



# CHILDHOOD OBSERVERS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Children exposed to domestic violence often exhibit similar reactions to physically abused children.

Discover guidelines for helping these children cope.

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Regardless of whether children are exposed to domestic violence through direct physical abuse or are observers only, they can be emotionally traumatized by the violence in the home. Childhood observers of domestic violence can display some of the same responses as physically abused children and may affect their ability to function in school.

The school community plays a pivotal role in the lives of childhood observers of domestic violence, and school counselors, as first responders, often function as crisis managers once a disclosure has been made. School counselors face three major challenges when advocating for childhood observers of domestic violence:

1. Recognizing children's responses
2. Understanding parent responses
3. Assessing school staff's knowledge of and comfort levels in addressing domestic violence

## Children's Responses

As mentioned above, childhood observers of domestic violence can model similar emotional, behavioral and physical indicators as physically abused students. Children can become desensitized to the abuse, and sometimes their perceptions regarding their abusive family dynamic can be distorted. Just as in any other type of childhood trauma, no two children will necessarily respond in the

exact same way, and symptoms may not be obvious. However, the effects can follow a child into adulthood.

Through our outreach with parents in school settings and in community agency work, we have found adult victims and perpetrators alike tend to minimize the violence between themselves and also tend to minimize or deny the harmful effects on their children.

Another challenge when advocating for childhood observers involves assessing our own and others' lack of knowledge about and comfort levels in addressing domestic violence issues. Graduate-level coursework in both school counseling and school administration degree programs don't usually include a focus on domestic violence. And current higher-level learning opportunities for school professionals rarely offer training on the damaging effects of domestic violence on childhood observers.

As a first responder and crisis manager, it behooves you to learn as much as possible about the generational effects of domestic violence. This knowledge and awareness not only will increase your comfort levels in dealing with domestic violence but also increases your effectiveness as the crisis interventionist/child advocate. Additionally, it positions you as a leader in educating teachers and administrators about such a complicated social issue affecting students.

## Intervention Strategies

No matter how experienced a school counselor you are, intervening in domestic violence cases can be intimidating. Consider using the following intervention guidelines.

- Student disclosures may be intentional or accidental. Handle any disclosure carefully, regardless of whether or not the student intended to tell you.
- The child's emotional state may not be predictable. Always accept and validate the child's feelings, and don't make judgments or assumptions regarding the feelings.
- Keep your responses nonjudgmental and accepting. Regardless of what you're feeling internally, maintain a calm exterior.
- Use developmentally appropriate language the student understands.
- Tell the student you are glad he or she trusted you with this information.
- Encourage the child to talk but avoid leading questions.
- Gently explore if the child has told anyone else about the violence and what happened when he or she told. Be keenly aware that you may be the first and only person to whom the child has told the story.
- Assess the child's support systems.
- Never make promises to the child you may not be able to keep.
- Consult and document as needed.

Some states have statutes specifically addressing the citations and consequences involving childhood witnessing of domestic violence. Not all states have such statutes, but with an increase in social consciousness and greater awareness of the damaging effects on children, many states and municipalities are moving in a more proactive, positive direction. To find out if your state considers witnessing domestic violence a form of child abuse, visit [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state).

Even if your state has not yet implemented such child protective state statutes, be the systems change agent and educate your school community to the potentially negative affects witnessing domestic violence can have on students. Contact local crisis centers, domestic violence skilled



## Children's Responses to Observing Abuse

Emotional indicators may include:

- guilt and shame over disclosures
- a sense of anxiety or fear for the adult victim or themselves
- feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- a sense of being responsible for the family dysfunction
- thoughts of suicide

Behavioral indicators may include:

- aggressiveness as evidenced by rough play, acting out or bullying or the opposite behavior – passiveness
- a refusal to attend school as a way to protect the abused family member
- low school performance or even over-performance in grades, sports and/or any afterschool activities allowing them to avoid home
- attempted suicide

Physical indicators may include:

- tiredness at school
- poor personal hygiene
- regression
- self-abuse
- substance abuse
- psychosomatic complaints and/or often ill
- high-risk play and increased pain tolerance

interventionists and battered women's shelters to collaborate on ways to support childhood observers.

In addition to being aware of state statutes, you also need to be familiar with your district's policies regarding reporting and documenting suspected child abuse and neglect. School personnel as a group traditionally underreport cases of suspected child abuse. Certainly cases of emotional abuse as noted in observers of domestic violence can seem a low priority on the abuse continuum.

## Coping Strategies

Helping childhood observers of domestic violence develop coping strategies for school and home can make a world of difference to the students.

**COPING AT SCHOOL:** For some students, intrusive thoughts about home violence can interfere with schoolwork. Providing these students with an opportunity to talk, especially during the tension-building phases of family violence, may alleviate some anxiety or fear and allow them to return to their schoolwork. For some, especially younger children, taking some time in your office to draw their feelings can help. Also consider teaching some stress relaxation techniques and help affected students learn to self-regulate and self-monitor their own responses. For some children, journaling can be a useful stress release and coping technique. Find out about affected students' support systems to determine who at school can help them during different times of the day.

Assess for maladaptive coping strategies and, if present, help students learn some better adaptive strategies. When issues of transitioning or noise levels trigger anxiety or fear, you can use an additional technique – a “school counselor pass” to be used during those times a student may be feeling distraught or in emotional crisis while at school. The pass allows a student to leave for the school counseling office without having to answer questions from staff when asking permission.

A final key strategy would be to involve and educate key members of the child's school team on voice levels, greeting warmly and informally

assessing the student's emotional state throughout the day. Consistency and structure are paramount.

**COPING AT HOME:** Asking students about their past coping skills at home will aid in planning. Encourage and compliment them for those adaptive skills that have worked. Help the students replace maladaptive coping skills with adaptive coping skills. Students can use many of the above-mentioned school coping strategies at home as well. Find out if the students have a safe place to go when the violence starts. For some, you may need to talk to them about calling 911 if they are fearful for a parent or have concerns about their own safety. Explore students' support systems outside of school as well.

Knowing which parent is the victim can be important if you choose to make contact with that parent regarding issues of abuse. This, of course, may or may not occur based upon your decision to contact and report to child

welfare. Note that even contacting the clear victim in the relationship may not be received well. It is also important to discover if the parents are involved in a mutually physically abusive relationship. Abusive parents seldom respond well to a school counselor initiating a discussion on and questioning their abusive behaviors. Decisions to contact the parents should not be made lightly.

### **Crisis Manager and Gatekeeper**

Unlike traditional models of crisis intervention such as dealing with suspected child physical abuse, dealing with suspected cases of emotional trauma as a result of witnessing violence at home may cause you to proverbially flinch. Of course in the field of crisis intervention, preparing ourselves for working with childhood observers should happen long before the crisis situation walks in the door.

At the moment of initial disclosure, the school counselor makes the switch

to crisis manager. Beyond the initial intervention, you'll make another switch to function as the student's gatekeeper. As gatekeepers, we coordinate ongoing follow up and effective communication with the school team, child welfare agencies, the family and, most importantly, the student. As school counselors, we realize that not every case of childhood observation of domestic violence is a mandated report to child welfare. As an educated crisis manager and gatekeeper, we realize ongoing communication is vital even in cases when the child welfare agency becomes involved. Child welfare and/or the district courts may mandate individual, perpetrator

## Love Is Not Abuse

Lindsay Ann Burke was often described as "the girl next door." A fun-loving, intelligent and generous teen, she was always thinking of others, standing up for their rights and her own. She met her killer by chance, at a wedding. She was drawn to him by his compliments, the attention he paid to her and his charming ways. She was swept off her feet, and when the controlling behaviors started, she, like many other victims of abuse, didn't recognize them. Lindsay eventually broke up with him, but that, unfortunately, wasn't the end of their contact. On Sept. 14, 2005, after discovering a photo of another man in her purse, her ex-boyfriend murdered her in a sudden rage.

Unfortunately, Lindsay's story is not unusual. Nearly one in three teens who have been in a relationship report physical abuse, sexual abuse or threats of physical violence, according to a recent survey by Liz Claiborne Inc. and Futures Without Violence.

Despite the prevalence of teen dating abuse, only 25 percent of students say they have a course on dating abuse in their school.

To address a clear need to educate teens as well as their teachers and school counselors

about teen dating violence and digital dating abuse, Liz Claiborne Inc. created the Love Is Not Abuse curriculum, which has been used in more than 11,000 high schools since it was made available in 2005.

The curriculum teaches middle and high school students about the dangers of teen dating abuse, helps students involved in such relationships to ask for help and teaches students how to reach out to affected friends or family members and direct them on where to find help. A lesson on digital dating abuse focuses on abuse through technology, including lessons on privacy invasion, sexting and handling the posting of abusive messages on social networks.

Ann Burke, educator and Lindsay's mother, recognizes the power of teen dating abuse education. "By teaching our teens about dating violence and healthy relationships, we are empowering them with the knowledge and skills to help themselves and others," Burke said.

"My hope is that teachers and school counselors will recognize dating violence for the serious problem that it is and recognize that they can indeed make a difference in the



lives of teens through education. Prevention is possible. I firmly believe had my daughter, Lindsay, been properly educated about this topic, she would still be with us today.

Love Is Not Abuse is a special blend of literature and health education and can easily be incorporated into already existing lesson plans in these subject areas. It offers educators detailed information about the scope of the problem and how to respond to students needing help. The training time required to teach Love Is Not Abuse is minimal, and educators can easily adapt the curriculum to their needs. The course is short but impactful and is ideal for eighth-, ninth- and 10th-graders. There is also an iPhone app available targeted to parents about the perils of teen dating violence; it's available in the iTunes store.

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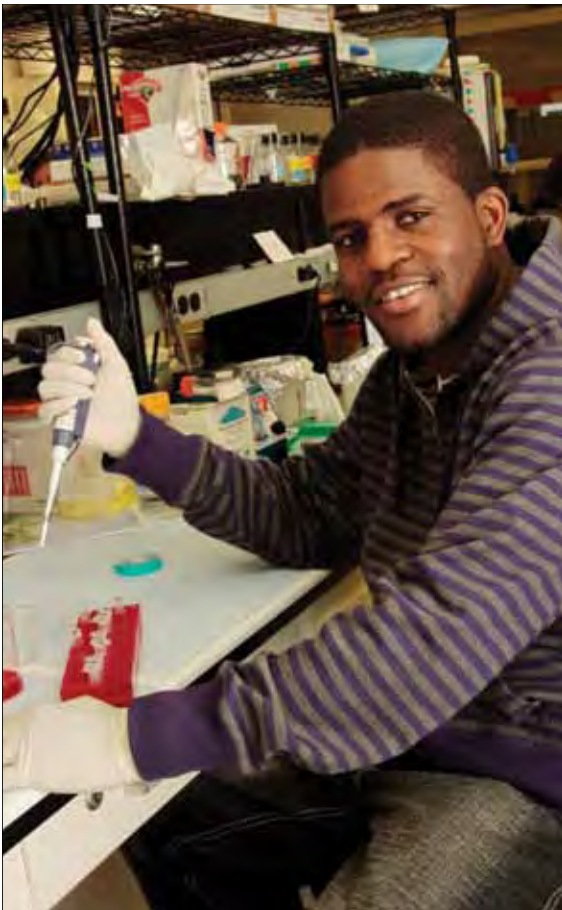
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and family counseling and monitoring for a period of time. This kind of involvement is more likely to happen in those states where laws are implemented to protect childhood observers.

Schools often function as a safe haven during the day for childhood observers of domestic violence and represent great hope for them when they disclose. As school counselors and gatekeepers, our stability and follow up for the child is critical – not only for systemic change for an individual family but as part of the larger systemic change in better meeting the needs of all childhood observers of domestic violence. 

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