

WHAT DID THE CHILDREN HEAR AND WHEN DID THEY HEAR IT?

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For Vermont Public Radio
May 1999

More than a third of women seeking help in hospital emergency rooms report that they have been abused by intimate partners. So say the results of a survey by the Allegheny University of the Health Sciences. Interviewing almost 3500 women, researchers identified something that puts women at especially high risk of domestic violence: raising young children.

Anyone who's been a parent can tell you that young children are only really perfect when they're asleep—and that if there's a short-fused temper in a house, the normal antics of wide-awake children might ignite an explosion. So learning that women with young children are in the high risk group for domestic violence doesn't surprise me. But it does concern me. Here we are, in the midst of an epidemic of school violence, pointing our fingers accusingly at TV screens as we try to track the epidemic's cause. And here I am, wondering: When dad is hurting mom are the high-spirited children awake? Listening? Watching? What's going on in the kitchen between mom and dad is probably way more interesting than what's happening on TV. Do the children know? And if they do know, how many of them now accept violence against women as an ordinary part of everyday life?

These are great questions to ask ourselves as the school violence epidemic spreads.

I'm willing to bet that TV, computer games, and teasing all play a role in school violence. But did you know that almost all of the children killed in the school murders

last year were girls—and that all of the killers were boys? Norwalk, Calif.: A boy killed his 16-year-old estranged girlfriend. Jonesboro, Arkansas: Four girls died when a 13-year-old, with help from his cousin, set out to kill all of the girls who had ever broken up with him. That was his threat just the day before. Pearl Mississippi: Two girls died. According to a friend of the murderer's, he had talked about killing one because she wouldn't go out with him anymore.

By the way, the Allegheny University study reported another interesting finding: Women trying to end an intimate relationship are seven times more likely to be hurt by their partners. Last school year, of the 11 students murdered, 10 were girls. And of the 7 murderers, 4 were boys who seem to have been hunting specific girls; the rest of the dead may have been what military generals euphemistically call 'collateral damage'.

Do we know whether these 4 boys had witnessed violence between their parents? No. While we can safely assume that some of last year's school murders were about romantic rejection, we can't safely assume that those particular boys learned violence at home. But it does make one wonder about children in general.

Studies since the early 80's have statistically tied witnessing family violence to violent behavior in boys. Interestingly, they have also tied witnessing family violence to 'sitting duck' behavior in girls. According to the American Bar Association, witnessing family violence places children of both sexes at high risk of lifelong problems—the boys as offenders and the girls as victims.

"Home Schooling" I guess you could call it. But at the same time, many kids from violent homes do grow up to have healthy relationships. Why? How? There are lots of good opinions from psychologists working with children of violence.

One whose name I have long forgotten said something like: “If kids in these families are to keep from going crazy, someone in their lives—it doesn’t have to be a parent—has to *be crazy about them.*” It’s a simplistic analysis that ignores all sorts of factors, yes. But I love it. It suggests a course of action. And I, anyway, am grasping for ways to help.

Many children who witness violence are threatened by the abuser not to tell anyone, and they don’t. So if we want to help, we’ll have to let all the children in our lives know that we’re crazy about them. We’ll have to get crazy and stay crazy,

Children of violence often act out in ways that make them difficult to love. So, long-term, getting and staying crazy about every kid in town is not going to be easy. I hope we don’t just cut a wide swath of well-intentioned promises without any real follow-through. I hope we don’t ride roughshod in delicate situations. And as much as we want to help, we will probably find that sometimes we can’t. Things conspire. And when they do we will be unbearably sad. But if nothing else our lives will be enriched by the happy lunacy of our actions. And that, perhaps, is something.

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