

PARENT Talk



Children Who Witness Violence

Children may witness violence in their own homes, in their neighborhoods, at school or on television. If the violence is close to the child's everyday life, it can cause emotional problems during childhood and throughout life.

What qualifies as 'witnessing violence?'

Children may see violence inflicted upon others – hitting, kicking, raping, pushing or threatening, for example. Or, they may see the bruises or blood after an incident has occurred. They also may see it on television – on “real-life cop” shows, news reports, music videos and in sporting events. Such exposure can harm children emotionally.

Forms of violence

When children see violence, they experience emotional harm, whether it's a one-time-only incident or an ongoing series. Without counseling, the events can affect a child throughout life.

One-time-only violence, such as a death from a car accident or a shooting by a sniper, is isolated and random. Though children have no control over the incidents, they're not likely to be threatened again by the same act. Under these circumstances, children may have nightmares and heightened anxiety after seeing the violence. However, those fears eventually go away.

Such incidents teach children that just because something bad happens doesn't mean bad incidents will occur again. They don't have to fear for their own safety.

Repeated violence – in the child's home or neighborhood, for example – is personal. Children have no control over the events, which may occur again.

This type of violence is more emotionally harmful to children, with serious effects on development. This, too, teaches children a lesson – that violence is part of life that it's inescapable, and that adults near them don't care.

These children may experience nightmares and anxiety, as well as sadness, anger or numbness. To cope, children may deny that violence occurred and that it may occur again. For instance, a child who is beaten up while walking to school may later insist, “Nothing's going to happen to me. I'm OK.” And instead of looking out for future attacks, the child remains susceptible and may be attacked again.

The same is true if violence occurs in the home, even if the child isn't hurt physically. A child who witnesses' violence may deny it exists, as in the above example. Or the child learns that the adults in his or her life – the people most needed – are dangerous. As a result, children who experience violence learn that the future is uncertain, that normal behavior includes violence.

They may use threats to prevent future violence. Or they may react aggressively to the slightest provocation, again in self-defense. In some situations, children may feel safer away from home, so they run away.

In the long term, children who witness violence may be drawn into violent relationships as adults – either as victim or abuser.

Violence at a distance includes movies, TV shows, sports and games. A child who sees this isn't in immediate danger. However,

one long-term effect is the normalization of violence. If children see their parents watch violence for fun, they learn that some violence is tolerated by adults, that the natural reaction to violence – disgust, fear, anger – is not normal and that the “normal” reaction should be acceptance.

Less harmful for children are sports that include violence. Boxing, for example, is not as harmful to children because it's not everyday life. Kids know that it's a sport, that it has rules.

Reducing violence, reducing impact

If your children may be exposed to violence, take these steps to reduce the impact on their lives:

- **Admit to children that violence is real.** Then children can talk about past events to find out what happened, why it happened, and how to stop it from happening again. Also, putting experiences into words helps children feel as if they can control them.
- **Make children safe.** That is, remove them from the emotional, physical, or sexual abuse they experience or witness.
- **Provide a safe relationship with someone.** This shows that kind adults really exist, despite a child's experience.
- **Help children understand violence.** If a young child asks, “Why are people killing each other in Rwanda?” explain in simple terms the events leading up to the fighting. Let them know that they are far from the war. Young children don't understand distance and time and may fear for their own safety.
- **Make sure adults watch children.** Since children can't control themselves as easily as adults, adult supervision is necessary to keep them safe.
- **Treat all children with respect.** Not only will this teach children to respect others, but it can ease situations with “tough” kids. The more frightened a child feels, the more threats or posturing he or she may exhibit. Showing respect can increase the child's sense of safety and worthiness and possibly prevent violent situations.
- **Teach children to say, “I'm sorry.”** This is best done by example. Apologize when you made a mistake or behave poorly. This makes it easier for children to apologize, and it shows children that they can make mistakes and be forgiven. Also, this phrase and other polite terms smooth the way for children. It decreases the chances that they'll insult someone who's “sensitive” to disrespect, which lessens the chances of a confrontation or violent situation.

Get counseling

If you need more advice, a counselor can listen and help. Call Crisis Services, at (810) 257-3740 where a counselor is always available. TTY users call (810) 232-6310. ©