**Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence**

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing awareness of the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment.[3](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nthree) Studies report that there are approximately between 750,000 and 2.3 million victims of domestic violence each year.[4](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nfour) Many of these victims are abused several times, so the number of domestic violence incidents is even greater. According to a national study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 903,000 children were identified by [child protective services](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceh.cfm#cps) (CPS) as victims of abuse or [neglect](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceh.cfm#neglect) in 2001.[5](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nfive) Increasingly, service providers and researchers have recognized that some of these adult and child victims are from the same families. Research suggests that in an estimated 30 to 60 percent of the families where either domestic violence or child maltreatment is identified, it is likely that both forms of abuse exist.[6](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nsix) Studies show that for victims who experience severe forms of domestic violence, their children also are in danger of suffering serious physical harm.[7](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nseven) In a national survey of over 6,000 American families, researchers found that 50 percent of men who frequently assaulted their wives also abused their children.[8](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#neight) Other studies demonstrate that perpetrators of domestic violence who were abused as children are more likely to physically harm their children.

### Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence

Children who live in homes where a parent or caretaker is experiencing abuse are commonly referred to as "child witnesses" or "children who are witnessing" domestic violence. The term "children's exposure" to domestic violence, however, provides a more inclusive definition because it encompasses the multiple ways children experience domestic abuse. Although caretakers frequently believe they are protecting their children from witnessing their abuse, children living in these homes report differently. Researchers have found that 80 to 90 percent of children in homes where domestic violence occurs can provide detailed accounts of the violence in their homes.[18](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#neighteen) Research studies have proliferated regarding children's exposure to domestic violence, the problems associated with witnessing, and the [protective factors](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceh.cfm#protectivefactors) that influence their responses to the violence.[19](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#nnineteen) Children's exposure to domestic violence typically falls into three primary categories:

* Hearing a violent event;
* Being directly involved as an eyewitness, intervening, or being used as a part of a violent event (e.g., being used as a shield against abusive actions);
* Experiencing the aftermath of a violent event.[20](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwenty)

Children's exposure to domestic violence also may include being used as a spy to interrogate the adult victim, being forced to watch or participate in the abuse of the victim, and being used as a pawn by the abuser to coerce the victim into returning to the violent relationship.[21](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwentyone) Some children are physically injured as a direct result of the domestic violence. Some perpetrators intentionally physically, emotionally, or sexually abuse their children in an effort to intimidate and control their partner. While this is clearly child maltreatment, other cases may not be so clear. Children often are harmed accidentally during violent attacks on the adult victim. An object thrown or weapon used against the battered partner can hit the child. Assaults on younger children can occur while the adult victim is holding the child, and injury or harm to older children can happen when they intervene in violent episodes. In addition to being exposed to the abusive behavior, many children are further victimized by coercion to remain silent about the abuse, maintaining the "family secret."

#### The Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Children who live with domestic violence face numerous risks, such as the risk of exposure to traumatic events, the risk of neglect, the risk of being directly abused, and the risk of losing one or both of their parents. All of these can lead to negative outcomes for children and clearly have an impact on them. Research studies consistently have found the presence of three categories of childhood problems associated with exposure to domestic violence:

* **Behavioral, social, and emotional problems**—higher levels of aggression, anger, hostility, oppositional behavior, and disobedience; fear, anxiety, withdrawal, and depression; poor peer, sibling, and social relationships; low self-esteem.
* **Cognitive and attitudinal problems**—lower cognitive functioning, poor school performance, lack of conflict resolution skills, limited problem-solving skills, acceptance of violent behaviors and attitudes, belief in rigid gender stereotypes and male privilege.
* **Long-term problems**—higher levels of adult depression and trauma symptoms, increased tolerance for and use of violence in adult relationships.[22](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwentytwo)

Children also display specific problems unique to their physical, psychological, and social development. For example, infants exposed to violence may have difficulty developing attachments with their caregivers and in extreme cases suffer from "failure to thrive."[23](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwentythree) It should be noted that there also are limitations and uncertainties to the research since some of the children in such studies do not show elevated problem levels even under similar circumstances.[24](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwentyfour) Preschool children may regress developmentally or suffer from eating and sleep disturbances. School-aged children may struggle with peer relationships, academic performance, and emotional stability. Adolescents are at a higher risk for either perpetrating or becoming victims of teen dating violence.[25](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolenceg.cfm#ntwentyfive) Reports from adults who repeatedly witnessed domestic violence as children show that many suffer from trauma-related symptoms, depression, and low self-esteem.