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Statistically Speaking:
The Long-Term Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

*Olivia Harrison**

I. INTRODUCTION

Children who are exposed to domestic violence in the home suffer long lasting harms. When children witness domestic violence, they experience elevated stress levels that can negatively affect cognitive functioning by impairing normal brain development. These effects become noticeable during behavioral changes early in life and can include excessive irritability and emotional distress, sleep problems, fear of being alone, immature behavior, and problems with language development.

Later in life, adults who were exposed to violence as children are at greater risk of substance abuse, juvenile pregnancy and criminal behavior, suicidal tendencies, and bed-wetting than those raised in homes without violence. Children who experience domestic violence in the home are also at higher risk of continuing the cycle of abuse as adults, either by becoming abusers or victims themselves. They are also fifteen times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average. Even when children are not physically harmed, it is estimated that children witness up to 80% of domestic assaults within their households. Not only is witnessing domestic violence psychologically harmful to children, but it also puts them at higher risk of eventually being abused themselves by the abuser.

It is evident that a child who witnesses domestic violence in his or her home suffers direct harm as a result. This article will explore the ways in which witnessing abuse impacts a child's short-term and long-term development and promotes the continuation of the cycle of abuse. The article will also illustrate the intersection of domestic violence and child welfare through one Florida dependency case and then conclude with possible solutions.

II. DEFINITIONS AND THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The National Domestic Violence Hotline defines domestic violence, also referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV), dating abuse, or relationship abuse, as “a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship.” These behaviors include physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion. Examples of physical abuse include hitting, slapping, choking, beating with an object, burning, and kicking. Domestic violence also encompasses psychological abuse, such as isolation from friends or family, threats, excessive jealousy, intimidation, humiliation, harassment, and stalking.

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Domestic violence is an international problem that does not discriminate based on race, religion, or class. While men can be victims as well, the vast majority of domestic violence victims are women. Globally, it is estimated that one in three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way—most often by someone she knows, such as a husband, boyfriend, or other male family member. Furthermore, one in four women has been abused during her pregnancy.

There are several abusive behaviors that greatly increase a woman's chance of being murdered by her abuser. These risk factors include substance abuse, forced sex, children by other fathers, violence during pregnancy, stalking, gun ownership, and choking. Of these risk factors, choking and gun ownership are two of the biggest red flags. The presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation increases the risk of homicide by 500%.

III. UNICEF REPORT

A 2006 report created jointly by UNICEF, The Body Shop International, and the Secretariat for the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children was published to provide definitive information on both the short-term and long-term impact on children who were exposed to domestic violence in the home. This is the first global report to date that documents the specific impact that witnessing domestic violence has on children. This report also described the nature and extent of various forms of violence against children.

The report indicates that there is an increased risk of children becoming victims of abuse themselves because of the link between domestic violence and child abuse. Among victims of child abuse, 40% also witness domestic violence in their homes. The National Domestic Violence Hotline found that children who witnessed domestic violence were fifteen times more likely to experience physical or sexual abuse compared to the national average.

Additionally, researchers found that there was a significant risk of harm to a child's physical, emotional, and social development *after* they witnessed domestic violence. This harm includes difficulty learning, limited social skills, exhibition of violent, risky or delinquent behavior, and increased risk of depression or severe anxiety. As children age, those who have been exposed to domestic violence may continue to show signs of problems and are more likely to have trouble with schoolwork and show poor concentration and focus. Children in the earliest years of life are particularly vulnerable to these harmful effects.

There is a strong likelihood that this pattern of abuse will become a continuing cycle of violence for the next generation. Whether or not children grow up in a home where there is domestic violence is the single best predictor of whether children eventually become either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence themselves. For example, a boy who sees his mother being abused is ten times more likely to abuse his partner as an adult. Similarly, a girl who grows up in a home where her father abuses her mother is six times more likely to be sexually abused than a girl who grows up in a non-abusive home. Studies also show that children who live in homes where domestic violence occurs are at a much higher risk of being abused themselves in the home. According to a study by the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention cited within this report, there is a 45 to 60% chance of co-occurring child abuse, a rate fifteen times higher than the average, in homes where violence exists between partners. While witnessing abuse is harmful enough for children, living in an environment where abuse is present increases the likelihood that they themselves will eventually be physically harmed as well.

IV. CAPSTONE RESEARCH PROJECT

Monica Gosal, a student at the Justice Institute of British Columbia, further explored the detrimental effects of domestic violence on children aged eight to eighteen years old in her 2018 research project titled, *What Are the Effects of Domestic Violence Against Children?* This study discusses the important and urgent need to provide effective intervention strategies to minimize the negative effects of domestic violence. It was specifically designed to help law enforcement agencies better prepare themselves for encounters with victimized children. Similarly, Gosal's research found that children exposed to family violence are at a heightened risk for poor social, emotional, and developmental growth. One of the key findings from her research is that parents who abuse children often report having been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or neglected as children themselves.

V. CASE ILLUSTRATION

In re K.B., a dependency case heard in the Florida Second District Court of Appeal in 2006, states that for domestic violence to constitute "abuse" of a child under the child welfare statute, the child must have witnessed the violence and the violence must have resulted in some physical, mental, or sexual injury to the child. In this case, the father and mother engaged in an altercation after the father learned that the mother was cheating on him. During this altercation, the father knocked the mother down several times, punched her in the chest, and kicked her. Their two children, ages three and five, were in the room and witnessed these events.

The Florida Second District Court of Appeal held that because the parents were separated and were seeing other people, the situation that gave rise to the violence no longer existed, and there was no evidence that the safety and well-being of the children would be threatened if they were placed in their father's care. This holding conflicts with a majority of the research on this topic, which indicates that children who witness violence are likely to suffer long-term emotional and behavioral harm. Additionally, children who live in a home where domestic violence occurs are more likely to eventually be victims of the abuser as well. It would have been in the best interest of the children for this court to continue to retain jurisdiction over the family in order to provide services such as counseling and to supervise visits with their father in order to ensure their safety should they be returned to his care.

VI. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

One way to attempt to combat this problem is to raise awareness about the harmful effects that witnessing abuse has on children. It is not necessarily a commonly known fact that children are affected by the presence of violence despite not being the direct victims themselves. Education on this issue can take many forms, such as public information campaigns.

Another solution is to implement more effective public policies and support systems that protect children and adult victims. Often, the cycle of violence continues in families because victims have no place to go or no family to turn to. This becomes increasingly difficult when children are involved and a parent worries about how to support them if they were to leave the abuser. Therefore, there must be an increase in services for victims of domestic violence so they have more options in terms of housing and other social services. By providing such resources, victims are more likely to be able to leave their abuser, thus protecting their children from exposure to violence as well.

Finally, there must be an enhancement of the social services that serve children. A large piece of this enhancement should come in the form of allocating financial resources to protect children affected by violence. Services in schools can help children affected by violence and prevent them from falling behind academically. Additionally, programs that identify early signs of domestic violence can encourage victims to seek help, thus protecting their children from the harms as well.

VII. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of UNICEF's report, as well as Gosal's capstone research, there is a clear difference between the behavior and psychological health of children exposed to domestic violence in the home and those who are not. In light of the overwhelming evidence that depicts both the short-term and long-term damage that witnessing domestic violence in the home can have on children, it is important to be proactive in protecting them from these harms through education, support for abused parents, and improved identification and intervention for their children.

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