

# Domestic Violence and Its Effects on Children

## Impact

Children witnessing violence in the home suffer serious cognitive, behavioral, emotional and developmental impairments which significantly alter their lives (Jaffe, 1990). In addition, school-aged children who have witnessed domestic violence are prone to poor academic performance, constant fighting with peers, and rebellion against adult authority (National Center on Women and Family Law, 1994). Adolescents raised in an abusive environment are dramatically more likely to be runaways, to engage in teenage prostitution, or other delinquent behavior; to be prone to substance abuse or suicide attempts, and to commit sexual assaults (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1985). In Oregon, 68% of juvenile offenders in treatment programs had witnessed the abuse of their mother and/or were subjected to abuse themselves (Rhoades & Parker, 1981). Studies show that in 50-70% of the cases in which a parent abuses another parent, the children are physically abused as well (Bowker, et al., 1988). Moreover, many male children experiencing domestic violence grow up to become abusive in adulthood (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986).

## Prevalence

A national survey found that 30% of parents admit the existence of domestic violence in their homes, and a 1992 estimate suggests that “at least a third of American children have witnessed violence between their parents, and most have endured repeated instances.” (Straus, quoted in Edelson). This finding is greatly underestimated, however, as this study focuses solely on violence likely to cause injury and excludes families with children under the age of three, as well as families where the parents were either divorced or separated, yet the violence was still occurring. This calculation placed the number of teens witnessing domestic violence at 10 million per year, and estimated that at least 3.3 million children yearly are at risk of exposure to parental domestic violence (Carlson, quoted in Edelson). Moreover, parents may severely underestimate the degree to which their children are exposed to the violence. In one study, 36% of the children reported seeing their father use violence against their mother when at least one of the parents denied that the children had witnessed such events (O’Brien, John, Margolin and Erel, quoted in Edelson).

## Intersection with Child Abuse

Spousal and child abuse often occur in tandem: 1.5 million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported each year (DHHS, 1998), and an estimated 1.8 million women are beaten at home each year (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980): the co-occurrence of this victimization occurs in about 810,000 families (Roy, 1988). Children under the age of 12 were killed by family members more frequently (57%); only 5% of older juvenile murder victims were killed by a member of the family (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997).

Full and complete references of all sources cited can be obtained by calling

*The Ripple Effect*

at 408-225-2381.

## Children in Santa Clara County affected by Domestic Violence

### *How great is this need locally?*

In 1998, Domestic Violence cases prosecuted in Santa Clara County involved:

- 14 cases involving pregnant victims
- 49 cases involving teenage victims
- 404 cases involving children present at the time of the violent incident

The Violence Intervention Program, a clinically-based intervention, reported that of the 110 domestic violence patients seen between September and November of 1998, a total of 133 children in Santa Clara County were living in a domestic violence situation.

Of the 1,413 Emergency Protective Orders issued in Santa Clara County in 1998, 740 of the cases (52%) involved children. The Domestic Violence Death Review Committee found that 31 of the 71 DV-related deaths (43.7%) in the county in the five-year period between 1993-1998 were witnessed by children.

SOURCE: *Domestic Violence in Santa Clara County.*  
Santa Clara County Domestic Violence Council 1999 Annual Report.

## Implications

### • Early intervention of at-risk populations

Children who witness domestic violence must be identified and provided counseling at an early age, for they are at great risk of continuing the intergenerational cycle of violence. A study of dating violence found that men who have a history of family violence are more likely to inflict abuse, violence, and sexual aggression (Gwartney-Gibbs, P., et al., 1987).

### • General preventive education

The Santa Clara County Grand Jury recommendations made to the County Superintendent of Schools and to the School District Superintendents directed them to the following edict:

1. *Include age-appropriate instruction about Domestic Violence in the elementary and secondary school curriculum.*
2. *Ensure that Domestic Violence counseling services are available to students and staff.*

Moreover, the Grand Jury Report reached this conclusion on the need for instruction on domestic violence in the schools:

*“Children need to be considered in dealing with domestic violence. We believe that domestic violence is learned behavior. The children in these homes are being trained to be the batterers of the future. They are also learning that violence is an acceptable way to solve problems. We see that violence played out on the street between youth. If children report domestic violence at school, it should not be just considered ‘a family problem’. Effort should be made to help the children and their mothers. Programs on Domestic Violence Prevention should be provided in the schools at an early age. Pre-teens and teens should be engaged in discussions of what is and what is not appropriate in dating relationships, for this is the beginning of domestic violence.”*

SOURCE: 1996-1997 Santa Clara County Review of Public and Private Agency  
Response to Domestic Violence. Final Report.