

## Literature Review

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Recent estimates for children effected by domestic violence states that “ as many as 10 million children are exposed to parental violence each year” (Straus, 1992). Washington State shows that with in one year, around 14% of Child Protective Services intakes contained allegations of domestic violence (English, Marshall & Stewart, 2003, p.44). With statistics like this, the question a rises as to what affects this life style might have on the children in these homes as they grow and develop? It is becoming more clear that aggression at home takes it toll on children in many areas of their life. Study show that three areas are most commonly affected are; behaviorally, emotionally, and can stunt their academic development. It is also important to look at some of the limitations of current studies to see what is needed in the future.

To more clearly understand what children face on a daily basis, one must look at the cycle of violence that takes place in an intimate partner relationship. “Cycles of violence occur when individuals or groups become trapped in a circular or escalating process that perpetuates violence or leads to repetition of violent acts” (Breaking the cycle of violence: a work group of the international work group on death, 2005, p.256-257). It begins with the tension building stage. Some sort of conflict takes place, such as minor disagreements. Then with little warning, the situation escalates and the abuse begins. It could be physical, emotional or sexual abuse. During the

abusive stage the victim is unsure exactly what has set the abuser off. After the incident, the abuser comes back and shows some sort of remorse for their actions. They could apologize, give gifts, and often promising that it will never happen again. This is referred to as the honeymoon stage. However, sooner or later the cycle repeats and the tension starts to build once again (County of Napa, 2008). One can see why this cycle could be confusing to a child and hard for a woman to break out of.

These women have to spend much of their time dealing with their abusers waves of emotions, causing them to have less time to focus on their children's needs. As primary care giver their children look to them for almost all of their needs. "The relative influence of any one male, or series of males, while potentially beneficial or dangerous, maybe too-short lived to act as a substantial effect on child health and behavior *compared* to the effect of the mother or primary caregiver" (English et. al., 2003,p.53). Women who are victims of intimate partner abuse are often more likely to be depressed or suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. These conditions often inhibit their interaction with their children (Lieberman, Wilkens, Ybarra, 2007). Although females in these situations are allowed more leniency regarding their parenting then before, many women in those situations do admit that they have, "reduced amounts of energy or time for their children" (Holden, 2003, p.157). The lack of parental interaction is one of the many reasons children who experience domestic violence begin to face issues in the their development.

One of the most commonly discussed issues that a child of domestic violence encounters is behavioral problems. Children receive much of what they learn about

the world through observing and repeating. Young ones who consistently see aggressive behaviors will begin mimicking it. “Abusive adult relationships model violence as a way of dealing with others... Thus, children are internalizing messages such as ‘the man has the power in the home’ and ‘violence is an effective way to resolve conflict’ (Graham-Bermann & Berscoll, 2000)” (Holden, 2003, p.157).

Researchers believe that there is a direct link between aggressive behaviors within the family and “a child’s psychopathology including both verbal and physical aggression” (English, et. al., 2003, p. 44). All of these issues tend to continue on into adulthood. Investigations continue to provide evidence those men who are witnesses to domestic violence in the early years of life later become abusers themselves. (Gelles, 1990).

A child’s emotional well-being is also very much affected by the messages they are getting at home. Fear is a common emotion for children to feel in this situation, not just for their own personal safety but for their mother’s as well. They fear doing anything that might trigger the aggressor to lash out, which can also lead to large amounts of anxiety (Buckley, Holt, Whelan, 2007). In “Listen to Me! Children’s Experiences of Domestic Violence” one group member shares that she was afraid to pick up the phone at any time to get some sort of help. She was concerned that at any moment her father might find out – whether by walking in on the call or seeing it on the phone bill later (Buckley et. al., 2007). Trying to ask for help from peers causes just as much anxiety. Children living with domestic violence are three times more likely to be truant school (Holt, Huebner, Kernic, McKnight, Rivara, Wolf, 2002). Even the thought of trying to ask a friend can bring up feelings of shame, as they

would have to admit to what is happening at home as well as the fact that they are unable to deal with it. With all of these emotions building inside, one can see why a child might turn inward and become very self-conscious. There is also a very good chance that the children themselves are being abused, as it is not uncommon for children whose parents are in an abusive relationship to have the abuser turn their verbal abuse toward the child (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky, Semel, 2001).

With all the stress that is taking place in the home – which is supposed to be where a child feels most comfortable – it makes sense that other aspects, like their education, begin to suffer. “Westra and Marting (1981) found that child witnesses (ages 2-8) scored significantly lower than normative score from the general populations on verbal, quantitative, motor, and over all intellectual ability tests” (Huth-Bocks et al., 2001, p.271-272). It has also been proven that children exposed to intimate partner abuse are referred to speech pathology seven times more often than those not exposed (Holt et. al., 2002). One study concluded that preschoolers who have witnessed domestic violence scored 8.9 points lower in the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised than those who were not (Lieberman et. al., 2007). However, rating children at this age does leave time for possible change – an increase or decrease. Even with the possibility of change in mind, it is clear that domestic violence has a very direct affect on the growth and development of a child.

Domestic violence really is an all-encompassing issue for children. Parents are the central focus and main source of interaction for children in the formative years. Many of these articles express limitations as to what could be accomplished while

trying to study this population. One limitation is to define what domestic violence really is as it could range from just physical – such as slapping or hitting – all the way to someone yelling inappropriate names (Ferrick & Prinz, 2003). Conveying this definition to those participating in the study can be difficult as well, as some may not believe that things that are being said and done are wrong. It is important that a concise definition is set at the beginning of the study and that all participants have a clear understanding of it. Probably the biggest issue that researchers face is how to monitor what happens in the home (Ferrick, et. al., 2003). Although many interviews can be conducted, each person within the situation has their own interpretation of events; therefore, making it difficult to get a comprehensive look at the exact events that took place. It would be ideal to be able to see the event there is a good chance this will not happen, as many people do not want to admit to what is happening.

“Thus far, research has provided only limited answers to the many questions that arise when studying this issue” (English, et. al., 2003, p. 44). To purpose a longitudinal study that follows children through the years is a large undertaking but is something that needs to be done. By watching children throughout life we can better understand what happens during and after the domestic violence has taken place. We could evaluate children who live with this problem for years or if during that time their primary care giver removes the family from the situation and what happens to them after they are out. Through a study like this we could also determine if the effects of domestic violence are long term or can be corrected over time; if children who originally have developmental or behavioral issues could out grow them or find

treatment to help correct them. Also to find better methods of counseling to help these children stop the cycle of violence. “Although much has been learned about the harmful effects of exposure to domestic violence, little research has focused on factors that help children cope with violence or that protect them from long-term, negative effects” (Ferrick, et. al., 2003, p. 218).

Studies continue to show that many children living in domestic violence situations are affected negatively by what they experience (Buckley et. al., 2007). It is especially prevalent in their development behaviorally, emotionally, and in their academics. Though many studies have examined issues there is still a need for a long-range study to more clearly identify the potential risk domestic violence has on a child and what possible steps could be taken to help a child overcome the effects. If steps are not taken to further our understanding of this issue, many more children will suffer through this alone. Every child deserves the chance to enjoy their childhood and given every opportunity to reach their full potential.

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