



The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

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As further attention is focused on victims of domestic violence it is critical to understand the plight of some of its youngest victims: children. Congress has responded to the needs of children who witness domestic violence by passing the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 and is now considering other provisions for children in the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. The following statistics reflect the most recent research concerning the effects of domestic violence on children.

- 8.8 million children in the U.S. witness domestic violence in the home each year ¹
- Slightly more than half of female victims of intimate violence live in households with children under age 12. ²
- Children are often physically injured as a direct result of domestic violence. It is estimated that 50% of men who frequently abused their wives also abused their children. ³
- Children of women who have been abused by a male partner are at high risk for being abused by these same men: 40 to 70 percent of children of battered women are found to be directly abused by their mother's batterer. ⁴ These children have been found to suffer high rates of mental and physical health concerns (e.g., headaches, failure to thrive, vomiting, diarrhea) ⁵ and are more likely to report distress related to post-divorce parental visitation. ⁶
- Children who are exposed to domestic violence are at an increased risk of being murdered or physically injured. ⁷
- 96% of sexual assault survivors under the age of 12 and 85% of those ages 12 to 17 were raped by family members, friends, or acquaintances. ⁸ These young girls frequently do not reveal their experiences of domestic and sexual assault because of shame, fear of retaliation, or hopelessness. ⁹
- Children who witness domestic violence are at increased risk of psychological and emotional problems, cognitive functioning problems, and long-term development problems. ¹⁰
- A batterer is four to six times more likely than a non-batterer to sexually abuse his children. ¹¹ Nearly one-half of incest perpetrators also batter the children's mother. ¹²
- Batterers are seven times more likely than non-batterers to frequently hit their children. ¹³ The batterer's history of sexually assaulting the mother is correlated to the level of physical danger for household members, ¹⁴ and specifically to his likelihood of physically abusing children. ¹⁵
- Child custody and visitation arrangements often provide a context for abusive men to continue to control and victimize women and their children. ¹⁶
- Fathers who batter the mothers are twice as likely to seek sole custody of their children than are nonviolent fathers and are three times as likely to be behind in child support. ¹⁷
- According to one study, 5% of abusive fathers threaten to kill the mother during visitation, 34% threaten to kidnap their children and, 25% threaten to hurt their children. ¹⁸
- A majority of parental abductions are orchestrated and/or carried out by a batterer. ¹⁹ About half of abductions that occur post-separation occur during an authorized visit. ²⁰
- Children exposed to batterers often have unusually high levels of tension in their sibling relationships. ²¹

ENDNOTES

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- ⁷ Straus, "Supervised Visitation and Family Violence," 29 *Family Law Quarterly*, 229, 232-33 (1995).
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- ¹² Herman, Judith, M.D. *Father-Daughter Incest* Harvard University Press, 1981, Sirles, E. and Franke, P. "Factors Influencing Mothers' Reactions to Intrafamily Sexual Abuse" *Child Abuse and Neglect* Vol. 13, pgs. 131-139
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