

EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

As Americans, we grow up believing that “there’s no place like home” that our homes and families should be sources of love, nurturing and warmth. While growing up, we learn from our parents how to handle problems and successes. We turn to them for acceptance and security. When we grow up, we tend to become the kind of parents that our parents have taught us to be.

Just as home can be a “training ground” for learning positive ways of acting, home can also train people in how to behave violently. Children who witness or experience violence at home are affected in many ways. A child may become a direct victim of abuse from a parent, or may be indirectly involved, as he or she tries to understand his or her parents’ aggression toward each other. A child whose parents live with feelings of fear and disappointment with each other frequently does not receive the security and nurturing he or she needs while growing up.

Some of the most common effects on children who grow up in violent families are:

1. Death or Physical Injury: The child may be hurt if he or she becomes a primary victim of a parent’s aggression, if the parent’s anger toward a spouse is taken out on the child, or if the child attempts to intervene on a parent’s behalf.
2. Role-Reversal: Children frequently feel that they have caused the violence between their parents or that they should be able to prevent it or stop it. They often attempt to take care of their parents and may feel guilty or inadequate when they find that they cannot successfully do so.
3. Emotional Difficulties: Difficulties such as low self-esteem and depression are common in all members of violent families. These families lead to suicide attempts and suicide.
4. Aggressive Behavior: Children who learn that aggression is an effective, acceptable way to behave may model and repeat this behavior, especially if it is learned from a respected parent.
5. Submissive, Withdrawn Behavior: Children who have been abused or who identify with the role of the victim may become passive and withdrawn, rather than aggressive, in response to conflict. They may become unable to assert themselves and may grow up to find that it feels “normal” to be a victim and to withdraw, since this is a role they have already known.
6. School Problems: These may include academic difficulties, due to such factors as difficulty concentrating; truancy, as children sometimes feel that they may be able to control the fighting if they stay home; and peer difficulties as aggressive behavior often occurs during conflicts with peers.
7. Running Away: Frequently children feel that the only solution to the home situation is to escape.
8. Substance Abuse: Using alcohol or drugs may also be an attempt to escape from the home situation, and may be a modeling parent’s use of alcohol or drugs.
9. Poorly Formed Adult Relationships: As adults, we usually choose partners who have experienced similar situations to our own and who see the world much as we do. Children from violent homes, therefore, often choose others who, like themselves, may enter the relationship with unrealistic expectations, poor self-images, and limited resources about how to act when under pressure.
10. Abusive Behavior: Children who have grown up around violence may retaliate with abuse toward their parents, may abuse their own spouses, or may abuse their children. Research shows that under stress we act in ways we have learned, and children in violent homes learn violence.