

ACT HAPPENINGS

Take Home and Share with Your Family!

FEBRUARY, 1998

Unseen Victims: How Domestic Violence Hurts Children

A growing phenomenon in our decade is that children witness violence at a young age, not just on their neighborhood streets but inside their own homes and at the feet of their caregivers. Domestic violence is more traumatic than street violence because the child is nearby and because the victims and perpetrators are often people the child knows intimately and depends on for love and protection.

Children do not have to be hit to feel the pain of violence. Seeing or hearing family violence has a similar emotional effect on the child as the psychological trauma of being a victim of physical abuse. Each year, an estimated three million or more children will witness physical and verbal abuse among adults in their home. These behaviors range from insults and hitting to fatal assaults with guns and knives. Despite mothers' best efforts to shield their children from violence, 68-87% of domestic violence incidents are, in fact, witnessed by children. Further, domestic violence is not particular to any geographic area, socio-economic class, or racial and ethnic group.

National statistics confirm the correlation between partner violence and child abuse and neglect, with domestic violence being a leading risk factor in the physical and emotional safety of children. The overlap between domestic violence and child abuse in the same family has been well documented; where one form of family violence exists, there is a likelihood the other does as well. A survey of more than 6,000 American families found that 50% of men who frequently assault their wives also frequently assault their children.

Another study found that half of the children who are abused are caught in the middle of an inter-parental attack. Children in homes where domestic violence occurs may "indirectly" receive injuries when household items are thrown or weapons used. Infants may be injured if being held by their mothers when the batterer strikes out. Older children may be hurt while they try to protect their mothers.

Exposure to violence affects children's abilities to concentrate and learn in school. Witnessing violence affects children's behavior and abilities to establish peer relationships. Children are typically more aggressive and fight more often, or they may be unusually withdrawn from others and from normal childhood activities.

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The Abington Community Taskforce (ACT) is a coalition of parents and Abington-based educational, religious, social service, recreational, civic, and law enforcement agencies. Its mission is to create a responsible, caring, and safe community. ACT welcomes comments, suggestions, and ideas for future events. For more information, contact Kelley Warner at the Abington Police Department: (215) 885-4450 extension 606, or Shelly Erwine, Abington School District: (215) 881-2570. ACT would like to express appreciation to Abington Memorial Hospital for its assistance in printing this publication.

Editor: Rosemary Peters Hinkle

Babysitting Workshop at Abington Memorial Hospital

The Babysitting Workshop, conducted by Child, Home, and Community, is a six-hour program to teach young people skills to become more qualified and responsible babysitters. The workshop covers basic child care, handling family routines and emergency situations, age-appropriate activities, and other related topics.

The next workshop will be held Saturday, May 1, 9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m. at Abington Memorial Hospital. The fee is \$25. Pre-register by calling 215-348-9770.

Domestic Violence and Children *continued from page 1*

In addition, children exposed to violence suffer a range of potentially serious effects, such as developmental delay, cognitive or language problems, depression, and/or stress-related physical ailments (gastrointestinal distress, headaches, insomnia, bed-wetting, asthma, ulcers, rashes). These children often feel responsible for the violence and thus experience guilt, shame, and self-blame. As teenagers, they are more likely than other teens to be involved in alcohol and drug use.

The pervasive nature of domestic violence and its affect on the entire family has prompted the communities, its leaders, and social organizations to respond. In our community, the Women's Center of Montgomery County offers a variety of programs for various school-age children to address violence and prevention. The Center's community outreach counselor/trainer visits schools to discuss with students and teachers topics that include what is violence, what to do if you are being hurt, and how not to hurt others. The Women's Center also has a 24-hour confidential hotline: 1-800-773-2424.

Medical professionals have a unique opportunity to intervene in domestic violence as they are often the first resource a victim turns to for help. In recent years, the medical response to victims has improved dramatically as a result of efforts by advocates within the battered women's movement and the health care community.

Domestic violence, considered by the medial community to have reached epidemic proportions, is no longer viewed as a private "family problem." It is a public medical concern that affects the entire community---neighbors, friends, police, clergy, physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, medical support staff, lawyers, and teachers. Today, in order to receive accreditation, all U.S. hospitals and their clinics are required to assess patients for abuse and establish protocols to intervene.

The medical staff of Abington Memorial Hospital (AMH) recognizes that family violence affects the emotional and physical well-being of its patients and their families and has been partnering with the Women's Center for more than four years to stop the spread of violence. They have developed and supported the Medical Advocacy Project with a full-time domestic violence social worker. This person also serves on the Emergency Trauma Center medical team. Like many hospitals, AMH offers patients who are victims of violence immediate on-site counseling, legal advocacy, and support groups.

AMH has been recognized throughout the state as taking a leadership role in health care domestic violence intervention and is actively involved in the state attorney general's Task Force on Family Violence as well as regional and county health initiatives.

Changing attitudes saves lives! The strong response to domestic violence from community agencies sends the clear message of "**Zero tolerance to violence against women and children.**"

Abington Memorial Hospital

Confidential Domestic Violence Counseling
Support Group – referral to community
services 215-481-4339
Emergency Trauma Center 215-481-2450

Women's Center of Montgomery County

24-hour Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-773-2424
Domestic Violence Support Group and
Telephone Information/Referral Service
215-885-5020 or www.wcmontco.org
Legal Advocacy Counseling 610-279-1548