

Michelle Murphy, B.A
Victim Services Program (VSP)
Intern, Graduate Student

May 17, 2017

Domestic Violence and Mental Abuse in Children

The history of domestic violence spans back centuries in the United States. It has been documented as early as the 1800's that women were thought of as the property of their husbands' and they could be physically abused with an instrument as long as the instrument was in moderation¹; and some of references imply the abuse cannot occur on Sunday. Few people realize the traumatic impact of domestic violence and the cycle of violence that may continue for generations. Domestic Violence can be difficult for family life and especially for children if they were involved and feel caught in the middle of their parent's dysfunctional behavior. This is a very sensitive subject, although it happens in many families. The abuse often goes unreported for various reasons, one of which is because the person/ persons doing this deviant act threaten their victim (s) not to tell anyone. Other reasons the abuse may go unreported are: fear of disrupting the family structure, public shame, feeling guilty of causing the abuse, fear of getting the abuser arrested, and feeling hopeless the situation will improve.

What Mental Abuse Looks Like to Children

Mental abuse can be difficult for a child to comprehend they can sense something weird or strange is not right but the scars and bruises are not present to support their thoughts. The child may be a witness to the abuser controlling the victim and might even become a part to the mental abuse feeling controlled to act and behave in a way to please the abuser. The child may learn from the older victim how to walk on egg shells as not to anger the abuser. The child may even become very skilled at acting passively to avoid repercussions for the abuser. Growing up in this type of environment can produce a child with high anxiety and or a passive aggressive personality.

Domestic Violence and Behavioral Changes in a Child

Behavioral changes in children are normally noticed by those who have consistent contact such as a teacher or care giver. The child will show conflicting actions or words which create uncertainty and insecurity. They often begin to pick up language from the abuser that should not be spoken out of the mouth of someone so young; they lack the ability to use positive words in ways to express themselves. This may lead the child to believe they are not capable of making good decisions and their thoughts have no value thus leading to the creation of low self-esteem.

¹ In 18th century England, husbands were legally entitled to strike their wives in order to 'correct' their conduct so long as moderation was the watchword. One judge, Francis Buller, even went so far as to specify that a husband could beat his wife with a stick.

Tucker, H., Says, J., Says, A., Says, M., Says, A., Says, A. C. . . . Says, L. L. (2009, July 31). 18th Century Domestic Violence. Retrieved May 17, 2017, from <http://www.wondersandmarvels.com/2009/03/18th-century-domestic-violence.html>

Michelle Murphy, B.A
Victim Services Program (VSP)
Intern, Graduate Student

The child starts to question if this occurrence is indeed their own fault. Overtime, one may start to inquire about behavioral changes particularly if the child's behaviors are negative and harmful to other children. Ironically, the behavior is reported to the parent, in charge of the household and responsible for causing the undesirable behavior; and yet another type of cycle begins. If this cycle were to be put on a timeline one could clearly see where the physical and verbal abuse begins; one problem is compounded with yet another problem.

As with adult domestic violence victims, the most effective intervention for children who grow up in families, whether family violence or domestic violence is counseling appropriate to the issues. Children look to their parents as a guide to life lessons, role models, and protectors; they deserve the best of what parents have not the best they can offer.