

Healing Child Victims and Their Parents in the Aftermath of Family Violence

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The dynamics of parenting in the aftermath of traumatic events such as family violence are unlike any other. In previous years, children's behaviors and emotional development were rarely correlated with their exposure to partner violence, so this problem was seldom addressed. Now, however, victims fleeing violence are reaching out for resources to protect and help their children through the trauma they experienced. The increased demands for services have led many researchers and child experts into new uncharted territories. The rise in behavioral problems from abused children has increased substantially, and the system is scrambling to find prevention and intervention strategies to aid these families. It seems no matter how diligently the community works to find solutions and generate programs, more victims are surfacing. We are experiencing an epidemic where the needs of these families often exceed the resources.

At this point, research is still sparse regarding the dynamics of family violence; and what little is available is often misunderstood. For example, many people suppose that domestic violence refers to a physical altercation between two adults. By doing so, they gravely underestimate the impact other forms of abuse (e.g., emotional or financial) have on families. Because these less conspicuous abuses produce no physical scars, they are often ignored or discounted. The reality however is that the emotional assaults often become predictors for future physical violence and they need to be taken more seriously. So the answer to eliminating later physical assaults then is to interrupt the nonphysical precursors in the earlier stages. In addition to changing how abuse is perceived, the system must also respond differently so that physical violence is thwarted.

This begins with redefining domestic violence and then reevaluating its players. Until recently, for example, little attention was given to its impact on child development. The definition of and the response to family violence for the most part, excluded children. Unfortunately professionals are now finding a correlation between witnessing violence and subsequent behavioral problems, suggesting that the severe conflict between parents significantly impacts children's physical, emotional, and social development. Some researchers now believe that witnessing physical and other forms of abuse against a parent may in some cases be more devastating than experiencing the violence firsthand. It seems reasonable to conclude that children should be recognized as primary victims. This writer's intent is to alert families and professionals to the problem of all forms of interparental abuse, demonstrate the lasting impact it has on child development, and then to provide strategies that change outcomes not only for children but for society as well. But first we must evaluate how the psychological dynamics contributes to the physical violence.

Popular Terminology—The Buzzwords

Power and control are the two buzzwords most often expressed when describing the dynamics of family violence. Usually, these two words have a negative connotation. Professionals would agree that many batterers seek to manipulate their families through power

and control. Although this is so, it might be helpful to understand why this manipulative behavior is necessary in the first place. Rather than believing that power and control are always the problem, we can instead acknowledge that everyone, on some level, needs a sense of power and control over their lives, and thus see these as possible solutions. The key is teaching abusive parents and partners how to manage, express and meet their needs more positively and appropriately. When the concepts of power and control are taught constructively, then the strong-armed approach is no longer necessary. It is this writer's opinion that most people do not intentionally want to hurt their families—but due to generational learning and social tolerance—it is what they know. When new positive skills are introduced, it gives abusive parents new tools and choices that were not previously available.

Because so little is still known about how to handle family violence cases, abusers and their victims are rarely provided with effective replacement skills. Consequently, the pendulum swings from aggression (severe punishment) to passivity (no punishment), which is equally as dysfunctional. One father professed that he could no longer control his teenage daughter (i.e., hitting her) anymore because he feared going back to jail. Although he had attended a batterers' treatment program—twice—he had not been given replacement tools to guide his child. He admittedly felt helpless (loss of power and control) and his daughter saw it as “payback time.” Without the necessary replacement skills, the family dynamics simply shifted the abusive behavior from one family member to another and nothing was resolved.

EXAMPLE 1: An abusive wife forced her battered husband to “discipline” the children or she would do it for him. To keep the kids “safer,” he would inflict the spankings so that their punishment wasn't so harsh. She eventually turned him in for abusing the kids and he was court ordered into treatment. This man had no self-confidence. Fearful of everyone, he maintained no eye contact and his body language suggested that he was terrified of social interactions. Almost every sentence out of his mouth was “I am sorry.” After the relationship ended, his ex-wife wanted to maintain the status quo, so she coerced their three sons into abusing their father—using the same threatening tactics that she used earlier against them. To help boost his confidence, he was taught how to change his bodily stance. He would be gently reminded to look toward the treatment provider when addressing her. Over time, as he began to believe that he would not be judged or punished, he was able to interact more socially with others. Unfortunately, however, he was forced to give up his parental rights because the court saw the children's behavior as retaliation against their father as a “clear sign” that they had been abused by him.

There are several reasons why people use power and control to get their needs met. The first is that they have learned that physical or emotional abuse are the *only* ways to be heard. They recognized (mostly through modeling) that coercion is the most effective and immediate way to meet their *requests*. The second is that abusers may not trust their environment enough to meet their needs, so they feel compelled to be in control of everything and everyone. Lastly, batterers may not consciously recognize that they can and do deserve to get their needs met the right way. These concepts apply to victims as well. Teaching victims how to get their needs met appropriately can also help interrupt the cycle of violence. When both parents become healthy, they can provide a secure and positive environment for the entire family. Later in this chapter, information will be provided that can aid in this process.

Changing the impact abuse has on individual parent/child relationships

In this section, we will discuss how to assist parents with changing the relationship they have with their children. Because parenting children is a skill, techniques will be provided to modify the parent-child interaction for both violent and victimized parents.

Violent Parents

The first step is to help offending parents understand that positive alternatives are available to them. In many cases, batterers have well-defended egos, which make them resistant to new ideas and can impede progress. Therefore, the first order of business is to build trust between the treatment provider and the offender. Many clients report feeling defensive and most admit that they personalize any outside criticism. The answer, then, lies in finding ways to redirect bad behavior without offending the perpetrator personally. Instead of changing who the abusers are, the strategy should be to change what they do or how they behave. When the behavior is separated from the person, a client seems more receptive to change and less resistant to treatment. Therefore the treatment providers' goals must be to break down these fortified and well-defended barriers.

No matter how dysfunctional the parent/child relationship might seem to outsiders, it is no less a lasting connection. Without intervention strategies, the impact the abusers have on their children can be psychologically detrimental with permanent consequences. It is widely accepted that the closer the bond between the batterers and their children is, the more traumatic the experience becomes. Kids deeply personalize abuse by a "loved" one and struggle with the conflicting emotions generated by their polarized feelings (fear and love). The objective, then, should be to assist abusers with changing the bond they share with their children. Even in the most severe cases of abuse, children are willing to forgive their batterers because they want their parents' love and validation. When parents acknowledged their mistakes and worked toward learning more effective methods of parenting, their children tend to recover more easily.

Victimized Parents

Effective parenting skills for victimized parents require a reorganization of roles and expectations. When they were living with the abusers, victimized parents had little power to make decisions or choices for their families. Children may adopt an abusive style and rationalize to themselves that victims deserve what they get. Altering this mentality is challenging, but not futile. Victims should be warned that children might initially be resistant to new limitations or rules, but that with persistence they will adjust. Kids are looking for boundaries, consistency, and fairness. When these three needs are provided, over time, children become more receptive to the adjustments. Victimized parents have to take back their position in their families before established dysfunctional patterns and mindset can be modified.

The children's natural presumption might be that their victimized parents were unable to keep them out of harm's way so the kids distrust them. As the new heads of households, the victimized parents must see to it that trust is rebuilt. The challenge is to convince the children that the victimized parents can now be their protectors. Since many victimized parents lack the skills to be protective, alert and engaged, new tools should be introduced to change that. Clients should be warned that their children might feel safe enough in their new environment to emot more freely, and that the parents need to be adequately prepared for the meltdowns that come in the aftermath of family violence.

When parenting abused children alone, especially when the victimized parent is burdened with guilt, the tendency is to let children slip into adult roles, which ultimately confuses everyone in the family. Although mutual respect is essential in any relationship, victims must remember that this is not an equal relationship. Ultimately, the goal should be to transfer the balance of responsibility back to the victimized parents by providing esteem-building techniques. Ideally these new skills will not only promote empowerment but also help victims make choices that feel right for them. The challenge though, is that most victims express self-doubt due to the conditioning they experienced during their abusive relationship. As a result, some victims may rely too heavily upon what others think, which could impede progress toward self-reliance. The caution here should be that when victims are over-dependent on others for decisions, it places them back in their past role. They need to be encouraged to hear what others think without giving up their opinions entirely.

Since victimized parents often suffer from lowered self-esteems and other emotional issues, progress could be hindered. Therefore, it is important to recognize characteristics that could deter or limit their ability to be successful parents and help the victims change them .

Characteristics of Victims

Self-perceptions play a critical role in determining how adults parent their children. In order to help victimized parents be more effective, the treatment provider must first recognize the character attributes that develop as a result of persistent emotional and physical assault. Next, the treatment provider needs to address these traits individually to change the parent/child dynamic.

A checklist of victims' attributes (from the soon-to-be released book, *Abnormal Psychology in the 21st Century*, in press¹), as well as definitions and possible intervention strategies, are outlined below.

v Depression—manifests through sense of helplessness and/or hopelessness

Helplessness is generated by the victims' past environment. In order to help clients combat helplessness and depression, and acquire a greater sense of purpose, treatment providers must encourage them to build stronger support system and develop well-thought-out plans of action. Depressive symptoms are alleviated when individuals become empowered. Direct them to enroll in supportive counseling and interactive classes, listen to motivational talks and read inspirational books.

v Anxiety/hyper-vigilant reactions—mimics hyperactivity or learning difficulties

Anxiety causes individuals to have racing thoughts that make focusing difficult, and sometimes can lead to panic attacks. Anxiety can be overcome by practicing relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation, or through other physical activities like exercise and running. Breathing normally and rhythmically is an essential piece to reducing anxiety, which gives the mind the opportunity to slow down and redirect its focus

v Poor self-image—behaves the way they feel, unwilling to excel or be self-reliant

Poor self-image is a result of negative external input, such as put-downs, constant criticism, and statements intended to shame and invalidate. The old information must be discounted and replaced. An obvious first step in improving one's self-image would be for the individual to remove him/herself from such abuse, and to find more healthy relationships. In addition, victims

can benefit from techniques which encourage internal input, and assistance with verbally acknowledging any positive attributes they already have. Provide them with exercises that promote positive affirmations and help them to value themselves.

v Incompetence—creates inadequacy through constant berating or emotional brow beatings

Incompetent feelings can be debilitating. Teaching clients strategies to change these feelings can be accomplished through programs such as wilderness training, assertiveness classes or teambuilding exercises. Initially, any strategies used should be fun and easily mastered so that victims can be successful. Accomplishing short-term goals first builds competencies for the more difficult long-term challenges.

v Fear of failure—learns that making mistakes has grave consequences so they either avoid trying or strive for perfection, believing they can manage the violence

Fear on any level is paralyzing, but fear of failure tops the list. So many victims learn that even the simplest mistakes can jeopardize their safety. Introducing fear-reduction exercises that encourage mistakes should help. For example, families can participate in games or activities where the goal is to have fun and not worry about who wins or loses. Rather than concentrating on “why” the individuals did something wrong, a strategy-building exercise that focuses on “what” they can do next time to change the outcome might be better. Asking the question what versus why sets clients up to focus on future problem solving rather than past blaming. Teaching them to laugh at themselves is vital. Perhaps incorporating the old adage, “We are laughing with you, not at you” would help. They have personalized the severe criticism inflicted upon them and need help lightening up.

v Poor social skills—develops inadequate relationship or interpersonal skills

Poor social skills are a direct consequence of being isolated from external interaction. Educating victims and children on how to select friends and establish healthy relationships can enhance these social skills. Because the violent interaction was so ingrained in them, abusive relationships now seem normal to them. As a result, victims may feel some discomfort with relating to the new style of interaction. Teaching them how to verbalize their needs and include themselves in the relationship will be key to changing how they relate to others.

v Poor eye contact—generates detachment issues and potential pathologies

Poor eye contact is due, in part, to the fear that connecting emotionally to anyone can provoke violence and subsequently pain. Therefore, individuals must learn how to trust that their environment is safe enough for them to interact with or connect to others. Because animals are nonjudgmental and are most often submissive, treatment providers should start by introducing exercises where victims look into the eyes of non-threatening animals (e.g., a bunny). Once they feel comfortable, the next step is for victims to connect with their children. If the kids have poor eye contact, they might need to follow the same protocol as their victimized parents by also beginning with something less threatening. The inability to connect with others can result in later pathologies; therefore, making eye contact is a must for these traumatized families.

v Over-reactive startle response—fears severe repercussions due to relentless abuse, body is held in a high state of arousal

An over-reactive startle response usually means that victims are always ready for the attack. They live in constant fear because their environment is so unpredictable and explosive. The only

way to overcome this response is for them to stop being afraid. This occurs when the victims are assured that they are genuinely safe. To help them reduce the intense fear, direct clients to stress management classes or, if appropriate, to self-defense training.

v Inadequate protective factors—accepts that they cannot protect their children or themselves or minimizes danger

Inadequate protective factors occur when victims have bought into their batterers' mindset and have rationalized that the situation "isn't that bad." Or—for whatever reason—they feel that they can somehow control the violent environment, so they lack the protective instincts that they need to keep their kids safe. Because of the mounting dysfunction that occurs with the escalation of violence, the boundaries between healthy and unhealthy interaction may become blurred. Children may be unwittingly placed in harm's way to the point of severe neglect or abuse. Therefore, building verbal, emotional and physical protective factors that ensure children's future safety is a must. In other words, victims should learn how to protect their children against any scarring—whether visible or not—that could potentially cause lasting damage. An example might be when a victim permits a perpetrator to watch the children even though a restraining order restricts contact. The victim may feel that the abuser is doing better and chooses to ignore the potential danger.

v Poor impulse control—forms by meeting internal needs through external sources, which can never be satiated

Poor impulse control is developed over time and usually starts in childhood. The body learns to regulate itself by searching for means to fulfill the empty emotional needs within it (i.e., food or shopping). Curbing these feelings for clients means teaching them skills that promote internal satisfaction. With children, start by giving them opportunities to earn privileges over an extended period of time rather than instantly. This forces them to wait and teaches them to depend on their internal value for reward because the external reward is not immediately assessable. The goal is to get the victims to meet their internal needs with internal resources (i.e., pride and confidence).

v Meltdowns—reacts inappropriately due to inability to cope with stress

Meltdowns occur as a direct result of not being able to manage emotions. Usually frustration levels run high and coping skills run low. Take for example, a child who fails a test or is teased by a classmate for making a mistake. This experience might be a painful reminder of how his batterer relentlessly called him a stupid loser. His reaction might be exaggerated to the point that he cusses at someone or hits his desk. Providing this child with replacement skills (i.e., communication or conflict management skills) for his inappropriate behaviors should help him deal with his emotions. Providing competency and coping skills can also reduce these overwhelming episodes.

v Regressive behavior—reverts to a younger age that may be inappropriate, i.e. bedwetting or thumb sucking

Regressive behavior is most evident in children victims, but can also occur with adults. In other words, an emotional relapse to a younger age might occur as a result of the victims' desire to circumvent their current violent situation. By reverting to a stage in their lives when they felt protected or cared for, they can use emotional avoidance. For example, children may begin bedwetting, thumb sucking or baby babbling whereas adults may become shy and withdrawn like

an awkward teenager. In either case, the victims are attempting to preclude their situation through an unhealthy emotional escape because they might genuinely believe that the earlier stages were a safer time. Essentially, people behave the way they feel; therefore, if they feel incompetent or helpless then they act those feelings out. To shift behaviors back to a more appropriate age might mean that the emotional deprivation that caused them to revert to the stage might require certain needs to be met again before they can feel safe enough to return to their chronological age. For example, when children have experienced traumatic events, the parents may need to rock their kids to sleep or hold them more often for comfort. When they feel safe enough, they will want to move forward. Victims cannot be forced back into their chronological age, therefore, patience and compassion are needed until they are emotionally ready.

v Passive or passive/aggressive behavior—expresses extreme or improper behavior due to low self-esteem and worth, believes they do not deserve to have needs met appropriately

Passive or passive/aggressive behavior is an indication that an individual does not feel deserving. Motivating clients to get their needs more effectively requires that they are provided with communication and conflict management skills. When victims believe that they have the right to speak out without severe repercussions, they can move toward assertive behaviors. The treatment providers' job is a daunting one, and helping clients identify self-defeating traits and develop strategies to combat them will take some ingenuity.

Because victims often feel so badly about themselves, they do not believe they are worthy of love or praise. Therefore, penetrating these embedded emotional filters might be challenging. To protect what little ego they have left, victims may withdraw or reject others before they can be rejected. Having drawn the conclusion that they simply cannot trust their environment, and anticipating problems, they tend to disengage and avoid social opportunities. Victims need to recognize that those who were abusive, negative and cruel were unjust. They will need encouragement to recognize that their requests were not unreasonable, and that loved ones should want to meet their needs. That's what relationships are all about.

Survivors of family violence build walls around their lives to protect themselves from being re-victimized. They unwittingly shut the world out in order to protect themselves against vulnerabilities. A victim once proclaimed, "*I will never let another man take me to a fancy dinner...I am not giving him a chance to trick me.*" Comments such as this one say, "*I was weak for believing that this was real.*" These strong emotions are not only impacting the choices that victims make but also their behaviors.

Characteristics of children who have witnessed/experienced family violence

Children in the aftermath of family violence have emotional issues that impede their ability to process and react effectively to the world around them. The severity and duration of the trauma and the amount of support they get may determine how children cope with their experience. Initially, these children are mistrustful, apprehensive, and fearful. How they react to those feelings, however, varies from one child to the next. Some act out aggressively and defiantly question the most insignificantly minute requests. Take for instance, a teacher that announces to the class that they have ten pages of reading for homework. The mistrusting child does not want anyone to control her, so she blurts out, "*Why do we have to do that?*" or "*That's stupid, I am not going to do that.*" Over time, this persistent reaction compounds the adult/child relationship and generates negative assumptions regarding the child's disposition, which are then reflected in his interaction with the child. As a result, the child internalizes how the adult

feels, which lowers her self-efficacy and then her negative self-concepts are negatively reinforced. Eventually, the dynamics of this relationship spread to other facets of her life. Without different input, she will ultimately stop caring about everything. This most assuredly will cause poor choices, which leads her onto a destructive course.

On the other hand, some children become passive, making them target practice by malicious others, so that the abuse is not only occurring at home, it is happening in other social settings as well. These children often become viewed as unimportant and their trauma usually goes unnoticed normally because they are not acting out. Whether children are aggressive or passive, the bottom line is they are wearing their emotions on their sleeves for the whole world to see. They need help in changing their responses and interactions to others.

Treatment providers need to understand the children's cognitive processing *before* they can change any behaviors. Children from violence have cluttered and busy minds, which run a mile a minute. Their thoughts race with anxiety and fear—and their focus scatters in every direction. As a result, some need help cleaning up their chaos. Their minds are cluttered, and so are their rooms. The way they live is the way they feel. They may therefore need assistance with organizing their lives and creating a sense of serenity.

Peaceful surroundings are not so familiar to children living in violence. They struggle with their emotions. Their inability to cope with the trauma often leads to inappropriate behavior. Therefore, skills must be introduced that can help them learn better coping mechanisms that make them successful. Although we can take children out of a violent environment, it takes years to take the violent environment out of them (Dalpiaz, 2004). Tolerance for their poor coping abilities is necessary to see them survive this devastation. In other words, using an authoritarian or hardnosed approach with them simply does not work. Punishing these emotionally bruised children only reinforces how they already feel—bad. Intimidation and aggression only serve to exacerbate the issues at hand. Ultimately, punishment compounds their self-perception and their behavior. Alternatives such as reward and praise should be considered to counteract these feelings. An example is to substitute punishments such as taking privileges away with having children earn their privileges. Adults need to be patient during any new changes. Behavior is a skill that must be learned—or unlearned. Parents should be reminded that children are apt to make good things better rather than make bad things good. Parenting is a perpetual esteem-building project that requires compassion, creativity, and effort to raise healthy and happy children.

Modifying child behaviors requires adults to see the situations through the eyes of the children and respect their perception. While disciplining, adults may not think that they are scary or intimidating, but to battered children they are. As a result, many children expect conflict and prepare for the worse. They are walking around with their fists raised, ready to take on anything or anyone. They see any confrontations as dangerous. Their reactions to others can be compared to a pot of water near its boiling point. The treatment providers' job is to reduce the heat. Otherwise, the argument increases the emotional boiling point where everything spills over; makes a mess; and someone ultimately gets burnt.

Children in this high state of arousal have soaring stress levels along with an overwhelming sense of helplessness that make it difficult for them to manage their emotions. To help them be more receptive to criticism or correction, they will need a calm, non-threatening environment they can trust. Assisting them with learning how to trust and have regard for themselves

requires an authoritative and lovingly firm approach. Using negotiation and compromise works best for most kids, but in particular, children from family violence benefit greatly from this approach because it give them back some of the control they lost while exposed to the abuse.

Generating Plans to Meet Children's Goals

Every child affected by family violence has some degree of lowered self-regard. The emotional abuse has taken its toll on them and eroded their confidence and their self-image. Many express their deep fear of failure and they give up more easily when they anticipate making mistakes. The stories that some children disclosed about their experiences are so outrageous that people—not familiar with their situation—would find them incomprehensible. Consider the following case.

EXAMPLE 2: A child reported that his puppy was severely beaten because he forgot to let her out to go to the bathroom. The batterer felt the child should learn a lesson about responsibility, and how it affects others. The message the abuser gave to this young boy was that when a person makes mistakes, someone else suffers the consequences. For abused children the punishments are far more severe than they need to be.

Experiences such as this contribute exponentially to children's self-images. Their fear of failure is often over-personalized when they make mistakes. These children have a strong sense of inadequacy and may avoid trying anything that could potentially set them up for criticism or failure. They will need to be encouraged to fail and be okay with it. This starts by raising their self-esteem so they don't associate their mistakes with who they are.

Esteem-building exercises

High self-esteem is important to developmental growth. To assist those who lack good esteem, therapists should use exercises that promote positive feelings.

EXAMPLE 3: A young man grew anxious when asked to verbally acknowledge some of his positive attributes in exchange for monetary rewards. . Although he could gain a coin for each item he could list, he struggled with this exercise because throughout his entire life he had only heard criticism. He could only define himself as bad, yet when asked, he could not verbalize why he felt that way. To initiate this exercise, the treatment provider provoked the child by declaring traits that were blatantly untrue about the boy, such as: "I know why you're bad...you're bad because you steal cars and you beat people up." As the incited child emphatically denied each allegation, he was rewarded with a coin. As negative traits were discounted and positive attributes were acknowledged, the pile of coins mounted. The treatment provider's outrageous examples continued until the child was able to note the positive traits without assistance. When the exercise was complete, he was asked to look at the two piles and pretend that the traits belong to someone else. Then he was asked whether he thought this person was a good or bad person. His response was, "I would have to say that he's good."

EXAMPLE 4: The treatment provider can use symbols to serve as esteem builders. In one case, a young boy was removed from both abusive parents and placed in foster care. He felt scared, rejected and unwanted. These feeling became so embedded that he felt unworthy of attention or love. The treatment provider decided that this boy needed to be recognized for the strides that he had made in treatment, so she purchased a trophy and inscribed it, "To the bravest guy I know." Obviously, this token piece of metal cannot

remove all the pain he had but it did served as a visual reminder that he was much more than he had ever imagined.

Children believe in symbols like lucky rocks, charm bracelets, and certificates of achievements. In a world that has punished and admonished them for so long, they need something tangible to hold onto—something that can serve as a constant reminder that they are something great.

EXAMPLE 5 : To promote healthier self-images, a safe place to start is with the written word rather than through verbal praise. When children are not accustomed to praise, it will seem foreign and uncomfortable. An abused father asked for help with changing his communication with his son. The relationship had been rocky and any positive interaction between the two was rare. The dad was asked to purchase a notebook and place it in plain sight where he could record his son's personal achievements. The father worked on this list for one week and then reported happily that, not only did his son enjoy the list, the boy reciprocated by making a list of his father's positive attributes. This exercise served two functions: to raise esteem and show just how powerful role modeling can be.

Some children, when given praise, withdraw and become uncomfortable. The emotional conflict they feel is likely based upon being told that they are good when they have been conditioned, for so long, to think otherwise. Therefore, children recovering from abuse may not always be ready to hear verbal praise, so using the above exercise might be safer for them because it is less direct and confrontational. In other words, when children are not placed in a situation where they have to respond to the accolades they may be able to embrace the acclaims by viewing the compliments when others are not present. Although, the ultimate goal is verbal praise, some children need to address their emotional safety first.

Competency Building

Building competence and confidence requires children to move beyond their current set of emotions and work toward acquiring more positive feelings. It takes many adults to raise a child – not just the parents. Because many victimized parents were isolated, and the few role models available to their children were often unhealthy and unsafe, it is essential that these children be introduced to others who can help redirect their lives. Find neutral adults who are not currently familiar with the children's background, who do not have "predetermined" discriminations against them. Unbiased strangers allow children greater opportunities to create new self-images. Athletic coaches or adult mentors such as those from the Big Brothers and Sisters program are helpful. The old proverb, "this project needs a new set of eyes," fits nicely here. We all know that children act better for other people than they do for their parents. They need a chance to participate in activities where their parents are not involved, and allowed to associate with others who have no preconceived ideas about who they are or who they "should" be. This provides them with a gateway to practicing a different way of living. It also frees them to be who they really want to be.

As mentioned earlier, taking the violent environment out of children takes time. There has been a great deal of damage inflicted upon their psyches. They will need to develop coping mechanisms, boundaries, and safety nets to overcome these feelings. The residual effects of violence last long after the family has left their abuser. The feelings and behaviors they have

experienced follow the victims wherever they go. The victims and their children will feel suspicious and fearful of others until they can let go of the past. Teaching them to be interactive with others after violence can prove challenging. Most have experienced severe emotional deprivation, which dampens their sense of worth. They will need assistance with learning how to combat these emotions.

To enhance a child's self-confidence, have him do role-playing exercises in a darkened room or with a blindfold. This exercise requires caution and should be done under safe conditions and only when the child feels comfortable enough to participate. The premise behind eliminating visual connection is that, by preventing the child from seeing the reactions of others, he can work toward overcoming his fear of them. For victimized children, even positive social situations can be intimidating for them because they feel unworthy of being treated nicely. Teach them to interact more appropriately by introducing exercises where they are asked to greet others by looking them straight in the eye, smiling, and returning the salutation. Again, preparing them for the anticipated anxiety is important—if they know it is coming they can brace themselves. So, warn them that this exercise might be scary the first few times they try it, and that their new positive interaction might feel somewhat funny. But also let them know that once they master this exercise, they can overcome some of their bad feelings.

Another exercise that promotes a better self-image is to have them watch themselves, privately, in a mirror for five minutes twice a day for several days. Initially, children will struggle with this exercise and feel extremely uncomfortable because they have been conditioned to loath themselves. But it is imperative that these feelings change. Once the children have mastered looking at themselves privately, the next step is to have them go to a public restroom and repeat the exercise. In the beginning, perhaps they could look at themselves only when no one is around them; but eventually they will need to be able to accomplish looking at themselves while in the company of others. The importance of this exercise is to teach them how to feel okay with gazing at their reflection without feeling badly.

Roadblocks to Recovery

The challenges of working with victimized children are obviously greater the longer they remained in their volatile environment. The psychological impact from constant verbal assault has permanent consequences. According to Johnson (1998), children produce a negative internal dialogue that matches with, and is a result of, the negative input. Consequently, victimized children are much more apt to acknowledge criticism than to accept praise. Positive integration exercises should be provided to allow new affirmative information to substitute the negative embedded input.

EXAMPLE 6 : An adolescent girl, diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, was ordered into treatment. She was failing academically and socially in school. She had been exposed to family violence her entire life. The harsh criticism reinforced her low self-image. She reported having been taunted and berated—both at home and in school. Her peers called her derogatory names because of her diagnosis. Initially, her negative dialogue focused exclusively on her disorder and her weight (one side effect of lithium). The therapeutic strategy was to identify other positive qualities that she possessed and work toward overcoming the diagnosis. The girl was asked to generate a list of positive attributes that could redefine her, then to write the disorder in the middle of a piece of paper in small print and circle it. Next, the treatment provider drew extending lines from the circle and

added the positive traits [purposely making the positive qualities larger in print]. Seeing how the diagnosis was overpowered by the other characteristics, the young girl became excited. The schematic was copied and strategically placed throughout the house to serve as visual reminders that she was so much more than her diagnosis. During the next session, she made a beaded bracelet where each bead represented an attribute listed on the schematic. After two months, her mother reported that the young girl was excelling in school both academically and socially; and that her behavior at home improved immensely.

The above technique illustrates just how much children need adult guidance to process and discern external input. Prior to treatment, this young girl readily accepted any unwarranted criticism inflicted upon her as true. She needed an adult to help her recognize her true internal value. Emotional growth is progressive, and often children, especially from violence, lack the maturity to discern truths from untruths, which makes them susceptible to developing poor self-images. Intervention strategies such as the one listed above can assist with these vulnerabilities and help children understand their own value. Acquiring an adequate level of coping skills permits children to reject any negative input thrown at them. The following case explains how to promote positive coping skills.

EXAMPLE 7: A young girl, recently removed from a violent environment, was threatened with expulsion from school due to fighting. When asked why she hit other children, she responded, “They call me names, so I have to hit them.” This young girl’s internal dialogue was negative. To change the belief system, a role-playing exercise was designed to teach her that she did not have to accept what the others were saying. The treatment provider warned the girl that she would be calling her names and that each time she heard the names, the girl needed to repeat the following silently in her mind: “I don’t have to believe that.” After several minutes of name-calling, the girl began to smile. At that point, the treatment provider told her to say the phrase as loud as she could in her head, so that no names being said out loud could get in. The exercise continued for several more minutes. Weeks later, the mother reported that while her daughter was playing with play dough, her cousin called her a loser. The young girl ignored the usual negative internal dialogue, looked up from her activity, and retorted out loud, “I don’t have to believe that.” The coping strategy appeared to be successful. Additionally, the girl’s behavior in school improved.

This exercise helped the young girl to determine whether others really deserved credibility or not. This technique can also be used to help children with difficult adults. Many children referred to treatment have problems with their teachers, due to “inappropriate” behavior. Because teachers are authority figures, these children must learn to react in a balanced way. They should be instructed to sit quietly during the negative criticism and be respectful, but be encouraged to understand that they may have to *take it*; but they do not have to *take it in* and personalize what the adults are saying (Dalpiaz, 2004). Children should be able to present their concerns to their parents so their issues can be dealt with on a more even playing field.

Big picture concepts

Abused children do not have the ability to process information globally, and see every situation as separate. Consequently, they react to each circumstance independently. Teaching children how to recognize the big picture requires that parents help them obtain an overall view

of their situation. For example, when an abused child gets a bad grade on a test, the likelihood is that he/she might focus only on the grade. The adults must break down the day to find something positive for this child to concentrate on, that would give him a sense of accomplishment. The adult may praise the child for having kept his room clean, or playing quietly with his brother. The abused child is therefore reminded that there was more to the day than just a bad grade. This might take some energy because their perspective is more than likely negative. The idea is to help them see the “brighter” side of their day.

Teaching the big-picture concept to abusers is also an incredible tool as well. The majority of abusers were also abused children who never adopted a global outlook.

EXAMPLE 8: A father recommended for treatment for throwing objects and violently screaming while his son cowered in a corner was introduced to the big-picture concept. During treatment it was disclosed that he was impulsively moody and reacted badly even when the day seemed to be going well. When he practiced utilizing the big-picture concept, he was able to learn how to view unexpected situations differently. This father wanted to stop his abusive behavior and was willing to hear his wife say, “Honey, remember the big picture.” This man reported that the technique allowed him to slow down and re-evaluate what he was reacting to.

Cognitive Processing—Arranging Thoughts

After the violence, victims don’t immediately find happiness. To reestablish a sense of purpose and contentment, they will literally need to practice being happy. As simplistic as this may seem, they have to learn how to have fun. Recently, during a court-ordered parenting class, this author had the students list attributes that described what effective parenting looked like. One of the characteristics listed was fun. The class was then asked to determine whether fun was an attitude or a skill. The entire group declared that fun was a skill. With this mental set, no wonder life after violence seems like drudgery.

With all of the sadness these families have experienced, it makes sense that they might overlook happiness. To change this outlook, the treatment provided should introduce fun activities (i.e., have parents run through sprinklers with their kids) that would make the family feel good. Parents might start by randomly selecting one day each week when they imagine that this is the last day they ever get to be with their children. The paradigm shift gives parents permission to disregard the extraneous demands that currently consume them. Clients report that when they consciously use this technique, they feel better about themselves as parents.

Next, in order to promote happiness, the family has to genuinely know what makes them happy. Have them generate a list of activities that would feel good for them to do. Start with the events or projects that are realistic and achievable. Initially, the daily goals should be to do a minimum of two activities (i.e., go to the zoo or ride bikes), and to make five positive statements (i.e., great job or you must be proud of yourself). Most times unhappiness is due to feeling helpless or out of control and is usually self-imposed. For instance, a father once reported resenting his children because he could no longer participate in the things he enjoyed. When he was given permission to make time for these activities, his feelings toward his children changed drastically.

One way to ensure that fun happens is to get a calendar to schedule these activities. It makes sense that if people can use a planner to get obligations done, then they can get fun done as well. Additionally, better feelings can be accomplished by getting involved in activities such as

volunteering for a worthy cause. Perhaps, doing a fundraising walk for children, animals, or cancer patients would take some of the focus off the misery the family has and allow them to contribute to society. This sense of contribution generates positive feelings. Mohandas K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) once said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Those who give to others gain a better sense of self-value if they allow themselves to embrace their gifts.

Reconnecting Children Through Trust

The recurring theme among traumatized children seems to be their inability to trust others. Many are withdrawn emotionally and physically. Because at least one parent in the family dyad lacked nurturing skills, touching such as hugging was absent. In fact, physical contact in violent homes often resulted in pain, so children learned to avoid contact with others to protect themselves. But the fact is that humans are social creatures by nature; and avoidance would be detrimental to these children’s mental health. Therefore, physical interaction is essential to building children’s sense of trust and safety.

Animals play a significant role in trust and competency issues. The unconditional affection that they provide can often facilitate trust, and help children recognize that they can share their secrets without judgment. When possible, encourage children to be responsible for animals because they can develop competency and self-esteem through contribution, while at the same time developing empathy. It forces them to think about something other than their circumstances.

Disclosure

One of the most tremendous obstacles for children to overcome is disclosure. They fear the outside world’s response; and they are often unwilling to share the degree of violation that they had experienced with their peers, other adults or even their parents. The following situation was eventually disclosed during treatment.

EXAMPLE 9: In one violent home, an adolescent girl went out drinking, and was rendered helpless by a group of young men who tied and gang raped her. She was fortunate enough to escape, but she never told her parents because she was more afraid of their response than to being raped. She explained that the fear of telling her parents was so great that the traumatic violation seemed the lesser of two evils. The goal should be to help such children learn not only how to cope with the victimization, but also to develop healthy relationships with others, so that they won’t become isolated and traumatized even further.

This chapter has covered a wide range of material. It is this writer’s hope that the information provided shines light on the devastating impact that family violence has on not only families but on society as well. If treatment providers use these techniques, they can move children and their victimized parents toward healing in the aftermath of family violence.

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