

Children and Domestic Violence

Exposure

Children are exposed to or experience domestic violence in many ways. They may hear one parent/caregiver threaten the other, observe a parent who is out of control or reckless with anger, see one parent assault the other, or live with the aftermath of a violent assault. Many children are affected by hearing threats to the safety of their caregiver, regardless of whether it results in physical injury. Children who live with domestic violence are also at increased risk to become direct victims of child abuse. In short, domestic violence poses a serious threat to children's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, particularly if the violence is chronic.

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Effects

Not all children exposed to violence are affected equally or in the same ways. For many children, exposure to domestic violence may be traumatic, and their reactions are similar to children's reactions to other traumatic stressors.

Short-Term Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Children's immediate reactions to domestic violence may include:

- Generalized anxiety
- Sleeplessness
- Nightmares
- Difficulty concentrating
- High activity levels
- Increased aggression
- Increased anxiety about being separated from a parent
- Intense worry about their safety or the safety of a parent

Long-Term Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Long-term effects, especially from chronic exposure to domestic violence, may include:

- Physical health problems
- Behavior problems in adolescence (e.g., juvenile delinquency, alcohol, substance abuse)
- Emotional difficulties in adulthood (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD)

Exposure to domestic violence has also been linked to poor school performance. Children who grow up with domestic violence may have impaired ability to concentrate; difficulty in completing school work; and lower scores on measures of verbal, motor, and social skills.

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In addition to these physical, behavioral, psychological, and cognitive effects, children who have been exposed to domestic violence often learn destructive lessons about the use of violence and power in relationships. Children may learn that it is acceptable to exert control or relieve stress by using violence, or that violence is in some way linked to expressions of intimacy and affection. These lessons can have a powerful negative effect on children in social situations and relationships throughout childhood and in later life.

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