**Domestic Violence Information Sheet for Parents**

**What is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic Violence is a pattern of control over the behavior, emotions, and choices of a partner. The methods of control can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, financial abuse, social restrictions, and the destruction of property and/or family pets. Other terms that are often used when referring to domestic violence include, but are not limited to, spouse abuse, intimate partner violence, and battering. Regardless of the term used, domestic violence is a social problem where one’s property, health, or life is endangered as a result of the intentional behavior of a partner. Current estimates are that in heterosexual relationships, domestic violence is most frequently committed by men against women. Domestic violence is as frequent in gay and lesbian relationships as heterosexual ones. Domestic violence is also believed to be largely underreported.

**What are the Effects of Domestic Violence on Children?**

Being exposed to domestic violence affects children’s emotional developmental and physical well-being. These children are more likely to be abused themselves, may be caught in harm’s way during a violent episode and be inadvertently injured, may experience behavioral problems related to anger, aggression, and oppositional behaviors, and are more likely to experience depression and anxiety than other children. They also tend to spend less time with their friends, worry more about the safety of their friends, and are less likely to have a best friend. At school, children exposed to domestic violence may present with elevated rates of behavior problems, hyperactivity , social withdrawal, and learning difficulties.

Many of these children develop symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to exposure to domestic violence. These symptoms include, but are not limited to, distressing memories and/or nightmares of the violence; efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations that may remind them of the violence; diminished interest in activities that were once pleasurable; social isolation; difficulty falling or staying asleep; difficulty concentrating; and anger outbursts.

Children exposed to domestic violence are also at a higher risk of being exposed to other forms of abuse. It is currently estimated that 50% of perpetrators who abuse their spouses also abuse their children. These children have also been found to be at a higher risk of being emotionally abused and sexually abused than other children.

Exposure to domestic violence may also cause other long-term effects such as an increased risk of entering the juvenile justice system, attempting suicide, committing sexual assault crimes, and abusing drugs and alcohol. There is also and increased risk of becoming victims of abuse as adults and of developing distorted belief systems in regard to relationships, personal responsibility, violence and aggression, and sex-role expectations.

Every child responds to domestic violence exposure differently due to the influence of such characteristics as age, length of time the abuse has occurred, frequency and severity of the abuse, the child’s relationship with the abuser, type of abuse, support system available to the child, and the child’s overall resiliency and vulnerability.

**How Common is Domestic Violence?**

Domestic violence occurs across all races, religions, ethnicities, and economic groups. It is estimitated that more than 1 million women are victims of domestic violence every year, with a high percentage of these assaults being witnessed by one or more children. In other words, more than 3 million American children are exposed to domestic violence each year.

**WHAT ARE SOME COMMON BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS OF A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

* Bullying, physical aggressiveness, and insulting behavior toward peers.
* Withdrawal from peers and social contacts, and overall poor peer relationships.
* Difficulty separating, especially from the battered parent.
* Oppositional and defiant behaviors with authority figures, especially with the battered parent.
* Increased verbal aggressiveness/talking back.
* Bed-wetting, daytime “accidents”, “baby talk”, or other regressive behaviors.
* Difficulty focusing and learning while at school.
* Loss of appetite or changes in eating patterns.
* Failure to thrive in infants.
* Nightmares, insomnia, or other sleep problems.
* Increased violent behavior toward siblings and peers.
* Running away from home.
* Role reversal: taking on parental role.

**WHAT ARE SOME BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS IN PRETEENS AND TEENAGERS WHO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

* Physically, verbally, or sexually abusing their dating partners.
* Being victimized physically, verbally, or sexually by their dating partners.
* Violence toward the battered parent/imitating words and behaviors of the abuser.
* Acting as the battered parent’s “protector”.
* Drug and/or alcohol abuse.
* Poor peer relationships and choices.

**WHAT ARE SOME EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS OF EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?**

* Increased nervousness, anxiety, and fear.
* Depressed mood and suicidal thoughts.
* Insecurity.
* Feeling responsible for protecting the battered parent and siblings.
* Excessive worry about the safety of others.
* Resentment toward the battered parent and siblings.
* Fear of day-to-day arguments.
* Fantasies of standing up to, or hurting, the abuser.
* Desire to have the same power as the abuser.
* Confusion regarding “loyalty” to both the abusive and abused parent.

**Who Perpetrates Domestic Violence:**

A perpetrator or “batterer” is a person who exercises a pattern of coercive control in a partner relationship, with one or more acts of intimidating physical violence, sexual assault, or threatening physical violence. This pattern may be manifested in the form of psychological control, economic control, sexual coercion, or primarily through physical violence. Although there are batterers in both sexes, most are male. Even though the batterer may be violent only toward his (or her) partner, he (or she) is also the person responsible for exposing the child to violence. Battering is not due to impulse control problems, drinking problems, or anger management problems. It is a problem of intentional, repeated coercive controlling behavior that one partner exerts over the other in an intimate relationship. For this reason, anger management, Alcoholics Anonymous or couples therapy are not the appropriate treatments to stop domestic violence.

**HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?**

* Tell him/her that abusive behavior is wrong.
* Reassure your child that none of the violent episodes were in any way his/her fault.
* Remind your child how much you love him/her.
* Develop a safety plan to prepare for crisis situations .
* Encourage your child to talk openly about his/her feelings.
* Prepare to get extra help for your child’s schooling.
* Seek help from a mental heath professional.