

## *The Effects of Violence on Children\**

### **Emotional**

- Sense of guilt, responsibility for violence.
- Shame, belief it doesn't happen anywhere else.
- Fear-of expressing feelings (anger) of divorce or separation, of the unknown, of injury, of a hostile world.
- Confusion - conflicted loyalties (love/hate).
- Anger - about violence, chaos.
- Depression/Helplessness/Powerlessness - to change things (especially caretaker children).
- Grief - over losses.
- Burdened - assumes inappropriate roles such as caretaker, parent.
- Engages in minimization and denial.

### **Behavioral**

- Acts out OR withdraws.
- Overachiever OR underachiever.
- Refuses to go to school.
- Aggressive or passive: bully or "doormat".
- Rigid defenses - aloof, sarcastic, rigid, blaming, defensive.
- Attention-seeking behaviors.
- Bedwetting, nightmares.

### **Social**

- Isolated - no friends OR distance in relationships.
- Relationships with friends may start intensely and end abruptly.
- Difficulty trusting others.
- Poor conflict resolution skills.
- May be excessively socially involved (overcompensates by staying away from home).

### **Cognitive**

- Feels responsible for the violence.
- Blames others for their behavior.
- Feels that it is OK to hit others for whom they care in order to: get what they want, express anger or feel powerful.
- Low self-concept (cannot succeed in changing violence).
- Don't ask for what they need.
- Don't trust (failed promises of caretaker to change).
- Feeling anger is bad - people get hurt.
- Strict gender roles.
- Shaky definition of self.

\*Sources: Domestic Abuse Project (DAP), Mpls, MN and Boyd, Behavioral Characteristics of DV.

## Indicators suggesting a child may be witnessing DV

All children are affected by violence. The signs may be different in each child because of the way children:

- ◆ Decode and interpret the experience.
- ◆ Have learned to cope and survive in stress.
- ◆ Use support people, like teachers and grandparents.

### **Infants**

- ◆ Fretful sleep.
- ◆ Developmental slowness.
- ◆ Fearful reaction to loud voices.
- ◆ Lethargy.

### **Toddlers**

- ◆ Frequent illnesses.
- ◆ Severe shyness.
- ◆ Low self-esteem.
- ◆ Hitting.
- ◆ Biting.
- ◆ Trouble in day care.

### **School age children**

- ◆ Frequent illnesses.
- ◆ Hitting.
- ◆ Stealing.
- ◆ Lying.
- ◆ Nightmares.
- ◆ Eating problems.
- ◆ Bedwetting.
- ◆ Poor school results.
- ◆ Being "too perfect".
- ◆ Drug and/or alcohol abuse.
- ◆ Becomes family caretaker.
- ◆ Running away.
- ◆ Copying the violent behavior, especially boys.

### **All ages, primarily boys**

- ◆ Serious problems with temper tantrums.
- ◆ Continually fights at school or with siblings.
- ◆ Lashes out at objects.
- ◆ Treats pets cruelly or abusively.
- ◆ Threatens younger siblings with violence.
- ◆ Models after dad.

### Teachers may find the child may:

- ◆ Be too tired to concentrate on his/her lessons.
- ◆ Be depressed or withdrawn, friendships may suffer.
- ◆ Display behavior problems in relation to anger and aggression.

### These kids often appear:

- ◆ Sad, fearful, depressed.
- ◆ Nervous, anxious - short attention span (seems like hyperactivity).
- ◆ Aggressively defiant or passively compliant.
- ◆ To have limited tolerance for frustration and stress.
- ◆ To become isolated and withdrawn.
- ◆ To have poor impulse control.
- ◆ To feel powerless.
- ◆ Lazy, tires easily, lethargic.

### Other signs

- Sleep troubles, nightmares, fear of falling asleep.
- Restlessness/anxious behavior at nap time.
- Headaches, stomach aches, aches and pains (somatic symptoms).
- Frequent illnesses (colds, flu, etc.).
- Severe separation anxiety.
- Regression in developmental tasks (regressive behavior).
- Increased aggressive behavior and angry feelings.
- A very high activity level, constant fidgeting.
- Constant worry about possible danger.
- Loss of skills learned earlier (such as toilet training, naming colors, etc.).
- Withdraws from friends and activities.
- Doesn't show feelings about anything, no reaction at times to physical pain.
- Worrying a lot about the safety of loved ones (e.g., needing to see siblings during the day, asking constantly about mom).
- Difficulty finding and completing an activity or task.
- Repetitive play about the violence event.
- Using bullying or aggression to control others.

*Not all children who display such problems have been exposed to domestic violence. Some children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence do not appear to experience serious problems.*