable, have a lack of responsiveness secondary to lacking the emotional and physical attachment to their mother. How can a mother show physical attachment towards her child when her own body is sore because of physical attack? She does not remain emotionally sane enough to shower her offspring with the kisses and hugs which a child truly deserves. As a result of which these children fails to show any emotional attachment with others when they grow up. They are less expressive as they don't know how to express emotions. Trauma and stress caused by the lack of affection plays with their health too. They might suffer from developmental delays and excessive diarrhea from both trauma and stress.

The behavioral and emotional effects is more evident in older children than physical effects of witnessing domestic violence. Their development and physical well-being is often associated with the trauma that children experience when they witness domestic violence in the home. It is often seen that these children turn to drugs in a hope to take away the pain as their own parents who were supposed to protect them from all the brutality of the world brings unending agony in their life. Children living in a household that is dominated by tension and fear gets suffocated before blooming in to a beautiful flower and all fragrance is lost amidst the hatred of their life-giver. As a result of which they are forced to worry about their future instead of leading a carefree life which they truly deserve. They grow in an emotionally and physically unsafe, insecure, smothering and unpredictable environment which inhibits them in showing their full potential. There are many talented children whose skills gets crushed under the hammer of domestic violence. They are mentally disturbed and unable to focus on their talent to show their full potential. In many cases, children are used and manipulated by the abuser to hurt their mother. The abuser brain washes the children and objectifies their mother as somebody who deserves to be mistreated and physically attacked. These children watch their mother threatened, disparaged, physically or sexually assaulted, overhear conflict and violence and visualize the aftermath of the assault such as their mother's injuries and her traumatic response to the violence. Children witnessing the ferocity inflicted on their mother often evidence behavioral, somatic or emotional problems similar to those experienced by physically abused children.

Risk of physical injury is also high in many cases. Children may be caught in the middle of an assault by accident or intentionally by the abuser. Infants can be injured if being held by their mothers when the abuser strikes out. Violence also occur during or after separation which sometimes includes child abduction. Separation is difficult for everyone involved in it. Watching their parents living separately is traumatic experience for children. Pulling one's life together and starting

it over again causes psychological stress which results in anger and irritation which is inflicted on others including children. The risk of children getting injured or in some cases getting killed following separation is substantial. The abuser in order to punish the woman for leaving may attempt to abduct the children away from their mother. Children feel helpless and sometimes blame themselves for their parent's separation and if assault is accompanied along with it then the trauma which the child goes through is unimaginable. This agony changes the personality of the children forever.

Physical symptoms are also manifested by the children which is associated with their behavioral or emotional problem, such as becoming aloof and not interacting with those around them, becoming non-verbal, and exhibiting regressed behavior as being clingy and whiney. Children who witness domestic violence in the home are often seen to be suffering from anxiety which further leads to other problems such as insomnia, weight and nutritional changes from poor eating habits. Children seeks attention which they don't get when the household is in the clutches of domestic violence. As their parents have themselves a lot to deal with so these kids sometimes shows disobedience, hyperactivity or aggression in order to capture the attention of their parents. They fail to understand that it is their mother who needs attention, love and care in such situation. A person who is not in a good mental condition, a person who is not happy themselves cannot spread happiness among others. This is exactly what happens in the house where violence becomes a family member. As children see no loving bond or emotional attachment between their parents, they are also prone to be in withdrawal or to be emotionless. They suffer from low self-esteem as there is nobody to appreciate and applaud on their achievements, children becomes pessimistic about their future and often fantasizes about normal home life. A normal life doesn't not include a big home and millions of cash it only consists of a loving house, caring and appreciating parents. There is something money can't buy and that is true and genuine love. It is heart rendering to see these children deprived of these basic necessities of life. When these children visit their friend's house and realize how happy a family can be without violence, threat or fear they start getting depressed and starts wondering, why they can't have a normal life full of love and care like others. They feel ashamed in calling their friends at home as they are embarrassed about their family and don't want others to know the brutal reality of their life. Many children put themselves in a shell and avoid interacting with others to save themselves from future humiliation. Unknowingly they suffer from the punishment of the crime which they haven't committed. There should be thorough assessment of children who witness domestic violence in the home. Someone trustworthy should always look for physical effects and physical injuries although evaluating physical findings such as changes in their eating habits, sleep patterns or bowel patterns would be difficult but physical injuries must be identified in order to save children from further sufferings.

All children are born with imitating behavior. When they see violence in their house they imitate violence as well. Over a period of time children may start thinking that violence is an acceptable behavior of intimate relationships and become

either the abused or the abuser. Thus giving birth to never ending vicious circle. They grow up as an adult who assaults other as they consider it as normal and then their offspring experience the same violence that the previous generation had gone through. There are many other behavioral problem that a child goes through because of domestic violence. They develop bed-wetting problem, because of continuous threat they have nightmares, they refuse to trust adults as adults don't behave as they are supposed to, they act tough in order to hide their vulnerability, they fail to attach themselves to other people as they had been hurt by their own parents with whom they had blood attachment, they isolate themselves from their close friends and family as they are reluctant to share their inner trauma and suffer on their own. Another behavioral response to domestic violence may be that the child may become introvert to avoid confrontation and excessive attention. In order to avoid attention children refuse to participate in any school activities as a result of which they may suffer with peer relationships, academic performance and emotional stability. Children learn to be what they see and hear on a regular basis, especially at very young ages. A safe nurturing environment with healthy, non-violent caregivers is the bare minimum requirement for a child to grow up as a healthy individual and with good coping skills.

Children regard "normal" what they see at home. If the home is secure and warm with caring adults and has good boundaries, it becomes the norm. If people in the home solve problems with violence, that becomes the model for how things "should be done". Children who grow up in violent homes are strongly impacted by the violence. Those that become healthy, non-violent adults have had at least one person to give them a "safe harbor" and help them with the trauma of living with violence. Children who become violent adults, who grow up in violent homes at a young age, might not have had someone to give them sufficient support, nurturing, guidance, boundaries and an adequately healthy environment for them to overcome their experiences.

Domestic violence has a wide range of emotions to target. It can be physical, emotional, sexual or financial or can involve restricting contact or family members with people outside of the house. It can involve secrecy and control issues. Domestic violence is kept alive through secrecy. People living in the house where domestic violence is practiced are often not allowed to interact with outside people as there are chances that abuser's activity would be reported to the police and major action would be taken. Abusers in most of the cases are aware that their activity is illegal and they don't want interference of the outsider. They want the victim to suffer in silence. It is traumatic to the children who witnesses it. Any significant trauma, such as domestic violence in the development years can interfere with brain and skill development of the child. Self-soothing, problem solving, communication, cognition and interpersonal skills can all be negatively impacted, while a safe environment supports the learning of skills that helps them cope with the problems they will inevitably face in the world. Children may render a broad range of reactions when they are exposed to domestic violence in their family. Some children become introvert and silent, some become violent and aggressive, but one thing is common among all and that is, all

are helpless and unhappy. The meaning of the abuse is generally not inferred by the preschool and kindergarten child and they start believing that they did something wrong, this self-blame may cause the child feeling of guilt, worry and anxiety. Witnessing violence in the home may change the perception of the child towards the world. They start getting an idea that nothing is safe in the world and that they are not worth being kept safe which contributes to their feelings of low self-worth and depression. In addition to the behavioral symptoms of children, domestic violence changes their whole personality, their emotions and their psychology. According to the study called "The Bobo Doll experiment" children's attitude is highly influenced by the environment of their home. A group of children were introduced to a role model who were aggressive, other group were given non aggressive role model and third group was exposed to no role model at all. All these children were given a doll and were asked for their reaction towards the doll. The children who were exposed to violence acted with aggression, the children who exposed to non-aggressive environment were quite friendly. This proved that there is massive impact of domestic violence on children.

Adolescents are in jeopardy of academic failure, school drop-out and substance abuse. Teenagers subject to viewing domestic violent situations experience teen dating violence, regularly abusing or being abused by their partners verbally, mentally, emotionally, sexually or physically. Their dating relationships can exhibit the same cycle of escalating violence in their marital relationships. The feelings of these children towards their parents is often antagonistic. For instance, distrust and affection often coexist for the abuser. The child becomes overprotective of the victim and feels sorry for them.

Sometimes there is role reversal between the child and the parent. The responsibility of the victim who psychologically and emotionally dysfunctional are transferred to the child. The parents start treating their child as a therapist or confidant and not as their child in this situation. As a result of which they are forced to mature faster than average child. Household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger children are also taken by them. These responsibilities which are taken by them are beyond normally assigned chores and are not age appropriate. They are deprived of activities that a normal child of their age usually participates in. These parent like children become socially isolated and are at risk for becoming involved in rocky relationships. Although, they tend to become perfectionist because they are forced to live up to such high expectations for their parents. In the course of time they lose out their innocence and their childhood much before they should have. As they start behaving like an adult too soon, these children experience a desensitization to aggressive behavior, poor management, poor-problem solving skills and learn to engage in exploitative relationship. Children exposed to domestic violence are more at risk for other forms of maltreatment such as physical abuse and neglect. Very often it is seen that parents who are violent with one another are at higher risk for physically abusing their children.

Statistics show that a child who witnesses violence between their parents or guardians is more likely to carry on violent behaviors in their own adult lives. Although there is no

physical injury to the child who witnesses domestic violence, the emotional consequence of experiencing, visualizing and hearing the act of violence in their niche is severe and long-lasting.

A home with domestic violence is not safe, nurturing environment. Moreover, it usually does not stop without the help of an outside agency which is more powerful than the offender, such as the police and the courts. Children are like flowers who needs nourishment to flourish, bloom and show their full potential. A garden with weed and no nourishment will not provide environment for a healthy flower to bloom and spread its fragrance. Weeds are required to be removed, soil needs to be turned up and nourishment needs to be added in the soil. Likewise a home with domestic violence cannot support healthy growth and development for a child. The violence must stop in order to improve family relationships and problem solving, and to support the healthy growth of all family members. The court and the counselor or social worker in the support system which should work together to give the family the help it needs to become strong and healthy. There are

several programs as well which helps families torn by domestic violence. Research has shown that children and victimized caregivers can cope and recover, particularly when specialized services are offered. Specialized programs and counselling models are rapidly being developed and implemented, often with a growing focus of attending to the mother-child relationship.

For most of us childhood comprises of best memories full of carefree laughter, security, care and unconditional love. But there are many whose childhood is not even worth remembering due to the trauma that they go through because of domestic violence. A child who does not even know the meaning of violence should not be the one facing it or experiencing it. Unless the woman of the house is not given her due to respect and love she won't be able to raise a child full of passion and positivity. It is our duty as a society to work together to stop domestic violence, as violence has no domesticity. Only a home full of warmth, smile and protection can give birth to child who will flourish and give right direction to the world.

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