



Violence in the Family

By Geri Redden

Family violence is the most popular violent crime in America. According to *Physical Violence in American Families*, "just over 16%, or one in six, American couples experienced an incident involving physical assault during 1985" (Straus & Gelles, 1992). Although alcohol is not necessarily involved in all cases of family violence, any police officer, ambulance driver or emergency room doctor will tell you that it is involved in a large percentage of these crimes and certainly in the most violent incidents. The family is a system, which means that violence in any part of the family equals violence in every part. Woman abuse is a primary indicator of child abuse and vice versa. This system of violence in the family is so exact that the family dog tied up in the yard and abused indicates that inside the house the family is being battered, too. Most people who work with children of alcoholics are well aware that these children often suffer from physical violence against them by a drunken parent. What they may not understand is that these children probably suffer more often because of abuse against their mothers, because woman abuse is even more common than child abuse. Many children of alcoholics have mothers who are abused and the mother's abuse affects the child in significant ways:

- Children who have witnessed abuse often suffer low self-esteem, depression, stress disorders, poor impulse control and feelings of powerlessness. They are at high risk for alcohol and drug use, sexual acting out, running away, isolation, fear, and suicide (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, *Children of Battered Women*, 1990, pp. 28-29).
- Children of battered women are fifteen times more likely to be battered than children whose mothers are not abused ("Women and Violence", U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearing August/December, 1990). A woman who is battered may turn to alcohol for relief from her pain and become alcoholic herself.
- The woman who becomes unable to cope as a result of the battering may develop an emotional or mental illness that leaves her unable to fulfill her parenting role.
- Because the abuser often uses the children's behavior as an excuse for battering the woman, children come to blame themselves for their mother's abuse.
- Children of battered women suffer "survivor guilt" because they must watch helplessly while their mother is beaten and can do nothing to save her.
- Since battered women are often raped (and, therefore, have little access to birth control), an alcoholic battered woman is at high risk for having a FAS/FAE child.

How to Help Women and Children Coping with Violence

There are ways to help women and children cope with family violence. The first step is to learn as much as possible about the dynamics of the violent family. To work directly with battered women, for example, one must learn that, when the abused woman leaves the abusive situation, her chances of being killed increase dramatically. Divorced and separated women, who compose only 10% of all women, account for 75% of all battered women and report being battered 14 times as often as women still living with their partners. (NCADV Voice, the newsletter of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Spring 1992.)



Violence in the Family (cont.)

To help battered women and their children:

- Work with shelters for abused women so that the women and children have somewhere to go for safety.
- Learn how to develop a Safety Plan for both women and children.
- Work with local child protective agencies to find resources to help children cope.
- Help children learn non-violent conflict resolution, anger control and other skills which will serve them well in their future relationship.
- Learn how to help battered women and their children safely leave the violent situation.

Family Violence Always Leaves Home

Violence is a learned behavior. Children who are raised in violent homes may learn to repeat the family patterns either by becoming abusers or battered themselves as adults. Boys who have witnessed abuse of their mothers are 10 times more likely to batter their female partners as adults ("Women and Violence," Hearings before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, August/December 1990). Schools and institutions suffer as children who witness violence at home often act out their rage and frustration in violent ways against other children, authority figures or even animals.

According to the American Medical Association (AMA News, 1993), family violence is the number one drain on our domestic economy because it is the bedrock for virtually all of our social problems such as violent crime, homelessness and the next generation of alcoholics and drug addicts.

There is much that can be done to help these children. As we educate ourselves about family violence and begin to develop the skills to work with the victims and perpetrators of violence, this oldest of human crimes will begin to disappear. The willingness to listen and to hear the cries of battered families is the first step. As long as we refuse to ask, battered women and their children will not talk about what's going on at home. Their shame is too deep, and they cannot trust that anyone will be able or willing to help. The solution to stopping violence in the family is up to each of us. When we understand this critical social issue, we will overcome our fear of working with battered families, and we will be able to reach out and draw them back into a sane and safe world.

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