

Preventing Violence

How Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Feed the Cycle of Violence

An unacceptably high percentage of American families are in trouble. Violence against women by their partners permeates communities across the country. Whether the violence occurs in a situation with or without children the effects on involved individuals can be devastating.



hen family violence exists, the lack of proper role models and supervision creates hostile settings in which children and teens are likely to become anti-social and isolated. Studies have shown that these children often become part of a cycle of violence into their teen and adult years. This violence can manifest itself in both dating violence and partner abuse.

Family violence has two subsets: partner violence and child abuse.

Partner Violence

Partner violence exists in every socioeconomic group, regardless of race or culture. It occurs in every community across the country. It is often considered “private” and is not talked about or acknowledged. However, the more people know about this issue, the better families, communities, religious institutions, and schools can deal with the problems. According to Prevent Child Abuse America (PCA), partner violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners.

Partner violence occurs as a result of complex interactions among individual, situational, and social factors with long-term consequences to the victim, all family members, and the abuser. It does not happen only because someone is drunk or high on drugs,

the partner “likes” being hit, or because the abuser does not love his or her partner. Unfortunately, partner violence is also not a single event—“I only hit her that one time.” In fact, episodes often become more frequent and more severe over time.

Partner violence and child abuse often go hand in hand. Children may be victimized and threatened as a way of punishing or controlling the adult victim of violence. Also, children can be injured unintentionally when acts of violence occur in their presence.

What About Child Abuse?

Both researchers and practitioners in the domestic violence prevention field believe that children who grow up in violent homes are more likely to become abusers and victims because they view such violence as normal and even acceptable. Nearly half the children of battered women have been physically abused, according to several studies. Bearing witness to a mother’s abuse can contribute to low self-esteem in girls, aggression and behavior problems in both sexes, and problems with social relationships, depression, and anxiety.¹ Many children are afraid to report an incident involving themselves to anyone, including the police, because the abuser is a family friend or relative.

Adolescents are not immune to child abuse. More than half of 12-year-olds, one-third of 14-year-olds and one-fifth of 16-year-olds are either hit, slapped, pinched, or shaken by their parents for doing something wrong.² A teen who is hit frequently attempts to hit back, which escalates the violence and potential for serious harm.³

According to a study on child abuse and neglect prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 12- to 14-year-olds are victims of physical abuse—commonly defined as punishment that leaves marks—at twice the rate of toddlers. Adolescents want more than anything to be treated as adults and physical abuse throws them right back into childhood.

A child exposed to partner violence sees the violence in his family and a victim of child abuse feels the violence. Some children are victims of both types of violence. According to PCA, parental stress is an important factor in child abuse, but this link has not been established in cases of domestic violence. PCA also reports that perpetrators of child maltreatment are equally men and women, but the majority of perpetrators of partner violence are men.

Feeding the Cycle of Violence

Victims of child abuse and witnesses to partner violence are likely to have difficulty coping and establishing healthy relationships when they reach adulthood.

Early experiences of violence can lead to later violence and delinquency. A National Institute of Justice-funded study found that experiencing childhood abuse and neglect increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent, of arrest as an adult by 38 percent, and of committing a violent crime by 38 percent.⁴ Other studies have shown that adolescents from families reporting multiple forms of violence are more than twice as likely as their peers from nonviolent homes to report committing violent offenses.

Children that are the victims of abuse often grow up to abuse others. The National Clearing House for the Defense of Battered Women estimates that one in four teens are in abusive dating relationships, and the FBI reports that 24 percent of teen homicides relate to dating.⁵

How do teens end up in abusive relationships? Many are experiencing intimacy for the first time and their inexperience leads them to be more susceptible to abuse—

especially if they've witnessed violence within their families. Peer pressure also plays a major role. Girls often feel pressured by other girls to be in a relationship, and often any relationship is better than none at all. And the difference between adult male batterers and adolescent male batterers also can be attributed to peer pressure. Teen batterers often abuse their mates in front of others as a way to maintain their image among their friends.

Dating violence follows the same pattern as adult partner violence. It starts with verbal and emotional abuse and escalates into physical abuse. The batterer begins by isolating his or her victim with jealousy and possessiveness—restricting his or her mate's time with family and friends, checking up on him or her, and putting him or her down in front of friends. Threats and fear are employed to keep the abuse secret. As the victim's self-esteem erodes, the batterer's power grows.

Rape and Acquaintance Rape

Most women are not attacked by strangers. Three out of four physical assaults on women are committed by current or former spouses, live-in partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, or dates. In contrast, men are primarily assaulted by strangers. Acquaintance rape is even more rarely reported to law enforcement than stranger rape. Women who have been raped by someone they know believe that it is a private or personal matter and they fear reprisal from the assailant.

According to a recent study on violence against women, "Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey," 18 percent of women reported having been raped at some time in their lives. More than half were under the age of 18 at the time of the first rape. Twenty-two percent of victims were under age 12.

Break the Cycle

There are no easy solutions to preventing family violence. Because of media attention to family violence issues, more and more survivors are speaking out publicly, helping to lessen the stigma long associated with these victims. Advocates, prosecutors, and survivors are working in states across the country to change laws and statutes. More men are taking public stands against family violence. Also, promising strategies for reaching out to families in trouble are now being used in social services, education, health, mental health, substance abuse, law enforcement, children's services, and juvenile justice arenas:

- family preservation programs
- family skills training programs
- family therapy programs
- parent training programs
- probation and rehabilitation service programs
- mandated batterers programs
- family mentoring.

Contact the local hospital, rape crisis center, colleges and universities, police department, religious institution, victims assistance program, or social service agency to find out the kinds of programs they offer to victims and perpetrators.

Another resource for victims of family violence are shelters. These resources were virtually nonexistent 15 to 20 years ago, now they are available to victims nationwide. They

often provide women and children a way for them to get their life together in a safe and non-threatening environment.

There is no one-size-fits-all-families strategy. There are programs designed for parents of infants, children, and adolescents. Features common to effective programs include the fit between the families, needs and the content duration of the course, the recruitment and retention of participants, and follow-up.

Look for programs designed to help end family violence that do not impose specific parenting styles; instead, they should aim to sharpen parents' skills and help them figure out how to handle problems more effectively. This will begin to pave the way for an end to child abuse, which includes a large majority of adolescents affected by the problem of family violence.

An example of a community creating a network of people to help deal with abused mother's and their children is the AWAKE project started in Boston, MA, by Children's Hospital. This program, Advocacy for Women and Kids in Emergencies (AWAKE), was developed to offer advocacy and support to mothers while the hospital provided medical attention to the children. AWAKE links the battered woman with an advocate, often herself a survivor of abuse. The advocate works with the hospital staff and outside agencies to devise a safety plan and offer other kinds of help to keep the mother and children free from violence and, whenever possible, together.

The Prenatal and Early Childhood Nurse Home Visitation program is a tested model that improves the health and social functioning of low-income, first-time mothers and their babies. In the program, nurse home visitors work intensively with families during pregnancy and after delivery, linking them with needed health and human services. The positive results it achieves during the prenatal and early childhood periods indicate its significant potential as a means of reducing violence and criminality in young adults.

Some key highlights of the major findings on maternal and child outcomes from two randomized clinical trials in Elmira, NY, and Memphis, TN, are

- ▶ 83 percent reduction in rates of child maltreatment among at-risk families from birth through the child's second year
- ▶ 56 percent reduction in rates of children's health care encounters for injuries and ingestions from birth through the child's second birthday
- ▶ 43 percent reduction in subsequent pregnancy among low-income, unmarried women by first child's birthday
- ▶ 83 percent increase in the rates of labor force participation by first child's fourth birthday.

A follow-up study of the youth involved in the Elmira program showed that they were significantly less likely to become delinquent than a similar group of children.

An excellent resource that schools and community organizations can offer children and teenagers that help break the cycle of violence are life-skills training. These trainings equip children and young adults with interpersonal skills and knowledge that are valuable in adulthood, especially in the parenting role. They also provide children with skills to help protect themselves from abuse. For adolescents, an added dimension of life-skills training should include education in sexuality, pregnancy prevention, and issues related to parenting.

With the high numbers of teenagers being raped at some time in their lives, it is crucial to teach personal safety strategies and rape prevention skills to teenage and even preteen

young women. Equipping younger women and girls with prevention and refusal skills can help reduce adult rape as well. A second part of a rape prevention strategy involves helping teens recognize and respect dating rights and responsibilities. These prevention strategies can be incorporated into life-skills training programs.

Communities also need to work together to address teen dating violence. Many state laws do not allow people under age 18 to obtain restraining orders. These laws can be changed to offer protection to teens nationwide. Counseling services and support groups need to be available to teen victims. Teens themselves can become involved in preventing dating violence. They can start a peer education program on teen dating violence, ask their school libraries to purchase books about living without violence and the cycle of domestic violence, create bulletin boards in classrooms to raise awareness, or perform a play about teen dating violence.

Parents need to be educated as well. They need to learn the signs that their child might be involved in an abusive relationship. A 1995 *Family Circle* survey of mothers and daughters found that while 31 percent of mothers reported their daughters had been abused by their boyfriends, 53 percent of the daughters reported having been abused.⁶

As individuals, each of us can play a role in preventing violence by⁷

- becoming aware of how we may unconsciously contribute to violence by supporting violent entertainment, seeking win/lose resolutions to conflicts with others, or being physically or emotionally abusive to people we care about
- speaking out publicly and taking personal action against domestic violence when a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, or a family member is involved
- encouraging your Neighborhood Watch or block association to become as concerned with watching out for domestic violence as with burglaries and other crimes
- calling the police if you see or hear domestic or family violence
- helping others become informed by inviting speakers to your church, professional organization, civic group, or workplace
- supporting domestic violence counseling programs and shelters.

What Can Communities Do?

- Provide financial resources to improve child protective services including better management of the system and training for child protective service workers, social case workers, judges, and court counselors.
- Support comprehensive adolescent pregnancy prevention programs.
- Support victim and crime prevention education for teens through community- or school-based programs.
- Advocate for manageable caseloads and properly trained child protective workers.
- Reform juvenile and family court administration to better address needs of victimized children and improve dependency case management.
- Launch local Healthy Start programs.
- Involve young men in parenting education programs, especially those placed in juvenile justice facilities and those incarcerated in correctional facilities. Also, teach them that their actions carry responsibility.
- Provide mandatory training for schools and child care centers to recognize abused children.
- Expand education and awareness efforts to increase positive attitudes toward nonviolence

- Encourage individuals to report rape and family violence.
- Form community-wide coordinating councils or task forces to assess the problem, develop an action plan, and monitor progress.
- Mandate training in domestic violence and rape prevention for all social service and criminal justice professionals.
- Advocate laws and judicial procedures at the state and local levels that support and protect battered women.
- Establish centers where visits between batterers and their children may be supervised, for the children's safety.
- Fund shelters adequately.
- Recruit and train volunteers to staff hotlines, accompany victims to court, and provide administrative support to shelters and victim services.
- Improve collection of child support.
- Establish medical protocols to help physicians and other health care personnel identify and help victims of domestic abuse.
- Provide legal representation for victims of domestic violence and their families.
- Address needs of population groups who may have difficulties accessing services: immigrants and refugees, gays and lesbians, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Is There Help for Abusers?

Psychological studies show that batterers, like other violent criminals, tend to use violence to demonstrate power and achieve control. Certain factors appear to be associated with battering—for example, low self-esteem, witnessing domestic violence as a child, having a lower educational and career status than a spouse—but no one factor stands out.

Society's longstanding view of domestic violence as a private matter has been one among many obstacles to successful treatment for batterers. Such programs were not developed until the late 1970s, and evaluation research on their effectiveness has been scarce and inconclusive. Most men enter these programs because of a court order and many do not complete the course. Most treatment programs last no longer than six months; follow-up or probation supervision is minimal or nonexistent. Some batterers are genuinely motivated to change, especially if intervention takes place in the early stages when abuse has not become routine. Others may simply shift from physical attacks to verbal threats and other forms of psychological intimidation.

The Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) in Duluth, MN, has gained national recognition for its court mandated 26-week curriculum that challenges abusers' attitudes and their learned behavior of dominance and control. But at least half the men who complete the program will continue to abuse the same or another woman, according to the program staff. Recognizing the complex nature of the problem, the DAIP forms one component of a coordinated response to domestic violence. The Duluth model includes a mandatory arrest policy, a comprehensive array of services for victims, a "no-drop" prosecution policy (the battering victim cannot drop charges), and automatic arrest and jail time for offenders who miss three consecutive DAIP sessions.⁸

Resources

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence
936 North 34th Street, Suite 200
Seattle, WA 98103
206-634-1903
Web site: cpsdv.org

Family Violence Project
National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
University of Nevada, Reno
PO Box 8970
Reno, NV 89507
702-784-6012
Web site: ncjfcj.unr.edu/

Family Violence Prevention Fund
383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304
San Francisco, CA 94103-5133
415-252-8900
Web site: fvpf.org

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
PO Box 18749
Denver, CO 80218
303-839-1852
Web site: ncadv.org/

National Coalition Against Sexual Assault
125 Enola Drive
Enola, PA 17025
717-728-9764
Web site: ncasa.org/

National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse
200 South Michigan Avenue, 17th Floor
Chicago, IL 60604-4357
312-663-3520
Web site: childabuse.org

National Crime Prevention Council
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006-3817
202-466-6272
Web site: ncpc.org

National Center for Victims of Crime
2111 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201
703-276-2880
Web site: nvc.org

Prevent Child Abuse America
200 South Michigan Avenue, 17th Floor
Chicago, IL 60604-2404
312-663-3520
Web site: childabuse.org

Violence Against Women Office
Office of Justice Programs
U.S. Department of Justice
810 7th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20531
202-616-8894

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