

Domestic violence: its effects on children

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the effects that domestic violence can have on children, and offers advice about how to try and avoid these problems.

Introduction

What is domestic violence?

The term 'domestic violence' is used to describe the physical, sexual or emotional (including verbal and financial) abuse inflicted on a man or woman by their partner or ex-partner.

How are children involved?

In relationships where there is domestic violence, children witness about three-quarters of the abusive incidents. About half the children in such families have themselves been badly hit or beaten. Sexual and emotional abuse are also more likely to happen in these families.

How are children affected?

Obviously it is very upsetting for children to see one of their parents (or partners) abusing or attacking the other. They often show signs of great distress.

Younger children may become anxious, complain of tummy-aches or start to wet their bed. They may find it difficult to sleep, have temper tantrums and start to behave as if they are much younger than they are.

Older children react differently. Boys seem to express their distress much more outwardly. They may become aggressive and disobedient. Sometimes, they start to use violence to try and solve problems, as if they have learnt to do this from the way that adults behave in their family. Older boys may play truant and may start to use alcohol or drugs.

Girls are more likely to keep their distress inside. They may withdraw from other people and become anxious or depressed. They may think badly of themselves and complain of vague physical symptoms. They are more likely to have

an eating disorder, or to harm themselves by taking overdoses or cutting themselves.

Children with these problems often do badly at school. They may also get symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, for example have nightmares and flashbacks, and be easily startled.

Are there any long-term effects?

Yes. Children who have witnessed violence are more likely to be either abusers or victims themselves. Children tend to copy the behaviour of their parents. Boys learn from their fathers to be violent to women. Girls learn from their mothers that violence is to be expected, and something you just have to put up with.

Children don't always repeat the same pattern when they grow up. Many children don't like what they see, and try very hard not to make the same mistakes as their parents. Even so, children from violent families often grow up feeling anxious and depressed, and find it difficult to get on with other people.

What can help?

- **Professionals** working with children, including doctors, nurses, teachers and social workers, should make themselves available for the child to talk to, and offer the help and advice they need.
- **Posters** in community centres, schools and health centres can give information and guidance.
- **Women's Aid** and **Victim Support** are national organisations that give information and support (see overleaf for further information).
- **Legal advice** is often important – the law has recently been changed to make it easier to get

Sources of further information

- Parentline offers help and advice to parents on bringing up children and teenagers. Helpline 0808 800 2222; textphone 0800 783 6783; www.parentlineplus.org.uk.
- The Samaritans provide a 24-hour service offering confidential emotional support to anyone who is in crisis. Helpline 08475 909090 (UK), 1850 609090 (ROI); e-mail: jo@samaritans.org; www.samaritans.org.uk.
- Victim Support – helping people to cope with crime. Supportline 0845 303 0900; www.victimsupport.org.
- Women’s Aid Line 0808 2000 247; www.womensaid.org.uk.

Or check out the following website:

www.thesite.org/info/legal/abuse

- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack, contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel: 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax: 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.

an injunction against abuse and harassment. This means that the abuser has to stay a certain distance away from the victims. If an injunction is taken out, a woman may not have to leave her home.

People in general need to recognise how harmful domestic violence is to children. This can help the victims of violence to realise that it shouldn’t be happening to them, and that they can ask for help.

Who can give mothers and children long-term help?

Help is often needed for a long time. Survival needs have top priority – safety from the abuse, a place to live, and money to live on. Then for the children involved, contact arrangements and school need to be sorted out. The mother is likely to be extremely stressed and may well need her own counselling, psychotherapy or treatment for depression or anxiety. Children showing

difficulties in school often need extra help from teachers. If the children continue to be emotionally disturbed, it may be helpful for them to be seen at the local child and adolescent mental health service or some other local family and child counselling service.

References

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