

The Long Arm Of Domestic Violence

Public attention to domestic violence tends to focus on the immediacy of the problem. In other words when the average person thinks about domestic violence, thoughts go to the fright of the victim in the situation and physical harm caused. Media attention often reinforces the present context of the violence and perhaps the criminal aspect and legal outcome. Little consideration is given to the emotional and psychological aftermath. The emotional and psychological aftermath can last years to a lifetime and affects not only the target of the violence but also the myriad of family members and relationships.

When children are involved, the aftermath can fracture or mal-align parent/child relationships in a manner that can continue to perpetuate distress for all involved.

In many instances children share in the trauma of the violent event. They witness it, observe the aftermath of harm to the parent or environment or are left to cope with the emotional and psychological distress of the violated parent. Further, their care can be affected by the violated parent who is traumatised, may in some cases be thus over-protective and in other cases unable to meet the emotional needs of the child in view of their own emotional dishevelment. Such children whose emotional and psychological care is altered in this manner develop problems in their own right ranging from fears and worries to lacking a secure sense of self and worth. In turn, their emotional and psychological issues manifest in behaviour at home and school next feeding into a cascade of more problems for the affected parent.

If the parental relationship continues where violence is a feature, children may learn that violence is a reasonable strategy to achieve goals and hence become violent themselves. Alternately, some children learn to be submissive and avoid conflict as a strategy to minimize risk of perceived violence and thus withdraw from meaningful participation where reliance on others is necessary. Further, some children may align with the violated parent, believing it is their responsibility to keep that parent from harm. They may feel a need to remain at home to keep their parent safe or suffer distraction at school as they worry about the safety of the parent at home. Other children may in fact align with the perpetrator and participate in the violation of the affected parent. These children grow to become bullies in their own right whose behaviour the violated parent cannot control and whose behaviour is reinforced by the perpetrator.

If the parental relationship ends, children may be subject to custody and access disputes locking them into an

ongoing parental conflict. Some children will seek relief themselves from the perpetrator. However, the perpetrator may not believe or accept that their child is uncomfortable, scared, upset or angry with them. Promises of better behaviour are met with scepticism. Children may naturally align with the violated parent in view of that parent's distress and be forever unforgiving to the perpetrator. Efforts by the perpetrator to reconcile with the child directly may therefore prove unsuccessful. The child may be influenced directly or indirectly by the affected parent or in his or her own right may reasonably be forever fearful and suspicious of the perpetrator.

In more extreme cases, due to size differential and the relative maturity of the child, the child may harbour feelings and thoughts of the perpetrator as quite larger than life. Fears, real and/or imagined, may intrude their conscious and unconscious mind causing them to hide or avoid detection by the perpetrator. Their behaviour can become organized by these fears and affect all manner of relationships thereafter as well as school and then vocational participation and performance.

The impact of domestic violence is not restricted to the violent act and physical harm caused. The impact of domestic violence thus reaches to immediate and extended family. As affected persons interact with the world, they too carry the aftermath with them and through their interactions, into the rest of the world. The impact of domestic violence next shows itself through fractured and altered relationships and learned behaviours of the affected persons who in turn make their imprint on others.

Needless to say, domestic violence is not a good thing. Nor is the impact isolated to the direct victim.