

Life in a War Zone: Impact of abuse against women on children

There is now a great deal of evidence that children are badly affected if their mothers are abused. The effect on children is not straight-forward. Abuse of their mothers usually occurs along with other upsetting events, some of which may be just as significant, for individual children. The effects on children are both direct (i.e. the trauma of witnessing assaults) and indirect (factors which often accompany the abuse).

Directly witnessing assaults on their mother Witnessing an assault on their mother is obviously a traumatic event for children of any age. An assault by a stranger is frightening and disturbing enough, but where the attack is carried out by one of the most important individuals in their lives (father or step-father) the psychological impact is greater. It should be recognised that exposing children to this is emotional abuse of the child. Younger children appear to be more affected by this in the short term but the psychological effects on older children may be more complex. Where violence and abuse are happening over a period of time the majority of children do witness violence. Some parents report that abuse is actually more likely to occur in front of the children or always occur in front of the children. Some men seem to use the children's presence as added humiliation or threat to their partners!

Awareness of violence towards their mothers Even when they do not directly witness abuse, children are often aware of the violence. They may hear fights, see smashed furniture or may be told about it by older children. Both parents, abusive and nonabusive, often underestimate and play down the extent to which children are aware of the violence. When asked, children often reveal more knowledge about the abuse than their parents expect. Knowing that raised voices or angry looks may lead to violence is highly stressful. They often fear worse than actually happens and they learn secrecy and lack of trust. This abuse is not something that children ever get used to.

Witnessing other forms of abuse

Although exposure to other forms of abuse of their mothers (treats, verbal abuse, emotional abuse etc.) may not be as directly traumatic as witnessing physical assaults, this is also stressful and can be psychologically damaging. Almost all women who are physically abused are also insulted, threatened or ridiculed (one study found this applies to 95%) and children are highly likely to witness this even if they do not witness the physical abuse. Children as young as 6 months show distressed reactions to parents' anger. Hearing one parent put down by another often reduces the child's respect for both of them.

Children are often victims themselves

Children whose mothers are abused are much more likely to be physically and emotionally abused them-

selves. Some estimates put the number of such children as high as 50% of all those living with domestic violence. Sometimes this is the result of children getting in the way or trying to protect their mother. In other cases, the attitudes and behaviours that lead the man to abuse the mother also lead to his abuse of children (sometimes not until adolescence when they begin to question the father's dominating tactics or try to defend their mother).

Poor parenting and parent-child relationships These children are likely to experience (at least for a time) poor parenting. The characteristics which lead their father to abuse their mother are unlikely to lend themselves to him being an involved, caring parent (though some are). It has been found that wifeabusing fathers tend to be distant from children, less physically affectionate and more likely to use physical punishment to control them. In addition to this, a mother who is severely stressed, depressed and with low self-esteem is not likely to be functioning at her best as a parent.

Family disruption

Children in abusing households are likely to experience other forms of family disruption. More parents separate, either permanently or temporarily. Such separations are more likely to be messy and nasty; may lead to restricted or no access to the absent parent; and often there will continue to be ongoing conflict between parents. There is evidence that the long-term damage by a separation is greater where there is parental conflict (before, during or after the separation). However, it should be noted that the adverse effect of continuing to live in a violent home (or even one with a great deal of conflict) appears to be worse than the effect of parental separation on children. Other forms of family disruption are hospital admissions, stays in a refuge, frequent changes of school, having alcoholic or drug-dependent parents etc.

What is it like for children?

Living with the abuse of their mothers has been compared to life in a war zone or experiencing natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes etc. Young children's immediate reactions to danger between adults (not necessarily violence) includes 'facial expressions of distress, gestures and actions indicative of fear and anxiety (e.g. covering the ears, moving out of the room), freezing (a tense, fixed-in-place posture), increased blood pressure and heart rate, and self-reports of anger, sad or fearful reactions.' Some form of mental or behavioural disturbance is four times more common in children of battered women than in children from non-violent homes.

Children exposed to violence towards their mothers tend to have similar adjustment problems to those who have been themselves abused.

These children are likely to be very insecure. "*Many children live with fear and anxiety, waiting for the next violent episode. They feel no safety in their own home yet are too young to seek out or even want an alternative... Little peace or security is available for these children.*" It is ironic that many women are staying in such situations to provide their children with 'security' or 'stability'!

Children find the abuse of their mothers very difficult to talk about for a variety of reasons: secrecy may have been forced upon them in the past; they often feel shame and guilt; they may be struggling to be loyal to an abusive father.

They are often very mixed up emotionally. They may feel guilty, believing that their bad behaviour caused the arguments and violence. They may also feel guilty because they could not stop the violence or protect their mother. They may worry that they are like their father (especially if they are feeling a lot of anger). They may blame their mother for leaving or even blame her for the violence. They may just want to escape (eg by running away or getting into drugs or alcohol).

Other behaviour problems: defiance, truanting, criminal activity, alcohol and drug taking, all are somewhat more common than usual in children from violent homes. It is seldom possible to say for sure that such problems are a direct result of witnessing abuse but it is often a contributing factor.

Lack of trust and respect for adults: Where abuse is prolonged children often lose respect for both parents! This leaves them feeling alone and unsupported, and as teens they may be more vulnerable to influences by their peer group.

Pseudo-maturity: false maturity is where children are forced to take on responsibilities they are not ready for.

Adopting abusive attitudes: Children generally absorb many of the attitudes and opinions of their parents. Adopting attitudes which support wife-abuse is probably of crucial importance in the intergenerational 'cycle of violence'.

The cycle of violence:

Much has been written about the extent to which violence runs in families. This may have been exaggerated to some extent and the idea that the process is inevitable is a dangerous one as it not only leads to wrong assumptions in individual cases but it may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

It is certainly a myth that all boys from violent families will become abusive but there is no doubt that the risks are much higher. It has been suggested that sons who

witness their father's violence are ten times more likely to be violent towards their own partners than those who do not witness violence! However, even if the majority of violent men come from violent homes it is a mistake to assume that a majority of children in violent homes will become violent.

Women and the cycle of violence

Another aspect of the Cycle of Violence idea is that girls from abusive homes will choose partners who are themselves abusive. There is a slight tendency for this to happen but it is nowhere near being the majority. About a third of women who are the victims of wife-battering come from violent families (but so do a fifth or a quarter who are not in abusive relationships).

A common pattern may be that (some) women from abusive homes accept verbal abuse and controlling tactics from their partners whereas women without such a background would be more likely to 'put their foot down' early or get out of the relationship before the abuse escalates.

Healing

Although it is safe to say that most children will be adversely affected by abuse of their mother by her partner, not every child will develop emotional or behavioural problems. Studies of children in refuges (who tend to be those in the worse situation) have found that some have no identifiable problems and some are even above average in social competence. Some children are very resilient.

Fairly obviously, the longer the abuse continues, the greater the effect will be. Good parenting (solo or as a couple) can undo some or all of the damage once the abuse stops. A particularly warm relationship with one parent can help counter (but not eliminate) the negative effects of marital conflict. Support from other adults can also help counter the effects of stress on children.

Counselling or group programs for children can be helpful (assuming that the abuse has stopped). Some of the damage can be healed by the abuser admitting his past abuse and making amends. It is very important that the fact that abuse is wrong is acknowledged. If children accept abuse as normal they are much more likely to grow up to be abusers themselves. Where a marital separation occurs, men can do a great deal of good if they are able to become reliable, responsible access parents (and they can continue to do a lot of harm if they are unreliable, irresponsible parents!). Children are often remarkably forgiving!

Eddie Gallagher. (1998). *Life in a War Zone: Effects on Children of their Mothers Being Abused*, in Jo Howard "*Bringing up Boys: A Parenting Manual*" ACER