



Secondhand victims: Children who witness domestic violence

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The impact of domestic violence is felt far beyond the initial victim.

Whether the abuse is verbal, emotional or physical, there are repercussions that can be seen throughout the families of those who have suffered through domestic violence - but especially in children who witness it.

Rhonda Zahn, director of the child advocacy center at Cayuga Counseling Services, has been a licensed therapist since 1998 and now specializes in working with children who have been affected by domestic violence. Whether dealing with direct victims of abuse or secondary victims who have witnessed violence within their homes, Zahn sees children every day who personify the effects of growing up in a home where domestic abuse is taking place.

"Childhood becomes negated when there's violence in the home," she said. "You don't trust anyone or respect yourself and the people you're supposed to feel safe with, you don't."

Before coming to the counseling center, Zahn spent time working at the Cayuga County Mental Health Center in Auburn as well as in the school system. Through her combined experiences, she has seen several areas of children's lives become changed by witnessing violence against one or both of their parents or guardians. One of the most common effects of living in an unstable household is that children can develop extreme anger, putting themselves at risk to continue to be in violent situations in the future.

"Anger is a natural reaction because children don't often know how to navigate the situation they're in," Zahn said.

She explained that many children manifest their trauma in behavioral ways, leading to problems with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder, as children will attempt to be in control of certain things in their lives because they can't control others, like the violence they endure.

Another area affected is school performance. A child's focus and productiveness can be severely diminished by the violence seen at home, which Zahn says puts them at high risk for failure within the school system.

"It's not because they're intellectually disabled, it's because of the environment they're in," she said. "If a child feels hopeless and helpless, what's going to motivate them to do well in school?"

Zahn said that witnessing domestic violence can also impact the romantic relationships that children will have in the future, since the trauma and anger can often linger and reappear later in life.

"You live what you learn," she said. "The issues are going to perpetuate and continue to bubble at the surface."

In order to tackle these issues and prevent long-term side effects, Cayuga Counseling Services works with victims and children who have suffered abuse and helps them move past the emotional trauma. It's often said that getting out of an abusive relationship can be the most dangerous time for a victim, but Zahn's experiences as a social worker and a therapist have taught her that bravery can go a long way toward helping to better a violent situation.

"It's a very thin rope to walk because when you start to threaten the status quo of a family based around violence, it could just get worse," she said. "Sometimes families are trapped - and we have to recognize that - but we want to help them anyway."

In the past year, Zahn and Cayuga Counseling Services have been applying for grants in an attempt to revamp their child counseling programs and offer more services to children struggling with domestic violence, victims and witnesses alike. She is confident that their work will continue to help those affected and stop the victims, and their children, from becoming just another statistic.

"I believe we empower people to help themselves," she said. "If we can acknowledge the courage it takes to come and admit the problem, we can plant a seed for that person and create a ripple effect toward the good."

Warning signs

Experts say children who have witnessed domestic violence are inclined to demonstrate the following:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Poor school performance
- Behavior problems
- Trouble sleeping
- Chronic health problems
- Developmental delays
- Poor social skills
- Substance abuse

Everyone's Battle

This is the second installment in a four-day multimedia series assessing the impact of domestic violence on our community and what's being done to reduce its prevalence. Head to auburnpub.com/everyones_battle to see related video interviews, as well as stories and videos published Sunday.

