

In what ways does witnessing domestic violence affect the lives of children?

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## **Introduction**

Almost 4 million children in the United States currently live in a home that has experienced domestic violence at some point in time; this puts them at high risk of witnessing or being directly involved in the abuse (Davis & Briggs, 2000). Without doubt, domestic violence can be a terrible event to be involved in. Children who witness domestic violence are “often referred to as the “forgotten” victims since interventions generally target the adult victim or perpetrator” (Davis, & Briggs, 2000). However, very few people consider the harm children can endure simply by witnessing domestic violence in their home. When examining the harm that can be caused, it’s important to keep in mind and understand the development of a child. According to Sigelman and Rider (2009), children have a much higher rate of growth than that of an adolescent or adult, which causes them to be more susceptible and influential to harm and patterns of poor behavior. From birth to about the age of five years old, children’s rate of learning is much higher in order to enhance their ability to gain basic motor and behavioral skills to function (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). If a child is in a family with domestic violence it is highly likely they will pick up the traits they witness from the abuse and experience behavioral issues as they grow older. However, if an adolescent were to witness the same event, they would not be nearly as likely to repeat or experience consequences from it due to their cognitive development and ability to analyze the situation and decipher right from wrong (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

## **Variations of witnessing domestic violence**

Witnessing domestic violence means the child could have directly seen the incident and made a visual connection, or it could be that the child has heard an event

take place and therefor made an audible connection. Approximately 13% of all children in the United States in 2003 (roughly 10 million children), witnessed domestic violence at least once between their parents. This data is not including the children who have experienced this more frequently. (Meltzer, et al., 2009) Another study conducted on children between the ages of 4 and 6 years old, and who were living with their biological mothers, found “1 in 2 children reported that they had heard grown-ups in their home yell at each other, and 1 in 3 reported they had observed grown-ups in their home hit each other” (Litrownik, et al., 2003, pg. 70). This data was collected through a study that interviewed mothers and children who previously, in some way, identified with maltreatment and remedial agencies. The results of this study illustrates that though domestic violence can sometimes go unnoticed, the traumatic experience affects more people than most individuals are aware of, and that each event can vary from the last.

### **Consequences of domestic violence on the child**

Each reported domestic violence occurrence can be different from the last and will therefore have different consequences. It is not the case that one can assume witnessing domestic violence will lead to specific results in a child’s life, but it can be expected that they will most likely be negative. Previous research has “demonstrated that witnessing domestic violence has a number of negative consequences” (Huth-Brocks, Levendosky, & Semel, 2001, pg. 270). There are multiple case studies, as listed by Dora Black (1998), which support this claim. Her data is also backed by a number of large-scale telephone survey’s and questionnaires completed by approximately 13,000 U.S. adults. After analyzing the research and many more case studies conducted on young children, Black is able to explain:

“Children and adults who witness horrific events, especially if they know the victims, are at greatly enhanced risk of developing psychiatric disorders, of which the most frequent is PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. They are also at higher risk for developing pathological grief reactions after bereavement, including anxiety and depressive disorder. In children, severe symptomatology may interfere with normal development, their ability to learn and make relationships, and may distort family functioning. In very young children, sudden and repeated disruptions of attachment bonds may lead to attachment disorders” (Black, 1998, pg. 204).

As previously noted, the related effects can vary extremely. They will range from academic, behavioral, psychological, family, and relationship complications in the future; as well as, learning that violence is a socially acceptable form of conflict resolution, experience partner violence in early adulthood, have higher psychological distress, lower social adjustment, or actively internalize or externalize their behaviors (Litrownik, et al, 2003; Sternberg et al, 1993; Huth-Brocks, et al., 2001; Meltzer, et al., 2009).

Some of the consequences from a traumatic event can be related back to the level of coping mechanisms within an individual. When an average person thinks of the term “trauma” the first reaction is to think of a serious event in which some form of horrific experience has occurred. However, psychological trauma, in particular, can be defined as “the experience of an inescapable stressful event that overwhelms one’s existing coping mechanisms” (Van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995, p.505). With that being said, due to natural development (during which coping mechanisms are much less experienced because of the lack of stressful experiences), a young child will be more

prone to develop symptoms. (Black, 1998) In a study conducted on 201 battered women, researchers found that those who experienced or witnessed violence in their families, as a young child, also reported greater depression and hopelessness (Sonnleitner, Basil, & Van Hasselt, 1999). Another example described adult women, who were also surveyed, openly reported having witnessed domestic violence as a young child, and also admitted to experiencing higher psychological distress and lower social adjustment than those who did not witness abuse (Davis & Briggs, 2000). While one set of these surveyed women had experienced battery and the other did not, they both experienced domestic violence as a child. The consequences from experiencing or witnessing the domestic violence in the home had varied between the two studies, providing evidence to support the claim that every situation can have a different outcome but will ultimately fall under a similar pattern of negative results and a common variable of personal development.

One symptom/consequence that is most frequent to show up right away is internalizing or externalizing behaviors. One measure of internalizing and externalizing behaviors is the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Jenkins and Oakley, researchers from Oxford University, hypothesize children's interactions early in life can cause patterns of emotion to regulate around anger, as it is often expressed as a first response to upsetting events. When anger becomes the default reaction with others, children can become less competent at properly organizing emotions, causing them to be at greater risk of externalizing problems. (Jenkins & Oakley, 1997)

Multiple studies have linked witnessing domestic violence at home with long lasting behavior issues at school or within society. A study completed by Marcus,

Lindahl, and Malik (2001) shows the way a child understands aggression can be intertwined with how they react to situations outside the home by showing aggressive behavior toward others. According to Albert Bandura, as cited in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, individuals do not inherit violent tendencies but rather repeat what is modeled to them (Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007; Isom, 1998). In the example of domestic violence, he believes if young children witness violence in the home the child will understand it as a normal way to resolve conflict. This can be seen in future romantic relationships as adolescents or even adults. One study found that young boys who had witnessed aggression between their parents were more likely to "view aggression as justifiable in relationships, to regulate their anger poorly, and to report that their friends engaged in higher levels of abusive behavior in their romantic relationships; each of these factors, in turn, uniquely predicted higher levels of aggression toward their dating partners." (Fosco, DeBoard, and Grych, 2007, pg.10) It is becoming more common to notice the effects from witnessing domestic violence as a young child continue throughout aspects of their lives as these children get older.

The long-term effects of witnessing domestic violence can appear later in life in multiple ways. In one study "approximately 50% of school-age children who had witnessed domestic violence, but were no longer living in a violent home, were significantly behind (at least 1 year) in reading abilities." (Huth-Brocks, Levendosky, & Semel, 2001, pg. 271) This evidence suggests that there are some long lasting effects to witnessing domestic violence that can be seen as little as a year later. However, this data was not compared to children from non-violent households. In yet another study, researchers from Marquette University examined short-term and long-term effects of interparental aggression among children. The results suggest "children's immediate and

enduring evaluations of violence provide insight into short-term and long-term [effects] of living in violent homes” (Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007, pg. 14). It was popular in these findings that a child who has witnessed interparental aggression was likely to exhibit aggressive behavior as a parent themselves. Through examining this data one can also suggest the children perceived the events as an acceptable way of living and is therefore willing (with or without intentionally doing so) to bring these actions into their own homes later in life. The representation of a child’s home environment will likely follow them through life in how similar situations are handled, as explained in the preceding studies.

The given research suggests that witnessing domestic violence does indeed have many negative effects on the life of a child. Lack of feeling safe, separation anxiety, poor sleeping habits, self-blame, aggressive/regressive behavior issues, and delinquency are all possible consequences of witnessing domestic violence. Witnessing domestic violence between parents can also dramatically decrease a child’s faith in personal safety and security, while bring discouraging feelings of whether or not they will ever be taken care of. This will consequently shape future attachment quality (Stiles, 2002). There are a multitude of factors that come into play with actively witnessing this abuse, such as home environment, parental status, age, and neighborhood. Long term effects can affect many areas of an individual’s life including future relationships and family dynamics.

### **Family-wide involvement**

In a study of the Jewish social welfare population (75% of which had parents born in Middle Eastern or North African countries), children and family members were

deeply interviewed regarding family domestic violence history, childhood depression, behavior problems, and parental perceptions of the children's behavior problems, in hopes of a relationship between the included variables. It was conducted on 110 children and their parents. Parents reported that their children were experiencing internalized and/or externalized behavior issues, 100% of these children also acknowledged this. (Sternberg, Lamb, Greenbaum, Cicchetti, Dawud, Cortes, Krispin, & Lorey, 1993). Not only was finding that the children also acknowledge that they had behavioral problems an interesting result, but this study was also able to conclude, children who had witnessed domestic violence were significantly more likely to experience these problems than those who did not (Sternberg et al, 1993).

How the family understands and develops from a domestic violence occurrence is a large factor in addressing the issue of witnessing domestic violence. In some cases the mother is unstable, lacks nurturing qualities, and is unsupportive. The father may be the one causing the violence and therefore ignoring it as an issue altogether. From data gathered from previous studies one can conclude this will dramatically increase the likelihood the child will perceive this as a normal interaction (Litrownik, et al., 2003; Huth-Bocks, et al., 2001; Meltzer, et al., 2009; Black, 1998). However, sometimes a mother, or other influential person, is still very nurturing and supportive for the child and can explain the actions occurring are far from normal or acceptable. According to multiple researchers, this will decrease the child's chances of exhibiting the same actions but will increase the child's awareness of right and wrong (Fosco, et al., 2007; Huth-Bocks, et al., 2001; Litrownik, et al., 2003).



## **The next step**

According to all the gathered data, we can conclude that domestic violence does, in fact, have a negative effect on young children in both short-term and long-term tendencies. The variation of these consequences can range from, but is not limited to, psychological to behavioral issues. It has been argued by many researchers a child's consideration for "threat, coping efficacy, attributes about why violence occurs, and perceptions of the justifiability of aggression are central to their efforts to make sense of domestic violence" (Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007, pg. 10). It's important to keep in mind the memory attached to our experiences is what shapes our reactions and thoughts throughout our life. The next step in research is to better understand how witnessing domestic violence at a young age can affect an individual later in life, with an enhanced look at memory development. A look into how memories change over time and can affect decisions would be an interesting topic to examine in hopes to better understand what influences a child to have domestic violence consequences as an adult. The question to be answered is, how does a memory of witnessing domestic violence influence decisions as an adult, and how does it compare to the recorded history of the event?

## **Method**

### *Population and Sample*

The sampling frame for this cross-sectional study will be adults who were recognized as a child witness (ages 4-10) to a recorded case of domestic violence. Participants will be selected from the population of current residents in Washington State. The individual's will be selected by a computerized system using a stratified

random sampling method. This method will guarantee a diverse group of adults will be selected from around the state. I will obtain consent to view personal records either from the state or the direct person(s) involved. A group of adults who had not witnessed domestic violence as a child will be used as a control group for comparison.

### *Design/Measurements*

This cross-sectional study will follow an in-person interview style survey design. Researchers will ask adult participants to meet with interviewers to discuss their experience as a child witnessing domestic violence, work history, family lifestyle, criminal history, and current and past relationships. The independent variable will be the documented police reports of domestic violence. The dependent variable is the survey results from participants who have and have not witnessed domestic violence. All participants will be surveyed for approximately 30 – 45 minutes. For list of survey questions refer to appendix A.

Memory accuracy will be measured by comparing how the participant remembers witnessing domestic violence against the details recorded in the documented police case file.

Level of influence of the memory will be measured by comparing responses to the related questions between those who have and have not witnessed domestic violence as well as comparing results against the Influential Memory Key (created for this study, based upon previous research). For full key refer to Appendix B.

### *Materials*

As proven valid through multiple studies on witnessing domestic violence, an interview style survey will be used (Meltzer, et. al, 2009; Black, 1998; Litrownik, et al, 2003; Sternberg, et al, 1993). Questions will discuss events of domestic violence, work, relationships, family life, and criminal history. All questions will be asked to all participants to ensure accuracy and availability for comparisons. As this is an in-person interview, an audio recorder will be present to record all responses. I will also be utilizing the previously recorded case documents retrieved from police departments in Washington State. An Influential Memory Key will also be used to determine the level of influence of witnessing domestic violence.

Response rates are higher, there is more control for the interviewer to direct the questions and provide clarification, and the interviewer is able to gain a full understanding of what the respondent wants to say through using an interview technique. However, it is essential to provide an identical environment to all respondents (facial expressions of the interviewer, room design, pleasant vs. rude attitude). Training and supervision will be required for each interviewer to prep for the study. This will consist of a one week session (2-3 hours a day for 7 days) to guarantee all researchers know how to act appropriately and not interfere with any data.

### *Procedure*

I will first use a stratified random sampling method to gather a diverse list of adults who had and had not witnessed domestic violence as a child. From here I will be sure to gain approval to pull and examine the police records of domestic violence related to its corresponding witnesses. The next step is the interviewing process which

will start by asking for informed consent from all participants. I will proceed to ask them questions regarding witnessing domestic violence, work, family, criminal history, and relationships. To reduce risk of inaccurate responses I will not inform the participants that I have access to the police record of the domestic violence incident.

## **Limitations**

### *Sample Limitations*

The sample for this study only included adult individuals who are currently living within Washington State. In order to improve the validity of this study it would be important to adjust the range so that it includes adults living in all areas of the United States. This adjustment would allow for a larger sample and more accurate results.

This study is also looking at children who were between the ages of 4-10 years old when the incident occurred. This provides us with a small sample. To increase data accuracy the sample will need to broaden, in turn changing some of the dynamics of the study (as it will no longer pertain only to young children).

### *Ethical Considerations*

It is important to keep in mind the level of privacy and confidentiality when examining vulnerable topics such as domestic violence and police records. Confidentiality is an ethical obligation we, as researchers, are bound to. To allow respondents to be comfortable answering survey questions confidentiality should be made aware right away. No information should be given out to anyone but strict research personnel and should only be used for research purposes. It would be a

requirement to gain some form of consent (either from the state or the person(s) directly involved with each case) in order to complete this study.

The data collected from this study will directly answer the research questions. By surveying the population directly and analyzing the recorded events we can ensure the results are tailored to the questions we are asking, ensuring we get some kind of conclusion.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all interviews are complete they will be sorted between those who had and had not witnessed domestic violence. From here I will examine the responses regarding having witnessed domestic violence and compare them with any recorded cases I have available to test for accuracy in the memory of the participant. The results will be recorded. Next the responses regarding work, family life, relationships, and criminal history will be examined and compared to the Influential Memory Key. The responses to these questions from adults who did witness domestic violence as a child will be compared to the responses to the same questions from those who had not witnessed domestic violence using coded key words. All results will be put into a computerized system which will code and compare them. At this point in time we might be able to see a trend in the gathered data. From here I will go on to discuss what trends may have been found and how they relate to answering the initial research questions. All results will directly affect future research and provided a basis for a new or expanded study.

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## Appendix A:

## Sample survey questions:

1. Do you work?
2. How long have you been at your current job?
3. How many jobs have you held in the last 5 years?
4. Describe any reasons you may have been let go from a workplace
5. What responsibilities do you have at work?
6. Marital Status: Single Married Divorced Other:
7. Please describe your most recent relationship:
8. Would you consider your relationship to be successful?
9. How many intimate relationships have you held in the last 5 years?
10. How long do your relationships last on average?
11. Do you and your partner argue: 1-3 times a week, 4-6 times a week, 6-8 times a week, or more than 8 times a week?
12. Describe your family
13. What role do you play in your family?
14. Does your family argue: 1-3 times a week, 4-6 times a week, 6-8 times a week, or more than 8 times a week?
15. Describe some of your family values
16. Describe your criminal history
17. Have you witnessed domestic violence as a child? Yes No
18. Can you explain, in detail, what happened?
  - a. Who was involved?

b. Where did it happen?

c. When did it happen?

d. How did it happen?

19. How do you feel you were directly affected by witnessing domestic violence?

## Appendix B:

## INFLUENTIAL MEMORY KEY – RE: witnessing domestic violence

Directions: If respondent expresses 5 or more, then memory of domestic violence was influential

- Experience depression
- Strongly internalizes or externalizes behaviors
- Lack of feeling safe
- Strong aggressive behavior
- Poor attachment quality
- Resolve conflict with violence
- Understands aggression to be okay
- Poor anger management
- Exhibits abusive behaviors
- Poor coping mechanisms (includes shutting down or becoming aggressive to cope with intense experiences)
- Experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- High levels of anxiety