Children Exposed to Domestic Violence and Substance Abuse

1. Violence occurs against both women and children in the same family.
   a. Severe and fatal cases of child abuse may occur in homes where domestic violence and/or substance abuse overlap.
   b. Witnessing domestic violence and being exposed to substance abuse can put children at risk.

2. Many men who physically or sexually abuse or neglect children also abuse the mother.

3. Some children who witness domestic violence are affected the same way as children who are physically or sexually abused.

4. In spite of what perpetrators and non-offending parents say, children have often either directly witnessed the physical and psychological assaults or have indirectly witnessed them by overhearing the episodes or seeing the aftermath of injuries and property damage. They are often all too aware of the impact of substance abuse in their family as well.

5. Children exposed to interpersonal violence and/or substance abuse do not experience a carefree childhood and may act adult while they are children. They may be busy surviving, placating, picking up pieces, adjusting and adapting just to stay alive.

Tactics of Abuse

Domestic violence perpetrators pose the following risks to children. They may:

1. Harm children by coercing them into abusing their mothers or other adult caretakers.

2. Endanger children emotionally and physically by creating environments in which children witness assaults against their mothers.


5. Endanger children through neglect.

6. Focus so much attention on controlling and abusing their adult partners they ignore and neglect children.

7. Prevent adult victims from caring for children resulting in neglect.
8. Endanger children by undermining the ability of providers to intervene and protect children.

9. Endanger children by exposing them to alcohol and other drugs.

Abusers also traumatize children in the process of battering their adult intimate partner. They do so by:

1. Intentionally injuring the children as a way of threatening and controlling the abused parent. (*For example, the child is thrown at the victim*).

2. Unintentionally injuring the children during an attack on the abused parent when the child gets caught in the fray. (*For example, the infant is injured when the mother is struck while holding the infant*).

3. Using children to coercively control the abused parent while living with or separated from the victim. The intent is to continue the abuser’s control over the victim with little or no regard for the damage done to the children. (*For example, the child is asked to report who mommy talked to*).

4. Creating an environment where children are forced to witness domestic violence and/or substance abuse and their effects.

Examples of a perpetrator’s behavior that traumatizes children include:

1. Asserting that children’s “*bad*” behavior is reason for drinking, drugging or violence directed at the adult victim by the perpetrator.

2. Threatening pets, loved objects, toys, etc.

3. Isolating children, banning friendships.

4. Interrogating children about the victim’s activity.

5. Forcing the victim to always be accompanied by the children.

6. Holding the children hostage.

7. Using lengthy custody battles as a means to continue abusing the victim; demanding unlimited visitation or 24-hour access by phone; threatening to report the victim to the Office of Children’s Services (OCS) for past alcohol or other drug use.