

# The Impact of Domestic Violence Upon Children

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*“But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round their neck”  
(Mark 9:42)*

These words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark highlight for us the seriousness of a present moment issue that can tragically impact the lives of innocent children, doing damage to them that can well have consequences for their young lives and beyond, into adulthood.

Jesus certainly doesn't mince words; He speaks with greatest clarity lest anyone misunderstand the gravity of the sin that harms children. In our present time the Church in response to its sexual abuse crises has done much to meet the challenge of abuse by clergy, religious and laity who ministered with children and young people.

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is an attempt to address this dysfunction found within the Church and society at large. In its commitment to address this issue in a healthy and responsible manner the Church has done much and continues to struggle with this issue.

One of the most important tools in our effort as a Church to understand and treat the issue is education. The Church strives to help those engaged in ministry to have sound awareness of the full expanse of abuse issues that are faced by children and young people, and which they may encounter in ministry with them.

Certainly, we as Church have been very attentive to the issue of sexual abuse and are continuing to work tirelessly to combat this brokenness that undermines the truth of Christ. Sadly there is yet another aspect of abuse that requires our attention as we continue to work with children and young people. It is a cause of abuse that has grown tremendously within society and which damages children and impacts their functioning; domestic violence.

The tragedy of domestic violence experienced by children within the home can profoundly affect children's lives causing long lasting harm that may well follow

them for the entirety of their lives. Children are its silent victims. Caught in an environment where domestic violence is present they are very often subjected to physical and emotional abuse. Statistics indicate that in excess of 15 million children in the United States alone live in homes where domestic violence has been experienced at least once (1).

Research further demonstrates that children caught in situations of domestic violence are subject to physiological and cognitive issues. Additionally, research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that “in homes where violence between partners occurs, there is a 45% to 60% chance of co-occurring child abuse at a rate of 15 times higher than the average”(2). Also, in adulthood individuals exposed to domestic violence within their home as children are at higher risk of have health issues, engaging in substance abuse, and presenting a myriad of other behavioral and emotional health challenges to their wellbeing and function. It is not uncommon for such individuals themselves to engage in domestic violence; acting out in adulthood that to which they were exposed as children.

As presented by Olivia Harrison of Loyola University Chicago School of Law; domestic violence which is also known as intimate partner violence, dating abuse, or relationship abuse is defined by the National Domestic Violence Hotline as “a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship” (3).

Such abusive violence can take the form of, but is not limited to, physically hitting, slapping, choking or beating. It can also be a matter of psychological abuse that

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(1) McDonald, R., Journiles, E.N., Ramisetty-Mikler, S., Caetano, R., Green, C.E.(2006) *Estimating the Number of American Children Living in Partner-Violent Families.*, Journal of Family Psychology

(2) Blake Griffin Edwards LMFT, *Domestic Violence, Alarming Effects of Children’s Exposure to Domestic Violence*, Psychology Today, 26 Feb 2019

(3) Olivia Harrison, JD, *The Long-Term Effects of Domestic Violence on Children*, 41 CHILD.LEGAL RTS. J. 63 (2021)

very often prompts isolation from family and friends and may embody threats of harm, intimidation, humiliation, harassment, and stalking (3).

Signs of children having been exposed to domestic violence or subjected to abuse stemming from such violence can range from bed-wetting, thumb-sucking crying and whining in the very young to guilt about the abuse and blaming themselves for it. In older children it can do much to damage their self-esteem and produce challenges of behavior within the school and social situations. Other signs among older children can range from skipping school to engaging in drug use or unsafe sexual practice and have great difficulty in forming relationships within their peer group.

For us, as ministers to children and young people, it is important to understand this serious issue and to be able to respond to those children who may come into the sphere of our work as clergy, religious education professionals and parish youth workers. We must also have insight into how we might respond in a good and helpful manner. Importantly it is necessary to understand that such situations may well violate civil law and we as mandatory reporters under the law are responsible to report any serious concern with regard to possible abuse.

As previously mentioned, it is important for us to know the warning signs of children living with domestic violence if we are to be of service to them. The following, according to particular age groups, provides a comprehensive overview of symptoms (4).

In **toddlers or preschool children** you may find them to be: aggressive, withdrawn, have delayed development, poor motor skills, anxiety / general fearfulness, stomach aches, nightmares, lack of bladder / bowel control, lack of confidence to begin new tasks

In **school age children** you may find aggressive / bullying behavior, anxiety,

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(3) Ibid.

(4) Author Unknown, Warning Signs of Children Living with Domestic Violence, National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence.

physical issues, nightmares, lack of bowel / bladder control, poor grades / failing subjects, low self-esteem / poor social skills, digestive problems, fear of abandonment, and grief and guilt.

Among teenagers you will find them to be withdrawn, have nightmares, lack bowel or bladder control, have poor grades and failing subjects, physical issues such as headache or digestive issues, irresponsible, be victims or batterers, have violent outbursts, destructive of property, runaways, inability to express feelings, social concerns and limitations, low self-esteem and even join in on physically assaulting the adult victim.

Tragically, the cycle of violence continues in families because victims have no place to go, be it family or other support possibility, and become prisoners of this dysfunction. For the abused, removing ones-self from such situations can be a very difficult and seemingly impossible task when children are involved and the very real need for economic support is present (5).

When confronted by the possibility of encountering a child being impacted by domestic violence we must address the issue with greatest sensitivity. It isn't necessarily a well-known fact that children, even if they are not direct victims of it, are none the less greatly affected by their exposure to domestic violence. The overwhelming evidence of research indicates that the short-term and long-term damage of witnessing such violence by children, can have a profound and life changing impact upon them (6). Consequently, it is important that we as responsible ministers be sensitive to this issue so as to be of support and assistance to the child that may be its casualties. Also, by our awareness of this issue we may be reasonably able to render constructive and helpful assistance to any individual, child or adult, caught in this tragic situation.

As individuals in ministry it is important that we have some working knowledge of how to render assistance in cases of abuse due to domestic violence that may come to our attention. The various states and local communities have social

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(5) Olivia Harrison, *The Long-Term Effects of Domestic Violence on Children*.

(6) Ibid.

service agencies that can provide us with helpful information and guidance. Also these agencies will very often provide practical assistance to those individuals who are victims of domestic violence. For children who have been exposed to domestic violence, or the victims of it, special services within the school setting can be of assistance to them and help them manage their academic and emotional lives. We may not have every answer to this challenging issue, but at very least, we can be a practical resource for those individuals who are part of our lives of ministry and have need of support and encouragement as they seek resolution for their painful situation.

The following are helpful resources for guidance and assistance in responding to issues of domestic violence.

### ***Helpful Resource Numbers***

National Domestic Violence Helpline

1 (800) 799-7233

National Child Abuse Helpline

1 (800) 422-4453

Healing Woman Foundation

1 (800) 477-4111