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Violence Begets Violence

Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Violence is pervasive in our society. It manifests itself in TV programs, in movies, on the streets, in our schools, and in our families. More than 3 million children are reported as victims of child abuse and neglect each year. In 1995, 3-4 million women were abused by their husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, significant others, or relatives. Teenagers are more than twice as likely as persons over age 20 to be assaulted, and most violence occurs close to schools or in the home. Except for rape, violence is more likely to be directed toward boys than girls. On the average, children and adolescents watch 20-25 hours of TV per week, and on some programs, see 20-25 violent acts per hour.

Witnessing excessive fighting in the home, seeing parents lose their tempers easily, and being exposed to violence in the neighborhood while growing up are harmful to children, even if they are not the direct victims. These circumstances put children at greater risk for becoming victims of violence or participating in violence later on, says the American Psychological Association's (APA) task force on violence and the family. Living in poverty, having easy access to weapons, and accepting violence as a way to solve problems are also risk factors associated with later violence.

Without intervention, violence seems to perpetuate itself throughout the lifespan. It can start with the abuse of a child, who might later abuse a dating partner, then a spouse, and might even end up being abused in old age by his or her own children.

Besides the different influences that can lead to later violence, growing up with violence can have other consequences, including substance abuse, emotional disorders, poor achievement in school, aggressive behavior, serious injuries, health problems, suicide attempts, separation or divorce, physical and mental disabilities, and other after-effects lasting many years beyond the original violent incidents.

A common dynamic of family violence is that, in most cases, the *"perpetrator misuses power, control and authority and has a history of violence. There is also an increased likelihood of other forms of abuse occurring when one form of abuse already exists in the family – or may occur in the future without appropriate intervention."* If a child is being abused by the father, there is a good chance that the father is also abusing the child's mother.

Other risk factors that are commonly associated with the various forms of family violence are: being

isolated from the community and extended family; expecting too much from a child or elderly parent; seeing violence in the neighborhood; and accepting that men can exert control over the family members.

Children who experience *"multiple acts of violence, or violence of more than one variety, appear to be at risk of continuing the cycle of violence."* Children who are neglected, who experience harsh, excessive physical punishment, and who do not receive emotional support outside the home are the most likely to be violent as adults.

Surveys examining the relationship between violence in the family in the home and later involvement with violence have found the following:

- Boys who saw their fathers abusing their mothers are at an extreme risk of using violence in their own homes as adults.
- The likelihood of marital violence increases when one partner has experienced physical abuse and observed violence between parents.
- Various forms of stress, such as caring for older people, criminal activity, alcoholism, lack of empathy, and paternal aggression are often associated with family violence.

A gun in the home makes an individual eight times more likely to be killed or to kill a family member or intimate acquaintance; three times more likely to be killed by or to kill someone in the home; and five times more likely to commit suicide or have a family member commit suicide.

Chronic exposure to viewing violence in the media can increase one's fear of becoming a victim, can desensitize one from violence, and can increase one's appetite for becoming involved with violence or exposing oneself in violence.

The APA report found that not everyone exposed to family violence suffers severe consequences; some individuals seem to be more resilient. Some of the resilience factors identified by the experts are:

- psychological "hardiness"
- experience of more positive than negative behaviors
- high self-esteem
- involvement with extended family and with people in the community
- support from teachers and friends
- family members' participation in mutual and independent activities

Even with all the shocking statistics that show how prevalent family violence is, *"the numbers still don't reflect all those who are being abused yet fail to come forward, especially women and children from families of color and outside the mainstream culture."* Failure to report violence is common because many people still see family matters as private, fail to see family violence as a crime, and many victims fear retaliation from the abuser.

Other reasons for the under reporting of family violence include:

- family members minimizing or denying abuse in order to preserve the family unit
- perpetrators' denial of abusive behavior
- victims' financial or emotional dependence on the abuser
- inability to respond to the abuse (e.g. when the victim is a child or a frail elderly person)
- discounting emotional abuse because no physical signs exist
- victims' belief that police or service providers will not help or will be unjust or discriminatory (especially among ethnic minority or gay and lesbian families)
- lack of nearby appropriate services (a common problem in rural areas)

The task force strongly recommends developing prevention strategies to keep family violence from occurring. These strategies and programs need to be made available through schools, hospitals, religious organizations, and even recreational centers so everyone has a chance to use them if they need them. To prevent abuse from ever starting the **programs should focus on helping families communicate, resolve conflicts, and deal with power and control issues** without resorting to violence.

Other important resources needed to keep existing violent situations from escalating are:

- community programs that have: shelters, counseling, and therapy for children and adults, both victims and perpetrators; substance abuse prevention and treatment; home visits for high risk families; advocacy and legal services; and programs that strengthen the bond between parent and child
- collaboration among experts to conduct better evaluation programs to determine the effectiveness of the treatment services offered
- mandatory pre-sentence assessment and treatment for people convicted of violence against a family member
- training for all teachers and school administrators to be able to detect and intervene in family violence or abuse situations and teach children how to recognize violence and seek help when they witness or experience it

Violence in the home is never acceptable. It never produces desirable outcomes if closeness, caring, respect, and effective learning are the goals. Families, especially, must learn to stop the violence, and abusers must begin to take responsibility for their behavior and for the safety of those they love.

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