

Home Truths

Children And Domestic Violence



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Home Truths

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Legal Niceties

The Video

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Summary

Home Truths is about children witnessing abuse of their female caregivers by a man they know. Some of the children are victims of abuse as well. This video focuses on male violence against women and children, as this is the most prevalent form of domestic violence. Through each of the children's stories found in this video, we see how difficult it can be to live in such a situation. Each of the children find a solution for breaking the cycle of violence found in their homes.

Several specific and difficult points are covered through each child's point of view, such as; the difficulty of leaving home for a shelter, how to get help from others, the possible 'pattern of abuse' as younger children pattern themselves after abusive parents, the feelings of guilt as a child is unable to stop the abuse in their home, and the potential positive roles of friends and family outside the home.

There is no excuse for domestic violence—though unfortunately, statistics show that children and adults may see different forms of abuse as 'acceptable'. This video seeks to illustrate the reality of violence in the home, and opens the door for children to start talking about how it can be stopped.

Key points:

- Every child and parent should be safe in their own home.
- There is no excuse to abuse any parent or child.
- If an adult is violent, the child should know it is not their fault.
- As a friend, it's okay to tell an adult when someone's getting hurt.
- People should listen to children and believe what they have to say; otherwise the abuse will continue.
- There are many forms of abuse—physical, sexual, emotional, and economic.
- A woman and her child(ren) are the most likely to be abused by a man living in the home.

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence can be defined as the misuse of power and the exercise of control by one person over another within the context of an intimate relationship. It is almost always women who experience domestic violence, and almost always men who are the abusers. Women of every class, age, race, and religion experience domestic violence—and it is no more prevalent or severe in any one group. Women's experience of domestic violence can include any of the following:

Physical – being slapped, punched, kicked, burned, choked, stabbed, and even murdered

Sexual – being spoken to in sexually degrading ways, being forced to watch or act out pornography, being forced to have sex, sometimes in front of others (including children)

Emotional – being verbally abused, being humiliated and intimidated, being constantly blamed, being kept away from family and friends, being controlled (such as with threats to hurt her or the children)

Economic – having money, belongings, or basic needs withheld, not being allowed to work or have her own money

Children may witness the violence as it happens, hear cries and shouts, or sense the tension. They may see the result of violence on the woman in the form of physical injuries or mental distress. They may be caught up in the man's violence toward the woman. A fetus in the womb may be injured, younger children may be hurt while in their mother's arms, and older children may be hurt if they try to intervene. A significant number of men who are violent toward their female partners also abuse their children. Children may experience physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; which may occur openly or in secret.

Living with violence obviously affects women and their relationships with their children. However, it is clear that women do not have to submissively accept their situation and become 'helpless victims'. Instead, they try to reason with their partners, develop strategies to avoid the violence, and seek help from a range of friends and professionals.

Some Facts and Figures

It is impossible to know how many women in this country experience violence at some time in their lives as much goes unreported. However, the statistics that are available illustrate the significance of the problem:

- Estimates range from 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend per year to three million women who are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend per year.²
- Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives, according to a 1998 Commonwealth Fund survey.⁴
- Nearly 25 percent of American women report being raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, or date at some time in their lifetime (according to the National Violence Against Women Survey, conducted from November 1995 to May 1996.)⁵
- Thirty percent of Americans say they know a woman who has been physically abused by her husband or boyfriend in the past year.⁶
- In the year 2001, more than half a million American women (588,490 women) were victims of nonfatal violence committed by an intimate partner.⁷
- Intimate partner violence is primarily a crime against women. In 2001, women accounted for 85 percent of the victims of intimate partner violence (588,490 total) and men accounted for approximately 15 percent of the victims (103,220 total).⁸
- While women are less likely than men to be victims of violent crimes overall, women are five to eight times more likely than men to be victimized by an intimate partner.⁹
- In 2001, intimate partner violence made up 20 percent of violent crime against women. The same year, intimate partners committed three percent of all violent crime against men.¹⁰
- Women of all races are about equally vulnerable to violence by an intimate.¹¹
- Male violence against women does much more damage than female violence against men; women are much more likely to be injured than men.¹²

figures from the Family Violence Prevention Fund website:

<http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/DomesticViolence.pdf>

Some Facts and Figures *cont...*

Domestic violence against women not only affects her, but her children as well. Though no one can know the full effect of domestic violence on children, the figures below illustrate how big a concern it is:

- The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse suggests that domestic violence may be the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in this country. ⁱ
- Studies suggest that between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually. ⁱⁱ
- In a national survey of more than 6,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children. ⁱⁱⁱ
- Slightly more than half of female victims of intimate violence live in households with children under age 12. ^{iv}
- Men who as children were exposed to their parents' domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own wives than sons of nonviolent parents. ^v
- One study of 2,245 children and teenagers found that recent exposure to violence in the home was a significant factor in predicting a child's violent behavior. ^{vi}
- Children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely to exhibit behavioral and physical health problems including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers.vii They are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes. ^{vii}

figures from the Family Violence Prevention Fund website:

<http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/DomesticViolence.pdf>

Emma's Story

I thought I was the only person...

Children witnessing or experiencing abuse often feel isolated and 'different' from their peers. They may feel embarrassed and ashamed of what is happening at home. These feelings can make it hard for children to get the help they need. The acknowledgement that domestic violence is common and takes place in all kinds of families can lessen these feelings. Bringing the problem out into the open and discussing the issues with young people can enable them to tell others about their experiences. Children report that it is particularly helpful to be able to share their experiences with their peers.

Why wouldn't she leave?

Many people ask, "Why does she stay?" rather than "Why is he so violent?" This shifts the blame and responsibility for the abuse away from the man and onto the woman. To understand these issues we need to understand that violence is psychological, as well as physical, sexual, emotional, and economic.

There are numerous factors that make it difficult for women to leave. They may feel great fear, guilt, helplessness, inadequacy, and shame; and often these feelings are reinforced by people around them. Women may fear the unknown, including what it may be like to live in a shelter. They may believe that the man will change his behavior, or that they are the only ones suffering—and so should stay for the sake of their children. It is often when women realize that their children are affected that they decide to leave.

When women do decide to leave they may face the loss of friends, family, home, and possessions. They may experience increased financial pressures as well. Displaced women may justifiably fear that the man will find them and punish them or their children, family, or friends. It can take a woman many attempts over a long period of time to leave, because the man may persuade or threaten them into returning. When women try to leave, it can mean increased danger. Many women suffer an increase in violence when they have left, or are in the process of leaving. Many violent men will persistently track down their former partners, which can make it impossible for a woman to settle down and start a new life with her children. A significant number of women who are killed by their partners are killed after they have left the man. Despite the difficulties many women do leave, even if it takes them some time and several attempts to do so.

Living in a shelter...

Leaving home to stay in a shelter is likely to be a difficult experience for children. It may feel frightening and strange, as well as possibly being a relief. Children may experience the loss of friends, family, pets, and possessions—if anonymity is essential for survival, a child may even lose a sense of their own identity. They will probably have to attend a new school, where people may not understand what they are going through. They may face a constant stream of strangers from housing, social services, police, and other agencies.

On the other hand, positive support can help children to feel that the move is beneficial—they are being listened to, they do matter, and things will now get better. Children may relax away from the violence, feel safer and more secure, grow in confidence, and feel hopeful about the future. They are likely to benefit from speaking with others who have had similar experiences. If they behave badly it may even be partly because it is safe to do so for the first time in their lives.

Sidra's Story

He was different at home

Many men who are violent at home do not appear to be so to the outside world. This can mean that children realize that they are unlikely to be believed if they try to tell of the violence. If the man's violence is psychological and emotional it can be hard for people to appreciate the damage caused to the woman and children. It is easier for people to recognize that a woman is experiencing violence when they can see evidence of physical injuries.

Getting help

Sidra tries to get someone to listen to her on more than one occasion. It is important to explain to children that they may need to be persistent when trying to get help. Friends and relatives can often find it hard to understand or accept that violence is occurring. Telephone helplines can be busy and it may take a number of attempts to get an answer.

One reason why children may be reluctant to seek help is out of a strong sense of loyalty to their mothers or female caregivers. They often feel ashamed of what is happening, and think that if they tell anyone they will be betraying their mothers. Helplines can be extremely useful if children want to talk to someone or get advice anonymously.

Issues for specific groups

There are additional issues for women experiencing violence who belong to one or more marginalized groups. For example, African-American women may be reluctant to turn to any organization where they have previously encountered racism. Women who are disabled may have difficulties in getting the help they need arising from people's prejudicial attitudes to disability.

Some women from different ethnic backgrounds may also experience difficulties with language, immigration law, financial support, or lack of access to information. Women from any background may find they are expected to 'put up' with violence because of gender stereotypes attributed to their particular community. For example, people may believe a Catholic woman could never consider leaving or divorcing her husband.

From father to son?

Sidra's brother Asim starts to think that it is all right for him to tell his mother and sister what to do. One of the attitudes that underpins male violence is the belief that men have the right to control women. For example, some people may consider that there are certain circumstances in which it is justifiable for a man to strike a woman, such as; if she is married to him (he owns her), or if she is unfaithful. The effect of violence on children can be all-encompassing—from direct abuse of the child, to the psychological damage of witnessing abuse, and even to male children emulating what abuse they witness as they learn it to be 'normal' in their family.

Jamie's Story

We had a great time but

Jamie recognizes that, although his dad is nice to him, what he is doing to his mom is wrong. He tells his teacher despite his fears of what may happen, but then feels that he has betrayed his father and is letting him down. Many children have mixed emotions when someone they love is violent. Children talk of being confused and feeling torn between their parents; often not wanting to lose their father but at the same time wanting the violence to stop.

Most children express the most intense sense of loyalty to their mothers. However, they are likely to hear their mothers being blamed for the violence, so some children may feel that it is their mother's fault. They may blame her for staying with the violent man. Some children are coerced by the violent man into joining in with his abuse of the woman. Others may take the man's side as a coping strategy to gain a feeling of power in an otherwise frighteningly powerless situation.

It is important to recognize that all these different feelings are valid, no matter how confusing and contradictory they may be for the child. Our understanding of the effects on children needs to be informed by listening to the children's own experiences and not based on adult centered interpretations.

My mom said she'd fallen

Many women cover up, deny, or minimize the violence that is occurring—in an effort to protect their children. This can be very confusing for children, who are nearly always aware of what is going on, even if they are very young. As in the case of Jamie and his brother, children can witness physical violence by hearing it or seeing the results. It can cause them to feel isolated from their mother or caregiver because they cannot talk to her about the situation.

I'm not like my dad

Jamie refers to the damaging myth that boys who witness physical violence will repeat the behavior they observe. Domestic violence is sometimes explained in terms of a 'cycle of violence'. This theory suggests that children who grow up in violent families will repeat the patterns in their adult relationships; men will become perpetrators, and women will become victims.

This theory allows abusers to blame someone else for their violence (i.e. their parents) instead of taking responsibility for their own behavior. It implies that men cannot change their behavior and have no choice about whether they are violent. It presents a hopeless picture to young people witnessing or experiencing violence—denying that they have the ability to learn from their experiences and make their own decisions about how they live their lives.

Research that has attempted to prove this theory has been undertaken with very selective sample groups—particularly violent men who have given retrospective information on their own childhood. It has ignored the experiences of adults, both men and women, who grew up witnessing or experiencing domestic violence and are now determined never to let violence be part of their lives.

Sophie's Story

I thought it was my fault

It is very common for children to hold themselves responsible for the violence. They may deliberately be made scapegoats, they may assume responsibility to try to alleviate the violence, or they may feel that they are in some way responsible for not being able to stop it. It is very important to reassure them that they are not to blame.

Organizations emphasize the importance of stressing to children that they are not responsible for the violence happening to them or their female caregiver. They should also know that they are right to tell someone what is happening, and that it should not be happening to them. Children need to hear these messages over and over again.

He said he couldn't help it

It is common for men to make excuses for their violent behavior. Whether stress, frustration, jealousy, work, money, or alcohol is given as excuses, alternatives to violence are always available. As Sophie points out, men choose when they are violent, and to whom. The assertion that men cannot control their behavior denies that they have freedom of choice and self-determination.

Another excuse given for male violence is that the violent behavior of males is somehow biologically or genetically predetermined. This assumes that different behavior can be expected from men and women simply on the basis of their gender. This needs to be challenged and the social construction of gender stereotypes explored.

I never felt safe

Research indicates that men who are violent to their female partners are also likely to physically or sexually abuse any children in the family. Adults working with children need to be aware of this, recognize possible signs and indicators that abuse may be occurring, and have knowledge of local child protection procedures.

Anyone working with children has a responsibility to report any concerns they have that a child may be experiencing physical or sexual abuse. This means that children need to know that adults cannot always keep secrets. If they want to speak to someone who can, they need to contact one of the confidential helplines.

If a child has experienced abuse you are unlikely to be able to meet all their needs, but you can help to meet some of them. You can tell them you believe them, you are glad they have told you, it is not their fault, it should not be happening to them, and you will try to get help for them.

Child abuse should always be reported:

- To keep the abuse from continuing
- To provide the child with support
- To protect other children the abuser may have contact with
- To ensure an appropriate response from the criminal justice system

Daniel's Story

My friend seemed to change...

Children may display changes in behavior as a response to witnessing or experiencing violence. They may appear anxious, fearful, or insecure. Some children may find it difficult to concentrate on their schoolwork. Others may become angry and disruptive. They may experience physical symptoms such as asthma, eczema, minor illnesses, nightmares, or sensitivity to certain stimuli (such as the slam of a door).

This can result in children employing a range of coping strategies to deal with their feelings and to try to get help and attention. These can range from becoming withdrawn and depressed to displaying anti-social behavior. It is helpful if adults realize that this behavior is a form of communication.

What is a restraining order?

A restraining order is a court order that requires someone to do or not to do certain things. For example, Tom's mom may have gotten a restraining order against her boyfriend to not come within a certain distance of her—so as not to assault or molest her. A restraining order will only protect the woman if the man will obey it, or if the woman is prepared to enforce the order if he does not obey it. If the abuser does break the terms of the restraining order the woman will have to call the police, and potentially go back to court for prosecution of the offender.

The police have the power to intervene, arrest, warn, or charge a violent man. Domestic violence is becoming more recognized as the widespread problem it is, and law enforcement agencies are a valuable link in breaking the pattern of violence. Women are often reluctant to call the police, fearing that they may not be taken seriously or treated with respect. A pattern of trying to reason with her abuser or avoid further conflict can be very hard to break. Often women fear that calling the police may only give them short-term protection, and that such a step will provoke her abuser to further or greater violence. In extreme cases, the abuser may become more violent following police intervention—and so relocation to a shelter would be in the woman's best interest.

What are your friends for?

A friend is often the first person to whom a child will disclose any problem. Children should be aware that they are not responsible for solving the problem, but that they can help. If a friend has a problem it can be a good idea to help them think about which adults they trust, and can talk to. Children can be very good listeners, but they also need adults who they can turn to for help.

Guidelines for Supporting Children Who Have Witnessed Violence

- Give them time to talk about it.
- Emphasize that the violence is not their fault.
- Let them know that they are not the only child experiencing this.
- Make sure they understand it is not their responsibility to protect their mother/caregiver, while still validating the child's concern and any action they may have taken to protect their mother/caregiver.
- Allow them to express their feelings about what they have witnessed.
- Find out if you can whether the child is currently in danger themselves from the perpetrator and take any steps to protect the child.
- Check with the child whether they have a safety plan and a network of adults who they can trust—if not, work on this with them.
- Don't minimize the violence.
- Offer them support with any difficulties in school.
- Keep the child's confidentiality unless it is necessary to tell someone for the child's safety—always check with or inform the child about whom you are going to share information with.
- Give the child information about sources of advice and support they may want to use.

*from 'Violence Against Women and Children by Men they Know; A Resource Pack for Schools'
Leeds Inter-Agency Project, 1997*

Questions For Discussion

1. Emma's story can help generate discussion about women's shelters and other aid groups established to help women who have been abused. Children can research local shelters and can then create their own posters advertising for a shelter of their choice. Discussion groups should focus on other agencies that abused women can turn to for help, such as; health services, education welfare, social services, housing agencies, and law enforcement.

2. Sidra's story can generate discussion on power and gender issues. This is a good opportunity to look at equal opportunity issues including race, gender, and disability in the local community.

One example of evaluating gender:

- Think of all the words used for or about women and men
- Look them all up in a thesaurus to generate even more words
- Analyze the results:
 - what kinds of words are used?
 - which are complimentary and positive?
 - which are potentially insulting?
 - what do they show about underlying attitudes?
- Do the same kind of analysis of frequently used phrases or statements

3. Jamie's story brings to light that we all choose how we act. Children often find it much more difficult to control their behavior when confronted with strong, negative feelings. Ask the kids about situations they've been in that have made them mad, frustrated, or scared. How did they behave at the time? Looking back, how could the situation have been better handled? This is also a great chance to create scenarios and discuss how they could best be handled—role-play is an excellent conversation-starter.

4. Sophie's story shows her stepdad making excuses for his violent behavior. Each character reacts in a different way to his violence—each person has their own point of view in this bad situation. Each point of view should be discussed as a group; why do you think each character acts the way he/she does? What other excuses might men use for being violent to their partners and children? Is there any justification for this violence? Children's answers to these questions are likely to bring out some commonly held misconceptions about domestic violence; which can then be discussed by the group.

5. Daniel's story illustrates what it means to be a good friend. Children should take a look at what it means to be a good friend—each child should write an 'advertisement' for a good friend, listing six characteristics they are looking for in a good friend, and six things they can offer to a friend. This is a good opportunity to discuss safety plans of 'what to do if...' This should include discussing the specific people they can turn to in different situations, knowing how to contact emergency services, and talking about helpline numbers available.

Home Truths

Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Why did Emma not have her friends over?
 - a) because her house was too small
 - b) because her mom said " no "
 - c) because her dad was abusing her and her mom
 - d) because she had no friends
- 2) Sidra's brother's name is:
 - a) Manuel
 - b) Asim
 - c) Punjabi
 - d) Sidro
- 3) Why did Sidra's brother stop siding with his father?
 - a) because Sidra told him not to
 - b) because his father smashed all of his CDs
 - c) because of a dream
 - d) because his father hit him
- 4) Who did Sidra call for help?
 - a) her uncle
 - b) her mom
 - c) Childline
 - d) the police
- 5) Which person did Sidra turn to for help after her call?
 - a) her aunt
 - b) her teacher
 - c) her uncle
 - d) the police
- 6) How did Jamie's mom explain her bruises?
 - a) her dad's abuse
 - b) she fell over or bumped into something
 - c) she got them from hiking
 - d) she got them from her job
- 7) Who did Jamie turn to for help?
 - a) a teacher
 - b) her grandma
 - c) her aunt
 - d) her uncle
- 8) Which family member struck Sophie?
 - a) her sister
 - b) her uncle
 - c) her stepdad
 - d) her mom
- 9) Who did Sophie turn to for help?
 - a) her mom
 - b) her uncle
 - c) the police
 - d) her aunt
- 10) Who was Daniel's friend?
 - a) Chris
 - b) Tom
 - c) Burt
 - d) Terri
- 11) Who did Daniel talk to about his friend's abuse?
 - a) his mom
 - b) his dad
 - c) his teacher
 - d) his uncle
- 12) How did Tom's mom get her boyfriend to leave?
 - a) she asked him to
 - b) Tom told him to
 - c) her boyfriend left on his own
 - d) she got an injunction to kick him out

Home Truths

Multiple Choice Worksheet *Answer Key*

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Why did Emma not have her friends over?
 - a) because her house was too small
 - b) because her mom said " no "
 - c) because her dad was abusing her and her mom**
 - d) because she had no friends
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For More Information

1. Women's Law.org—state-by-state legal information and resources for domestic violence
<http://www.womenslaw.org/>
2. Domestic Violence U.S. Resources
http://www.vachss.com/help_text/domestic_violence_us.html
3. The National Domestic Violence Hotline
<http://www.ndvh.org/>
4. U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women
<http://www.usdoj.gov/ovw/>
5. National Organization for Women
<http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>
6. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress—Effects of Domestic Violence on Children and Adolescents
<http://www.aaets.org/article8.htm>
7. Love Our Children U.S.A.
<http://www.loveourchildrenusa.org/>
8. The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence
<http://www.ncccev.org/>
9. familydoctor.org—Domestic Violence: Protecting Yourself and Your Children
<http://familydoctor.org/052.xml>
10. National Coalition for Child Protection Reform—When Children Witness Domestic Violence
http://www.nccpr.org/index_files/page0007.html
11. Network Women's Program—Stop Violence Against Women
http://www.stopvaw.org/Effects_of_Domestic_Violence_on_Children.html
12. Domestic Violence Notepad—A Directory of Women Lawyers
<http://www.womenlawyers.com/domestic.htm>
13. findings—Understanding what children say about living with domestic violence...
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/514.asp>
14. Family Violence Prevention Fund
<http://www.endabuse.org/>