

Divorce Caused by Domestic Abuse: How it Affects the Children

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This paper explores the dynamics of domestic violence to comprehend why it occurs, to examine whether or not mediation works in a divorce involving domestic abuse, to see what effects divorce has on the children, and how to help children cope with divorce caused by domestic abuse. In retrospect, by changing the erroneous social perceptions of domestic abuse, people can learn how to analyze, understand, and see domestic violence for what it really is. Since the effects can be lifelong and very damaging, especially to children, it is imperative for society, as a whole, to put an end to it immediately.

¹There are many different reasons why couples file for divorce, such as lack of communication, commitment issues, financial problems, addiction, irreconcilable differences, or simply falling out of love with one another. There is, however, one cause of divorce that is very detrimental to a child's health and capacity to evolve and grow into a healthy loving adult, which is domestic abuse. Domestic violence is more common than many people think, and it is the cause of many divorces. We will explore the dynamics of domestic violence to comprehend why it occurs, to find whether or not mediation works

in a divorce involving domestic abuse, to see what effects divorce has on the children, and, finally, how to help children cope with divorce caused by domestic abuse.

In order to understand the complexities behind a divorce caused by domestic abuse, one must be able to analyze the reasoning behind such violence and the reasoning behind staying in the relationship or seeking help. According to Professor Robert A. Pollack (2004) of Washington University, he introduces "an intergenerational model of domestic violence [in which he] proposes and analyzes [the] behavioral strategies or scripts [which] are transmitted from parent to child (92)." Pollack's model is based on three assumptions:

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- *The probability that a husband will be violent depends on whether he grew up in a violent home.*
- *The probability that a wife will remain with a violent husband depends on whether she grew up in a violent home.*
- *Individuals who grew up in violent homes tend to marry individuals who grew up in violent homes as well.*

Pollack (2004) emphasizes the trend that individuals who were raised in a home where they were exposed to violence--physical, emotional, or verbal--will most likely be in a violent relationship in the future, whether they themselves are the victims or the abuser. It is crucial to understand that children who grow up witnessing violence in their home will learn that violence is admissible. When children are young, they learn from the behaviors of their parents or care takers and soon begin modeling the very same behavior they see on a day to day basis. This cycle must be put to an end because it is possible that the more violence children are witnessing and exposed to, the more acceptable it seems to hurt others and to have no boundaries. If a child sees his/her parents constantly fighting--verbally and/or emotionally unstable--they will grow up thinking that abuse is normal in every relationship, and they too will suffer the same abuse in their future relationships.

In short, Pollack (2004) emphasizes the fact that individuals who were raised in an abusive environment will most likely be in an abusive relationship in the future. It is harder for

abused children to leave an abusive relationship when they are older because that is a lifestyle they are familiar with, and thus much harder for them to change their ways. A person who was not raised in a violent environment will most likely seek help, if they are in a violent relationship or leave their partner, because that type of violence should not be tolerated, no matter how much they love their significant other. So far, we have analyzed domestic violence and why it occurs, and now we will learn about the importance of changing society's views on violence within families.

Social workers have been known to help out families in trouble for many years, and one way they have been trying to help out is to change the social perceptions of domestic abuse. Social worker Liane V. Davis claims that "sexual and physical abuse of children, wives and elders are not new phenomena. We do not really know whether there is more or less now than in centuries past. What has changed now is how we perceive the problem (Davis 91)." What Davis means by this is that viewing domestic abuse as a very common and traumatic problem for all provides social support for the victims. She also emphasizes that battered women's shelters did not spring up because there was an upsurge in abused women; child protective services did not develop because more children were being abused and neglected. Instead, services developed because some people decided to do something different about problems that have been around since the beginning of recorded history.

When people change their perceptions on certain problems, it

makes other people think differently as well. For years, domestic abuse was perceived as something that was normal in families, that it was a man's right to put his wife in place, and to physically hurt children; however, now, people have been voicing their opinion. Women and children should not have to go through these traumatic experiences, that women have the right to protect themselves and their children. It is incredibly important to change the social perceptions of domestic abuse and any other brutalities as well. No type of destructiveness should be permitted, and the only way to change this cycle of violence is to put an end to it, to come out and say that hitting ones' wife is not acceptable anymore, and it should not have been acceptable in the past either. If nobody stands up and says something is wrong, then nothing will ever change, and society will stay the same. Change is needed to grow, and it is necessary that our society changes its views on domestic violence and that it shouldn't be allowed to happen. What Davis has to say is imperative: that we as a society have to change together in order to make a difference in helping women and children grow and live in an abusive free environment. Now that we have analyzed domestic violence and learned the importance of changing social perceptions of violence, we will learn how mediation works in abusive and non-abusive relationships.

In many divorces, mediation is used to gather both parties and consult them to agree on decisions that will favor both parties and the children; however, there are many pros and cons in having a mediator within a divorce caused by domestic abuse. According to

research specialist, Wendy Koen, and California attorney Board certified licensed psychologist, Dennis P. Saccuzzo, "when mediation is used, [in a nonviolent home] conflict is decreased, cooperation is increased, and there is evidence of more child-focused communication between parents (Koen and Saccuzzo 2006)." However, in a home with domestic violence, Koen and Saccuzzo claim that the act of separation and bringing legal finality to the marriage relationship may act as a trigger to the abusive spouse, causing the abuser to attempt to regain control over the victim of DV through increased violence.

The abusive spouse might make the victim seem miniscule in court by slandering their partner and saying they are not fit to take care of their child in order to gain back control of the deteriorating relationship, or the abuser might threaten the victim that they will never have their child back and other such threats. Koen and Saccuzzo (2006) also emphasized that "the abused spouse has been conditioned to relent, compromise, and conform . . . in order to be safe from violence." The abuser will try his/her hardest to make the process of divorce as difficult as possible for the victim, so that they will give in and agree to almost anything just to get everything over with. Some examples are giving in to spousal visits with the children, causing the victim to constantly face her abuser. So, even though it has been proven that while mediation in nonviolent families has productive outcomes for couples in a divorce, it does not necessarily work for couples with a history of DV, because it involves both the abuser and victim to still visit

each other and be a part of one another's' life. Now that we learned that mediation does not work in violent families, we will discuss the conflicts related to child-visiting in domestic abuse cases.

When a couple who has a history of Domestic Violence decides to divorce, it does not necessarily mean that the violence automatically ends; there are many conflicts the victims have to deal with even after the divorce has been settled. According to Melanie Shepard (1992), "60% of women reported ongoing psychological abuse in the form of threats and intimidation, often involving mutual children, after legal intervention and counseling had taken place (Shepard 92)." Shepard states that women were still abused by their ex-husbands mostly during the pickup and return of the children. Because the children are still exposed to the abuse, they begin to form adjustment problems and become very anxious, as well as forming psychological problems (Shepard 92). Through research, Shepard (1992) has found that "the seriousness of children's adjustment problems was related to the frequency of wife-battering, to the number of negative life events, and to the levels of anxiety and other stress-connected dysfunctions of their mothers." The more stressed out the mother is about having to see the abuser, then the more anxious the child will become as well. When they are forced into mediation, the feelings of anxiousness, uneasiness, intimidation, and fear, will only continue. In addition, through Shepard's research, she has found that after all the legal matters have been settled in a DV divorce where mediation is involved, the abuse does

not end, and that different options should be considered that will help the battered women/men and children feel safe during child-visiting to help keep the children safe from harm and from viewing more abuse. Now that we have learned about the conflicts related to child-visiting in domestic abusive cases, we will take a look at how a family's divorce with history of DV can cause more problems than before.

Although some people seem to believe that once a family with a repeated history of domestic violence files for divorce, the violence ends. As mentioned before, this is generally not the case. Sometimes, cases of DV actually cause more abuse once the divorce is finalized. As Robert Geffner (1990), founder and Executive Director of The Family Violence Research and Treatment program at the University of Texas, and Mildred Pagelow, research Professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton, both remind us that this indeed is the case for most DV divorces, and they further indicate that "the pending termination of [an abusive] marriage leads some men into abusive activities such as 'spying, breaking down the door at night, obscene phone calls, physical beatings, vandalism, and attempts at child-napping (quoted Wallerstein & Kelly 1980)." The abuser feels threatened that they will no longer be in charge of the relationship, or have control over the victim and the children any longer, so they begin to further abuse the victims as much as possible to keep them in fear that they cannot get away from them. Because the abuser needs to be in constant control of his or her victims, they use violence in order to

keep them in line. Now we will learn the major effects of divorce on the victims.

The effects of divorce in an abusive marriage can be very traumatic, especially to the children involved. It has been said that “psychological violence, family disruptions, and characteristics of parental conflict have all been associated with a greater risk of developing adjustment problems in childhood and adolescence (Gange & Drapeau 2007).” Not only do the children of abusive relationships have to deal with the trauma of their parents’ divorce, they have to deal with even more emotional and psychological problems brought on by the stress of their parents. They have to live in the fear of what their abuser might do next--like kidnap them, hurt their mothers or even of being victimized themselves, more so than before. Often times, the children feel pressured to favor one parent over the other (called triangulation), which can also lead to more problems. Should the child pick the mother, who is also being victimized and threatened, or are they supposed to pick the abusive father with the fear that in choosing to side with their mother might cause the father to become more violent and abusive? The children are going through enough in having to go through the divorce as well, there shouldn’t have to be any more pressure or fear instilled in them. In short, it has been emphasized that children of divorce caused by domestic abuse have more psychological and emotional problems than that of a child whose parents are not involved in an abusive relationship.

Not only do children of abusive relationships acquire psychological problems, they also tend to suffer from

negative attitudes towards many aspects of life. According to Mo-Yee Lee, Associate Professor at the College of Social Work at Ohio State, she claims that “[s]tudies of children from violent homes have shown the prevalence of the emotions of fear, anxiety, sadness, and anger in children that may be related to post-traumatic stress symptoms (quoted Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson 1990; Pelede 1998).” Because these young children have to go through all the fear and manipulation involved in a divorce involving DV, they also end up suffering much more afterwards, such as not knowing what to expect anymore, always being scared or fearful of abandonment. Since they were not raised in a healthy environment, they are not capable of maturing the way a child brought up in a loving household would be capable of. Due to their neglectful upbringing, children of divorce caused by domestic violence are more vulnerable to feelings anger or sadness than love and happiness, and thus are more prone to post-traumatic stress disorders than children of divorce in a healthy environment.

Children that are raised in an unhealthy, abusive environment are more likely to have long-lasting emotional problems in their adulthood. According to journalist Raymond Taylor, traumatic childhood experiences can be profound: Childhood traumas can result in intimacy disturbance (e.g., fearing, distrusting, and experiencing ambivalence about interpersonal closeness; impaired ability to trust), difficulties with sexual relating, increased probability of physical violence and re-victimization, problems with emotional expressiveness and

intimacy, and emotional avoidance, which may in turn interfere with effective relationship functioning (as quoted Briere 1992; Compton & Follette 1998).

It is important to be aware of the fact that if the children of abusive relationships grow up into fearful and distrusting adults it can affect them in a completely negative manner. They will have many more problems to deal with once they are in an intimate relationship of their own, if they are even able to do so. Everyone should have the right to openly and expressively love another person. And if their childhood trauma keeps them in fear of trusting anyone other than themselves, and keeps them from acquiring a healthy loving relationship, then something should be done in order to help these innocent, young victims. Living in a world full of fear and anxiety is not healthy or productive at all, and they are not to blame.

There are many sources from which individuals going through a divorce can rely on to help them get through such a difficult process, one form of help is through therapeutic intervention. Raymond J. Taylor claims that Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) with supplemental modalities of Ericksonian hypnosis and anchoring devices of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is [a] therapeutic model that may be combined with the efforts of mediation, divorce education and support and counseling groups to reduce the pain and anguish being experienced (Taylor 04).

The process of EMDR and NLP (under the directions and supervision of a psychotherapist) consists of the

following: The desensitization of negative cognitions and installation of positive processes or thoughts by use of planned, rapid, rhythmic eye movements and internal body scanning of the results. The client rates the level of anxiety using a 10-point Subjective Unit of Disturbance Scale (SUDS) where 0 represents neutral intensity and 10 equals the highest possible anxiety (quoted Wolpe, 1991).

Because the patient is working to desensitize their negative cognitions and to replace them with positive processes, this, in turn, allows them to be less anxious regarding whatever makes them fearful or any other negative feeling regarding their traumatic childhood experience of their parents' divorce. In making their fears less fearful, they are able to overcome emotional and psychological obstacles they were once not able to face. This process can be very productive and helpful for individuals who are not able to deal with their childhood trauma through regular therapy. In short, through therapeutic intervention, many adults who were affected by their abusive parent's divorce are now able to live in a life with less fear and anxiety.

Therapeutic intervention is not the only source to helping children coping with distress; there are also other ways to help them grow productively and healthy. According to (Bradley 2007), there are four main perspectives a parent can keep in mind in helping their child grow as any healthy young child: "(1) [protection] from direct threats of harm; (2) [provide] a sense of emotional security; (3) the capacity to enact adaptive coping strategies; and (4) the opportunity and ability to build and use

positive personal assets (quoted Cummings, Davies & Campbell 2000; Lazarus, 1993; Scales & Leffert 1999).” If a parent is capable of offering these four necessities to their child, then there is a chance that they will be able to grow up with the basic capabilities of functioning in a relationship as a child who did not grow up in a violent home. If the abused mother or father is able to rid the family of their abuser, then she/he will save the children from strain and stresses. If the victim is able to offer emotional security, and to build positive communication skills with the children, then the children might not be as traumatized internally as they would have, if the parent had not been able to offer these securities. These are just a few ways in which a parent can help their neglected, abused child to cope with a painful and violent divorce. If a parent is capable of offering these perspectives, then their child has a greater chance of developing and growing in a more healthy state of mind.

In retrospect, we learned how to analyze domestic violence by changing the social perceptions of domestic abuse, and that mediation works in divorce where abuse is involved. It is imperative to understand the seriousness of domestic abuse and how it affects victims, especially if children are involved. The effects can be lifelong and very damaging. It is unfair for the children to be a part of such a hostile environment because then they will abuse other innocent individuals as well. They also should not have to go through such trauma, or simply be in a relationship as the victim, because they do not know anything else. No one should be put through abuse in a

relationship; love is not really love if someone is getting hurt. Just because someone is not getting physically hurt does not mean they are not in an abusive relationship; verbal and emotional abuse are still abuse, and it still hurts. All this constant abuse and negative attitude is unbearable, and nobody should have to stay in a relationship where there is more damage than productivity and love. I have so much empathy for women, children and men as well as those who are the victims in abusive relationships; it should not be tolerated and should be put to an end immediately.

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