

Healthy Moms, Healthy Kids:

A Series on Maternal and Child Health in Colorado

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence affects families from all racial, ethnic, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. It can encompass various types of abuse, including physical assault and psychological or emotional abuse and is usually used as a method of maintaining control or power over a victim.¹ Domestic violence is not incident-based, but rather is a pattern of ongoing victimization and coercive control. Although both men and women can be victims of domestic violence, women typically experience more incidents of domestic abuse than men throughout the course of a lifetime.² Nationally, nearly one in four women experiences violence perpetrated by a current or former spouse or boyfriend.³

“Domestic Violence” is one in a series of six briefs published by the Colorado Children’s Campaign addressing maternal and child health topics titled *Healthy Moms, Healthy Kids: A Series on Maternal and Child Health in Colorado*. Other topics in the series include maternal depression, healthy pregnancies, family structure and teen motherhood, social determinants of health and nutrition. We wish to thank Kaiser Permanente for their generous support of this project.



Even when children are not the direct targets of violence in the home, they often become indirect victims of abuse by witnessing episodes of domestic violence and are sometimes injured or killed when they intervene in physically abusive acts in an effort to protect the abused parent.⁴ Family violence can have disastrous implications for a mother’s mental health, as well as a child’s development and long-term well-being. Since domestic violence is often intergenerational in nature, witnessing domestic abuse may cause children to internalize abusive behaviors and negative attitudes.⁵ Programs that comprehensively address domestic violence through advocacy, counseling, education, and prevention are essential resources for victims of family violence.

Child Development and Domestic Violence

In the first few years of life, the brain is developing at a faster rate than at any other point in a human being’s lifetime. In fact, research shows that 80 percent of brain development occurs before age three.⁶ During this time period, young children’s brains are building billions of cells and creating new connections that can affect their actions and reactions for the rest of their life. The relationships children develop during these early years build the foundation for their social and emotional well-being later in life and can affect the likelihood that they will grow into trusting, confident adults. Children who develop a secure attachment with a consistent caregiver during their formative years are more likely to have positive relationships with peers throughout their lives. When a partner is perpetrating domestic violence in the home, it can undermine the connection between mother and child with fear and insecurity.⁷

One of the most basic developmental building blocks for a child is his or her perception of the family as a safe and nurturing environment. Witnessing abuse within the family can severely jeopardize the completion of this developmental step. A child’s early years are a crucial time for developing healthy perceptions about appropriate family structures, and children exposed to domestic violence can develop unhealthy beliefs surrounding gender roles. For example, research shows that children who repeatedly witness violence inflicted upon their mother may begin to believe that abuse of females is acceptable.⁸



Exposure to Violence in the Home

Research has demonstrated that children who are exposed to fear and insecurity in the form of domestic violence often experience a variety of negative emotional responses, including anxiety, fear, depression, low self-esteem and aggressive behavior.⁹ Children who experience particularly distressing episodes of domestic violence may develop more serious conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Children with PTSD often exhibit symptoms such as intense fear or sadness, repeating behavior associated with the trauma, difficulty concentrating or falling asleep and becoming overly emotional or irritable.¹⁰ These symptoms can last for years and may affect the child's overall development and well-being, as they interfere with school attendance and performance. Additional long-term effects of early exposure to domestic violence include an increased likelihood of engaging in violence and criminal behavior.¹¹

In addition to its implications for a child's mental and emotional well-being, the cumulative effect of repeated episodes of family violence can have an equally negative impact on his or her physical health. Research shows that children who have been abused or exposed to domestic violence are significantly more likely than their peers to be diagnosed with asthma or a gastrointestinal problem. Studies suggest that these health problems are most likely an effect of the chronic stress experienced by children exposed to violence in the home.¹²

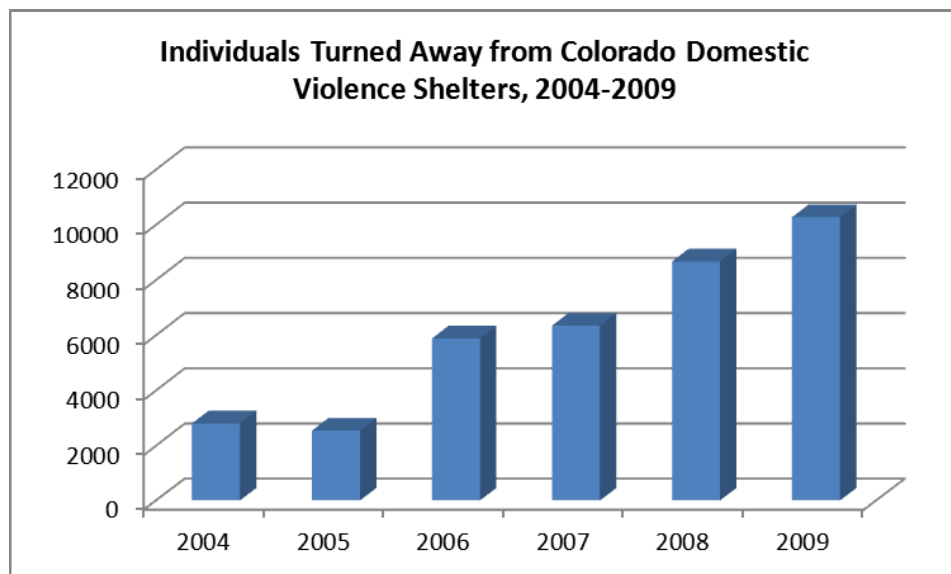
Consequences for Maternal Health and Well-Being

Those who choose to abuse the mother of their child, do so at great cost to the mother and the child. Victims of domestic violence incur serious costs to their health, safety and well-being. Domestic abuse victims often experience adverse physical health consequences, such as broken bones, headaches and a variety of conditions brought on by chronic stress.¹³ In addition, the psychological ramifications of domestic violence can be extremely damaging to maternal mental health. Psychological consequences of domestic abuse include depression, sleep disturbances, suicidal behavior and emotional detachment.¹⁴

In addition to concerns about physical safety or mental well-being, a battered mother may worry about how to provide financially for her child should she leave a violent relationship. It is not uncommon for a woman to be under the financial control of her abuser. For women who leave abusive relationships, a decline in standard of living is often an unavoidable reality. Leaving a violent family situation may require a mother and child to change homes, neighborhoods and schools, resulting in the disruption of a child's friendships and peer networks.¹⁵ Furthermore, the more severe, recent or persistent the abuse experienced by a woman, the more likely she is to experience homelessness, to be on welfare and to have lower wages and lower economic well-being.¹⁶

Domestic Violence in Colorado

Each year, domestic violence affects thousands of families across Colorado. In 2009, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation received nearly 13,000 reports of domestic violence incidents from victims. Even more troubling is the connection between domestic abuse and child fatalities. Between 2000 and 2006, 19 Colorado children were killed during a domestic violence-related incident.^{17,18} The Colorado Department of Human Services 2007 Child Maltreatment Fatality Report, which reviews child fatalities in families involved with Child Protective Services, found that 70 percent of the families involved in the review had a history of domestic violence.¹⁹



Colorado has made commendable strides toward addressing this daunting problem. In 2009, the Colorado Department of Human Service's Domestic Violence Program provided funding to 47 domestic violence crisis centers throughout the state. These crisis centers serve as a crucially important lifeline for victims of domestic abuse, offering confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In 2009, crisis centers funded by the Domestic Violence Program in Colorado answered 75,962 emergency crisis phone calls – a 62 percent increase over 2008.²⁰ While the services these centers provide to victims are invaluable, an increase in domestic violence incidents, coupled with a decrease in funding in recent years has hindered their ability to meet the needs of everyone seeking services. In 2009, Colorado's domestic violence crisis centers were forced to turn away 10,270 individuals due to lack of capacity.²¹ This number has been on the rise every year since 2005.

Domestic Violence: Best Practices

Domestic Violence Education and Advocacy Programs

Domestic violence programs are an important tool for abused parents attempting to navigate various systems and access resources to meet their needs. Many of these programs provide financial literacy and empowerment services, as well as transitional housing. In addition, they offer support groups, counseling and therapy for adults and children affected by domestic violence. Colorado's Address Confidentiality Program, which helps survivors of domestic violence keep their addresses confidential from their former abusers after they have relocated, is recognized as a national model for domestic violence programs.²²

Interventions that Preserve the Mother-Child Bond

While simply removing a child from a home where domestic violence is occurring may seem like a logical intervention, taking a child out of a domestic violence situation is not sufficient to ensure their safety and well-being. In fact, experts caution that removing a child from a home where domestic violence has occurred is often more traumatic for the child than the violence itself and should not be viewed as the preferred solution to the problem in every case. Research suggests that one of the key mitigating factors in whether or not a child will experience lasting negative effects from exposure to violence is a strong relationship with a positive adult role model.²³ When feasible, interventions that address the source of the violence, while keeping intact the child's bond with the non-abusive parent and primary attachment figure, are preferable to removing the child from the home altogether.

Parent Supports

Establishing a safe, stable home environment during a child's early years is essential to ensuring that he or she grows up with healthy attitudes toward relationships with peers and family members. Unfortunately, these formative years mark the time when a child is most likely to witness an episode of domestic violence. One study found that children under age five are more likely to live in a home where domestic violence occurs than children in any other age group.²⁴ Parent supports like the Colorado Nurse Home Visitor Program, in which nurses work with low-income first time mothers in their homes to provide guidance on roles, risks and parenting skills until their child's second birthday, can be important tools to help identify or prevent exposure to domestic violence during these crucial formative years.

Quality Child Care

Ensuring access to affordable, quality child care for mothers who are victims of domestic violence can provide respite time for a mother and serve as a consistent source of social and emotional support for a child. Research shows that high-quality care may buffer children from family risk factors and that high-quality preschool has clear positive effects on at-risk children.²⁵ Increasing community capacity for quality child care and supporting programs that help families find and access child care are other thoughtful strategies for assisting mothers and children affected by domestic violence.

Efforts to Address Domestic Violence through the Judicial System

Providing training and education for judges and judicial officers on how to handle cases involving domestic violence is an important strategy for protecting victims from further abuse. The National Judicial Institute on Domestic Violence offers three-day workshops that aim to help judges and judicial officers better understand the complexity of cases involving domestic violence.²⁶ Participants in the workshop learn how to assess the dangerousness of perpetrators of domestic violence, draft orders of protection and assess the impact domestic violence has on cases involving custody or visitation.²⁷ Additionally, several states around the nation have developed specialized domestic violence courts that aim to simplify the criminal justice process for victims of domestic violence. Benefits of domestic violence courts include the use of court-mandated alcohol and drug treatment plans for offenders, when appropriate, mandatory participation in domestic violence treatment programs and increased familiarity with the complexities involved in domestic abuse cases, since many of the courts are presided over by a single judge.²⁸ Increasing judicial awareness of domestic violence and its repercussions is a key strategy for improving outcomes of cases involving domestic violence.



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End Notes

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