

# Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

*by Janina Tauro*



# Prevalence of domestic violence effecting children

- According to a study published in 2003, over **15 million children** in the U.S. lived in families where intimate partner violence had occurred at least once in the past year, and **seven million children** live in families in which severe partner violence occurred (Whitfield, 2003).
- In a study of domestic violence shelters and services in the U.S., in a single day in 2008, **16,458 children were living in a domestic violence shelter** or transitional housing facility, while an additional **6,430 children sought services at a non-residential program** (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2009).
- There is about a **50% overlap between domestic violence and child maltreatment**. Children may be inadvertently or accidentally hurt through incidents of domestic violence (Edelson, 2003).
- The UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children conservatively estimates that **275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home** (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008).
- Given the high statistics, it is safe to say that all children are affected in some way by family violence; they could be affected emotionally, physically, behaviorally, sexually, economically, etc.

# Recognizing the effects: The power and control wheel

- The power and control wheel was developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project and it displays the “core tactics that all abusers use” to gain power and control over their victim.
- As most of you are familiar, these tactics include:
  - emotional abuse
  - economic abuse
  - sexual abuse
  - using children
  - threats
  - using male privilege
  - intimidation
  - isolation
- These same tactics can be used to understand the correlating effects of domestic violence on children.

*Inner Circle adapted from "Power and Control Wheel" developed by:*

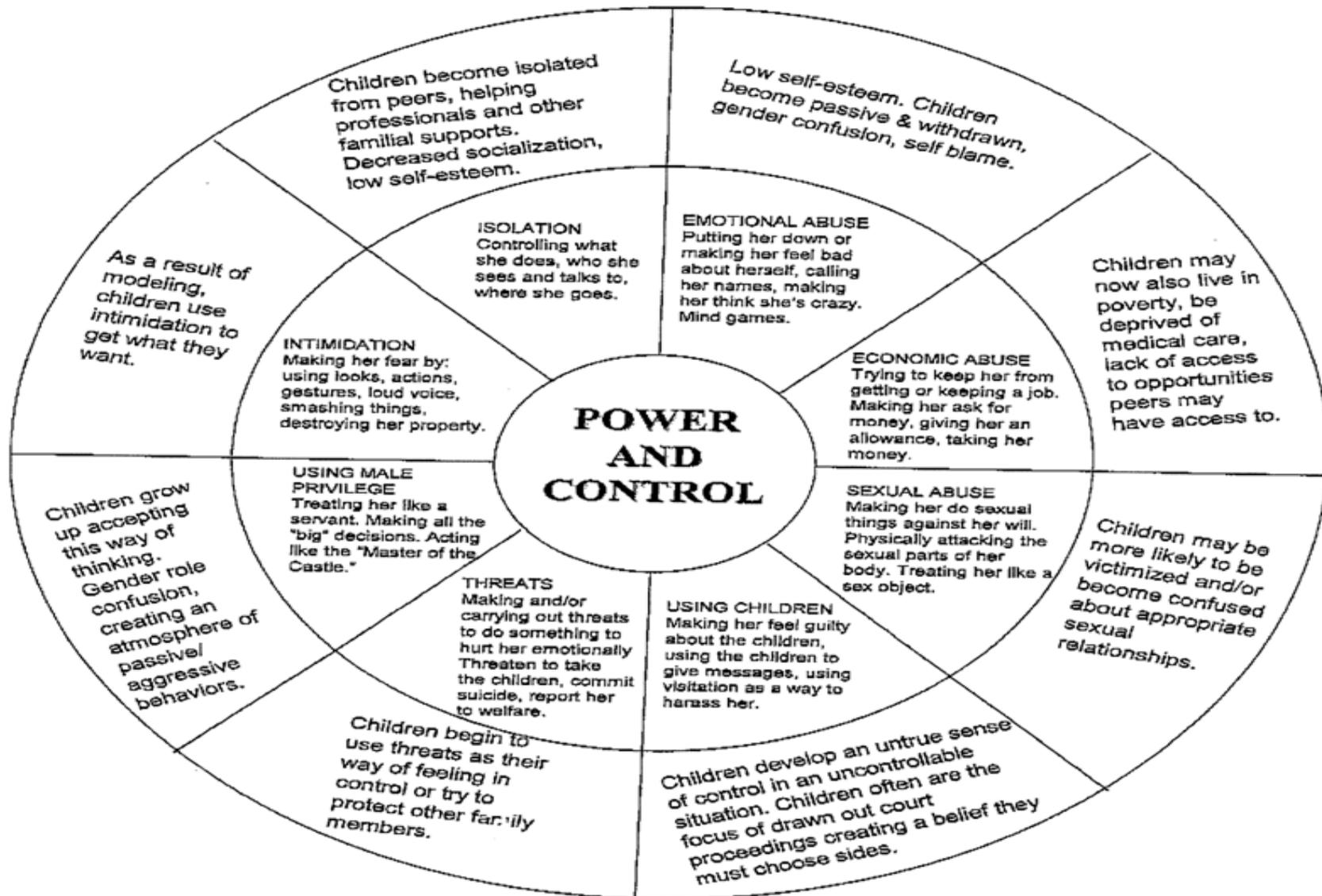
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# Effects of witnessing domestic violence

- Children living in homes where domestic abuse occurs become victims themselves whether or not they are physically abused themselves. The stress caused by the cycle of violence, and the mother's distress related to the abuse, causes a wide variety of responses in children (McDermott, 2007).
- Such effects include physical, emotional, behavioral, and developmental responses.



# Physical Effects

- Given the abuse, in the prenatal stage of development, the fetus may experience **poor nutrition**, which could also increase possible **miscarriages**. Miscarriages are also at a higher likelihood if physical beatings occur.
- Children from birth to 2 years of age also experience **low weight, digestive problems, and little to no appetite**.
- Other physical effects for children ages 2 to 6 years old, experience **lack of bowel and bladder control, and stomach aches**.
- Such stomach problems could continue or could develop from children ages 7 to 12 years of age, while also **increasing the possibility of ulcers**. This age group could also develop **headaches, insomnia, and eating disorders**.
- In older children, we are likely to similar physical effects.
- Overall, physical effects due to domestic violence have been linked to the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in this country (U.S Advisory Board on Child Abuse & Neglect, 1995).

# Emotional effects

- Children often have a wide range of emotions as a result of domestic violence. These feelings begin as early as the infant to toddler stage of development in which we often see children experiencing feelings of **irritability, sadness, and anxiety**.
- As children start growing developmentally, while witnessing the domestic violence in their environment, children as young as 2 years old can experience **fear, anxiety, and separation anxiety**. Up to age 6, similar emotional effects occur, as well as feelings of **guilt, lack of self-confidence, and feeling self-centered**.



From age 7 to 12 years old, children start to experience more confusing and combatting emotions such as **denial & secrecy** of the abuse, **fear & anger, low self-esteem & self blame**, feeling **ashamed & embarrassed**. They also may experience ambivalence towards the abuser, and nightmares.

- Children 13 and older also experience similar responses, as well as additional emotions such as **extreme anger, loneliness & isolation**, becoming **withdrawn** (especially about feelings), or **indifferent** (not expressing any emotion about the abuse).
- As a result, exposure to violence may desensitize children to aggressive behaviors (Baker, 2002).

# Behavioral effects

- One study of 2,245 children and teenagers found that recent exposure to violence in the home was a significant factor in predicting a child's violent behavior (Jaffe, 1995).
- Behavioral responses to witnessing domestic violence occurs as early as the birth to 2 year developmental stage. They can experience **sleeping problems**, they could **startle easily**, and they could also **cry and scream excessively**.
- At a later age, we start to notice that the child could become **defiant, verbally abusive, or very aggressive**. They could also begin to **act out**, have **problems making or keeping friends** in school, or **regress to a younger behavior**.
- As children get older, especially between 7 and 12 years old, we are likely to see other behaviors such as **lying and stealing**, becoming **self-abusive**, and **denying violence** in the home.
- Children who are exposed to domestic violence are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crime (Jaffe, 1995). Such behavioral responses are more often seen in teenagers.



# Developmental effects



- As a result of domestic violence, children are also likely to experience developmental problems.
- Developmental effects begin as early as the prenatal stage in which increased **miscarriages and low birth weight** are likely to occur. As the child continues to grow, **poor verbal skills, poor cognitive skills, and poor impulse control**, are several of the developmental responses that we are more likely to see as early as age 2 years old.
- Once the child begins school, they may have difficulty concentrating, and therefore have **poor grades or failure**. Other times they may be feeling fear and/or confusion to reveal their family secrets, therefore they could experience **school phobia**, and/or **poor peer relationships**.
- Similar responses occur in teenagers, while also increasing the possibility of dropping out of school.

# Conclusion: How this information can be used in social work practice

- The power and control wheel, and the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children, for example, are used as interventions in group and they help to guide group discussion.
- In order to address the continuing evidence on the effects of domestic violence on children, Jersey Battered Women's Services, my 2nd year field placement & Morris County's domestic violence agency, facilitates a mother's group for the mothers in their Safe house program.
- The purpose of their mother's group:
  - to offer a safe and nonjudgmental atmosphere to discuss the challenges of parenting
  - to support creative problem solving
  - to offer alternative to physical discipline
  - to address the impact of domestic violence on children and the mother's parenting ability
  - to offer support to mothers
- In addition to the concerns that a victim may feel, they are also being challenged as mothers; some of these challenges include putting your child's needs first, which could be very difficult when the victim themselves has been hurt. **“When you have been hurt, it is often difficult to think beyond your own pain”** (McDermott, 2007).



# Mother's Group Work

- While reflecting during group, some of the following questions are used:
  - Why do mothers leave a domestic violence situation with their children?
  - How does living with violence impact children?
  - How have mothers seen their own children impacted by domestic violence?
  - How do mothers feel about this?
  - What do children need to help them heal?
- Many of the mothers can relate to one another as they share their own experiences, and share their answers to these questions.
- Such group work has proven to be successful at JBWS. Mothers are able to learn more about how the abuse has effected their children, and how they can talk to their children about family violence in order to guide them through the healing process as well.

*\*Overall, children of domestic violence need support, understanding, validation, explanation, and love in order to heal from abuse.*