



Wife Abuse – The Impact on Children

Information from...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

The scope and seriousness of wife abuse is increasingly becoming known in our society. Thirty percent (3 in 10) of Canadian women reported at least one incident of physical or sexual violence at the hands of a marital partner in a large-scale 1993 national survey on violence against women conducted by Statistics Canada. Of the women who had been abused, one-third had feared for their lives during the abusive relationship.¹ Forty-eight percent of women with a previous marriage reported having experienced abuse.

The profound negative effect on children who witness their mother being assaulted is now being recognized. Children are affected in their emotional development and behaviour, as well as in their educational adjustment. Children, especially boys, who witness violence are more likely to be violent when they grow up. Witnessing violence in childhood increases the likelihood of a man becoming an abusive husband and causing severe injuries.²

How many children are affected?

Estimates of the proportion of children of abused women who witness the violence range from 40 to 80 percent.¹⁻³ The consensus of opinion is that children see, overhear or are aware of the majority of violent incidents. Best estimates indicate that three to five children in every Canadian school classroom have witnessed their mother being assaulted.³ In many cases children witness severe violence. For example, in the 1993 Statistics Canada study,¹ children were reported to have witnessed violence in more than half of the cases in which women feared for their lives. Children who witness physical violence toward their mother almost invariably witness a great deal of psychological abuse, including verbal abuse, belittling and threats toward her.

What are the links between wife assault and child abuse?

- Children who witness the violent behaviour of their father or their mother's partner toward their mother are being emotionally abused.
- There is 30 to 40 percent overlap between children who witness wife assault and children who experience direct physical abuse themselves.²
- Women are often abused during pregnancy and miscarriage sometimes results.^{1,2}

- Abuse and the resultant trauma and stress on the mother lessen the coping resources that mothers have available for parenting. This can result in less effective parenting by the mother and neglect or child abuse in some cases.^{2,4}
- A pattern of physical and emotional abuse of mother by father or other male partner is common in families in which children are sexually abused by fathers or male partners of mothers.^{5,6}

What are the emotional and behavioural effects on children?

- Children who witness their mother being abused by their father or mother's partner frequently experience Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁷ The symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the trauma (nightmares, intrusive thoughts or images, flashbacks); fear, anxiety, tension and hyper-vigilance; irritability and outbursts of anger and aggression; and efforts to avoid being reminded of the abuse.
- If the mother takes her children and leaves, the children suffer disruption of their home, routine, relationships with their friends, and often their school. These children may be pre-occupied with fear that violence will re-occur and are often aware of threats and attempts at renewed contact, or stalking, by their

fathers. At the same time the children may be relieved to be in a safer place.

- Children who have witnessed their mothers being assaulted display greatly elevated rates of depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem and other emotional problems.^{2, 8-12}
- These children who witness wife assault have a much greater risk of behaviour problems, such as aggression with peers, non-compliance with adults, destructive behaviour, and conflict with the law.⁸⁻¹²
- These children who witness wife assault and whose parents separate may have ambivalent feelings toward their father. They may miss him, and worry about his well-being, but also be afraid of him at the same time.
- Children, as they enter adolescence, may also have mixed feelings about their mothers. They may feel sympathy and support, but also be resentful and disrespectful, because of their opinions about their mother's choices.
- Their level of emotional and behavioural problems is of a magnitude similar to that of children who are themselves physically abused.¹²

What is the impact on education and social skills?

- Children who witness their mother being abused by their father or other male partner tend to have lowered school achievement. They may have increased school absences because they are needed at home to look after siblings when the mother is incapacitated, or they may refuse to go to school because they do not want to be separated from their mother. At all ages, they may not pay attention at times because they are preoccupied and anxious. They are more often truant. When at school they may be withdrawn and/or aggressive.
- Children from violent homes tend to have lowered social skills.¹¹
- Abusive homes are often socially isolated and children may be taught to be secretive about the abuse.²

What are specific effects at different ages, and for girls and boys?

- Very young children, even infants, are seriously affected, and may suffer problems with sleeping, weight gain and excessive crying.

- Pre-schoolers display effects such as anxiety, clinginess and aggressive behaviour.
- Children beyond the infant or pre-school age often feel responsible to try to intervene in the abusive situation.
- Children aged 6 to 10 tend to have school and peer relationship problems.
- Teenage children tend to be truant, run away or drop out of school, and they tend to become involved in violent dating relationships. Teens may, in some cases, use denial as a coping method.
- Some, but not all, studies find that girls who witness violence have a greater tendency to become withdrawn and depressed, while boys have a greater tendency to act aggressively. However, these problems are present in both boys and girls.¹³
- Boys, especially at age 11 or older, who identify strongly with their fathers may imitate his actions by being aggressive towards their mother and other women.

Are all children affected to the same degree?

- Children whose mothers cope especially well and have strong social support will fare better.⁴ Children who have areas of strength in school, social relationships and sports activities are also better off.
- Children who witness abuse and are also

themselves abused tend to fear the worst.⁹

Links between witnessing violence and learning to be violent

- Children from violent homes are being taught that violence is an effective way to gain power and control over others.²
- Children from violent homes are more prone to accept excuses for violent behaviour, and have increased risk of acting aggressively toward peers and adults.²
- Witnessing violence greatly increases the chances that a boy will grow up to act violently with dating and/or marital partners. For girls, it increases the chances that she will accept violence which occurs in her dating and/or marital relationships.¹³

What can be done to help children who witness wife assault?

A coordinated community response, with all professionals and service agency personnel trained to understand issues of woman abuse and its effects on children, is needed if battered women and their children are to be adequately protected. Public awareness of the issues involved is also important.

Early identification and appropriate referral of battered women can assist in preventing future harm to these women and their children.

Legal/policing issues

When the legal system and police effectively protect women and their children, the trauma for children is lessened. Current issues include effective and easily accessed protection orders; quick access to the matrimonial home with the batterer removed; and the enforcement of probation conditions and anti-stalking laws. Appropriate penalties for wife assault all directly affect children's safety, sense of security and adjustment after abuse.

Child protection

Recognizing that witnessing wife assault constitutes emotional and psychological abuse is an important first step in protecting children. At the same time, support to the mother, without victim blaming, is essential. Six of ten provinces in Canada stipulate in legislation that children who witness woman abuse can be found in need of protection.¹⁴ (However, child protection agencies are overwhelmed with existing caseloads and may not have adequate resources for these cases.)

Child custody/access

After separation, many batterers use the issue of legal child custody as a means to threaten and control their former spouses.¹⁵ The period immediately after separation is a very high-risk period for abuse and killing of mothers. In a recent study, it was found that of 1,157 wife assault cases tracked through the Nova Scotia justice system, 24 percent of victims suffered abuse while

their male partners were exercising court-ordered child visitation.¹⁶ Wife assault should be considered a major factor in child custody cases, as the effects on mothers and children are so serious.¹⁷

Children's mental health/Children's groups

The high incidence and serious effects of witnessing wife assault make it a prime issue in children's mental health. Groups for children who have witnessed violence are an important service. In group situations, children can learn safety skills for themselves in abusive situations. They can learn that no one has the right to abuse another and that they are not responsible for the abuse. They can also learn alternative ways to handle conflict without violence.¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Individual treatment, and treatment for depression, fear, post-traumatic stress disorder and aggressive behaviour may also be needed, depending on the child's adjustment.

Shelters and advocacy for battered women

Support services for battered women, through shelters, legal, housing and financial supports, all have a major positive impact on the accompanying children. Without such services, many more children will continue to witness abuse.

Schools

Schools are in contact with hundreds of

thousands of child witnesses of woman abuse in Canada each year. Professional development for teachers, as well as the development of school protocols to deal with and assist such children are very important.

Prevention

Schools and community resources cooperating in awareness programs constitute the best hope to educate all community members about the effect of witnessing abuse on families and children. Effective programs are available and can be implemented at low cost.

Resources for prevention

For educators:

A.S.A.P.: A School-based Anti-Violence Program. M. Sudermann, P. Jaffe, E. Schieck. 1993, London Family Court Clinic, London.

A.S.A.P. provides a comprehensive and evaluated plan to implement violence prevention programs in schools with a special emphasis on violence in relationships. It is designed for teachers, students and parents. Community involvement is an important component. Wife assault, dating violence, bullying, racism and sexism, and other forms of violence are addressed. The manual includes information about handling disclosures from children. Many reproducible materials are also included. A curricular resource document, *65 friendly*

lessons on violence prevention, accompanies the manual. Available from: The London Family Court Clinic, 254 Pall Mall St., London, ON N6A 5P6. Tel: (519) 679-7250.

Thumbs Down – A Classroom Response to Violence Towards Women. Canadian Teacher's Federation, Ottawa, 1990.

Thumbs Down is a violence prevention program for Kindergarten to Grade 12 which encourages classroom discussion and age-appropriate activities. This is a valuable resource with suitable in-class exercises, individual exercises, handouts and read-aloud books and videos. The manual is available in English and French.

Suggested readings

Ending the Cycle of Violence: Community Responses to Children of Battered Women. E. Peled, P. Jaffe, J. Edleson, Eds. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995.

This is an excellent resource book for community workers and professionals working in the social service, legal, policing and advocacy fields. Issues addressed range from assessment, child custody and advocacy to prevention.

A Handbook for the Prevention of Family Violence: Child Abuse, Wife Assault and Elder Abuse. S. Mulligan, S. Barrs, D. Mitchell, R. Pickering, J. Pritchard, J. Quinn, Eds. Family Violence Prevention Project, The Community Child Abuse Council of Hamilton-Wentworth, 1991.

This handbook has good information about both wife assault and its effects on children, among other topics. It also deals with child physical and sexual abuse and elder abuse.

Children of Battered Women. P. Jaffe, D. Wolfe, S. Wilson. Sage Publications, Newbury, Park, 1990.

This is a good source book on the effects of wife assault on the children who witness it. It also contains a description of a group treatment program for children.

Video resources

Preventing Family Violence: A Catalogue of Canadian Videos on Family Violence – lists videos which can be borrowed for a small administration fee through the offices of the National Film Board of Canada. The Catalogue is available through the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Tel: 1-800-267-1291.

Make a Difference: How to Respond to Child Witnesses of Woman Abuse (1995). The London Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse, c/o C.A.S. of London & Middlesex. Tel: (519) 455-9000.

A 20-minute video produced for educators and children's service providers. Topics include the effects on children of witnessing wife assault, identifying child witnesses, and how to respond to disclosures.

The Crown Prince (1989). National Film Board of Canada (also available in French).

A 37-minute video that depicts the feelings and problems of two children (Billy, 15, and his younger brother) who live in a home where their mother is a victim of wife assault.

Break the Cycle (1991). Esprit Films Ltd., Tel: (905) 685-8336.

This 25-minute video addresses issues related to wife battering. The film includes interviews with a battered woman, a violent husband and several teenagers who witnessed violence against their mother.

Tulip Doesn't Feel Safe (1993). Kinetic, Inc. Tel: (416) 963-5979.

An animated 15-minute video which teaches children aged 6 to 8 how to deal with various unsafe situations, most specifically wife abuse.

Kid Stuff (1990). National Film Board of Canada (also available in French).

A non-verbal 6-minute video which combines drawings and puppet animation to convey the impact on a young boy of his parents' quarrel.

Seen but Not Heard? (1993). Friday Street Productions and the BC Interval and Transitions Houses. Available through the National Film Board of Canada.

A 29-minute video on the effects on children of witnessing woman abuse at home.

Books for children

Hear My Roar: A Story of Family Violence, by Ty Hochban & Vladyana Krykorka, Annick Press Ltd., Toronto, 1994.

Hear My Roar is to be read to children aged 5 and up who live in a family where there is wife abuse. It provides a framework for discussion with a child who witnesses woman abuse at home.

Mommy and Daddy are Fighting, S. Paris, Seal Press, Seattle, 1986.

Never, No Matter What, by M. Oho & C. Clarke, Women's Press, Toronto, 1988.

Something is Wrong at My House: A Book about Parents' Fighting, by Diane Davis, Parenting Press, Inc., Seattle, 1984.

A good book about feelings and ways to cope when living in a violent household.

French-Language resources (Suggested readings and videos)

Au Grand Jour par Madeleine Lacombe, Regroupement provincial des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, Montréal, 1990.

Derrière les chiffres, Regroupement provincial des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, Montréal, 1990.

Enfantillage (1990). Office National du Film du Canada (aussi offert en anglais).

Interventions auprès des enfants exposés à la violence conjugale, par Yvette Garceau Durant, Centre local de services communautaires de Sept-Îles, 1990.

Portrait de santé des femmes violentées et de leurs enfants, par Suzanne Kérouac, Elizabeth Taggart, and Joëlle Lescop, Faculté d'Infirmière, Université de Montréal, 1986.

Le Prince Héritier (1989). Office National du Film du Canada (aussi offert en anglais).

Un film de fiction qui cerne la souffrance des adolescents aux prises avec les situations d'un quotidien devant lequel ils se sentent impuissants. Mais le sont-ils vraiment?

Relations parents-enfants: Fiche de renseignements (1993). Centre national d'information sur la violence dans la famille.

Violence conjugale: Les enfants témoins (1995). CECOM de l'hôpital de Rivière-des-Prairies, Montréal, Québec. Tel: (514) 328-3503.

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This fact sheet was revised under contract
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