

# 7. The impact of domestic abuse on children

## Training topics

- A. Intersection of domestic abuse and child physical abuse
- B. How children who witness abuse can be harmed
- C. Immediate and long-term effects upon children of witnessing abuse
- D. How leaving the abuser creates distress for children
- E. Interviewing children about family violence
- F. Optional: mandated reporting of child abuse

## Participant handouts

Intersection of domestic abuse and child physical abuse  
Defining the intersection between domestic abuse and children  
How exposure to domestic abuse hurts children  
Scenarios: domestic abuse and children  
Long-term effects on children  
How children are interviewed about family violence

## Trainer overheads

Domestic abuse hurts children  
Long-term effects on children

## Additional materials

Optional: video clip

# A. Intersection of domestic abuse and child physical abuse

## Review and discuss handouts

Domestic abuse creates a “war zone” in which children witness stressful, very frightening, and often dangerous encounters between adults they must depend upon for their own nurturance, guidance, and safety. Children who live in the tension-filled environment of domestic abuse will see and/or hear direct assaults between the adults or witness its aftermath. These children then become victims of domestic abuse, because they suffer from the immediate impact of the abuse and longer-term consequences. Children are at risk for harm both directly and indirectly. Studies indicate that child witnesses of domestic abuse can exhibit a variety of behavioral, emotional and interpersonal problems.

Review and discuss handouts “Intersection of domestic abuse and child physical abuse” and “Defining the intersection between domestic abuse and children.”

**Discussion questions:** As you can see there are a range of effects on children. How do you think this might affect client self-disclosure? What could you say, when appropriate, to create a safe place for self-disclosure?

**Trainer note:** You may need to give an example or two to start discussion on the latter point. These could include “I understand a child can be frightened by hearing or seeing adult abuse. If the child is not otherwise harmed, you can talk to me about this. I can tell you about some of the resources we have to help you.”

# B. How children who witness abuse can be harmed

## Presentation

Refer to handout and overhead titled “How exposure to domestic abuse hurts children.” Amplify on the six learning points:

### 1. Physical injury

- Accidentally hurt when in the proximity of objects thrown, weapons used, or when physical struggles or assaults occur
- When a child tries to intervene in order to protect the victim or stop perpetrator

- As the target of assault in order to hurt/control the victim
- As a physical weapon against a victim

## **2. Emotional injury**

- Taking a child "hostage" to control the victim
- Forcing the child to watch assaults on the victim
- Using the child to find out information about the victim
- Alienating the child from the victim
- Giving child permission or encouraging disrespect or disobedience of victim
- Experiencing the aftermath of the abuse by seeing objects broken, the victim injured, paramedics or police in the home

## **3. Negative role models**

- Children imitate what they see parents do as a way to master skills and identify, which creates a mental "blueprint"
- Observing abuse reinforces belief that abuse is an effective way to resolve conflicts
- Repetitively witnessing abuse creates the belief that abuse is a normal or ordinary part of family life
- Observation and reinforcement factors allow the child to justify and rationalize abusive behaviors that they see
- Practicing the abusive behaviors witnessed or behaving in ways that lead to victimization creates an intergenerational transmission of domestic violence

## **4. Ineffective parenting**

- Volatile quality of partner relationship can affect parenting
- Parents may engage in harsher or inconsistent discipline, or may ignore or back away from confrontations with child
- Fewer positive interactions with child
- Parent may confuse child by responding one way when they are alone and another way when the perpetrator is present
- Parents are unable to provide consistent supervision and guidance
- Parents fail to teach child to internally control aggression and may reinforce impulsiveness and aggression

## **5. Attachment disruption**

- Victims and perpetrators may have difficulty maintaining close and positive parent-child attachments
- Parents are too stressed to respond to child's needs effectively
- Additional stressors such as divorce proceedings, financial problems, unemployment and relocations.
- Perpetrator challenges to or sabotage of a victim's authority and parenting ability can damage attachment to the child

- Prolonged separations from either parent may create anxieties related to abandonment and rejection by the child

#### **6. Compromises/impairment of development**

- Infants: attachment phenomenon and basic trust
- Toddlers and preschool children: the regulation of internal control of behaviors and the beginning of the identification process
- School-aged children: development of cognitive skills, including problem-solving, reasoning, belief systems and interpersonal development
- Adolescence: identity formation and separation issues

### **Activity**

Review handout titled "Scenarios: domestic abuse and children." Ask participants to form three groups and direct each group to discuss the scenarios. They are to discuss how each scenario indicates that witnessing abuse caused "harm," keeping in mind the various learning points they just reviewed. Reconvene class and ask each group to tell the class what elements of harm they have identified. Chart their responses on an easel pad.

## **C. Immediate and long-term effects upon children of witnessing domestic abuse**

### **Presentation**

Discuss how children exposed to domestic abuse may suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms as an immediate response to their experiences. Some children are able to cope successfully with disturbing events and will not manifest symptoms. However, others may develop significant problems in a number of developmental domains including cognition, emotional regulation, behavior, social interaction, and self-concept. The impact of initial exposure to abuse as well as repeated exposures may produce stress-related symptoms. Factors that influence the degree and severity of symptoms relate to the nature and intensity of abuse witnessed, the involvement of the child in the abusive episode, other cumulative stressors in the child's life, and whether the child was also maltreated.

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress in children are understood to be similar to those of adults. The manifestations include re-experiencing the incident, numbing of responsiveness, and additional symptoms that did not exist prior to the incident.

Evidence suggests that over time, children from homes where there is domestic abuse are at greater risk of adjustment problems than children from nonabusive homes. Adaptive defenses such as denial, secretiveness, externalizing blame, rationalizing, and dissociation may be used by a child as a coping strategy. These defenses affect how the child interacts with others and forms a part of the child's self concept. Long-term effects throughout a child's development have also been noted.

## **Review and discuss handout**

Review handout and overhead titled "Long-term effects upon children." Discuss the five learning points.

### **Cognitive abilities may be diminished**

- Poor academic performance due to lack of parental guidance and reinforcement about education
- Lower motivation resulting from anxieties, fears, depression, and a chaotic home life
- Rigid or limited problem-solving capacity
- Developing belief system that aggression is the way to solve conflict or get what one wants

### **Emotional regulation may be more difficult**

- Arousal intensifies resulting in heightened anxiety, fears, anger, irritability, hostility
- Depletion of emotions resulting in depression, withdrawal, isolation, psychosomatic symptoms
- Mood swings or fluctuations

### **Social interactions may be problematic**

- Inability to "read" interpersonal cues of others
- Lack of empathy for others
- Using aggression to solve problems or control a situation
- Being rejected by peers

### **Behavioral manifestations may occur**

- Acting out or various conduct problems
- Aggression against others, oneself, objects, property, pets
- Immaturity and regressive behaviors
- Perpetrator behaviors resulting from identification process
- Teens may engage in substance abuse, delinquency, running away, promiscuity, or antisocial activities

### **Self-concept may be impaired**

- Low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, poor self-image
- Assuming the role of the parentified child for the safety of younger children or for general responsibilities in the home

- Assuming the role of the protector for the victim
- Recreating either perpetrator or victim roles with others

## **D. How leaving the abuser creates distress for children**

### **Presentation**

When a victim leaves an abusive relationship, whether through flight to a shelter or moving away in a predetermined and anticipated manner, children are distressed. The children may have to leave their home, toys, personal belongings, and pets behind. Their daily routines may change and, if they are in hiding, they are cut off from the friends, relatives, and teachers they have relationships with. Children also may miss the perpetrator. If the victim returns home, which is often the case until there is a final severance, children may have to deal with the shame related to public knowledge of the abusive situation when they return to their school or neighborhood. Children also become highly fearful of police or prosecutors who may interview children about abusive events. This creates loyalty conflicts for children who want to protect parents, even if the parent had caused harm. Children may become very confused or upset when they are in contact with members of the legal system.

### **Optional activity**

View a video clip of an abusive situation. *Once Were Warriors* is one possibility. Ask participants to discuss the following points in small groups:

- What behaviors or actions of the children indicate they have established “adaptive” patterns of coping with the domestic abuse?
- How do the children exhibit symptoms, and would these be interpreted as post-traumatic stress symptoms?

## **E. Interviewing children about family violence**

### **Review and discuss handout**

Briefly review the handout "How children are interviewed about family violence." Explain that interviewing children is a very specialized skill handled in most agencies by CPS workers. Make the link to earlier discussion by asking how interviewing addresses some of the issues and behaviors covered in previous handouts "Defining the intersection between domestic abuse and children" and "How exposure to domestic violence hurts children."

## **F. Optional: mandated reporting of child abuse**

Depending on the audience (new vs. experienced staff) and the recency of other agency training, consider closing this section with a review of child abuse mandated reporting responsibilities.

# **Participant Handouts**

# Intersection of domestic abuse and child physical abuse

- 72% of sheltered women reported that children were involved in the violent situation
- 45% of sheltered women reported that child abuse had occurred in the violent situations
- 22.8% of husbands who are violent with their wives physically abuse their child
- 23.9% of wives who are violent with their husbands physically abuse their child
- Each additional act of husband-to-wife violence increases the odds of physically abusing the child, by an average of 12%
- Each additional act of wife-to-husband violence increases the odds of physically abusing the child by an average of 4%
- Child abuse is 15 times more likely to occur in families where domestic violence is present

#### Sources:

Ross, S. (1996). Risk of physical abuse to children of spouse abusing parents. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20 (7), 589-598.  
Stacey, S., & Shupe, A. (1994). *The family secret*. Cited in M.Mckay. The link between domestic violence and child abuse: Assessment and treatment considerations. *Child Welfare*, XXIII, (1).

# Defining the intersection between domestic abuse and children

**In homes where adult partner violence takes place, children can be victimized in the following fashion:**

## **Children witness the adult partner violence by**

- Viewing it
- Seeing the result
- Hearing it
- Being deprived of parental care and attention

## **Being a party to the violence**

- Intervening
- Summoning assistance
- Being injured as a bystander
- Being injured to punish the other adult
- Triggering abuse to reduce tension
- Triggering abuse to deflect it from the adult target
- Becoming an informant

## **Becoming a perpetrator**

- Assaulting the adult perpetrator
- Killing the adult perpetrator
- Assaulting sibling
- Assaulting parent as an adolescent
- Assaulting dating partner
- Abusing an adult intimate partner
- Abusing their own child as a parent

# **How exposure to domestic abuse violence hurts children**

**Physical injury**

**Emotional injury**

**Negative role models**

**Ineffective parenting**

**Attachment disruption**

**Compromises/impairment of development**

# Scenarios: domestic abuse and children

**Directions: Read the following three scenarios and identify indicators of the “harm” to the children in each scenario.**

1. Diane is a 6-year-old female who has revealed to her guidance counselor that last night her father again “beat on” her mother by punching her in the head, choking her, and threatening her with a gun. Diane’s father is an alcoholic. Diane’s way of coping with the consistent family violence is to hide in the closet whenever the eruptions occur. Her mother has taken the children and left before, but not in a long time as grandma won’t help anymore.

2. Andrew is a 10-year-old boy who just entered the local shelter with his mother and two younger siblings. It was noted that they all had bruises in various stages of healing on their bodies. Upon inquiry, the mother revealed that prior to last night her boyfriend had only been emotionally abusive toward herself and the children.

3. The police were called to Sarah’s (age 4) and Michael’s (age 11) home last night as a domestic dispute was reported by the neighbors. When the police arrived, they found Michael wielding a baseball bat in an effort to protect his mother and sister. This is the fourth time the children’s mother had to be admitted to the hospital due to injuries incurred during a domestic dispute. When confronted by this fact, their father broke down crying, saying that it was all due to his having been laid off from work and that he was sorry.

# **Long-term effects on children**

**Cognitive abilities**

**Emotional regulation**

**Social interactions**

**Behavioral manifestations**

**Self-concept impairment**

# How children are interviewed about family violence

**THESE ARE EXAMPLES OF THE KINDS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT FAMILY VIOLENCE THAT CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES STAFF AND OTHER INVESTIGATORS ASK CHILDREN. THE EXAMPLES ARE INCLUDED FOR INFORMATION ONLY AND ARE NOT INTENDED FOR USE BY CALWORKS STAFF.**

## Actual violence

- What happens when the people in your house disagree, argue, fight? (“People” may be clarified by replacing it with adults, siblings, parents.)
- Does anyone get hurt when there are fights at your house? Ask follow-up questions for clarification.
- Has anyone gone to the doctor or been taken to the hospital in an ambulance after a fight?
- Have the police or sheriff been to your house because of a fight?

## Implied violence

- Has anyone in your house ever gone to jail?
- Do you have any pets? If yes, have they ever been hurt?
- Has anything ever been broken during a fight?
- Has anyone ever put any holes in the walls, doors, or windows during a fight?
- Are you ever afraid at home? Tell me about it.
- Is anyone else at home ever afraid? Tell me about it.

## Risk to child due to family violence

- Have you ever been hurt when other people have been fighting?

continued...

- What do you do when other people are fighting at your house? What do your siblings do?
- How do you feel when other people are fighting?
- Do you ever talk to anyone about the fights?
- Who do you go to about the fighting?
- Has anyone ever had or used a knife or gun during a fight?
- Does anyone ever get drunk or high at your house?
- Do you feel safe at your house?
- Do you ever wish someone would leave your house?
- Do you ever want to hurt someone or yourself?

# **Trainer Overheads**

# **Domestic abuse hurts children**

- **Physical injury**
- **Emotional injury**
- **Negative role models**
- **Ineffective parenting**
- **Attachment disruption**
- **Compromised/impaired development**

# Long-term effects on children

- Cognitive abilities
- Emotional regulation
- Social interactions
- Behavioral manifestations
- Self-concept impairment

