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How Does Witnessing Domestic Violence Affect a Child's Academic as well as Behavioral Performance at School?

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December 14, 2003

How Does Witnessing Domestic Violence Affect a Child's Academic as well as Behavioral Performance at School?

Public awareness is rapidly growing regarding the serious psychological and physical harm that witnessing domestic violence can cause to children. In the past, most of the focus has been on the grave harm that domestic violence causes to the battered women and very little attention on the harm suffered by millions of children who witness it. However, there is a growing concern about how exposure to violence impacts a child. Research suggests that between 3.3 million and 10 million children in the United States are exposed to domestic violence each year (Carlson, 1992). Exposure to family violence has significant negative repercussions for children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. These problems may be seen in the different realms of the child's life, especially regarding his/her performance at school. While several researchers have already shown that domestic violence disrupts a child's academic as well as behavioral performance at school, I wanted to find out how this process occurs. Exactly how does the violence among family members at home translate into a child's school life?

Although many researchers agree that millions of children are exposed to domestic violence each year, there is no consensus regarding the specific number of children effected. Various studies have been conducted annually that have determined that the effects of domestic violence can vary from one child to the next. According to one study conducted by Gaylord, Holt, Kenny, and Kitzmann (2003), both a child's family environment and the resources available to them may affect they way in which he/she reacts to the violence. "Compared with the general population, families characterized by domestic violence are likely to experience higher levels of general stress, including lower income and more frequent moves; violent couples are likely to be

younger and less educated, exhibit higher rates of divorce and single parenting, and have more alcohol-related problems." (Gaylord et. al. 2003) Every child has a varying number of risks and protective factors within his/her life. Therefore, the way in which a child reacts to the violence depends on the severity of the actual situation and the other risks present in his/her home. For example, a child from a home in which domestic violence as well as substance abuse, poverty, and negligence are all present risks may be more inclined to have academic and behavioral problems at school, as opposed to a child who is suffering from exposure to domestic violence alone.

Behrman, Carter, and Weithorn (1999), suggested that although every child may be affected differently from exposure to domestic violence, there are some common trends that may be seen. Based on the gathered data, Behrman et. al. suggested that children exposed to domestic violence may demonstrate poor academic performance and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, Behrman et. al. stated that children may exhibit behavioral problems such as aggression, phobias, insomnia, low self-esteem, and depression.

Another study conducted by Fauber, Forehand, Tomas, and Wierson (1990), discussed how parental involvement influences the way child reacts to the violence. Fauber et. al. suggested that violence between parents may reduce parents' availability and attentiveness to their children's developmental and emotional needs. Because the parents are not as accessible to their child, this may result in the child having more academic and behavioral problems at school.

Thesis:

Based on the information I derived from both primary as well as secondary sources, I have concluded that exposure to domestic violence has serious negative effects on children and these effects can vary tremendously from one child to the next. As a result, I had to construct a thesis that clearly demonstrated the various ways children may be affected. First, for most children, exposure to domestic violence interferes with their ability to function in school and thus, leads to a decline in their academic performance. The second part of my thesis is that the majority of children who witness domestic violence carry over this exposure to their school life and exhibit a range of disruptive behavioral problems (i.e., increase in aggression, social anxieties, difficulties concentrating …etc.) However, for a minority of children, however, extra parental support and parental barriers between home and school prevents domestic violence at home from influencing school life.

Significance:

Over the past two years, I have been volunteering with the Lifesaver Project, a support group that meets once a week at the Hartford Hospital. The Lifesaver Project is an open discussion group for women to come to and to share stories about their own personal experiences regarding domestic violence. While the women meet in one room, I work with their children in a separate room organizing activities and helping them with homework.

In the past two years, I have noticed that most of the mothers that attend to these meetings have specifically told me that their child is not performing well at school. In hopes of getting their child to do better, many of these mothers will ask me to spend time

helping their child read, do homework, or just practice math problems. Although there has been some research done in the past about the effects of domestic violence on a child's school performance, there has not been much specifically done on the direct effects it causes on a child's academic achievement. As an educational studies major, I want to find out more about how witnessing domestic violence lowers a child's academic performance and to share my findings with the general public.

Methodology:

To conduct my research, I gathered subjects from the Lifesaver Project. I attended the meetings for about two months before recruiting subjects. Although I have been volunteering with the program for over two years, there are many new women that come to the meetings that I have not gotten to know as well as others. In order to assure that all of the women willing to participate were comfortable enough with me to answer personal questions, I felt as though it was essential that they got to know me before conducting the interviews.

After about two months, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board that my project met ethical standards for research involving human participants. I then presented my proposal on November 16th, 20003 to the mothers attending the support group and asked for those willing to participate to sign informed consent forms. Before their meeting started, I gave a formal presentation of exactly what I was researching and why in fact I needed their help. The women were all very responsive and were all very excited to help me. I really didn't know how the women were going to react, but they were all very willing to share their personal stories with me. I answered any questions they had for me and then proceeded to hand out the informed consent forms. On the

consent forms, I requested that the women give me a phone number I could reach them at so that we could do the interviews over the phone. Initially, I was going to do the interviews in person, but after speaking with the women we decided that phone interviews would be the most convenient. I also obtained informed consent from social workers involved with the Lifesaver Project that wanted to participate.

Overall, I conducted seven interviews with the mothers. Each interview had ten questions and lasted relatively 10-15 minutes long. The interview questions for the mothers focused primarily on how they perceived their child's academic performance to have been affected by the abuse. Questions such as: did you notice any change in your children's school work before, during, or after the violence? Has there been any change in their working habits? Did they spend more/less time on homework when the violence was going on? In addition, I asked the women if they would be willing to give me written permission (consent) to interview their child's social worker and their child's teacher about his/her school work.

I also conducted a total of three interviews with the social workers. The interview questions for the social workers were different from those I asked the mothers; these were more general questions regarding children's behavior/academic performance in school. Have you noticed any significant change in children's behavior either during or after the domestic violence? Have you noticed any changes in children's school work either during or after the domestic violence? How do you encourage mothers to help their child with their school work when domestic violence is going on in the household?

Ultimately, I was also going to include interviews from the teachers that have worked with the children of the mothers I interviewed. Unfortunately, none of the

women (with the exception of one) felt comfortable giving me permission to contact the school systems that their children were enrolled in. Most of these women have tried to keep their personal lives out of the schools, therefore the teachers and/or faculty did not know about the violence going on at their homes. Although one of the women did give me permission to contact the school, I did not feel as though one interview with a teacher would be concise for this project; therefore, I did not conduct any interviews with teachers.

Interpretation and Analysis:

About 85% of the mothers stated that they noticed a negative change either academically and/or behaviorally with their child around the time when domestic violence was occurring. Five out of the seven mothers interviewed stated that once the domestic violence stopped, their children's performance actually improved (i.e., better grades, more time on homework, more class participation…etc.). These findings suggest that because domestic violence creates a high stress environment, this may make it more difficult for the child to concentrate on work both inside/outside the classroom. If the child falls behind in his/her classes, it is very difficult for them to get back on track. The child's grades fall and then it is very difficult for them to keep up with the rest of the class. Ultimately, the child may lose hope in getting good grades because they are so far behind with the class material.

On the other hand, two of the women stated that their children are doing extremely well in school. According to these mothers, their children's academic performance has not been affected by the abuse. These mothers have stated that the reason why they think their child is doing well in school is because they have worked

especially hard as a parent trying to always be there to help their child when needed. One mother, "Linda,"[1] who has a 10 year old daughter as well as a 17 year old son, claimed that her children have always been "A-B" students. "I have always worked extra hard to keep their lives stable. It has been my goal as a parent to be the very best I can be and when I can't, or don't, I try to seek support or assistance." In addition to always being their to help her children with their work, Linda has become involved in the PTO at her daughter's school and tries to be very visible within her son's school as well. It may be suggested that because this mother has always been a consistent, helping figure within her children's lives that maybe this counteracted the detrimental effects witnessing the domestic violence may have caused. In this respect, Linda has been a protective factor for her children and thus, these children have overcome the risks that may have led to negative developmental outcome as well as to lower academic performance.

According to Cowan, Cowan, and Schulz (1996), processes that flow from risk situations can affect a child directly (e.g., the emotional atmosphere from domestic violence can upset a child) or indirectly by their influence on mediating variables (e.g., domestic violence can disrupt quality of care giving by parent which, in turn, may upset the child). Studies have shown that battered mothers may be less emotionally available to their children because they are preoccupied with the violence and trying to stay safe. Additionally, many of these mothers may in fact be experiencing depression and therefore, can not attend to the needs of their child. Winter (1999) stated "in cases of domestic violence, in which one parent is a victim of the violence and the other is the perpetrator, children may be even less able to turn to their parents for support and reassurance." Out of all the women that I have interviewed, those mothers that claimed

[1] In order to maintain confidentiality, all names of subjects have been changed.

they have continuously strived to provide an adequate means of support to their children outside of their schooling were the ones who felt as though their children have performed consistently well at school. Merely taking time to help with their homework, practice their reading, or even getting them involved in extra-curricular activities have all helped these children stay on track during times of upheaval.

Those parents that have not been able to provide the extra means of support to their children (for one reason or another) have noticed significant changes in their performance at school. "Cathy," a mother of three children, stated that her two oldest children have always been very "up and down" with grades in school. Both her 18 year old son and her 12 year old daughter have struggled academically over the years and Cathy claimed it was she was never their to provide the extra support they needed. When I asked Cathy if she thought her children's behavioral/academic problems were primarily from witnessing the domestic violence, she stated "I think it's because of a lot of things…drugs; I was in and out of jail…etc." Cathy was never around for her children because she was struggling herself trying to overcome the emotional stress and problems created from the domestic violence. These stresses, in turn, negatively affected the quality of care that Cathy was providing to her children. In many studies, researchers have found that violence between parents may reduce parents' availability and attentiveness to their children's developmental and emotional needs (Fauber, et al., 1990). This may be seen in Cathy's situation because she was unable to attend to her child's needs in school and as a result, they have had many academic problems.

Another mother who has noticed significant changes in her children's school performance is "Rita," a mother of four. Rita noted that her two of her children, 11 _ year

old son and 9 year old daughter, have had great difficulty at school both academically as well as behaviorally. Once the violence started in their household, the two children started acting out in class, fighting with peers, and performing poorly in various subject areas. This mother had particularly a lot to say about her 9 year old daughter because her academic performance appeared to decline the greatest during the violence. When asked question #5, "Did you notice any change in your children's school work before, during, or after the violence," Rita replied "yes" without any hesitation. Apparently, once the violence started her 9 year old daughter began exhibiting a range of externalizing and internalizing symptoms from aggressive explosions to difficulties interacting and getting along with others. "When I witnessed domestic violence…I noticed a change with [my 9 year old]. She got more attitude, talking back…stuff like that…and the school saw that too. They asked me what was going on because she was a good person and then got a nasty attitude and if you ask her something she will say nasty things back," claimed Rita. The school has tried contacting Rita numerous times, so they are very much aware of the violence that is taking place at their home.

Here we can see that an increase in aggression is clearly what has caused a decline in school performance for Rita's children. Oftentimes children who have witnessed domestic violence at home will replay this violence at school. Fighting with peers, disobeying authority, or even vandalizing school property are all examples of how a child may exhibit his/her behavioral problems. As children get older, especially if the violence is still continuing, they learn that violence is the appropriate way of resolving conflict in human relationships.

The most interesting finding from this particular family is since the violence has stopped (at least the physical, the verbal is still going on every now and then because their mother still has contact with the abuser), Rita says that her children have been doing better in school. Rita claimed that since the batterer left the house, all of her children have been spending a lot more time on their homework after school. More importantly, Rita claimed that the school has actually noticed a big change in the behavior of her oldest daughter who is 11 years old. According to Rita, "[The school used to always tell me that my 11 year old] was too quiet. She didn't talk to no one. She was very on herself and last year and some of this year they said she is participating more. [Things like] raising her hand more when she knows the answer which she didn't do before. This year she is really trying to participate." This finding suggests that once the violence ceases in a household, there is great potential for the children to get back on track with their performance at school. It is possible that the violence causes so much disruption within the family that it is difficult for the children to concentrate/focus on their school work.

Furthermore, while the violence was going on, Rita's 11 year old may have been under a lot of emotional distress. This in turn may have caused her to have lowered self esteem and thus, she did not feel comfortable talking up in class. In many instances, children who have witnessed domestic violence become very withdrawn and suffer from severe shyness. The child may be feeling scared, confused, and insecure about his/her role in the family as well as at school.

According to both the mothers as well as the social workers, there are various reasons that cause a child to have academic and behavioral problems at school as a result of being exposed to domestic violence. Overall, I found a number of similarities as well

as discrepancies in the responses from both the mothers and social workers. The social workers tended to note more reasons why a child's performance at school may decline. For instance, the social workers mentioned that separation anxieties (i.e., fear of leaving mother alone in house) may cause a child's school attendance rate to decline. This causes a child to miss a lot of important discussions, assignments, readings…etc. completed during class time. Ultimately, this is going to lead to a decline in the child's academic performance. A list of the most common responses from both groups of participants may be found in Appendix A.

In Conclusion:

Exposure to domestic violence, for most children, interferes with their ability to function in school and thus, leads to a decline in their academic performance. The domestic violence creates a great deal of stress that may cause the child to have difficulties concentrating both inside and outside the classroom. As a result, the child may begin receiving poor grades because of his/her inability to focus on schoolwork.

On the other hand, a child who has been exposed to domestic violence may by more inclined to have behavioral problems at school. These children learn that violence is a way to deal with anger and conflict, therefore they may exhibit behavioral problems at school when interacting with peers and adults. The school is a very "social" environment thus, these behavioral problems may be more noticeable than at home because the child is interrelating with a variety of different people.

Finally, it appears as though inconsistencies in parental practices make a child more likely to perform poorly in school. Mothers/victims of domestic violence may become so preoccupied with the critical issues of safety and survival that they are unable

to fully assess the needs of their children. Children need consistency in their lives; they need to know that there is someone always available to help them when needed. If a parent is failing to provide their child with the extra emotional support they need, then most likely the child is going to be adversely affected.

Ways to Reduce the Impact of Domestic Violence

Based on the research gathered from subjects, there appears to be certain ways to reduce the impact of domestic violence on a child's school life. For one, making sure that the child is receiving extra emotional support from a competent, caring parent. Another way may be keeping personal matters separate from school. Out of all of the interviews conducted, there were two mothers that claimed their child's school did not know anything about the violence going on in the home. These same two mothers were the ones that stated their children were performing consistently well in school. It appears as though keeping the school faculty completely unaware of the violence may make it easier for the child to work and focus in class. The school acts as a "safe haven" for the child and helps them get rid of fears and anxieties caused from their dreadful home life.

A third way to reduce the impact of domestic violence is involvement in extracurricular activities. As stated in the interviews, the children that were consistently performing well in school were all involved in activities (e.g., ballet, soccer, boys and girls club…etc.). Children need consistency in their lives and by keeping them involved in a daily routine allows them to achieve it. Also, activities after school keep the child outside of the home for a longer period of time.

An additional way to reduce the impact of domestic violence is increasing parental involvement with the child's school life. Getting involved in things such as the

PTO or even the prom committee is a great way for a parent to show their child that they care. This also increases the parent's awareness of events and activities going on at their child's school.

Finally, if a parent can not provide the necessary measures to their child to help them academically and behaviorally, then he/she needs to seek extra support from others. Providing their child with a tutor and/or academic mentor is a great way to help their child stay on the right track at school. This way, if the parent is not available, then the child has someone else to turn to for assistance and help on school related issues.

Future Research:

Growing up in a violent home is a terrifying and traumatic experience that can affect every aspect of a child's life, growth and development. It can make children less likely to succeed in school, more likely to suffer and commit violence, and more likely to face a host of health problems that can last throughout their lives. Most Americans recognize the grave harm that domestic violence causes to women who are battered, but too little attention has been paid to the harm suffered by the millions of children who witness domestic abuse. Intervention programs for children and adults need to be readily available so that there is always a place for victims to go when in need of immediate attention. As Linda told me in the interview, "[I try to be the best mother I can] and when I can't or don't I try to seek support." Social support networks such as the Lifesaver Project help these mothers figure out how to get their lives back on track as well as how to help enrich their children's lives. More focus on the academic performance of children who have witnessed domestic violence needs to be discussed in these meetings so that these mother's know how to help their child succeed both

academically as well as socially at school. One way to help these children may be to implement programs in the schools that give extra attention to those students at risk. Tutors/mentors could be available that would help the child with homework or any subject area he/she may be doing poorly in. Help could also be available for the parents to help teach them what they need to do to help provide their child with an adequate amount of academic support.

It is very important that we foster the needs of children who have been victims of domestic violence. More research in this area is a good way to promote public awareness of the detrimental effects domestic violence has on children. Also, by implementing both within as well as outside of the school system is a great way to educate people about domestic violence and how it affects a family in various ways.

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APPENDIX

Most Common Responses

Mothers Responses

- Increase in aggression
  - Fighting w/peers
  - Talking back to authority
  - Negative attitude
- Emotional distress
  - Lowered self-esteem
  - Withdrawn, shy behavior
  - Anxiety
- Poor grades
- Spent less time on hw

Social Workers Responses

- Increase in aggression
- Emotional distress
  - Psychosocial issues
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
- Separation anxieties
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulties concentrating
- Poor grades