



The Other Victim

More than three million children in the United States witness domestic violence each year. These young people literally grow up in a "climate of fear". Tragically, many of these children hold themselves responsible for the violence.

As a community, we place the responsibility for the violence with the offending parent. Our programs are designed to support the abused parent with the expectation that they will adequately protect their children. Therefore, the effects on the children who witness violence in their homes often go unacknowledged because they are not the direct recipient of the abuse. Contrary to this expectation, some children who witness domestic violence have higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems than other children.

Individual children may respond differently even within the same family. Some children may become violent, while others may withdraw. They may think they are making things easier for the mother by appearing to cope with the situation, by trying to be quieter, and by not saying how they feel. These children often feel isolated and ashamed about the violence happening at home. Many children may be placed in opposing positions, such as being the only person who is able to phone the police for help, or being told that the abuse is a "family secret" that no one should know about. Regardless of the family dynamics, children and young people also bear the burden of domestic violence. They are victims, too.

An adult might say that it is alright if the partner is emotionally abusive to them, as long as they are good to the kids. But, domestic violence comes in many forms and includes emotional, financial, sexual and physical abuse. By abusing the adult, the partner is NOT being good to the children. Showing attention or affection to the children cannot make up for denying the kids (through the violence) the right to a safe and happy childhood.

Although many parents believe that they can hide domestic violence from their children, children living in these homes report differently. Research suggests between 80 and 90 percent of these children are aware of the violence. Even if they do not see a beating, they hear the screams, feel the fear, and see the bruises, broken bones and abrasions sustained by the victim.

What can you do for children of domestic violence?

- Let them know the abuse is not their fault, or the victim's fault.
- Let them know it is not their role to protect the adult. Children should never place themselves between their parents during a fight, nor should they hide (i.e. in a closet or in the basement). Children should be taught to go to a designated safe location (a neighbor or friend's house).
- Even though your children may not have been in the room, they will have been able to sense the atmosphere, so if you can, explain to them in their language what is happening.
- Let them know that they are entitled to express their feelings and you want to hear 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 (such as a relative, school counselor or teacher).
- Find services, information, and support for the children. Locally, contact LEVI (Longmont Ending Violence Initiative) at 303.774.4534.