

Children Affected by Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse

Below are some considerations to take into account when working with children affected by both domestic violence and substance abuse, including substance abuse coercion. Appropriately responding to the needs of children experiencing any type of harm or abuse requires knowledge of a child's developmental stage as well as their capacity to seek and obtain safety. It also requires knowledge of available resources as well as mandatory reporting guidelines in your state.

For additional resources related to children see the NCDVTMH web page on Supporting Children, Parents, and Caregivers Impacted by DV: <http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/trainingta/supporting-children-parents-caregivers-impacted-by-dv/>. See also "Safety Planning with Children," a video developed by the AWARE Shelter in Juneau, Alaska marketed by Intermedia. To preview a copy of the video see: <http://www.intermedia-inc.com/title.asp?sku=SA13&subcatID=87>

1. Violence occurs against both adults and children in the same family. Witnessing domestic violence and substance abuse can affect children and put them at risk for harm. While not the norm, severe and fatal cases of child abuse may sometimes occur in homes where domestic violence and/or substance abuse overlap.
2. Many people who physically or sexually abuse or neglect children also abuse their partner – who is often the children's mother.
3. Some children who witness domestic violence are affected the same way as children who are physically or sexually abused.
4. Children have often either directly witnessed the physical and psychological assaults or have indirectly witnessed them. This may be through overhearing the episodes or seeing the aftermath of injuries and property damage. They are often all too aware of the impact of substance abuse in their family as well.
5. Children affected by domestic violence and/or substance abuse do not experience a carefree childhood and may act adult while they are children. They may be busy surviving, placating, picking up pieces, adjusting, and adapting just to stay alive.

Tactics of Abuse

People who harm and abuse their partners (*perpetrators of domestic violence*) pose the following risks to **children**. They may:

1. Harm children by coercing them into abusing their mothers or other adult caretakers.
2. Endanger children emotionally and physically by creating environments in which children witness assaults, including substance abuse coercion, directed against their mothers or others.
3. Physically abuse children.
4. Sexually abuse children.
5. Endanger children through neglect.
6. Focus so much attention on controlling and abusing their adult partners they ignore and neglect children.
7. Prevent adult survivors of domestic violence from caring for children.
8. Endanger children by undermining the ability of providers to intervene and protect children.
9. Endanger children by exposing them to the effects of alcohol and other drug abuse as well as the effects of substance abuse coercion.

Those who harm their partners (*abusers*) also traumatize children in the process of harming their adult intimate partner. They do so by:

1. Intentionally injuring the children as a way of threatening and controlling the abused parent.
2. Unintentionally injuring the children during an attack on the abused parent when the child gets caught in the fray.
3. Using children to coercively control an abused parent while living with or separated from the abused parent. The intent is to continue abusive control over their partner with little or no regard for the damage done to the children. (*For example, the child is asked to report who mommy talked to.*)

4. Creating an environment where children are forced to witness domestic violence and/or substance abuse, substance abuse coercion and their effects.

Examples of a person who is abusive (*perpetrator's*) behavior that traumatizes children include:

1. Asserting that children's "bad" behavior is reason for their drinking, drugging, or violence directed at their parent or other caregiver.
2. Threatening pets, loved objects, toys, etc.
3. Isolating children, banning friendships.
4. Interrogating children about the victim's activity.
5. Forcing a survivor to always be accompanied by the children.
6. Holding the children hostage.
7. Using lengthy custody battles as a means to continue abusing a survivor; demanding unlimited visitation or 24-hour access by phone; threatening to report to the Office of Children's Services (OCS) for past alcohol or other drug use.