

Shock Waves: The Batterer's Impact on the Home

From: The Batterer As Parent: Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Family Dynamics by Lundy Bancroft & Jay Silverman ©2002

Roger, 36, and Marsha, 34 are married. Their son Kyle is 11, and daughter Felicia is 8. On Sunday morning the children wake excited about a long anticipated afternoon canoe trip. After breakfast, Marsha asks her son to help with the dishes, and he gets mad, saying, "My friends are waiting for me. Why do I have to do the stupid dishes? Why can't you or Felicia do them?"

Roger steps in and says to Marsha, "You tie that boy down with too many chores. He needs to be active. Go on out, Kyle." Kyle says pointedly to Marsha, "I told you this was stupid, Mom." His father winks at him, and Kyle runs outside. Marsha gives Roger a dirty look, then asks Felicia for help with the dishes.

Roger leaves the kitchen, but later he finds a moment when he thinks that Felicia is out of earshot and says angrily to Marsha, "What was that look you gave me earlier? I don't need that shit from you!" An argument ensues about Kyle, and Roger finally yells, "You don't understand boys! You're messing him up completely. You want to handle things your way, go ahead. I'm not going on any stupid canoe trip." He stomps upstairs and slams the door.

An hour later, Roger has still not emerged, and Marsha has to tell the children that the canoe trip is off. Felicia bursts into tears and says, "This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't argued with him! You know how mad he gets. Why did you have to do that?"

Later, Felicia wants help organizing her butterfly collection and asks her father. He yells at her to leave him alone. After lunch, Roger finally comes downstairs and goes outside to join Kyle and his friends in a game of touch football. He jokes as if nothing has happened. After the game, one of Kyle's friends says, "I wish I had a dad that was as much fun as yours." Roger then leaves to play golf for the afternoon.

After dinner, when the children are in their rooms, Marsha asks Roger if he could either help pick up the house or take care of his mother's birthday card. He says, "Don't bother me with this stupid stuff," and an argument rapidly escalates to yelling and name-calling. Marsha is louder than Roger in the argument, as his style is to use logic and cold sarcasm. Roger finally becomes enraged, however, and knocks over two kitchen chairs, smashes a glass against the wall, and shoves Marsha against the refrigerator so that she falls to the floor. He continues yelling as he goes out the front door.

When Roger returns a short while later, the police are at the house following a neighbor's call. The police ask if there has been any violence, and both Marsha and Roger say no, just some arguing. Roger tells the police that Marsha did most of the yelling. Because Marsha does not have visible injuries, the police do not arrest Roger. The children hear all of these events from upstairs. A few minutes after the police have left, Felicia begins to repeatedly ask Marsha, "What happened?" and refuses to go back to bed until her mother answers her. Marsha finally yells at her to get back in her room "or you'll be sorry."

In the morning, Marsha tells Roger that she can't take the fighting anymore and she wants him to look for a separate place to stay. He refuses to leave, saying that he paid for the house and that if she doesn't

like it, she should be the one to move. He says that he should report her to the Department of Social Services for being a lousy mother and that if they break up, he will get custody of the children. Marsha and Roger are unaware that the children can hear pieces of this argument from upstairs. The children leave for school and both parents go to work.

Kyle acts up in class that day and is sent to the principal's office. The principal says to Kyle, "I'm very disappointed to see you going back to your old ways, young man, since you've been doing better for awhile now. This better be the last time, or you'll be suspended."

Felicia is sent to her school nurse complaining of a stomach ache. She is crying and the pain is getting worse, so the school calls Marsha, who leaves work to take Felicia to the doctor. The pediatrician finds nothing wrong, saying that Felicia perhaps ate something that didn't agree with her.

At home, Felicia falls asleep. Marsha calls her therapist, describing the incidents of the night before. They talk about the stresses that Roger is under and how Marsha could help him feel better. The therapist says, "I'd like you to think about why you feel the need to provoke Roger, when you know what it can lead to. It seems to be a way to punish yourself."

When Roger gets home that night, he brings presents for both children and announces that he is taking the family out for dinner and ice cream. He tells Marsha that he is sorry that he lost his temper but "let's not dwell on it," and gives her a hug and a kiss in front of the children. She stiffens and looks away, which the children notice, but gradually she interacts more cordially with Roger, who is fun and charming all evening. Before bed that night, Kyle says to his mother, "I don't understand why you have to be the way you are with Dad. He tries so hard to make things go well."

Roger helps Felicia get ready for bed that night, and while they are alone together, he says to her, "I'm sorry that Mommy yelled at you last night. She shouldn't do that. She needs to work on her temper, and I'm going to get her to see a therapist. Don't you worry about it, she just has some problems."

Felicia has a bad dream that night and comes to her parent's bed, but Roger tells her angrily that she is too old for that. She returns to her room and stays awake alone, frightened. When Roger is asleep, Marsha slips out of bed quietly and goes to be with Felicia. Two days later, Kyle gets in a fight with another boy at school and is suspended.