

# Experiencing and Witnessing Domestic Violence on School Aged Children

By

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## Abstract

*Domestic violence is an important international social and health issue .Far less is known about the impact of children being subjected to domestic violence. In view of this, this article seeks to identify causes of domestic violence. Causes are examined from social, cultural and psychological standpoints. Ways by which children are exposed to domestic violence are highlighted. The paper seeks to establish the consequences school children encounter as they experience and witness violence in the family. Ways of preventing domestic violence are identified. The article prescribes ways of helping these school children*

## 1. Background and Context

Domestic violence is an ancient problem, that mere mention of it today as an ongoing crisis should really make our society embarrassed and oppressive. It has recently gained increasing recognition as a serious social problem the world over (Clinard and Meier, 1998: 168).The family structure tends to hide patterns of assaultive behavior from official view, but increased sensitivity in recent years has encouraged a greater awareness of the problem and its pervasive effects in the family structure. When domestic violence is discussed people tend to think of violence between two adults, typically husband and wife. People have long forgotten that in a large percentage of families who experience violence, children suffer in silence (Estrada, 2009). A lot of focus has been on the cycle of violence, power and control and safety plans for adult victims. It is long overdue to raise awareness about the psychological, emotional, physical and social impact of domestic violence on children. Child exposure to domestic violence is a serious, public health, justice, social services and educational problem. It is a major social and health concern affecting countries worldwide. The world health organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity (Brunnet, 2009).Martin (2002) asserts that children exposed to family violence cross all cultural and socio economic lines. For many children home is far from a safe haven.

Research on children who witness family violence is a case of counting the hard-to count and measuring the hard to measure (Fantuzzo et al, 1997). The global dimensions of children exposed to domestic violence are alarming as highlighted by studies on prevalence. Numerous studies undertaken in both developed and developing countries document its prevalence. Several studies have found that 85 -90 % of the time when a violent incident took place in a domestic situation, children were present and children were also abused during the violent incident in about 50 % of those cases .A research by United Nations Secretary General (2006) provides what is believed to be a first critical step towards a fuller picture of how many children are exposed to domestic violence in the home. This is the first study to estimate the numbers of children exposed to domestic violence globally. According to the study as many 275 million children worldwide are exposed to domestic violence in the home. This range is conservative estimate based on the limitations of the available data – limited by under reporting both by the abused parent and children who live in the home. The table below shows number of children exposed to domestic violence in various countries from the research carried out by United Nations Secretary General (2006).

**Table 1: The National Estimates of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence for the Body Shop International Countries where available:**

The Body Shop International Region	The Body Shop International Country	Estimated Number of Children exposed to domestic violence-Range
UK and ROI	UK Republic of Ireland	240,000 to 903,000 8,000 to 42,000
Americas	Canada Mexico USA	85,000 to 362,000 1,6 to 8,5 million. 339,000 to 2.7 million.
Europe ,Middle East and Africa	Austria Belgium Denmark Finland France Germany Greece Holland Iceland Italy Kuwait Norway Portugal Romania Saudi Arabia South Africa Spain Sweden Switzerland Turkey	82,000 26,000to 170,000 22,000 61,000 240,000 to 802,000 1 million 45,000 237,000to 431,000 2,000 385,000 to 1,1 million 28,000 38,000 to 68,000 44,000 to 168,000 300,000 1 million 500 000 to 1,3 million 188,000 46,000 8,000 to 76,000 2 to 6.2 million
Asia Pacific	Australia Hong Kong Japan Korea Malaysia New Zealand Philippines Thailand India Pakistan	75,000 to 640,000 75,00 to 82,000 427,0000 to 875,000 1,2 million 951,000 18,000 to 35,000 18,000 to 35,000 1,8 to 3,2 million 903,000 to 2,6 million 27,1 to 6,9 million 6,1 million

**Source:** United Nations Secretary –General’s Study on Violence against Children (2006)

Research has also indicated that up to 10 million children between ages of 3 to 17 are exposed to at least one act of violence between their parents yearly, and that up to 27% of adults recall witnessing violence between their parents (Fontes 2000). In Queensland, 88% (580) of the 856 respondents to the phone-in conducted by Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force reported the presence of dependent children in the household during the course of the violent relationships. The researchers also found out that in Western Australia 84% of the 420 respondents to a newspaper survey had children living in the same household as the abusive partner. In a phone-in conducted at the same time almost 87% of the 297 respondents with children reported that their children had witnessed them being abused.

Another major issue of domestic violence is its effect on student learning (Crawford, 2006). In Zimbabwe's educational system many cases abound of learners whose education has been negatively impacted as a result of domestic violence. There are reports from preschoolers, primary school pupils, secondary children and tertiary students of their bad experiences of family violence and the consequences they have upon them. A high proportion of street children report marital violence in their family home.

## 2. Conceptualizing Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is the victimization of a person with whom the abuser has or has had an intimate, romantic, spousal relationship. It consists of a pattern of coercive behaviors used by a competent adult to establish and maintain power and control over another competent adult. These behaviors which can occur alone or in combination, sporadically or continually include physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, and economic abuse (Gewirtz and Edleson 2004, Davies 1994 : 1-2, Musasa project booklet 2008 Volume 1 : 13). Adams( 2001 : 256 ) also define domestic violence as a pattern of behavior that includes physical ,psychological and/or emotional abuse toward an intimate partner describe Domestic violence is the abuse of one person by another in an intimate relationship where the abuse can be physical, emotional, psychological, economic, intimidation, stalking and harassment and is not only confined to spouses, but may also occur between partners ,dating couples, and elders (Report on the SADC Media Training Workshop on Covering Violence Against Women : 26).The Domestic Violence Act defines domestic violence as any unlawful act, omission or behavior that results in death ,physical ,sexual or mental injury to any complaint by a respondent.

According to the above authorities physical abuse refers to any behavior that involves the intentional use of force against the body of another person that risks physical injury, harm and/or pain Dutton (1992) cited in (Volpe 2011. *Physical abuse* includes slapping, beating with fist or object, strangulation, burning, shoving, and threats with a knife. Physical abuse can also include behaviors such as denying victim of medical care when needed, depriving the victim to sleep or other functions necessary to live, inflicting physical injuries onto other targets, such as children and pets so as to cause psychological harm to victim. *Sexual abuse* is any unwanted sexual intimacy forced on one individual by another. It includes coerced sex through threats or intimidation, forcing unwanted sexual acts, forcing sex in front of others and forcing sex with others.

*Emotional or psychological abuse* involves isolation from others, excessive jealousy, control of his/her activities, verbal aggression, intimidation through destruction of property, harassment, constant belittling and humiliation, refusing to talk, and restricting freedom.

*Economic abuse* is when spouse spends all their spouses' money. In its extreme form, this involves putting the victim on strict 'allowance' withholding money at will and forcing victim to beg for the money. This also includes preventing the victim from finishing education or obtaining employment. From the above definition, the common traits that emerge on domestic violence are:

- Acts perpetrated against, women, men, girls and boys
- It causes physical, emotional, psychological and social harm
- It occurs in the private sphere

There are two essential elements in every domestic violence situation: the victim and the abuser have been intimately involved at some point in time and the abuser consciously chooses to use violence and other abusive tactics to gain control over victim. United Nations Secretary General's (2006). Domestic violence encompasses violence against both men and women. Burnnet (2009) also asserts that the abuser may be female while the victim is male. However 96% of reported assaults on spouses or ex-spouses are committed by men against women. All forms of domestic abuse have one purpose: to gain and maintain control over victim. Domestic violence is used for one purpose; to gain and maintain total control over

another person. It does not discriminate. It happens among heterosexual couples and in same-sex relationships. It occurs within all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. While women are more commonly victimized, men are also abused especially verbally and emotionally, although sometimes even physically as well. An abuser's goal is to control victim, and he/she will frequently use money to do so.

### **3. Causes of Domestic Violence**

Psychologists and many researchers have always been interested in a way to adequately explain why it is that so many intimate human relationships evolve into the violence and barbarism of domestic violence (Orakles, 2005). There are many theories that have taken shape overtime that attempt to explain domestic violence. There are social explanations, psychological theories and others. There is however no consensus on what might be the primary cause on domestic violence. As with many phenomena regarding human experience, no single approach appears to cover all cases.

#### **i) Explanations from a social standpoint**

##### ***Resource theory***

According to the theory, the more resources- social, personal, and economic a person can command, the more power he/she can potentially call on(<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/192-258790013html>). In contrast a person with little education, low job prestige and income, or poor interpersonal skills may use violence to compensate for a real or perceived lack of resources and maintain dominance. Financial difficulties in a household are known to have the man in a relationship react violently with feelings of inadequacy. Since men feel that arranging for adequate finances is their responsibility, failing to do so cuts a man to the quick. He responds to this with a desperate attempt at reassertion of authority with violence. (Farmer 1979: 65, Madhurima 1996 : 44).

##### ***Subculture of violence theory.***

Madhurima (1996 : 46) asserts that subculture of violence is a sociological theory explaining that there is a subculture of violence in which some groups within society hold values that permit and even encourage the use of violence. In such societies "Who loves well punishes well". Family violence will occur more frequently in violent societies than in peaceful ones.

##### ***The feminist theory***

The feminist theory views violence as a manifestation of the patriarchal structure in our culture, which is reflected in the patterns of behaviors and attitudes of individuals, that is, violence rather being an individual psychological problem, is instead an expression of male domination of females (Denmark ,Krauss, Halpem and Sechzer 2006 : 265 and Davies 1994) These authorities assert that origins of violence are located in the social structure and the complex set of values, traditions and beliefs which relate to gender inequality. Norms embody values, social practices, and gender roles which create sexist attitudes giving rise to inequality between men and women. This inequitable organization is one of the fundamental factors in the high domestic violence worldwide. Thus the feminist theory looks at the institution of patriarchy and argues that battering mirrors male power and control over females. Women's experiences are often described as inferior because male domination influences all aspects of life. This theory according to Madhurima( 1996 : 46) fails to explain why the most powerful uses violence against the least powerful even if his power is not challenged by the subordinate. It has another drawback of being a theory that is essentially a single factor(patriarchy)explanation of violence against women.

##### ***Biopsychosocial perspective***

Sana (2001) posits that this theory is an attempt to tie together biological (testosterone levels, alcohol abusive) factors, and social factors such as social stress and quality of relationship. The association of alcohol and violence is well documented. Drug and alcohol abuse as echoed also by Farmer (1979:67)

and the domestic violence pamphlet (Know your rights 2006: 6) may be a precursor to domestic violence. Substance abuse leads to out-of-control behavior. It seems that some men are changed into irrational friends by drink. However, g t, many researchers generally do not consider drug and alcohol abuse to be the cause of violence-they find that it can contribute to accelerate or increase aggression(<http://www.allaboutlifechallenges.org/causes-of-domestic-violence-faq.html>.) Thus alcohol and drug abuse may or may not be a direct cause of domestic violence.

Farmer (ibid), goes further to point out that poor communication skills and lack of respect for other partner leads to domestic violence. When families have not gained enough skills in discussing problems it is easier just to use violence as away of showing their feelings. With regards to respect, Farmer is of the view that it is very difficult for anyone to hit someone they respect. A man who hits his wife does not feel basic respect for his wife as a human being

### ***Cultural explanations***

Other cultural explanations include impact of polygamy, infidelity, the power of the extended family over the married couple, and the almost universal institution of bride price as underlying the widespread abuse of wives (<http://stopvaw.org/theories-of-violence.html>). Violence is also said to be initiated by jealousy. Sexual jealousy can elicit violence in both sexes (Farmer, 1979). When a wife is seen as challenging her husband's authority and prerogatives by inquiring about his extra-marital involvements it results into her abuse. Out of the eight cases studied ,Infidelity on the part of the husbands was the main issue of conflict in five cases.(Madhurima 1996 : 180) .During 2003 in Zimbabwe for example, the late Learnmore Jongwe ,a well respected politician from the opposition MDC, stabbed his wife to death for alleged infidelity(Mashavave :2004).In a recent article by Phyllis Kachere *Murder or Suicide* in *The Sunday Mail News* March20-26 2011 : 5 a 49 year old Mrs Musunga suffered numerous domestic violence episodes at the hands of her husband and his alleged lover and this has resulted in her death on February 26 2011.

On the hand, in traditional African society a married woman would have minimal contact with men other than her husband but this is much less possible today, especially when woman works. Yet tradition-minded husbands feel threatened by interaction between their wives and other men and may act out violently because of that threat imagined or real. Other commonly reported causes of arguments that escalate to violence are disputes about the husband's traditional economic obligations to his extended family, now seen as a direct threat to the economic survival of the nuclear household

These cultural explanations emphasize the close link between violence and the enforcement of conformity to traditional roles for women and dominance for their husbands. They see violence as emerging out of society that threatens women as property, socializes women to be passive, and the like. In this sense, the cultural arguments may merge with those based on gender inequality.

### ***Social learning theory.***

Another explanation of the causes of domestic violence from a social standpoint is the social learning theory. According to the social learning theory, patterns of domestic violence may arise from learned behavior (Orakles 2005 and Farmer 1979: 65). With so many households in the country reporting problems with domestic violence, there are millions of children growing up watching regular examples of violence before them. Children could learn this kind of behavior and use it in their own lives. Statistics show that 73% of male abusers had grown up in a family where they saw their mother beaten, or experienced abuse themselves (Alexander 1991). In the same vein, Jarman(1991) asserts that using the Freudian model, which claims that all mental illness stems from traumatic child trauma, one can see how there is a direct correlation between violence in the family of orientation and violence within the family of procreation. Thus, social learning theory as a family based theory examines the level of family conflict and the indirect lessons children learn about the relationship between violence and love.

***Explanations from a psychological standpoint.***

Orakles (2005) points out that explanations of domestic violence that appeal to psychological causes place their focus on the mental character of the perpetrator. Psychological profile of such a character includes a pattern of sudden bursts of anger, poor impulse control, and poor self esteem.

*A psychological frustration aggression theory* holds that aggression and violence are caused by individual frustration (Coleman and Cressey, 1987: 445). People become frustrated when they want something they do not have, and the stronger the blocked desire, the stronger the frustration. The frustrated person may lash out at the source of his /her frustration, or in the case of displaced hostility, at someone else. This frustration aggression theory is the most explanations of violence in a family. However, it has also its problems. Frustration does not always provide aggression. All of us are frustrated to some degree, but only some of us are aggressive.

From the above explanations of causes of domestic violence it can be noted that its root causes are the unequal relations of power between men and women. It is caused by a need to have control and power over another partner.

**How Children are Exposed to Domestic Violence**

Studies reflect that at 3.3 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year. In a relationship where there is domestic violence, children witness about three quarters of the abusive incidents(<http://ww>) .Children witness domestic violence in a variety of ways ( Edleson,1999 and Toussaint, 2006).They assert that children`s exposure to domestic violence typically falls into three primary categories:

- Being directly involved as an eyewitness that is being present in the room intervening or being used as a part of a violent event, for example, being used as a shield against abusive actions, trying to call the police.
- Hearing violence from another room. The children may lie terrified in their beds as the violence rages outside their bedroom doors or cower within the safety of a closet or other hiding place.
- Expecting the aftermath of a violent event such as seeing mother`s bruises, black eyes or broken limbs.

**Impact of Domestic Violence on Children Exposed and Experiencing it.**

Violence in the home has grown to be one of society`s most shameful scourges. As many people know, domestic violence can tear families apart and cause one to feel helpless and alone, but what many people fail to realize is the damaging long term effects of domestic violence on children even years and years after the abuse has stopped(<http://ezinearticles.com/The-Long-Term-Effects-Of-Domestic-Violence-On-children-id=1358550>) In addition to the subordinated spouses, the children of violent homes must also be considered as victims. Thus until recently the effects of children who witness violence in the home have not been fully acknowledged by the community because the violence has not been seen as a direct abuse of children. In this way the effects on children have been easy to minimize or attribute to other causes .Exposure to domestic violence does not only affect its adult victims, but it also plays developmental growth of children witnessing the violence .Childhood is regarded as a period of special protection and rights .Children`s development is expected to unfold within a secure and nurturing environment is infected with violence and fear all normal tasks of growing up are likely normal tasks of growing up are likely to be adversely affected it was estimated that in the United States as many as 7 to 14 million children are exposed to domestic violence, falling victims to its effects (Pediatri, 2005).Children who witness domestic violence respond in a variety of ways. Some children remain unscathed from the experiences, whereas others reveal a range of adjustment problems .Newton (2001) points out that factors which appear to affect children`s responses to witnessing domestic violence include what the child

actually saw or heard, the child's temperament, age, race, sex and culture of child. Children who are exposed to domestic violence are risk for many difficulties both immediately and in the future. It can thus be noted that it is not only the beleaguered spouse who suffers the effects of an abusive domestic life. Due to their age and dependence on their parents children, are among the hardest hit by the effects of domestic abuse. Children of any age are like sponges, absorbing both consciously and unconsciously taking in everything around them, every event ,every emotion, every argument, and every bit of violence and hatred they are exposed to hence the effects on them socially,psychologically,physically ,AND behaviorally are alarming.

### ***Emotional Impact.***

Domestic violence is often overlooked when it is not physical-broken bones,. Emotional abuse is often minimized, yet it can leave deep and lasting scars(9www.helpguide.org/mental/domestic). What cannot be seen are emotional injuries that is ,the hurt someone feels inside when they are attacked by someone who is supposed to love and protect them all these mean that a person's life is disturbed and they cannot carry on their normal life because they are frightened and nervous .

Infants by definition are the most limited of all the children in their cognitive abilities and resource or adaptation (<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch>).Infants are often directly involved in violent domestic incidents. They are held as a shield by the mother, hit by thrown objects. Even if they are lying passively in their cots, infants are exquisitely sensitive to the emotional signals given out by their caregivers including caregivers'depressed, anxious, fearful or angry mood. Any rejection from lack of availability of caregiver would be felt by the infant and would have long tem effects in the form of emotional deprivation.

Domestic violence has consequences on feelings of children who are exposed to it. These children have conflicting feelings of distrust and affection, love and disgust often co exist for the abuser(UNICEF 2006, Peditr, 2005 ).These conflicting emotions often confuse the children. They find it difficulty to understand why two people they do not love each other any more.

Fear is another emotion experienced by children exposed to domestic violence. Domestic violence makes the home a place of fear rather than a place of comfort and security. Child witnesses are fearful (Edleson 1999, Getecha and Chipika 1995). The children witnesses fear that

- they might be injured during altercation between their parents.
- their parents might abandon them.
- they are to blame for the violence.
- they or one of their parents might die.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is another important effect of witness domestic violence (Newton, 2001). The severity, duration and proximity of an individual's exposure to traumatic event as echoed by the above authorities are the most important factors affecting the likelihood of developing the disorder. Traumatic Stress is produced by exposure to the events that are so extreme or severe and threatening such as natural disaster, sexual assault, physical attack. Symptoms of this are nightmares, depression, phobias, insomnia and anxiety. They overwhelm a person`s sense of safety and security.

Grief, shame and low self esteem are common emotions experiences by children exposed to domestic violence. Edleson (1999) and Peditator (2005) allude to the fact that children exposed to domestic violence often feel that they are responsible for the abuse and may feel guilty because they think they caused it or because they are unable to stop it. Child is torn between a desire to help victim and the need to keep a family secret. They live with constant anxiety and get depressed. These children feel hopeless because there is nothing they can do to help. Children of both sexes living in this type of environment also grow thinking it is okay to physically abuse another human being, and girls in particular are given the impression that females are supposed to be weak and subservient, while males are supposed to be domineering. In line with this Mashavave (2004) quotes the view of a child witnessing family violence

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“When I was a little kid, I thought it was normal for men to beat up women. I grew up witnessing the beatings. I thought it was part of life”. More girls internalize their emotions and show signs of depression. On the other side boys are apt to act out with aggression and hostility. In line with these feelings of hopelessness of powerlessness of children exposed to domestic violence. Getecha and Chipika (1995) say that unfortunately the school system does not have a subject called ‘family’ so in the case of a boy the only way he learns to be a husband is to watch his father. When young the boy feels the father is cruel but when he marries and faces problems he will begin to think the father was right and starts beating up his wife.

Children exposed to and witnessing domestic violence bear emotional scars which disturb their normal lives. An 11 year old girl wrote the following letter expressing her feelings about her fighting parents to Gogo in kids for Real issue 2 for all kids and teens who want to make a difference page 11:

My parents fight all the time and they think that I do not know. My father says I am lucky because he never hits me. I am not lucky because I feel afraid and worried for my mother who is always sad and unhappy. I am nervous at school and find it hard to concentrate on my books.

As can be noted, scars of emotional abuse are very real, and they run deep. Witnessing violence in the home can give a child the idea that nothing is safe in the world and that they are worth being kept safe.

### ***Behavioral Impact***

Marital conflict has been found to be the strongest risk factor for behavioral problems (<http://www.enotalone.com/article/1996.html>, Pediatr 2005). Children from unhappy situations may become withdrawn, non-verbal and exhibit regressive behaviors such as clinging, whining, and thumb sucking. In preschoolers as alluded by the above authorities withdrawn, subdued or mute behaviors are commonly seen. They also suffer eating and sleeping difficulties-nightmares and reenact the domestic violence in their play. Infants who witness spousal violence are often characterized by poor sleeping habits, excessive screaming, lack of appetite, and digestive problems (Alabama Coalition against Domestic Violence 2008).

School aged children and adolescents in domestically violent homes manifest rebellious and oppositional defiant behaviors (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/understanding-what-children>). It is common to observe temper tantrums, irritability, frequent lashing out of objects, treating pets cruelly, threatening of peers with violence for example, “give me my [pen or I will smack you,” hitting kicking or choking peers. Incidentally girls are more likely to exhibit withdrawal. On the other hand as highlighted by UNICEF (2006) adolescents who are exposed to domestic violence manifest rebellious behavior such as truancy, running away, dropping out of school, drug/alcohol use.

Carrel (2009) points out that increased exposure to children linked to domestic violence causes significant increases in misbehavior at school. He goes further to say there is a widespread belief among parents and school authorities that troubled children negatively affect learning in the classroom. In a national representative survey cited it was found that 85 % of teachers and 73% of parents said that school experience of most children suffer at the expense of few chronic offenders. Children from troubled families significantly decrease their peers reading and mathematics test scores and increase misbehavior in the classroom. This provides strong empirical evidence of the existence of the ‘bad apple’ “peer effects model, which hypothesizes that a single disruptive student can negatively affect the outcomes of all other students in the classroom.

Domestic violence has been known to drive people out in the streets. The home becomes a source of discomfort and hate rather than love and comfort. Children who run away from violence are at risk of substance use, prostitution-HIV/AIDS, homelessness, physical illness or injury, and victimization. Lying



to avoid confrontation, excessive attention seeking, getting very defensive, and being aggressive are some behaviors the adolescents exhibit.

Campbell (2010) and Volpe( 1999) share the same opinion that in a domestic violence situation children are not allowed a normal childhood, there is a role reversal between a child and parent which is known as parentification. The child's needs of comfort, guidance and attention are sacrificed to meet parents 'physical and emotional needs. Parents talk to their children as if they are therapists or confidants. The responsibilities such as helping with homework, giving out medications, cooking and much more are beyond the age-appropriate level for child. The above authorities go on to say that a parentified child has little or no time to engage in normal childhood activities and they may associate with individuals who are older, putting them at risk of being manipulated or used by older people.

It can thus ,be said that the dominant explanation of children experiencing behavioral problems is in terms of deficiencies in children's home circumstances. Children who come from homes where there is a high level of stress due to spousal violence may use the school to vent frustration.

### ***Social impact***

Children exposed to domestic violence frequently do not have the foundation of safety and security that is normally provided by the family (Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2008). The children experience a desensitization to aggressive behavior, poor anger management and problem solving skills, and learn to engage in exploitive relationships. The symptoms of children living with violence present differently at various ages of development. School aged children present with an excessive worry of possible danger and feelings of resentment towards the perpetrating party. Symptoms include isolation from friends and relatives in an effort to stay close to siblings and victimized parent. They may feel unable to invite friends (or may be prevented from doing so by the abuser) out of shame, fear, or concern about what their friends may see. Adolescents present with a difficulty in trusting adults and engage in excessive social involvement to avoid volatile situations at home. The adolescent may display these symptoms by joining a gang or becoming involved in relationships that mimic the learned behavior. In addition Edleson(1999) says some children lose the ability to feel empathy for others. They show less skill in understanding how others feel and in examining situations from perspectives of others when compared to children of non-violent households.

Another aspect of the effects on children as documented by UNICEF(2006) is their own use of violence. Social learning theory would suggest that children who witness spousal violence may also learn to use it. Several researchers have attempted to look at this link between exposure to domestic violence and subsequent use of it. Some support of this hypothesis have been found. Carlson( 1990) cited in (Edleson ,1999) and Khapp (1994) cited in (Pediater ,2005) found that boys who witness spouse abuse were more likely to use violence than non witnesses. They have a 1000% increased risk of abusing their spouse. Boys learn from their fathers to be violent. Girls learn from their mums that violence is expected, and that it is something one has to put up with.

Children who grow with violence in the home learn early and powerful lessons about the use of violence in interpersonal relationships to dominate others. However as also noted by UNICEF (2006) not all children fall into the trap of becoming abusers and victims. Children do not always repeat the same pattern when they grow up. Many children do not like what they see, and try not to make same mistakes as their parents. Some adults who grew up with violence in the home are actively opposed to violence. There is reason to believe that children know that domestic violence is wrong and want to stop it.

### ***Physical impact***

Physical abuse refers to any behavior that involves the intentional use of force against the body of another person that risks physical injury, harm and/or pain. It involves hitting, punching, slapping, choking, pushing and other types of contact that result in physical injury or death. It can also include depriving

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victim of sleep, inflicting injury onto other targets for example children or pets. Volpe (1999) citing (Daton, 1992 )

The effect of domestic violence on children can start while fetus is in the mother's womb <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>. Low infant birth weights are associated with both direct and physical trauma inflicted on fetus' mother as well as the emotional stress. Direct physical abuse can lead to multiple physical injuries associated with the infant child ranging from premature birth, birth of a disabled child, excessive bleeding, and even fetal death(still birth).

Pediatrician (2005) cites a study by Christian et al 1997 who reviewed records of 139 children who presented to the emergency department with injuries resulting from domestic violence and found the age of the child victim to range from two weeks to 17 years with a mean age of 5 years. The most common mechanism of injury was a direct hit. Children younger than 2 years were most frequently injured while being held by a parent, 39% while attempting to intervene in the violence, 9% required hospitalization, and 2% required intensive care. Physical abuse is also said to occur:

- During the course of parental fighting, where violence shifts directly onto the child, especially older males,
- Accidentally during course of parental fighting for example, if a mother drops her infant during a fight or a parent accidentally hits the child. <http://www.domesticviolenceservices.com/violenceeffectsonchildren.html> ;

Children who witness domestic violence in the home may also suffer a tremendous amount of physical symptoms. They may:

- complain of general aches and pain such as headaches and stomach pain
- have irritable and irregular bowel habits, cold sores
- have short attention spans
- show symptoms of fatigue and constant tiredness
- fall asleep in school due to lack of sleep at home. Much of their night may be spent listening to witnessing the violence,
- suffer from poor personal hygiene,
- have a tendency to partake in high risk activities, self abuse, and death by suicide

Sexual abuse is a form of physical abuse. Any situation in which one is forced to participate in unwanted, unsafe or degrading sexual activity is abuse (<http://www.domesticviolenceservices.com/violenceeffectsonchildren.html>). The sexually abused, most commonly father-daughter incest, may be sanctified in some violent families. The female spouses may be aware of the incestuous activity but does not intervene in order to avoid retaliatory violence to herself or unwanted sexual demands. The page goes on to highlight that a spouse may also not be aware of the sexual abuse because of her own preoccupation with survival and safety from spouse's violence. Due to a sense of fear, guilt, responsibility, and confusion the child may not reveal the incest for a long time. Thus children who live in violent homes are at risk of physical injury both pre-natally and post-natally.

### *Cognitive effects*

A number of studies have measured the association between cognitive development problems and witnessing domestic violence. In a study cited by Rossman () in (Edleson 1999) it was found that increased violence exposure is associated with lower cognitive functioning. Infants and small children who are exposed to violence in the home experience so much added stress that it can harm the development of their brains and impair cognitive and sensory growth. Osofsky, Wewers, Hann and Fick (1993) are of the opinion that that cognitive problems associated with exposure to violence comprise one of the most direct threats to the developmental task of school adaptation and academic achievement. The above authorities go on to say deficits in attention regulation, language skills, and memory undermine the child's ability to accomplish the central requirements of academic achievements and school adaptation, namely to encode, organize, recall, and express understanding of new information. Accordingly, physically abused school-age children have been found to score lower than non-abused comparison

children on tests of verbal ability and comprehension, reading and Mathematics skills, and overall achievement on standardized tests.

Osofsky et al (1993:3) say that cognitive effects of violence exposure affect more than children's academic performance. Children who have difficulty with attention and memory may not be sensitive to important social cues and expectations and thus find themselves struggling with school rules, peer relationships, and classroom instructions. At school, in one study, forty percent had lower reading abilities than children from non-violent homes.

From the foregoing discussion it can be noted that domestic violence affects children's performance suffer a lot as their minds continue to drift to the unpleasant situation at home. Cognitive effects of exposure to domestic violence may disrupt children's successful functioning in the school environment in addition to hindering academic performance.

### **Helping Victims of Domestic Violence**

Children and partners witnessing and exposed to domestic violence need to be helped to recover emotionally from the violence. According to the first thing a parent can do to help child who has witnessed domestic violence is to allow the child to be seen by professionals at the school (<http://www.acadv.org.chn.html>). It is found that trained professionals, often provide the level of counseling that child needs This is also echoed by Edleson ,Ellerton .Seagren,kirchberg and Ambrose (2007 )who say referrals to the appropriate school personnel could be the first step in assisting the child in need of support Counseling is a process of helping a person learn to solve interpersonal, emotional and decisional problems. For some children question about home life may be difficult to answer, especially if the victim has been warned or threatened by a family member to refrain from talking to strangers about the events that have taken place in the family. The counselor can then as highlighted on webpage(<http://www.acadv.org.chn.html>)

- reassure child that non of the violent episodes were their faults.
- encourage them to talk about their feelings openly.
- help make a safe plan which they can follow.
- let them know that others have had similar experiences.

The second thing that needs to be done is to test out various types of counseling for children. This can include play therapy, peer support groups, anger management, classes, and safety programs to teach kids how to extract themselves from dangerous situations. An early intervention is one of the best ways to counteract the effects of witnessing abuse. In Addition to talking ,children may also be encouraged to write in a journal, draw or paint .These are all viable means of facilitating expression in young children. Adolescents are typically more abstract in their thinking and generally have better developed verbal abilities than younger children. Listening in a warm non-judgmental and genuine manner is often comforting for victims

The third thing according to the above website that can be done to help children is to find a loving and supportive adult to introduce to child, whether it is family member or community advocate. Family Violence Defense Fund reports that the single most important ingredient to help children heal and develop resiliency is the presence of a loving adult. The child should be encouraged to spent as much time regularly with the adult and be provided with a safe environment that does not include violence in any form.

The last thing that should be done to help children who have witnessed violence in their families is to help children create a sense of safety to have regular meetings and homework times can help demonstrate structure that was not therein the previous violent environment. With routines children can come to count on the and, the adult can keep promises made to child.

## Prevention of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a serious crime that thrives on the use of emotional, psychological and physical abuse to control its victim. It can end in serious injury or death. Children that witness domestic violence suffer and have haunting memories to live with. It is because of such seriousness of the crime that it is extremely important to prevent domestic violence (<http://www.ehow.com/2222947-prevent-domestic-violence.html>). Some of the biggest victims are the smallest. Protecting children should be the absolute concern of everybody who is working to see an end to domestic violence.

According to Elder (2007) the Domestic Violence Act which came into operation on 25<sup>th</sup> of October 2007 was a triumph in Zimbabwe. The Act was enacted to protect victims of domestic violence and provide long term measures of prevention of domestic violence. All persons involved in a relationship including children benefit. Although advocating for the Act is a great stride, nonetheless there remains a widespread lack of knowledge about the Act and its provisions (<http://www.preventgbvafrica.org/member/musasaproject>). With regards to this, it follows that traditional leaders, pastors, police and teachers should be engaged to address these knowledge gaps. Chiefs are often custodians of traditional law and receive the bulk of cases dealing with domestic violence. The silence from traditional and religious sector which takes a powerful place in the lives of ordinary women and men condones abuse and allows the cycle of violence to continue. Involvement of the cultural and religious leaders has to go beyond information dissemination to a level where leaders appreciate the benefits of the law so that they also can influence acceptance among their followers.

At the launch of the domestic violence Act the minister of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, Doctor Olivia Muchena said that because domestic violence is a threat to family unit and a developmental issue every effort should be made to break gender barriers and ensure that women and children's voices are heard (<http://www.preventgbvafrica.org/story/zimbabwe-launches-anti-domestic-violence-council>). This is in line with UNFPA 2001 that asserts that prevention activities should target root causes that is, removing the abuse of power which is the root cause of violence by seeking to influence changes in the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of a community especially men who are predominantly perpetrators of violence. This will assist in challenging social attitudes that condone domestic violence. There is need as echoed by <http://Zimbabwe-let's-Unite-to-End-Domestic-Violence-News-Library-News-and-Events-peaceWomen.mht> to go backwards and study root causes of domestic violence so as to adopt more practical approaches to eliminate this kind of behavior. Contributing factors should also be looked at. Victims' voices should be heard they should speak out. Silence is always affirming and when people decide not to speak out they are in fact supporting the behaviour condemned (Musasa Gweru Branch Counseling Unit; Annual Report 2010)

Promoting domestic violence awareness campaigns is one way of preventing domestic violence. UNFPA (2001) asserts that when people become aware of the statistics and effects domestic violence has on lives it keeps the issue alive and important. Awareness campaigns use information and education to promote changes to specific groups of people including women, men, youth, children, leaders, elders, and others.

Some examples of awareness campaigns include:

- Posters and pamphlets
- Using drama, dance or song to express an idea
- Radio discussions and public service announcement
- Video presentation slogans printed on T-shirts, containers
- Training workshops

Below is an example of an awareness campaign held in Zambia.

**Messages and Slogans For Combating Violence Against Women in Zambia**

AREA /ISSUES	TARGET	MESSAGES /SLOGANS
<b>Domestic Violence</b> -wife battery -psychological -family negligence	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise a family not a fist.</li> <li>• Domestic violence is everyone’s concern Report it</li> </ul>
	Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real men don’t abuse women</li> <li>• Running away from home running away from responsibility</li> </ul>
	Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am not a punch bag. I am a partner.</li> </ul>

Reporting on SADC Media Training Workshop on Covering Violence against Women page 63.

One way of preventing domestic violence according to [http://www.ehow.com/222294?-prevent-domestic-violence, html](http://www.ehow.com/222294?-prevent-domestic-violence.html) is to teach and educate young people that violence is never acceptable behavior. Teaching young children that violence is not a way to handle anger and emotions, will go a long way in preventing violent behavior when they become adults. Efforts should be made right from kindergarten, primary school and colleges to inculcate more responsible behavior at a tender age. IN the same vein *The Herald* 24 November 2010 in an article entitled “ lets unite to end domestic violence ”says that preschools can engage in such activities as drama ,song and dance that denounces domestic violence while the media should also continue to play their role in highlighting cases of violence giving the platform to proffer solutions. In light of this ,playwright Stephen Chifunyise has written a play against domestic violence entitled “365”(The Sunday Mail leisure March 20-26 2011).In the play he brings out the various elements of a dysfunctional family while at the same time proffering solutions for addressing the problems. He brings out various forms of abuse including verbal, sexual and emotional while taking the opportunity to show how such matters can be handled traditionally. Such comical and high energy drama with discussions at the end of performances are worthwhile.

In Zimbabwe and the rest of the world there are days set aside every year to take a re-look into domestic violence. This subject going by its effects on family and society should not just be confined to the special days, but deserves more attention(<http://Zimbabwe-let’s-Unite-to-End-Domestic-Violence-news-library-news-and-Events-peaceWomen.mht> )It is critical that commemorating the 16 days of activism against gender based violence does not just become a one –off event but a more aggressive approach towards ameliorating the scourge be adopted.

Some of the ways of preventing domestic violence highlighted by <Http://www.ehow.com/how222294?.prevent-domestic-violence.html> include:

- Organize fundraisers to support the local efforts behind domestic violence prevention and awareness. The better funded the programmes,the more reach they can have.
- Encourage communities to establish centres for domestic violence. Those that are being abused domestically will go get help.
- Report suspicions of domestic violence to the proper authorities. Domestic violence is a very secret crime, and it often sits silently within any given home in any given neighborhood.

Every child deserves to be raised in a calm, peaceful, loving and violence free environment if he is to grow up into a health balanced member of society as highlighted in the poem below by a young person yearning for an end to domestic violence.

**Stop Domestic Violence**

We are victims of domestic violence...  
Parents think wounds and bruises are only physical injuries,  
But they don't consider emotional injuries...  
It affects and disturbs our lives as children.

***I say stop domestic violence***

We tend to copy, so it tends to spread and continue  
In the next generation.  
It causes wounds which produce days off school.  
It makes home a place of fear rather than a place of comfort and security.  
***Stop domestic violence.***

*Kids for real issue 2; For all Kids and Teens Who Want to make a Difference NAP for OVC page 7*

The poem clearly shows how scaring the effects of domestic violence are on children who witness and experience domestic violence. Thus as also highlighted in *The Standard* November 28 to December 4 2010 in an article entitled "No to violence against women" marriage partners should learn to treat each other with respect ,dignity and as equal partners the marriage institute would not be in so much trouble. Both men and women should make a pledge to be kind of fathers and mothers who are a source of comfort, joy and protection to their families and loved ones instead of being the source of pain and constant fear.

Domestic violence as rightly concluded by *Know Your Rights DOMESTIC VIOLENCE Pamphlet 2006* page 19 is criminal because it has bad effects not only on individual families but on society as a whole .It is important therefore for every citizen to ensure that in their small way they work towards eliminating domestic violence. Those small efforts will add up to produce more friendly homes and hence the nation.

**Conclusion**

Child exposure to domestic violence is a major social and health concern affecting many countries the world over. Witnessing and experiencing domestic violence has a negative impact on school aged children's physical, social, cognitive and emotional development. Children who have been exposed to domestic violence need to be helped to go over the abuse and empowered with safety plans to take when they next encounter similar situations. Efforts need to be made to prevent domestic violence.

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