

PARENT Talk



Young Children Emotionally Hurt by Violence

When violence occurs near us, adults feel somewhat relieved if their children are infants, toddlers or in their early years of school because they think the youngsters are too young to be harmed emotionally. But it's a myth that young children aren't affected by violence. In fact, research shows that young children are the most vulnerable.

Most damaging to children is violence in their own home. If your children have witnessed or experienced violence – in the past or now – they need immediate and ongoing counseling.

Treatment is not only good for the children but also good for the community. Patterns of aggression and violence are evident by age 8, so children exposed to aggression and violence may become violent themselves unless they receive counseling.

Parents may need counseling, too, to learn how to best help their children and to recover themselves.

Violence outside the family also harms young children. They are extremely sensitive to the violence they see on television, movies, games or comic books. They also can be affected by stories they hear from older brothers and sisters.

How violence hurts young children

It's hard enough for adults to cope with violence, but young children simply don't have the tools. Children can't control their own responses – the brain doesn't mature until around age 9. Young children, when exposed to violence or other trauma, have an overwhelming arousal response. An incident may cause a child's pulse to race, breathing to increase and adrenaline to flow. The child may feel uncontrollable terror. And the event may cause a "pathway of fear" – that is, the next time the child feels even slight fear, he or she may feel these extreme responses instantly.

Events that may not be traumatic for adults or older children can cause younger children to experience traumatic stress disorder – commonly associated with veterans and victims of war. Research shows that an event that caused post-traumatic stress in only a few older children caused it in the majority of children age 10 and under. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a collection of signs and symptoms – such as uncontrollable fear and panic, depression or sleeplessness, anxiety, nightmares and rage – that follow a traumatic event, such as witnessing or experiencing violence. It may last a short period or last for years – or it may not show up until years after the event.

Young children who have to spend emotional energy coping with violence have fewer resources to cope with other factors in their lives. As a result, their school work may suffer. Their relationships with adults and other children may decline. If children have other problems, such as a divorce in the family or a disability, violence can harm them even more profoundly.

How violence hurts infants

Even infants 14 months and younger are affected by violence. Infants are especially vulnerable because they can't talk about the events, which could help to make sense of a situation. Infants just see images, and their sensations explode in response to certain situations. They can develop traumatic memories.

Most people don't have many memories before age 3, but we now know that when something goes wrong at that early age, children are harmed emotionally. Without therapy, they can develop "floating anxiety." As traumatized infants and toddlers grow older, they may feel anxious or fearful without being able to pinpoint a cause. This may last through adulthood and can even increase in adulthood with certain triggers.

Reality or fantasy?

Many adults don't know if their child is affected by violence. It's difficult to know what affects a child because children truly see the world differently. For instance, for young children, there is no difference between reality and fantasy. Even if they tell you they know something is "make believe," they may doubt that secretly. By the same token, children may think that real events are make believe, especially if the events are traumatic and they occur often. So if a baby-sitter watches "Friday the 13th" with your child, your youngster may suffer, without showing immediate signs.

If your child is affected ...

To find out if your child has been affected by violence, look for these signs:

- The child's play includes violence. Children use play to cope with events in their lives. But it can be a sign that they need extra help.
- Violence shows up in the child's drawings, songs or stories. This is another way children cope – and it's another sign.
- Children overreact in certain situations. For instance, a stranger knocks at the door and the child becomes hysterical.
- Children frequently have nightmares – or great fear even while awake.
- Children have fits of rage. Children who have suffered violence directly often act out their fear, anger and frustration.
- Children are aggressive with other kids, pets or adults.
- Children ask a lot of questions about death, guns, war or criminals. They may have been affected by TV shows or conversations. They need help interpreting these events.
- Children seem extremely sad, possibly depressed. Sometimes events can be so traumatic that children withdraw.
- Children have unexplainable physical ailments, such as stomach aches, diarrhea, and headaches. Stress and anxiety – which can be caused by exposure to violence – can cause physical problems.

Where to get help

Call GHS Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740, where a counselor is always available ©