

Executive Summary

THE DAVID and LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION

The Future of Children

VOLUME 9 • NUMBER 3 - WINTER 1999

DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE
AND
CHILDREN

A decorative graphic consisting of a series of horizontal lines and bars of varying lengths and shades of blue, arranged in a stepped pattern on the right side of the page.

Domestic Violence and Children



ANALYSIS

Today, domestic violence, defined as violence between adult intimate partners, is recognized as a serious societal problem in the United States. Researchers estimate that between 3.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year, and that this exposure can have significant negative effects on children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. These effects may include:

- ◆ Aggressive behavior and other conduct problems;
- ◆ Depression and anxiety;
- ◆ Lower levels of social competence and self-esteem;
- ◆ Poor academic performance; and
- ◆ Symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder, such as emotional numbing, increased arousal, and repeated focus on the violent event.

Studies of children's resilience in the face of community violence and war reveal that the most critical protective factor against the negative effects of child exposure to violence is a relationship with a competent and caring adult. In instances of domestic violence where one parent is the victim and the other parent is the perpetrator of the violence, parents may be unable to meet their children's needs. Because the battered parent can be a critical support for the child, and because children often have ongoing contact with the batterer, domestic violence services must be made available to help parents improve interactions with their children.

Many families in which domestic violence is present struggle with multiple problems including poverty, substance abuse, and exposure to other forms of violence, such as child maltreatment. For example, in 30% to 60% of families experiencing either domestic violence or child maltreatment, the other form of violence is also present.

Families experiencing domestic violence utilize the services of health care, child protective services (CPS), mental health, and law enforcement agencies, as well as the courts and community-based domestic violence programs. Current services reach only a small percentage of children exposed to domestic violence, and are typically not designed with the specific needs of these children in mind. Promising new programs for children exposed to domestic violence exist in each system, and emphasize collaborative, cross-agency service provision and training.

Federal and state policies in a wide range of areas affecting families may have an impact on children exposed to domestic violence. At the federal level, these policies include recent domestic violence, welfare reform, and child welfare legislation. Policies at the state level include:

- ◆ Criminal sanctions for perpetrators of domestic violence;
- ◆ Judicial authority to issue civil protective orders that prohibit a perpetrator from approaching the adult victim, the children, and their home, school, or workplace;
- ◆ Child custody and visitation laws for divorce cases; and
- ◆ Child protection policies that determine when CPS intervention is indicated, and the nature of that intervention.

Little is known about the effectiveness of current policies and programs in improving outcomes for children exposed to domestic violence. Despite the limitations in current research, the potential harms of child exposure to domestic violence necessitate action shaped by the best information currently available, and new research that improves the present knowledge base.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

Research is needed that advances the current understanding of the prevalence and effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence, and the impact of resilience and risk factors, so that policymakers and practitioners can design interventions that sufficiently address the size, nature, and complexity of the problem.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Stable public funding sources are needed to support comprehensive and coordinated community-based services for battered women and their children, as well as program evaluations and replication of effective interventions.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Because the majority of children exposed to domestic violence do not have access to services through traditional avenues such as battered women's shelters, new strategies for identifying and serving these children in other venues, such as health care institutions, must be developed.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Child protective services and domestic violence service organizations must develop clear protocols for intervening with families in which both domestic violence and child maltreatment are present, and these protocols should offer services that provide safety and stability to the child, support to the battered woman, and treatment and sanctions for the batterer.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Professionals who have regular contact with families and children, including teachers and child care workers, health and mental health care providers, law enforcement officers, child welfare workers, and court personnel should receive ongoing training related to domestic violence and its impact on children.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Courts must be empowered to design and enforce protective orders that comprehensively address the safety needs of battered women and their children. All battered women must have access to affordable legal counsel, so that they can utilize available legal means to protect themselves and their children.

RECOMMENDATION 7

In child custody and visitation cases involving domestic violence, courts should consider in their analysis the best interests of the child and the potential impact on the child of ongoing exposure to parental conflict and violence.

RECOMMENDATION 8

In designing new laws to address the effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence, policymakers should assess the potential unintended negative consequences of these laws and weigh them against the benefits.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Ongoing public support is needed for effective prevention programs that address the underlying causes of domestic violence.

ARTICLE SUMMARIES

Prevalence and Effects of Child Exposure to Domestic Violence

John W. Fantuzzo, Ph.D., and Wanda K. Mohr, Ph.D., R.N., F.A.A.N.

Presently there are no scientifically credible estimates of the national prevalence of children exposed to domestic violence. Nonetheless, existing data suggest that large numbers of American children are affected. And, though research examining the effects of child exposure to domestic violence is also limited by methodological problems, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that such exposure has adverse effects. The specific effects may differ depending on the children's ages, the nature and severity of the violence, the existence of other risk factors in the children's lives, and whether the children are also directly physically abused. In general, childhood exposure to domestic violence can be associated with increased display of aggressive behavior; increased emotional problems such as depression or anxiety, lower levels of social competence, and poorer academic functioning. A scientifically credible body of research on the prevalence and effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence is vital to the development of effective interventions. This article identifies some of the steps that can be taken to build the research capacity necessary to obtain the needed data.

The Impact of Violence on Children

Joy D. Osofsky, Ph.D.

Existing research on the effects of children's exposure to violence covers a broad range of community, family, and media violence. This research is relevant and useful to an examination of domestic violence in two key ways. First, understanding how exposure to various types of violence affects children and what best enables them to cope, can inform approaches to helping children exposed to domestic violence. And second, many families experiencing domestic violence are exposed to other types of violence as well. Exposure to violence on multiple levels can affect the parents' behavior, and compound the effects on children. This article begins with an overview of the extent of children's exposure to various types of violence, and then reviews what is known about the effects of this exposure. Protective factors for children exposed to violence are also examined. Research indicates that the most important protective factor is a strong relationship with a competent, caring adult, most often a parent. Yet, when parents are themselves witnesses or victims of violence, they may have difficulty fulfilling this role. In the final section, directions for future research are discussed.

The Impact of Federal and State Laws on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Martha A. Matthews, J.D.

Until recently, few federal and state laws specifically addressed the needs of children in families in which there is domestic violence. Yet, many laws, particularly in the areas of domestic violence, family law, child welfare, welfare reform, and immigration, can have a profound impact on the well being of these children. Policymakers' growing understanding of the potential harms of domestic violence to children has resulted in recent years in statutory changes, particularly at the state level. However, laws that are enacted and implemented with inadequate knowledge of the complex dynamics of domestic violence and the unique issues battered parents and their children face, may have unintended negative consequences for the children these laws are designed to protect. Collaboration across public and private social service agencies and domestic violence training for court personnel can bridge this knowledge gap and increase the likelihood that the protective intent of the laws is carried out in practice. This article analyzes current and proposed federal and state civil laws in order to better understand their potential impact on children affected by domestic violence.

The Legal System's Response to Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Nancy K.D. Lemon, J.D.

Historically, the legal system has not responded adequately, if at all, to cases involving domestic violence. In the past two decades, courts and law enforcement agencies have increasingly acknowledged the seriousness of domestic violence and developed responses to it. Unfortunately, the legal system has been slow-

er to recognize the impact of domestic violence on children. This article highlights four key areas of case law in which the courts have begun, in varying degrees, to examine the effects of domestic violence on children: child custody and visitation, restraining orders, failure to protect a child from harm, and termination of parental rights. A survey of appellate cases since 1990, though not representative of all cases, shows an ongoing need for mandatory judicial training on domestic violence and its effects on children, greater clarity about how to interpret relevant laws, changes in the laws to better serve children, and the renewal of national funding for legal aid programs. Courts and law enforcement agencies in some locales have implemented innovative programs to improve their interventions with children exposed to domestic violence. These programs include coordinated court responses, child development training for police officers, multidisciplinary team approaches, and supervised visitation centers. However, few of these programs have been evaluated for overall effectiveness in improving outcomes for children. Better evaluation is needed, as is ongoing funding for the replication of successful programs nationwide.

Child Protective Services and Domestic Violence

Janet E. Findlater, J.D., and Susan Kelly, M.S.W.

Studies indicate that domestic violence is present in at least one-third of the families involved in the child protective services (CPS) system. Yet, until recently, CPS has not directly addressed domestic violence in its handling of child abuse and neglect cases. By the same token, domestic violence programs have historically emphasized services for battered women, with limited understanding of the child safety goals of CPS. Despite these historical differences, collaborative efforts between CPS and domestic violence service programs are emerging based on a common goal of safety from violence for all family members. Innovative strategies include the use of domestic violence specialists in a variety of child protection settings for case consultation and for support to the battered women; direct referrals of battered women from domestic violence programs to family preservation services; and cross-training of CPS workers and domestic violence service providers. A survey of state CPS administrators and domestic violence coalition directors conducted for this article revealed that, though there is mutual interest in greater collaboration, such efforts remain limited. Critical to successful strategies are supportive agency leadership, greater understanding across systems, a recognition of common goals, and a willingness to change policies and practice.

Community-Based Domestic Violence Services

Amy J. Saathoff and Elizabeth Ann Stoffel, J.D.

Community-based domestic violence services have expanded their range of programs since their emergence in the 1970s. In addition to crisis-oriented services, such as telephone hot lines and temporary shelter, many of these agencies provide legal, health, mental health, or vocational services, and assistance in finding housing and planning for safety. Most recently, in response to increasing knowledge about the deleterious effects of child exposure to domestic violence, community-based service providers have developed programs addressing children's mental health, health, educational, and safety needs. This article concludes that, whereas there has been significant growth in community-based domestic violence services for children, substantial segments of the target population still are not reached, and the range of services is not sufficient to meet children's diverse needs. Nonetheless, there are promising new directions in service delivery, including community outreach efforts and collaborative approaches with other agencies concerned with children's welfare. These developments suggest that future years will see continuing progress by community-based organizations in addressing the needs of children exposed to domestic violence.

Health Care System Responses to Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

Patti L. Culross, M.D., M.P.H.

The health care system has only recently adopted protocols and provided training to enable practitioners to identify and respond to victims of domestic violence. Currently, most hospitals have domestic violence protocols in place, although training in the use of protocols is less routine. However, because the provision of health care focuses on the treatment of the individual, the well-being of the children of adult domestic violence victims has received little attention in adult health care settings. Pediatricians do not routinely receive training in domestic violence and do not see responding to battered mothers as within the purview of their practice. Innovative programs in children's hospitals in Boston and San Diego recog-

nize that the safety of children is integrally tied to the safety of their mothers. These programs identify abused children whose mothers are the victims of domestic violence, and provide advocacy and support that allow mothers and children to remain together in most instances. Integrating the health care needs of mothers and children from violent households will require continued and expanded training, collaboration with community institutions, and improvements in insurance reimbursements to cover the costs of needed services.

Mental Health Services for Children Who Witness Domestic Violence

Betsy McAlister Groves, M.S.W., L.I.C.S.W.

Exposure to domestic violence has significant negative repercussions for children's social, emotional, and academic functioning. In the past decade, mental health professionals have developed treatment programs and approaches aimed at mitigating these deleterious effects. These approaches include promoting open discussion about children's experiences with domestic violence; helping children deal with the emotions that follow exposure to domestic violence; reducing problematic symptoms children experience; and assisting children and their families to create relationships free from violence and abuse. Unfortunately, controlled outcome studies demonstrating the effects of these approaches do not exist. The development of such evaluative components is an important future direction for this field. Some of the other challenges that confront clinicians include: working with children's families, addressing children's complex and intense emotional experiences, and determining whether children have themselves been victims of abuse or neglect.

Emerging Strategies in the Prevention of Domestic Violence

David A. Wolfe, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., and Peter G. Jaffe, Ph.D., C.Psych.

To date, responses to domestic violence have focused primarily on intervention after domestic violence has been identified and harms have already occurred. There are, however, new domestic violence prevention strategies emerging, and prevention approaches from the public health field can serve as models for further development of these strategies. This article describes two such models. The first model involves public health campaigns that identify and address underlying causes of a problem. The second public health model can be utilized to identify opportunities for domestic violence prevention along a continuum of possible harm: (1) primary prevention to reduce the incidence of the problem before it occurs; (2) secondary prevention to decrease the prevalence after early signs of the problem; and (3) tertiary prevention to intervene once the problem is already clearly evident and causing harm. Early evaluations of existing prevention programs show promise. But, results are still preliminary, and programs remain small, locally based, and scattered throughout the United States and Canada. A broadly based, comprehensive prevention strategy is needed that is supported by sound research and evaluation, receives adequate public backing, and has as a zero tolerance policy for domestic violence.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

See back cover for information about ordering additional Executive Summaries or issues of the Journal.

The Future of Children (ISSN 1054-8289) © 2000 by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 300 Second Street, Suite 200, Los Altos, California 94022, all rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Cover photo © Donna Ferrato. ♻️ Printed on recycled paper with soy ink. (The electronic edition of this issue can be found at <http://www.futureofchildren.org> on the World Wide Web.) Note: Opinions expressed in *The Future of Children* by the editors or the writers are their own and are not to be considered those of The Packard Foundation.

The Future of Children

Journal and Executive Summary

BACK ISSUES IN PRINT

- U.S. Health Care for Children (Winter 1992 • Vol. 2, No. 2)
- Health Care Reform (Summer/Fall 1993 • Vol. 3, No. 2)
- Children and Divorce (Spring 1994 • Vol. 4, No. 1)
- Sexual Abuse of Children (Summer/Fall 1994 • Vol. 4, No. 2)
- Critical Health Issues for Children and Youths (Winter 1994 • Vol. 4, No. 3)
- Low Birth Weight (Spring 1995 • Vol. 5, No. 1)
- Critical Issues for Children and Youths (Summer/Fall 1995 • Vol. 5, No. 2)
- Long-Term Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs (Winter 1995 • Vol. 5, No. 3)
- Special Education for Students with Disabilities (Spring 1996 • Vol. 6, No. 1)*
- Financing Child Care (Summer/Fall 1996 • Vol. 6, No. 2)*
- The Juvenile Court (Winter 1996 • Vol. 6, No. 3)*
- Welfare to Work (Spring 1997 • Vol. 7, No. 1)*
- Children and Poverty (Summer/Fall 1997 • Vol. 7, No. 2)*

- Financing Schools (Winter 1997 • Vol. 7, No. 3)*
- Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect (Spring 1998 • Vol. 8, No. 1)*
- Children and Managed Health Care (Summer/Fall 1998 • Vol. 8, No. 2)*
- Home Visiting: Recent Program Evaluations (Spring/Summer 1999 • Vol. 9, No. 1)*
- When School Is Out (Fall 1999 • Vol. 9, No. 2)*

CURRENT ISSUE

- Domestic Violence and Children (Winter 1999 • Vol. 9, No. 3)*

UPCOMING ISSUES

- Unintentional Injuries in Childhood (Spring/Summer 2000 • Vol. 10, No. 1)*

MAILING LIST

- I would like to receive all upcoming issues
- Remove my name from mailing list

* Executive Summaries available for these issues only.
All issues—including those out of print—available online.

Name _____

Title _____/Affiliation _____

Organization _____

Dept./Floor/Suite/Room _____

Street Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ E-mail _____

To order free JOURNALS and/or EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES, please send requests to: Circulation Department,
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation,
300 Second Street, Suite 200, Los Altos, CA 94022
E-mail circulation@futureofchildren.org or FAX (650) 948-6498. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

JOURNAL and EXECUTIVE SUMMARY also available online:

<http://www.futureofchildren.org>

Note: We regret that, at this time, only Executive Summaries can be shipped internationally.