

Counseling Works

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Family Violence, How Children Are Affected

The Generational Cycle:

We learn about relationships, marriages and parenting from our parents, not by what they tell us, but by carefully and closely watching what they do and how they live their lives. Violent parents teach that you hit the people that you love. Violence solves problems. Children who grow up in violent families accept violence as normal in relationships and as an appropriate way to cope with stress. They are unable to build healthy, happy relationships with themselves or with others.

The two greatest risk factors for a man to batter a woman are:

- Having watched his own father batter his mother (Violence and Victims, 1986)
- Having been abused himself during childhood (Violence and Victims, 1986)
- Of boys aged 11 to 20 years old who commit homicide, 63% kill a man who was abusing their mother (UCR, FBI, 1987)
- 85% of prisoners come from violent homes.

Typical Childhood Reactions to Violence:

- Fearfulness (terror during the incident, followed by generalized fearfulness)
- Withdrawal, isolation and a lack of ability to trust easily; difficulty in relating to others appropriately.
- Guilt and an inappropriate sense of responsibility – Children hear their parents fighting and assume that they must be the cause of the problem. They also feel responsible if Mom leaves.
- Internalized emotional pain, sometimes leading to frequent or severe illness.
- Increased aggression – indiscriminate temper tantrums directed at authority figures, hostility and cruelty directed to those less powerful (a bully).
- Generalized sense of confusion, difficulty in concentrating, a child who doesn't seem to care or pay attention.
- Eating disorders – overeating, lack of appetite, a “picky” eater
- Sleeping disorders – difficulty in getting them to bed or to sleep, wakefulness during the night, reports of hearing fights even when asleep, nightmares.
- Separation anxiety – afraid to leave the parents and then, once away there is a strong reluctance to go back home or to have the “company” leave, since visitors can provide a measure of temporary safety.
- Depression and sadness (usually without a cause the child can name) tearfulness
- Regression into a safer time (wanting bottles, thumb sucking or bedwetting).

Adolescents/Teens:

- Boys are 6 times more likely to become violent if they witnessed violence in their home.
- All normal teen problems are magnified. The inappropriate coping skills they developed early, often take on more uncomfortable consequences.
- As teens begin experimenting with relationships, the early “rules” they learned about relating, guide these new relationships. The learned behaviors are replicated on a less violent scale at first, but then the cycle begins.
- Often rush into a relationship or are desperate for a relationship so that they can escape the violence at home.

Safety Planning For Kids:

- Call -911- if one of your parents is hitting the other.
- Get a resource number if you need to talk to someone.
- Find a neighbor you can talk to or go to when violence starts.