

Silence and violence

by Pam Adams

Dad might beat Mom.

Mom might pull a knife on boyfriend.

Mom and Dad or Mom and boyfriend might argue all the time.

Or, simply, Mom could have a black eye when the kids wake up in the morning.

THE SILENT MAJORITY - Children's agency counselors are puzzled over why many potential clients hesitate to come forward. CNS Illustration by Michael Anthony Noel. The staff of Peoria's Children in Peoria, Ill., counsels very young children who have been exposed to all kinds of violence, but mostly domestic violence. Peoria's Children began in 2001 as one of six pilot projects throughout the state designed to identify and serve children 5 or younger who have been affected by violence in their homes or neighborhoods.

But the program faces a quandary as it enters its seventh year. If so many of Peoria's children live in violence-plagued neighborhoods, why doesn't Peoria's Children see more of them?

Case coordinator Julia Preston is stymied. She knows young children must see or hear the shootings, gunfire and other violence detailed regularly in media reports. Based on what she knows about the impact of violence on children, she knows some of them must be as traumatized by community violence as the Peoria community is.

"I don't know why we're not seeing them, but I'd like to know," she says. "These are children who are grieving, they may be having behavior problems, and I feel they could use our services."

Of the 60 families referred to the program this year - that's 126 children and 73 adults - six families were referred because children were dealing with grief and/or loss of a loved one through violence.

"That's high for us," says project manager Kelly Lenz.

About 80 percent of the children in the program are referred because of domestic violence. And most of them are referred through the Center for Prevention of Abuse, the local parent agency of Peoria's Children.

Preston suspects the dearth of other kinds of referrals could be because people aren't aware of the program or because they don't understand how violence can affect very young children.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

"Can it affect 1-year-olds?" Crystal Johnson asked during a presentation Preston gave recently.

Johnson, along with about 12 other parents, attended the talk as part of a school district program for parents of young children.

Very young children take their emotional cues from parents or caretakers. If a parent is tense, anxious or hysterical, very young children can pick up their emotions and become crabby or clingy, Preston said. They might hear gunfire, but it depends on how their caretaker reacts.

Every child is different, but chronic exposure to violence can have long-term effects.

Child development experts often cite aggressive behavior in children as an indicator of exposure to violence. But new research also indicates how trauma can affect a child's brain development and lead to developmental delays or symptoms easily confused and diagnosed as attention-deficit disorder.

Children referred to the Peoria's Children program can get free counseling services if needed, usually about an hour a week for six to eight weeks, Preston says. Children and parents who need more extensive help are referred to other agencies.

'PEOPLE JUST DISAPPEARED'

Kathleen Kostelny, a former senior research associate with Chicago's Erickson Institute for Child Development, evaluated the first four years of the program at Peoria's Children.

In general, young children are exposed to less community violence because they're at home, Kostelny says. "Their primary relationship is with their mother."

As an evaluator, Kostelny studied whether or not the program's services made a difference in children's lives. She planned to assess them after they completed services, then six months and a year later.

"One of the big problems was that people just disappeared," she said. "They might come for the first two sessions, then they'd drop out after the initial crisis was over."

OTHER RISK FACTORS

Parents whose children completed the sessions did report significant decreases in their and their children's stress levels.

"But it's hard to tease out the effects of violence alone," Kostelny said. "It wasn't just violence in these children's lives. Most of them were living in poverty, with all the inherent risk factors and instabilities that come with living in poverty."

Kostelny also has researched the impact of violence on children internationally, from child sex slaves in Sierra Leone to child soldiers in Uganda.

Drug abuse or mental illness in parents, violence and poverty are among her list of risk factors in children's lives.

"From my previous research of children in war zones, I can tell you children can deal with one or two risk factors in their lives and be fine. But it's the accumulation of risk factors, one on top of another, that causes problems."

AGE FINDINGS

Adults who work with children who have been exposed to violence at home report a wide range of symptoms exhibited. Among the most common, by age groups:

Young children (up to 3 years old):

- Clingy behavior.
- Aggression toward parents and siblings.
- Sleep disturbances.

Children 4-5:

- Sleep disturbances.
- Aggression toward parents, siblings and peers.

- Fearfulness and phobias.

- Repetitive talk and play about the traumatic event.

Children 6-12:

- Aggression toward siblings.

- Depression.

- Parent-child relationship problems.

- Sleep problems

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