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Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Every year, children* are exposed to the abuse and/or assault of adults by their intimate partners. Such violence is perpetrated against men and women and occurs in homosexual and heterosexual relationships. All relationship violence is unacceptable, is harmful to the victim, and threatens the well-being and security of children within the family.

A Canadian population [survey](#) indicates that 70% of children who witnessed spousal violence saw or heard assaults against their mothers. This is not surprising given that women suffer more serious and repeated spousal violence than do men, and incur more serious consequences as a result of domestic violence. Factors contributing to the dynamic of violence against women in our society are rooted in gender inequalities and other systems of oppression.

Young people have taught us that they are intimately and actively involved in the domestic violence occurring at home. They interpret, predict, assess their roles in causing a fight,

worry about what will happen, and engage in problem solving.

Children exposed to domestic violence may...

- see or hear their mother assaulted or demeaned,
- learn what happened to their mother,
- experience the aftermath of violence in their home (e.g., injuries, damaged possessions),
- be used by an abusive parent as part of the abuse,
- see or hear conflict and abuse during access exchanges or visits,
- see or hear their mother killed,
- see their father abuse his new partner during visits,
- be denied necessities (e.g., economic abuse of mother deprives child).

*In this newsletter, the term "children" refers to all young people – infants, children, teens -- in the family.

Exposure Underreported

Underreporting occurs for many reasons, including fear (reprisal, getting loved one's in trouble), stigma, and pressure to remain silent. In Canada, estimates of children's exposure to domestic violence are derived from data on vulnerable populations (child welfare, shelters for abused women) as well as general population surveys.

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| 52 | Percent of adult victims with children exposed to domestic violence between 2005 and 2009. |
| 34 | Percent of substantiated maltreatment investigations in Canada during 2008 where exposure was identified as the primary type of abuse. |
| 39 | Percent of substantiated maltreatment investigations in Ontario during 2008 where exposure was identified as the primary type of abuse. |
| 3611 | Number of children living in Canada's shelters for abused women on April 15, 2010. |
| 1589 | Number of children living in Ontario's shelters for abused women on April 15, 2010. |
| 67 | Percent of children under age 10 living in shelters for abused women across Canada on April 14, 2004. |

Research on Children Exposed

The [research](#) on children's exposure to domestic violence has burgeoned since the 1990s and has furthered our understanding of the emotional and behavioural difficulties affected children experience relative to their non-exposed peers, the different patterns of adjustment within groups of exposed children, the factors that appear to moderate children's adjustment, and interventions that benefit children.

Potential Impacts of Exposure to Domestic Violence

The majority of research has looked at quantitative differences in the adjustment of groups of children who were exposed to domestic violence compared to children who were not. Findings indicate that exposure to domestic violence is a risk factor for the development of difficulties for children of all ages.

- Physical (e.g., stomach aches; headaches; asthma; insomnia)
- Emotional (e.g., depression; anxiety; guilt; self-blame; PTSD)
- Behavioural (e.g., aggression; suicidal behaviours; alcohol and illicit drug use; truancy/early school leaving)
- Academic/Cognitive (e.g., distortions in attitudes and beliefs about violence and abusive behaviour; difficulty concentrating and learning)
- Social (e.g., isolated; difficulty trusting; may accept and/or use violence within peer and dating relationships)

Children may experience and display the above difficulties for reasons other than exposure to domestic violence (e.g., significant stressors such as death of a loved family member or pet; serious illness of parent; homelessness; marital separation; losses due to dislocation). [Learn more.](#)

Patterns of Adjustment

A small number of studies have looked at different patterns of adjustment within the population of children exposed to domestic violence. Results indicate qualitatively different adjustment patterns.

- Internalizing difficulties (e.g., depression, anxiety)
- Externalizing difficulties (e.g., oppositional behaviour, conduct problems)
- Both internalizing and externalizing difficulties (e.g., depression and conduct problems)
- No known adjustment difficulties (e.g., no symptoms at the time of assessment)

Some children do not appear to suffer adverse effects in response to exposure to domestic violence. Resilience to the effects of domestic violence has been linked to protective factors related to the child, his/her family, and the community. [Learn more.](#)

Factors Moderating Adjustment

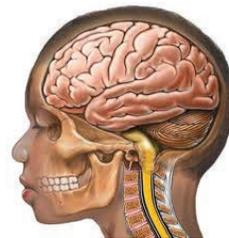
- Safety and well being of abused parent
- Violence characteristics (e.g., frequency, intensity, duration)
- Child characteristics (e.g., temperament, age, coping style)
- Environmental protectors (e.g., community supports, positive relationships with extended family)
- Environmental risks (e.g., co-occurring adversity such as poverty, child maltreatment, parental mental illness)

While estimates vary as to what proportion of children will experience harm, evidence suggests that impact is cumulative and that longer exposure, co-occurring adversity, and multiple losses from dislocation result in greater harm for children. [Learn more.](#)

Traumatic Stress Reactions

Research shows that young people exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience [traumatic stress symptoms](#), which can predict children's health independently of other experiences.

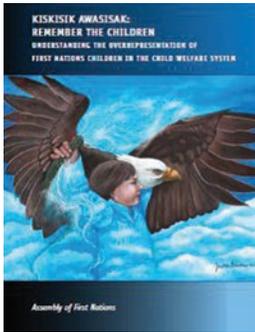
Evidence of traumatic stress reactions to domestic violence indicates the importance of assessing for and addressing trauma in interventions for children. The Child-Parent Psychotherapy program uses talk therapy to directly resolve trauma issues for both women and their children. An outcome evaluation, using random assignment, revealed that children who received [Child-Parent Psychotherapy](#) were six times less likely to be diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than children in the comparison group (6% versus 36%).



British researchers explore neurobiological impacts

Exposure to domestic violence and physical abuse has been shown to elicit [heightened neural activity](#) in children's brains similar to that of soldiers exposed to violent combat situations. Areas of the brain associated with threat detection were activated when exposed children viewed pictures of angry faces. This activation did not occur with non-exposed children. These particular brain areas have been associated with anxiety and may explain why children exposed to domestic violence are at an increased risk of developing anxiety disorders in adulthood.

First Nations Children



The [Kiskisik Awasisak report](#) provides a context for understanding the overrepresentation of First Nations children in the child welfare system. This overrepresentation is positioned within the historical contextual background of institutionalized racism as well as the effects of historical violence, such as residential schools, the Indian Act, and other legacies of colonization. The resulting impacts have included the breakdown of family and community structures, intergenerational trauma, lack of opportunities for education and employment, and economic deprivation. These realities create vulnerabilities for children and their families, including increased risk for exposure to domestic violence.

Safety for Adult Victims Protects Children

Research suggests lethal risk to children is not distinguishable from lethality for adults in the context of domestic violence. Children's safety is inextricably linked to the safety of adult victims, usually their mothers.

Children in Ontario Affected by Domestic Homicide (2002-2007)

| | |
|----|---|
| 23 | number of children killed in the context of domestic violence |
| 61 | number of children present during a domestic homicide |
| 16 | number of children who witnessed a domestic homicide |

Promising practices include safety planning for victims and children, risk assessment and management with abusive partners, and collaboration between systems and services (e.g., justice system, anti-violence agencies, child protection services, and child and family intervention services). [Learn more.](#)

Cumulative exposure linked to premature aging

Research has indicated that cumulative exposure to violence (i.e., exposure to 2 or more types of violence including domestic violence, physical abuse, bullying) shows an acceleration of telomere erosion from age 5 to 10 years. A telomere is a protective cap at the end of our DNA chromosomes. Throughout our lifetime, the telomere gets shorter and shorter with cell replication eventually leading to age-related diseases. Accelerated telomere erosion may explain the link between exposure to violence and poor health later in life. [Learn more.](#)

Exposure linked to delayed cognitive development

By studying a large sample of twins, researchers were able to control for genetic factors and isolate environmental impacts, such as domestic violence, while controlling for other adversity (e.g., child maltreatment). Results indicated that the more severe the exposure to domestic violence, the greater the suppression of IQ leading to delayed intellectual development for children. It is uncertain if the effects of exposure on IQ are long-lasting; however an IQ disadvantage when starting school can lead to poor academic performance and adjustment problems throughout life. These results suggest prevention of domestic violence would benefit neurocognitive development in children. [Learn more.](#)



Learning from and Supporting Children

[Honor Our Voices](#) is an online training module, for social service providers, based on the direct experiences of children exposed to domestic violence. Learn from the "diaries" of David, Lucia and Alex. Each diary illustrates important themes around children exposed to domestic violence including: developmental impacts of domestic violence on children; effective safety planning; resiliency factors; intervention and prevention strategies; and short- and long-term support plans. The module is interactive and user-friendly and can be completed at your own pace.

Help Children by Helping Women

A recent review of the evaluations of four intervention programs was published in the [Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly \(2012\)](#). The outcomes of these randomized controlled trials, point to characteristics of programs that benefit exposed children:

- Addressing safety
- Helping women access resources
- Providing parenting education
- Providing direct support to children

Programs that specifically addressed parenting significantly reduced behavioural problems in exposed children.

Additional research is required to help determine what interventions for children exposed to domestic violence will be most helpful for what children, in what dosages, and at what points in their development.

Promising Directions

Muslim Resource Centre Partners with CAS

The [Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration \(MRCSSI\)](#) works with the Children's Aid Society of London-Middlesex and of Oxford County as cultural consultants to help Muslim and Arab families accessing services. The main goal of this partnership is to provide a pathway of understanding between the CAS and the family. Since the inception of this program, the number of Muslim children entering care has been reduced by 80%. MRCSSI helps recruit Muslim families to become Kinship care providers to ensure that children will not be placed with strangers and that their cultural and religious needs will be addressed. It was announced in December 2012 that this initiative will expand to York Region, Ottawa, and Kingston with funding from the Trillium Foundation and the Ministry of the Attorney General.

A Guide for Educators

Woman Abuse Affects Our Children helps educators to understand the impacts of woman abuse on students. It provides educators with strategies for responding to disclosures and supporting students who display troubling behaviours. Reporting guidelines, safety planning, and school-based prevention resources are profiled. Supplementary videos contain five modules: Setting the Context; Strategies and Identification; Multiple Barriers; Duty to Report; and Support and Referrals. [The Guide](#) and [video modules](#) are available online.

Engaging Fathers

Caring Dads is a 17-week group intervention program for abusive men that addresses domestic violence as a form of child maltreatment. The program encourages fathers to recognize how their abusive behaviours can have a negative impact on their children and the father-child relationship. Caring Dads helps fathers develop strategies and skills for interacting with their children, and their children's mother, in healthy ways.



Children See, Children Do

The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) in Australia is a charitable organization that advocates for children's rights and aims to prevent child abuse and neglect. NAPCAN developed a public awareness video titled [Children See, Children Do](#). The video depicts young children imitating abusive behaviours of adults, including racism, child abuse and domestic violence. Children See, Children Do has had over 8 million views on YouTube.



From the Learning Network (LN)

Now Available on LN Website

List of links to [resources](#) on children exposed to domestic violence

Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses:
The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women. [A Resource Document](#)

Evaluating Violence Against Women Training Initiatives: [A Primer](#)

Coming soon

Human Trafficking Forum March 5, 2013 – [Online Registration](#)

Next issue

March 2013

Please evaluate us!!!

Let us know what you think. Your input is important to us. Please complete this brief survey on your thoughts of the current newsletter. [Click here.](#)

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