

Domestic violence cripples children's lives

Written by Deborah M. Clubb | Commercial Appeal
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In homes filled with terror, youngsters are witnesses and victims, and the resulting scars can affect attitudes and behavior throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

Every day in Memphis, police officers respond to 50-60 911 calls that report domestic violence.

A woman, a man or a child is on the phone, calling for help because someone in their family is threatening or hurting someone else.

Much of the time, children are there. They are hearing it, seeing it, sometimes literally feeling the pain as someone who should love and protect them instead is beating, shouting, slapping and slamming.

Children watch as their fathers beat, kick and cut their mothers, pull their hair, strangle them, holding them against walls with their feet off the floor. Children listen or watch as their mothers are raped by husbands or boyfriends who so control their lives that the women will not report the assaults.

Sometimes these mothers cannot or do not protect their children from predators -- boyfriends, husbands, other relatives -- who sexually abuse the children.

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Each year in our city, girls as young as 8, 9 and 10 years of age become pregnant due to rape by a household member. Girls are over-sexualized -- not only from cultural images or music lyrics -- but by being sexually used at tragically early ages by males in their environment.

The culture of violence in intimate relationships is pervasive -- and women sometimes are the batterers. Children learn to hide, to cope, to clean up bloody messes and act like nothing happened. Too often, they learn that this is how relationships work, this is what relationships are -- violent, painful, unfair, destructive, turbulent.

These men have such control, have isolated the women from any family or friends they might have had, or have so tapped into the women's fear, shame and lack of self-worth, that the women stay in the relationship. They don't believe they can survive on their own and, in this community, some of them don't survive the abuse.

Who can forget the 12-year-old girl who saw her father choke and stab her mother to death, and how he forced her to help him cut her mother up the next day? That man also was the father of the girl's two younger brothers.

Last year 17 people were murdered during domestic violence; nine of those were children under age 4.

This violence is in every kind of home, and every income range, race and religion. The names of local women killed by men who were supposed to love them includes teachers, nurses, business executives.

And even though hundreds of assaults are never reported, still Judge Lee Wilson in General Sessions Criminal Court Div. 10 hears 140-170 domestic violence cases every day.

Some within law enforcement talk quietly and with frustration about the families that seem to use 911 as a referee, as their only option because they are not equipped to change the dynamics in the household themselves.

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The impact this chaos and screaming and terror has on children cannot be overstated.

Even at ages less than 1, babies are affected. Their brains are taking it in. Research clearly shows the crucial impact on development during the first three years of life.

Constant change and chaos cause stress that limits optimal brain development, as we know from the "Better Brains for Babies" training offered earlier this year by The Urban Child Institute.

Children in unpredictable environments develop overly reactive brains that can make learning and discipline difficult. In addition, according to "Better Brains," "A baby who experiences chronic stress may develop anti-social behavior later in life."

Violence at home is ruining our children's present and future, crippling their ability to become productive citizens and parents.

Babies who grow up in chaotic, abusive homes become adolescents and teenagers who oppress and abuse their girlfriends, and become girls who expect to be mistreated.

We see it seep into the dating violence among our adolescents and teenagers, who have begun to turn to law enforcement for orders of protection or with assault charges.

As we pause in April to consider National Child Abuse Prevention Month and Sexual Assault Prevention Month, we should rededicate ourselves as a community to helping all our children live in order and security. Help them to live with a sense of control and the ability to develop self-regulation and positive stable relationships.

We can work together in the Erase Domestic Crime Collaborative on strategies for educating people across the community about the critical linkage between brain development, child

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rearing/parenting and eventual behavior of adults.

We can all be part of helping families trapped in violence to make safe choices. Tips on how to help and community resources are at erasedomesticcrime.com.

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