Before the early 1980s, little was known about the impact that family and community violence has on children. The American Humane Association now estimates that between 3.3 million and 10 million children nationwide are at risk of witnessing parental abuse each year. Since it is suspected that a significant amount of domestic abuse goes unreported, this estimate may be low. The American Psychological Association reports that children who witness multiple acts of violence of more than one variety (including community and family violent acts) appear to be at a greater risk of continuing the cycle of violence.

THE CHILD WITNESS

Children are exposed to severe and chronic violence at much younger ages than in the past. A survey of elementary school children in New Orleans found that more than 90 percent of these children had witnessed violence, 70 percent had seen a weapon used and 40 percent had seen a dead body. Elementary-school-aged children have reported witnessing high levels of violence by the time they enter first and second grades. In addition, a study of 159 children in grades K through 6 found that children suffered posttraumatic stress symptoms following exposure to acute episodes of urban violence.

Violent events can be witnessed by children in many ways, not just by sight.

- Children may hear violence-cursing, degrading language, screams and pleading, fists hitting flesh, glass and other objects breaking.
- Children also can witness the consequences of violence after it has occurred such as bruises, torn clothes, broken furniture, their family members' bruises and torn clothes, holes in the wall or broken furniture.
- Children can sense the tension at home and in their community.

THE EFFECTS THAT VIOLENCE HAS ON CHILDREN

Children are victims even when they are not the direct targets of the physical abuse. Those children who witness violence can be affected emotionally, psychologically and even physically. They can experience anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and fear.
1. In a national survey of over 6,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children. 

2. Child abuse is 15 times more likely to occur in families where domestic violence is present. 

3. Men who have witnessed their parents' domestic violence are three times more likely to abuse their own wives than children of nonviolent parents, with the sons of the most violent parents being 1,000 times more likely to become wife batterers. 

4. Children who witness violence at home display emotional and behavioral disturbances as diverse as withdrawal, low self-esteem, nightmares, self-blame and aggression against peers, family members and property. 

5. A comparison of delinquent and non-delinquent youth found that a history of family violence or abuse is very significant when evaluating the differences between the two groups. 

6. Over 3 million children are at risk of exposure to parental violence each year. 

Children are especially vulnerable to being traumatized by violence because they feel helpless to prevent it. When an adult is out of control, there is very little a child can do to bring order to the situation. Violence in the home can be a source of anxiety for children. Seeing a stranger assaulted is alarming for a child, but seeing a parent or relative assaulted can be devastating to that child. 

The social learning model explains that the intergenerational transmission of violence is a learned behavior. Children learn how to behave from the actions they see in their parental role models. The witnessing of violent acts may have an impact on children's self-perceived views as an appropriate means of resolving conflict. Aggressive and violent behavior is learned at an early age. Studies have shown a relationship between a child's behavior in elementary school and the tendency toward antisocial or criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood. 

The process by which violence is taught is circular. The teaching begins in the family, expands through the culture of the community and larger society in which the child grows and matures and is then again reinforced or discouraged in the family. 

WAYS IN WHICH VIOLENCE IS BEING TAUGHT TO CHILDREN 
- Children see parents demean and strike each other 
- Parents encourage their children to fight back or be bullies 
- There is easy access to guns in the home or community 
- Toy guns or other toy weapons are supplied to children 
- Violence is glorified in competitive sports 
- Violence and sexual aggression are seen as entertainment in TV media, song lyrics and computer games 

FACTORS THAT PROTECT CHILDREN FROM BECOMING VIOLENT 
- Exposure to more positive behavior rather than negative behavior 
- High self-esteem 
- Involvement with extended family 
- Interaction with those in the community 
- Support from family, teachers and friends 
- Participation of family members in activities that are mutual and independent 
- A sense of hope about the future 
- A spiritual or religious base with which the child can identify 

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT CHILDREN WITNESSING VIOLENCE? 
- Parents can learn how violence affects children 
- Parents can learn and teach children effective nonviolent coping skills 
- Parents can listen to children in order to understand their interpretation of violent episodes 
- Parents can seek help with issues of violence in the family
WHERE CAN YOU GET HELP?

- Child Abuse Hot Line 399-0081
- Clark Count Family and Youth Services 455-5200
- Crisis Call Line 1-800-992-5757
- Domestic Violence Hot Line 646-4981
- Early Childhood Services 486-6138
- Family and Child Treatment Services (FACTS) 258-5855
- Safe House-TADC 564-3227
- University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Violence Prevention/Anger Management Project 222-3130
- WE CAN, Inc. 368-1533

References