

# Little Eyes, Little Ears...Children & Abuse

On any given day in Canada, approximately 2500 children are living in abused women's shelters with their mothers. That means that half of all women who enter shelter bring children with them. 67% of those children are under the age of 10. Shelters provide a safe and supportive environment for women and children fleeing violence in the home. The effects of abuse are not only traumatic but also long lasting. Violence against a mother shapes children as they grow. Imagine what the world must be like for a child who lives with abuse.

Child maltreatment, also called, "child abuse", is a term that can mean physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and/or physical or emotional neglect and/or denial of medical care. Domestic violence is the abuse, assault or systematic control of someone by an intimate partner, usually, but not always, a pattern of behaviour used by men against women.

Abuse threatens a child's sense of his or her family as being safe and nurturing. Bad sights, sounds and experiences take many forms. A hit or a slap is obvious to see; abusive words cause invisible bruises. Children are naturally good observers yet poor interpreters making their worlds chaotic and confusing. Little eyes and little ears don't miss much. Violence in the home may cause kids to feel fear, self-blame, anxiety, guilt, anger, worry, and hope for rescue. Children may also complain of physical symptoms such as: tummy aches, headaches, fatigue and bed-wetting.

Unhealthy lessons children may learn from violence against their mothers:

- Violence and threats get you what you want
- A person has 2 choices – to be the abuser or the victim
- Victims are to blame for the violence
- When people hurt others, they do not get in trouble
- Women are weak, helpless or incompetent
- Anger causes violence or drinking causes violence
- People who love you can also hurt you
- Anger should be suppressed because it can get out of control
- Unhealthy, unequal relationships are normal or to be expected
- Men are in charge and get to control women's lives
- Women don't have the right to be treated with respect

***A child who lives with violence is forever changed, but not forever damaged.  
There is a lot we can do to make tomorrow better.***

Helping a mother is among the most effective strategies to help her children. A mother's love, affection, availability and investment in her children's well-being and healthy development are powerful factors to harness in our work of helping children. Each day brings dozens of priceless opportunities for teachable moments, which foster healing and promote healthy development.

Three strategies for helpers:

1. Ending a child's exposure to domestic violence and maltreatment is the single most important way to help children
2. If required, help the family find a safe place to live, a source of income, and other features of daily living to meet basic needs and create stability
3. Support women as mothers by fostering good parenting skills and encouraging them to address any personal issues compromising their parenting (e.g. depression)

***For more information call 7<sup>th</sup> Street Health Access Centre - 578-4801 or  
YWCA Westman Women's Shelter 727-3644 or  
24 hour toll free 1-877-977-0007***