

Invisible Victims: Children and Domestic Violence



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Domestic violence is [more prevalent](#) than you may realize. 95% of the cases involve female victims of male partners, but the female often isn't the only victim. An estimated 3.2 million children living in America witness incidents of domestic violence annually. [Witnessing](#) has an array of meanings. It includes seeing the actual event of physical or sexual abuse occur, hearing threats or other violent noises from another room, observing the aftermath from the abuse like blood, bruises, tears, or broken items, and being aware of the tension in the household like the fear when the abuser is present. The child is like an extension of their abused parent– when the mother gets abused, it's like the child gets abused. Here are some of the long-term effects of domestic violence on children:

Physical Health Problems

Unfortunately, children aren't always just witnessing these attacks– sometimes they are on the receiving end of it as well. Other [physical symptoms](#) of growing up in a violent home include stomachaches, headaches, bedwetting, and inability to concentrate. Experts believe that children who grow up in abusive homes think that violence is an effectual way to resolve conflicts and solve problems. This may result in the child replicating the violence and intimidation that they witnessed when they were younger in their teen and adult relationships, and can lead to the cycle of violence with their children.

PTSD

[Exposure](#) to domestic violence as a child can lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Children's interpersonal violence exposure wasn't always recognized as a potential antecedent to PTSD, but now it is acknowledged that extraordinarily stressful events can occur as part of children's habitual experiences. Recent definitions of trauma stressors now include moments within ordinary circumstances that are capable of causing death, injury, or threaten the well being of a loved one or the child itself. [Signs](#) of PTSD include:

- **Reliving the event:** Memories of the event can resurface at any given moment, evoking the same feelings of fear and horror that occurred during the actual event. Nightmares, flashbacks, and triggers like seeing, hearing, or smelling something that causes the child to relive the traumatic event are forms of these re-experiencing symptoms.
- **Avoiding situations that remind the child of the event:** The child may try to avoid situations or people that trigger those memories of a past event of domestic violence. They may keep busy or avoid seeking help because it keeps them from having to think or talk about the event.
- **Negative changes in beliefs and feelings:** The self-image the child possessed may change, as well as the way they view others. There are many aspects to this symptom, including a belief that the world is completely dangerous and no one can be trusted, or a lack of loving or positive feelings in relationships.
- **Hyperarousal:** The child may be jittery, irritable, angry, or always alert and on the lookout for danger. Trouble sleeping and concentrating may occur, or they may be startled by loud noises or surprises.

Substance Abuse

Often a matter of [coping](#) with the domestic violence and the consequences it brings, children who experience violent and traumatic events use drugs and alcohol to numb the pain and block out the memories. Substance abuse is most likely a learned behavior. Regular alcohol abuse is one of the leading risk factors for partner violence, and the risk of violence increases when both partners abuse drugs or alcohol.

Therapy and Treatment Options

There are numerous [organizations](#) that offer several avenues for child victims of domestic violence to address their issues and attempt to heal. Group and individual therapy, as well as dyadic treatments with their nonoffending parent are essential components of intervention. The National Domestic Violence Hotline for victims is 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Their website, www.thehotline.org, provides information about local programs or resources available.