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Experts: Domestic violence harms children physically, emotionally

By Pierrette J. Shields
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LONGMONT — Shelley Mann believes 100 percent of children who live in homes where domestic violence occurs also are victims of child abuse.

That abuse, she said, doesn't have to leave cuts or bruises to cause damage.

"There is a big misconception that kids aren't aware of what is going on and that kids are just really flexible and go with the flow," said Mann, the children's advocate for Safe Shelter of St. Vrain Valley. "But there are memories being made, and damage."

Mann estimates she has 30 child clients at any given time at the shelter, which primarily serves people from Boulder and south-west Weld counties.

More than 3 million children witness domestic violence each year, according to Cheryl Swanson of the Longmont Ending Violence Initiative, which helps people in violent relationships find counseling and other resources.

October is domestic violence awareness month, and organizations like Swanson's are campaigning to bring such issues to the forefront.

What children can do

- Go to a safe location if an abusive situation is happening.
- Tell a trustworthy, sympathetic adult, such as a relative, school counselor or teacher.
- Express feelings to an adult who will listen.
- Know that feeling frightened, angry, confused or sad is normal in the situation.

What adults can do to help kids

- Let the child know the abuse is not his or her fault, or the victim's fault.
- Let the child know it is not his role to protect the adult. Children should never place themselves between their parents during a

fight.

- Teach children to go to a designated safe location.
- Even though your children may not have been in the room, they will be able to sense the atmosphere. It's important to explain what is happening in words children can understand.
- Encourage them to express their feelings, and listen to what they have to say.
- Assure them that feeling frightened, angry, confused or sad is normal in the situation.
- Find a trustworthy, sympathetic adult that the children can talk to.
- Identify local services, information and

support for the children.

- The most important thing an adult can do to help children living with domestic violence is to do *something*.

Source: Longmont Ending Violence Initiative

Local resources

Longmont Ending Violence Initiative
303-774-4534
www.longmontdomesticviolence.org

Safe Shelter of St. Vrain Valley
303-772-4422
www.safeshelterofstvrain.org

In an emergency, call 911.

She said calls for resources are up so far this year. LEVI typically handles about 300 calls a year; already this year, the organization has fielded about 350.

Swanson said local statistics show that in 2008, 20 percent of domestic violence cases that led to charges in Boulder County included children as witnesses. In 68 percent of those cases, the suspect also was charged with child abuse. Last year, 566 local children were witnesses to domestic violence, and in 19 of the reported

cases, children called the police.

Safe Shelter has Mann to counsel children, some as young as 2½, and another counselor for teenagers.

She said children often are tuned in to relationship problems between their parents and naturally feel like they are at fault. Some parents, she noted, confide too much in children, who will take on the burden because they cannot offer parents a solution.

"They are a lot more aware than parents realize and at a really, re-

ally young age," Mann said, adding that research has found that infants can have a physiological reaction to an abusive parent's voice.

Mann said children sometimes develop physical ailments from the stress of violence in the home, such as migraine headaches and ulcers, and suffer from nightmares.

The shelter and LEVI work to find resources for kids who live in homes with domestic violence. And Longmont Police Officer

Sara Pierce wrote a children's book called "On a Dark, Dark Night" to explain domestic violence to children. The book is scheduled for release next month.

Mann said it's important for parents in domestic violence situations to talk about it with someone trusted, whether a friend or a professional.

"Abuse really thrives in silence," she said.

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