

Printed From Acorn-Online.com

## Opinion

Protecting children when domestic violence hits home

Jun 5, 2008

There are some who would suggest when people begin experiencing financial stress, the incidence of domestic violence increases. This might seem to be the case here locally, given the latest statistics released from the Domestic Violence Partnership in conjunction with the New Canaan Police, cited in the article "Economic woes bring abuse home: Domestic violence reports on the rise," (Advertiser, May 29).

Children were present for or involved in 40 percent of domestic violence incidents reported statewide during 2007.

As a mental health professional who frequently deals with child victims of domestic violence, I have often seen the impact that such violence has on its most innocent victims. We know that when one parent attacks another, children are all too aware that their own safety hangs in the balance. There are lifelong consequences when a loss of basic security interferes with the crucial family relationships that set the foundation for a child's sense of self and trust in others. These effects can be presented differently and vary greatly among children and teens.

Violence at home can make children feel isolated and alone, ashamed, or even at fault themselves. They might exhibit psychosomatic symptoms such as frequent headaches or stomach aches for no apparent reason. Behavioral reactions might range from complete social withdrawal to overachieving tendencies. More likely than not, however, children will fall somewhere in between, making it extremely difficult for any of us — teachers, health care professionals and fellow parents — to discern what might be wrong.

For teenagers particularly, exposure to violence at home can lead to a cycle of violence in their lives. They may be too scared or embarrassed to discuss what they see or experience at home and may, as a result, close themselves off from others who might be able to help. This increases their likelihood to enter into violent relationships themselves, either as the victim or the abuser.

For both younger children and teenagers, exposure to domestic violence might manifest in problems at school. This could surface as having a hard time concentrating on work, completing tasks and interacting with others. They might lack an interest in socializing entirely, even with family and friends or might seem to withdraw from activities that have previously given them pleasure. Younger children might appear extra-clingy with caregivers, while those of any age might display aggressive behavior, exhibit other signs of depression and low self-esteem, or express feelings of guilt.

The Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut is part of two important community partnerships that have had a real impact on domestic violence cases and

the outcome for children involved. The Child Guidance Center works with area police departments as part of a Community Policing Partnership Program. This program provides 24-hour outreach and mental health services to child victims and facilitates immediate Child Guidance Center involvement at the scene to try to mitigate long-term consequences for the child. Additionally, the center works in collaboration with the Domestic Violence Crisis Center and the New Canaan Domestic Violence Partnership to ensure that the safety and advocacy needs of the adult victim, as well as the child, are met.

Thankfully this community has resources to support domestic violence victims, especially those with the littlest voices. In economic times like these, we should have heightened awareness of domestic violence and watch for signs that it may be impacting an innocent child we know. If you suspect that a child is dealing with violence at home, you can contact the Connecticut Department of Children and Families or a resource such as the CGC, Domestic Violence Crisis Center or any other member of the New Canaan Domestic Violence Partnership. Remember, help is only a phone call away.

*Deborah Matthews, Ph.D., is director of Crisis Services for the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut, a non-profit mental health resource, serving children and teenagers*

© Copyright 2008 by Hersam Acorn Newspapers