

Vulnerable victims

Thousands of children caught in cycle of violence

*As his mother endures drunken rage on the living room floor,
the child cowers in fear and shame,
blaming himself for somehow loving this father,
for allowing abuse to continue.*

Walk into any Alberta classroom, and very likely one in every seven children has experienced assault at home—whether as witness or target. What's more, it's all too easy for those children to repeat rather than defy the cycle. Traumatized, desensitized, stigmatized, isolated by secrecy, they stand at risk of falling behind in school, of turning to gangs and crime. Boys will more likely grow up aggressive and violent; girls will tend to accept violence as normal in their own relationships, and see few options for escape.

Alberta women's shelters offered a safe haven for 5,546 of those youth in the past year, but another 9,017 were turned away and uncounted thousands more suffered continued trauma behind closed doors. "The high incidence and serious effects of family violence on children make it a prime concern," says Jan Reimer, Provincial Co-ordinator of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. "We call on every citizen to be vigilant for signs of abuse, and on our government for resources to stop the cycle. It's up to us to ensure that the most vulnerable among us don't spend their childhoods learning to abuse."

Key to halting the cycle is ample shelter space, coupled with therapy and an aware, supportive network, Reimer says. "Kids who feel safe and heard can make dramatic progress, learning the skills they need to choose a different way."

Far too many Alberta children grow up amid chronic family violence. It's time to aim for a better future.

"Both policy-makers and activists in this field must give greater priority to the admittedly immense task of creating a social environment that allows and promotes equitable and non-violent personal relationships. The foundation for such an environment must be the new generation of children, who should come of age with better skills than their parents generally had for managing their relationships and resolving the conflicts within them, with greater opportunities for their future, and with more appropriate notions on how men and women can relate to each other and share power."

(World Report on Violence and Health, World Health Organization, October 2002)

"We believe in a world free from violence and abuse."

CHILDREN AS VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

- Children in close to half a million households in Canada have seen or heard one parent being assaulted by the other. (*1999 General Social Survey Data analyzed by Mia Dauvergne and Holly Johnson*)
- Four in 10 women who experience violence in relationships report that their children are witnesses. (*Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, Statistics Canada, 1999*)
- In half of all cases witnessed by children, the women feared for their lives or were physically injured. In 21% of cases, victims required medical attention and in 14% they were hospitalized. (*Family Violence in Canada, Statistics Canada, 2001*)
- There is a 30 to 40% overlap between children who witness abuse and children who directly experience physical abuse. (*BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses*)
- Police data for 1999 indicates that 60% of all sexual assault victims are children and youth (under age 18). Parents are responsible for 42% of these sexual assaults.
- Children's exposure to family violence is the most common form of emotional abuse, accounting for 58% of cases substantiated by child welfare workers across Canada. (*Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect, Health Canada, 1998*)
- Numerous studies show definite links between witnessing violence and learning to be violent. Abusive men are three times as likely as non-abusive men to have witnessed spousal violence in childhood, and women raised in similar circumstances are twice as likely to be victims of spousal violence.
- Over 56% of inmates indicated that some form of abuse occurred between their parents during their formative years. (*Correctional Services Canada*)
- Sibling violence may be more common than spousal and child abuse combined, but because it is so common, few perceive it as a form of family violence. Because abuse is learned, sibling abuse is a good predictor of other forms of family violence.
- Children exposed to adults or teenagers physically fighting in the home are more likely to have contact with mental health specialists, to exhibit physical aggression, indirect aggression, emotional disorders or hyperactivity, and to commit property crime. (*National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Statistics Canada, 1998-1999*)
- Responses to abuse vary by age. Infants typically show attachment problems and a failure to thrive. Preschoolers are often "clingy," difficult to manage and negative. School age children often act out aggressively or become withdrawn at school. Adolescents become truant and run away from home. Teenagers might be more involved in juvenile crime, drugs and alcohol.
- Permanent and negative changes occur in a young brain exposed to violence. Early intervention is the only way to help. Teachers, doctors and counselors need to act if social, emotional and physical problems are visible, and we all need to be alert.
- Clear signs that children are witnessing violence include noise and shouting in the home. Often warned not to tell anyone, children are afraid of consequences if they do.
- Useful Web sites: <http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/childafs.html#consequences>
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/lifestyles/cfv.html>
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/publicat/cisfr-ecirf/index.html>