

CHILDREN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Children are profoundly affected by witnessing violence and abuse between home. The impact is as great as if children were the direct victims. For example:

- ◆ A child's brain development is affected by being in an abusive environment. Energy necessary for development is diverted to being hyper vigilant and/or watching for danger;
- ◆ Children may feel confused and guilty about how they feel towards an abusive parent; may have contempt for a parent being abused, or want to protect the parent.
- ◆ Children in violent homes are more likely than those in non-violent homes to grow up to become victims of violence, become violent themselves, or both;
- ◆ Children's sense of and self-worth is affected; they do not feel safe at home;
- ◆ To cope, children may: become aggressive or withdrawn, leave home as soon as able, etc.

Understanding the impact of domestic violence on Children

- ◆ Sometimes adults are so involved in their own pain and terror that there is not a lot of energy left for their children. Victims may not realize their children are affected by the violence and abuse. They think if they have not been hit, that they are not affected.
- ◆ Domestic violence may happen more than once before victims realize the impact on their children because it is such a painful realization for them. But, when a victim becomes aware of how profoundly children are affected, they find the strength to make changes.

If the adult victim is choosing to stay in an abusive relationship:

- ◆ Teach children to memorize (not write down) emergency numbers. If possible, program your phone with emergency numbers and teach children how to use them.
- ◆ Teach children not to get involved in the violence. Instead, teach them a code word or phrase to use if a parent needs them to get help.
- ◆ Teach children and practice an escape route out of the home. Pre-arrange a safe location (not a friend's or relative's home, the abusive person will likely look there first.)
- ◆ If the children are staying elsewhere, do not run to where they are, it may put them at risk.

If the adult victim is in the process of leaving an abusive relationship:

- ◆ Instruct children NOT to tell the abusive person they are leaving.
- ◆ Teach children and practice an escape route to a safe place.
- ◆ Teach children to memorize (not write down) emergency numbers.

If the adult victim and children have left an abusive relationship:

- ◆ Teach children not to let the abusive person in the home.
- ◆ Teach children what to do if the abusive person comes to their school or day care centre.
- ◆ Give a copy of any protection order to the child's school or childcare facility.
- ◆ Teach children how to get to a safe location.

FINDING SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE FOR CHILDREN

- ◆ Find a counsellor with experience and skill working with children in abusive situations. Even very young children will benefit and need to discuss how they feel about what has happened.
- ◆ Any opportunity for children to be normal, safe, affectionate will be a support to them.
- ◆ The Victim Advocate can assist with finding affordable day care, school locations, baby items, etc., and links to legal assistance in dealing with matters such as child custody.
- ◆ Tell children that violence is wrong; even if the abusive person is someone they love.
- ◆ Explain that the violence is not their fault or the abused adult's fault.

- ◆ We need to stress to children that they are beautiful and worthwhile human beings, regardless of what someone may say about, or to them, and treats them badly.
- ◆ Children need to be in "normal" and safe environments where adults and children treat one another with respect and affection; they need opportunities for normal play and fun.

INDICATORS OF CHILD ABUSE:

- ◆ Injuries inconsistent with child's age and development or explanation offered or several injuries in various stages of healing, & various injuries over time
- ◆ Facial injuries in infants and pre-school children
- ◆ Runaway attempts, fear of going home, school absences, wary of adults
- ◆ Stilted conversation, vacant stares, no wanting comfort when hurt, cries frequently,
- ◆ Describes self as bad and deserving punishment, extremely aggressive or withdrawn
- ◆ Cannot recall how injuries occurred or offers inconsistent explanation
- ◆ Finch if touched unexpectedly, extremely compliant and/or eager to please
- ◆ Bed-wetting or diarrhea non-medical in origin
- ◆ Frequent psychosomatic complaints: headaches, nausea, and abdominal pain

INDICATORS OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE:

- ◆ Mental or emotional developmental lag,
- ◆ Fear of failure, overly high standards, reluctant to play, extreme inhibition
- ◆ Fear of consequences of actions, often leading to lying, running away from home
- ◆ Extreme withdrawal or aggressiveness; mood swings, Severe depression; suicidal
- ◆ Overly complaint, constantly apologizes, too well mannered, neat and clean

INDICATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE:

- ◆ Sores in the mouth, unusual itching or injuries in genital or anal area
- ◆ Torn, stained or bloody underwear
- ◆ Pregnancy or venereal disease
- ◆ Reluctance to participate in physical activities or to take a shower after sports
- ◆ Fear of normal physical contact, especially when initiated by an adult
- ◆ Eating or sleeping disturbances, self-mutilation, depression, suicide attempts
- ◆ Dramatic behavioral changes, promiscuity, prostitution, seductive behaviors towards opposite sex, fear of home; excessive fear of men or women.
- ◆ Overly compliant or conversely, overly aggressive and destructive behavior
- ◆ Poor peer relationships, self-image, age inappropriate sexual play with toys, self, others, sexually explicit drawings,

INDICATORS OF NEGLECT:

- ◆ Abandonment, consistent lack of supervision
- ◆ Unattended medical and dental needs, (head lice, diaper rash, skin disorders)
- ◆ Consistent hunger, inappropriate dress, poor hygiene
- ◆ Developmental delays (language, weight)
- ◆ Demands for constant attention, reports no caretaker at home
- ◆ Lack of parental participation and interest
- ◆ Regularly displays fatigue or listlessness, falls asleep
- ◆ Steals food, begs from classmates
- ◆ Frequently absent or late, school drop-out
- ◆ Self-destructive, abuse of alcohol or drugs

Rarely is any one indicator conclusive proof that a child has been harmed. Neglect or abuse is suspected when a cluster of behavioral and physical indicators are apparent.