

THE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

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Young children who have witnessed acts of violence, even if they were not directly involved, can be deeply affected, a new study in the American Journal of Psychiatry (February, 2000) shows. But because these kids often show no obvious symptoms of harm, it's easy for parents, educators, and doctors to overlook the damage done to them. Further, parents are not always aware that their preschoolers have been exposed to violence -- either because it happened when the child was away from home, or because the parents are repressing such information.

Preschoolers who had witnessed violence tended to internalize their problems and were often depressed, anxious, and withdrawn, the study found. In contrast, victims of mild violence were apt to engage in aggressive and disruptive behaviors. Often professionals pay attention to kids with obvious symptoms of exposure to violence, like aggression. This study highlights the importance of paying attention to children who are witnesses and who may not show on the outside that they are being affected by violence, but are certainly showing symptoms on the inside.

The study looked at 155 families with children 3 1/2 to 6 1/2 years old who were enrolled in a Head Start program in a "moderately violent" neighborhood near Washington, DC It found that three-quarters of the children reported that they had witnessed or been a victim of at least one violent incident, but only two-thirds of the parents said this had happened to their children.

Professionals have been more concerned about adolescents and violence because that is where we see a lot of dangerous behavior occurring. These findings show that violence is significant in young children's lives as well as in older children's lives.

The findings from this research indicated that the children reported higher levels of exposure than the parents reported. For example, 37% of the children said they had witnessed severe violence, but only 7.7% of the parents reported this. Similarly, 31% of the children said they were victims of severe violence, but only 0.8% of parents said their children were victims. These results may be because parents are unaware of their children's exposure to violence -- for instance, if the child spends part of his day in childcare -- or because the parents may repress such information. This study also found that children who are exposed to violence tend do much worse if parents are unavailable to them afterward.

Parents must remember they are the first resource for their child. For a child to function well in a dangerous and difficult society, parents need to be functioning well.