

Prevent Child Abuse America  
200 South Michigan Avenue, 17th Floor, Chicago, Illinois 60604-2404  
Tel: (312) 663-3520, Fax: (312) 939-8962

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## The Relationship between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

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## The Relationship between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse

Researchers have long been aware of the link between domestic violence and child abuse. Even if children are witnesses to acts of violence and not the intended targets, they can be affected in the same way as children who are physically and sexually abused.<sup>1</sup> Since domestic violence is a pattern of behavior, not a single event, episodes may become more severe and more frequent over time, resulting in an increased likelihood that the children eventually become victims.

### What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 95% of reported assaults on spouses or ex-spouses are committed by men against women.<sup>2</sup>

### What is child abuse?

Prevent Child Abuse America defines child abuse as a nonaccidental injury or pattern of injuries to a child. Child abuse is damage to a child for which there is no "reasonable" explanation. Child abuse includes nonaccidental physical injury, neglect, sexual molestation, and emotional abuse.

### How common are these problems?

Domestic violence is a widespread problem with long-term consequences to the victim and all family members as well as to the abuser. Recent surveys indicate that increased public awareness about domestic violence, along with a more understanding attitude toward victims, has encouraged women to come forward.<sup>3</sup> In a survey conducted in early 1995, 31 percent of women said they had personally faced abuse, while in a similar survey conducted in July 1994 only 24 percent they had been abused.<sup>3</sup>

Child abuse has become a national epidemic. More than one million children are confirmed each year as victims of child abuse and neglect by state departments of child protective services.<sup>4</sup> And every day a minimum of three children die as a result.<sup>4</sup> Violence in the home has been listed as a major factor contributing to the growth of reports of child abuse and neglect.<sup>4</sup>

### How does domestic violence affect children?

Domestic violence often includes child abuse. Children may be victimized and threatened as a way of punishing and controlling the adult victim of domestic violence. Or they may be injured unintentionally when acts of violence occur in their presence. Often episodes of domestic violence expand to include attacks on children.

However, even when children are not directly attacked, they can experience serious emotional damage as a result of living in a violent household. Children living in this environment come to believe that this behavior is acceptable.

The estimated overlap between domestic violence and child physical or sexual abuse ranges from 30 to 50 percent.<sup>5,6</sup> Some shelters report that the first reason many battered women give for fleeing the home is that the perpetrator was also attacking the children.<sup>7</sup> Victims report multiple concerns about the effects of spousal abuse on children.<sup>8</sup>

Are there similarities between families involved in domestic violence and families involved in child abuse?

The two populations share several similarities as well as some important differences. Both forms of abuse cross all boundaries of economic level, race, ethnic heritage, and religious faith. Neither child abuse nor domestic violence is a phenomenon of the Twentieth Century. Children have been physically traumatized, deprived of the necessities of life, and molested sexually by adults since the dawn of human history.<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, parents claimed ownership of their children and society hesitated to interfere with the family unit. Similarly, society in the past, has sanctioned the belief that men have the right to use whatever force is necessary to control the behavior of women. Those in intimate relationships as well as those who abuse children often are repeating learned behaviors transmitted intergenerationally. Both forms of abuse are identified by patterns. Neither domestic violence nor child abuse is an isolated event. Both occur with some regularity, often increasing and becoming more serious. Adults who were abused as children have an increased risk of abusing their children, and adults who grew up in a violent home are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of domestic violence. For a number of reasons including shame, secrecy, and isolation, both types of abuse are underreported.






Domestic violence and child abuse also differ in some significant ways. Parental stress is an important factor in instances of child abuse, but this link has not been established in cases of domestic violence. Reported perpetrators of child maltreatment, are equally men and women, but the majority of perpetrators of domestic violence are men.

How can we prevent these problems?

Domestic violence and child abuse proliferate in an environment that accepts the lesser status of women and children. Shrouding the violence in secrecy allows this behavior to continue. Educating the public about the extent of the problem establishes a foundation that permits victims to come forward.

Prevention efforts that reach parents before or soon after the birth of their baby, and provide intensive services on a moderately long-term basis can greatly reduce the incidence of child abuse as well as identify other problems such as domestic violence. Home visitors using a comprehensive approach can tailor their services to match a family's needs. After establishing a trusting relationship with the family, the home visitor will be able to identify problems. While the home visitor may not be able to offer intervention services, he or she can provide resources and ensure the safety of the children.

Other prevention efforts include the following:

-  Educate health and child welfare agencies about the prevalence of domestic violence and its effect on children.
-  Involve the community in a multidisciplinary approach to provide intervention and prevention services to those families in need.
-  Educate the public about domestic violence and child abuse and the long-term costs to society.
-  Provide access to self-help groups and other supportive services for all perpetrators, victims, and survivors of abuse.
-  Educate all who work with children and families, including teachers, service providers, and health care professionals about the interplay between domestic violence and child abuse.

- <sup>1</sup>Goodman, G., and M. Rosenberg. 1987. The child witness to family violence: Clinical and legal considerations. Domestic violence on trial: Psychological and legal dimensions of family violence. Edited by D. Sonkin. New York: Springer.
- <sup>2</sup>Douglas, H. 1991. Assessing violent couples. Families in society 72(9): 525-535.
- <sup>3</sup>Lieberman Research Inc. 1996. Domestic violence advertising campaign tracking survey , Wave 3, November 1995. San Francisco, CA: Family Violence Prevention Fund and The Advertising Council.
- <sup>4</sup>Lung, C. T. and D. Daro. 1996. Current trends in child abuse reporting and fatalities: The results of the 1995 annual fifty state survey. Chicago, IL: National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.
- <sup>5</sup>Jaffe, P., D. Wolfe, and S. Wilson. 1990. Children of battered women. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- <sup>6</sup>Straus, M.A., and R. Gelles. 1990. Physical violence in american families. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- <sup>7</sup>New Beginnings. 1990. A survey of battered women seeking shelter at New Beginnings, a shelter for battered women in Seattle, Washington.
- <sup>8</sup>Hilton, N.Z. 1992. Battered women's concerns about their children witnessing wife assault. Journal of Interpersonal Violence 7: 77-86.
- <sup>9</sup>National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. 1993. Think you know something about child abuse? Chicago, IL: National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse.

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