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Effects of Domestic Violence on Children and Teens

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Holland, MI

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Effects of Domestic Violence on Children and Teens

Domestic violence is, and has been for many years, a severe problem worldwide. Its affects on children and teens are often life changing; it can cause severe depression, feelings of guilt, and a declining sense of self-worth. But they do not have to be. Today's society treats those affected by domestic violence very carefully, so as not to offend or upset. Society is overly aware of the effects of domestic violence, to the extent that it can sometimes worsen the effects of the problem rather than help those suffering from it. Not everyone who is exposed to violence in their home experiences emotional trauma; not everyone's life is changed by the experience. Many people continue to live their life as they did before. Additionally, not every young child who sees violence in their home grows up and follows the example of their parents. The cycle of domestic violence is not inescapable. Domestic violence profoundly affects the children and teens who witness it in their homes, however society worsens those effects by perpetuating the idea of abuse and violence as being an inescapable cycle, which is inaccurate.

Children and teens can suffer from social withdrawal, substance abuse, and depression among other things in reaction to the presence of abuse in their lives. Domestic violence is startlingly common and the number of children affected by the abuse in their homes is immense: "one-third of the children who witness the battering of their mothers demonstrate significant behavioral and/or emotional problems..." (Long-term Effects of Domestic Violence). Children do not know how to react to witnessing this, so a common reaction is to blame themselves and feel guilty, but as the children get older, this guilt often turns into shame. This shame then can push teens to become less social and distance themselves from friends. Director of Professional

Development at the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, Joseph S. Volpe writes, “In addition to symptoms commonly seen with childhood anxiety...victims within this age group may show a loss of interest in social activities, low self-concept, withdrawal or avoidance of peer relations, rebelliousness and oppositional-defiant behavior in the school setting...”

(Volpe). In addition, because of this shame and the inability to cope with and understand their emotions, many teens then turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to handle what has happened.

“Adolescents are at risk of academic failure, school drop-out, delinquency, and substance abuse” (Volpe). Quite often teens exposed to domestic violence are treated differently by those around them due to the way society views people who have been in abusive homes.

Society views those affected by domestic violence with pity, therefore compounding the effects people who have witnessed abuse might already be feeling. Domestic violence issues are frequently met with feelings of pity, charity, and ostracization; these reactions only further contribute to the problem. “The emotional damage due to maltreatment may last a lifetime” (Cicchetti). In his statement, Cicchetti provides a valuable point-- some of the damages of viewing abuse could affect people for the rest of their lives. However, this statement does not help someone who is already suffering from depression, substance abuse, or social withdrawal regain their vitality.

Society’s attitude of misunderstanding and pity does nothing to help those affected, but rather intensifies their issues and makes them feel hopeless. A chart from “Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal” displays the exposure to violence leading to psychological distress, but between the two, there are certain mediating and moderating variables. These variables include school and peer support. School atmosphere, teachers, education, sports, and friends can play a role in how someone reacts after witnessing violence. If members of

the school and close friends share society's view and treat the person affected by violence differently, by babying them, not talking to them, changing their relationship, or making jokes, the individual could react to the violence in a much more negative way. For example, when a teacher treats a child in their class differently than the other students, due to the fact that violence is present in the child's home, other students will treat that student differently too. This may add to the previously tough situation for the child and worsen their effects. When a teacher takes special interest in a child that is acting withdrawn, the child may be ostracized by the other students, causing he/she to become even more withdrawn. Society's view does not encourage recovery or overcoming the past, but rather encourages resignation to one's fate as someone who has been abused and thus, continues the cycle of violence.

When talking about the issue of domestic abuse, many people reference a cycle of violence. "Social scientists have theorized about the cycle of domestic violence in family abuse" (Smith and Williams). This cycle is the idea that violence passes down to the children in the family because they have witnessed it for so much of their life. A cycle is something that moves in a circle and therefore does not have a beginning or ending. Once part of the "cycle", there is no escaping it. However, in the case of domestic violence, this is not true: "...these data do not support the idea of an inescapable pattern of violence among adolescents who have experienced violence themselves" (Smith and Williams). There are many people who have been able to overcome the violence in their lives and not continue the trend of abuse in their own families. Padmasri Manumari for example was an Indian woman whose husband abused her for many years. She was forced to have an abortion, cut off from her family, and beaten. In her culture, women do not divorce; they stay in relationships their whole life, even if they are abusive. Manumari knew this and had seen it before, but she chose to go against her culture's ways and,

eventually, took matters into her own hands and got a divorce. Manumari has lived through and survived immense amounts of hurt but still has hope for a better future: “It’s hard for me to believe what I’ve been through. But I know bad things happen to make us strong,” (Survivor Success Stories). Manumari survived domestic abuse, escaped, and broke the cycle. There are hundreds of other stories like those of Padmasri Manumari; girls and boys who had seen what it was like to live with abuse and broke free from the trend. It is those stories that show the world that the cycle of domestic violence is not inescapable.

Societal views on domestic violence, along with the idea that abuse is an inevitable cycle, add to the emotional and physical effects of domestic violence on the children and teens involved. Children react to violence in the home in many different ways and society perpetuates these effects by treating abuse as such a tender subject. The cycle of domestic abuse is thought of as irreversible, yet it is that very thought that makes it that way. In order for those affected by domestic violence to be able to break the cycle and continue to live life, society must stop viewing people exposed to abuse as different and accept them as other everyday citizens. Everyone can help to make the stories of children who have witnessed abuse and are withdrawn, depressed, or lonely have an ending like that of Padmasri Manumari-- an ending full of love and hope. However, in order to do that the way society views those affected by abuse must change. They should not be treated differently for what they have been through but rather be included as part of normal society and shown that it is possible to love without hatred and violence. Psychological effects from witnessing abuse in a household will always be present, however, the way individuals, and society as a whole, handle those effects could vastly change the lives of those involved.

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