

# THE EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

*My name is Joan Cooney  
and I am the Supervising Judge of the Family Court in the Ninth Judicial District.*

*I hope this video will help women coming into the court  
to understand that by protecting themselves they are protecting their children.*

As you sit here in Family Court today waiting for your cases to be called, or for your papers, I want to talk with you about the effects of domestic violence on children. It is important that you know what happens to children in homes where there has been domestic violence.

You're here because you want to end the violence in your home.

You're taking an important step and everyone knows this is a painful time for you.

You obviously care about your children or you would not be here.

It is essential that you know what you can do to help your children. Children always need our help. Domestic violence affects every member of the family, including children.

You are not alone.

*Between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year.*

Some children hear and see the conflict and violence in home. Others don't actually hear and see the incidents but they sense the fear or observe the consequences of the violence. Unfortunately, we cannot hide domestic violence from children.

*Between 80 and 90 percent of children are aware of the violence that occurs in their home.*

Children can react differently to domestic violence depending on their age or whether they are a boy or a girl. It may also depend on how serious the abuse in the household has been and many other factors. You should know that while many children do suffer from domestic violence, which we will be discussing today, there are many children who appear to cope well with the experience. The long term effects, however, cannot be precisely measured.

*Some children are affected physically.* They may have headaches and stomach aches. They may become nervous, anxious and tired. Some children become sick more frequently; stop cleaning themselves; start acting younger than their ages; abuse themselves; eat poorly; take drugs or alcohol; or become delinquent.

*Some children are affected emotionally.* They may blame themselves. They may be sad, confused, fearful, angry, depressed or embarrassed.

*Domestic violence affects girls and boys differently.* Boys often act out. Sometimes learning to resolve conflict by reacting in a physically controlling or violent manner. Girls are likely to feel the suffering inside. Sometimes feeling badly about themselves or behaving toward others in a passive manner.

*The harmful effects of violence can occur before children are born. Women who are physically abused while they are pregnant have more miscarriages than those who are not abused. More women have miscarriages who are physically abused while they are pregnant and severe physical abuse can cause birth defects in unborn children.*

Once children are born they continue to suffer. Babies may not attach as well to people and their health may be affected because their feeding and sleeping routines are disrupted. Babies may get sick more often. They may not respond to people well. And they may have delays in their development.

Preschoolers suffer from the effects of domestic violence, too. They may become irritable, anxious and fearful of being alone. Or they may start to behave younger than they are.

Elementary-age children may have developmental delays, behavioral problems or inadequate social skills.

Teenagers suffer when present in families where domestic violence occurs. Teens may have difficulty controlling their emotions. They may become unable to trust others and become unable to form stable bonds with others.

If parents who suffer from domestic violence rely inappropriately on their children emotionally, those teens may feel responsible for the violence in their homes and may take on the role of family nurturer. They may be prevented from being children which may contribute to the teens feeling of pressure, anxiety or depression. Sometimes teenagers from violent homes experience guilt and shame about their violent homes and are fearful to talk to others about it for fear that bad things will happen to the family. *Studies have shown that teenagers from violent homes have higher risks of alcohol and illegal drug abuse. Sometimes teens blame the victim for the violence and then feel guilty about their conflicted feelings. Some studies show that between 20 and 40 percent of chronically violent teens have witnessed domestic violence at some point in their lives.*

***My name is Susan Pollett  
and I am the Executive Director of the Pace Woman's Justice Center.***

*The Pace Woman's Justice Center, through its family court legal program, helps thousands of families a year by getting orders of protection for them and for their children.*

You've heard some of the harmful effects that children may suffer who have been exposed to domestic violence in their homes. You're probably thinking what can I do to help my children? What can I do to make life better for them? None of us wants our children to suffer.

*The most important thing that you can do is to teach your children to be safe.*

How can you do that? *You must teach your children to stay out of the fight.* They can be physically hurt if they try to stop the fighting. Depending on the circumstances, you must work out a safety plan for your children.

There are different possible safety strategies.

Teach your children to go to their room or another safe place in the house. Tell them about different ways to escape the house. Have a plan that they can go to a specific friend or neighbor's house, if need be. Teach your children how to call for help. At a minimum, they should be

taught how to make an emergency 911 phone call. They must also be told how to tell an adult what is happening in the house. A safety plan is important because children need a safe place with an adult they trust in order to heal. The children may need help for a long time. And their physical and emotional survival must be a top priority.

Parents need to nurture their children. It is also important to get children enrolled in counseling as soon as possible to expand their support system so that they can receive additional nurturing.

How can you nurture your children so that feel better?

Therapists have given us some guidance about what actions parents can do to improve the situation. Give your children trust and respect. Be receptive to their feeling, opinions, activities and friends. Teach them how to be independent. Give them privacy and believe in them. Give your children emotional security. Be gentle and dependable so that your children will feel safe and comfortable talking with you. They will respond not only to your words but also to your actions. Give your children physical security. Provide them with healthy food, safe housing and appropriate clothing. Teach them about eating well and taking care of themselves with good personal hygiene.

You have to pay attention to their safety. You have to try to maintain routines. You have to attend to any physical or emotional problems your children may have by speaking with school personnel and other professionals. At the same time, you have to supply discipline. It must be consistent and you must make rules that are clear and are appropriate for your child's age and development.

There are other ways to nurture your children as well.

You must give them your time by participating in their lives. Go to their activities, their school sports and special events. Take your children with you to your activities. Let your children get to know you. Your children need your encouragement. Help them to follow their interests. Allow them to disagree with you. Tell them when they have improved. Teach them new skills and let them make mistakes. Give your children affection. Hug and kiss them. Tell them you love them. Be especially affectionate when your children are physically or emotionally hurt.

This is a long list of things your children need to grow up strong. But you need to care for yourself, too, in the midst of it all. You must give yourself personal time. Keep healthy. Maintain friendships and accept love. *You need to be strong and healthy to be able to take care of your children.*

This is a lot of information to take in at a time when you are probably more stressed than usual. There is a lot of evidence that exposure to domestic violence can have a damaging effect on children. Children respond differently at different ages and stages of maturity. Here are some bullet points to help you remember the main points of this talk.

We hope they help.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD

- Make a safety plan
- Talk to your child
- Listen to your child
- Get counseling
- Take care of yourself
- Tell them you love them AND

• ***IT'S NOT THEIR FAULT.***

## SAFETY PLAN WITH YOUR CHILD

- Tell them to stay out of fight
- identify a safe place
- identify a safe contact
- identify safe routes

• **911**

## PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Frequent illnesses
- Developmental delays
- Tiredness, lack of energy
- Nervousness, easily startled
- Short attention span
- Learning problems at school
- Eating disorders, drug/alcohol abuse

## **EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN**

- Shame, guilt, self blame
- Grief for family loss
- Confusing about conflicted feelings
- Fear of abandonment
- Fear of expressing emotions
- Fear for personal safety
- Fear for safety of parent
- Anger about chaos in their life
- Depression
- Feelings of helplessness
- Embarrassment

## **BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN**

- Acting out – aggressive, antisocial behavior
- Internalizing – guilt, self blame
- Manipulative behavior
- Attention-seeking behavior
- Rigid defenses – aloof, sarcastic, loner
- Inability to concentrate

## **EXAMPLES OF ACTING OUT BEHAVIOR**

- Temper tantrums
- Hitting, biting, screaming
- Destroying toys or other objects
- Bullying, fighting
- Swearing, threatening
- High risk activities
- Pushing limits
- Disrespectful of authority

## **EXAMPLES OF INTERNALIZING BEHAVIORS**

- Withdrawal
- Refusal or unwillingness to communicate
- Inability to connect with others socially
- Shyness
- Separation anxiety
- Depression
- Caretaking behavior inappropriate for age

## **TEACH YOUR CHILD TO BE S.A.F.E.**

- Stay out of the fight
- Ask for help
- Find an adult who will listen
- Everyone knows it's not your fault