Therapeutic Interventions with Children Affected by Domestic Violence

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Interventions for Battered Women & Children

- Safety & Stability
  - Legal interventions
  - Emergency shelter
  - CPS
- Counseling interventions—therapy with a large “T”
  - Groups
  - Individual and/or child-parent therapy
- Engaging “the village” to support children—therapy with a small “t”

Helping Children Heal from Trauma

- Address issues of safety and stability
- Provide a safe and neutral place for the child to talk about what has happened
- Support/repair the parent-child relationship
  - Working with the non-offending parent
  - Working with the offending parent
- Provide the opportunity for play and enjoyment
- Screen/assess for additional services
Safety & Stabilization for Children and Families affected by domestic violence

The Role of the Courts in Providing Safety

• Stabilizes the environment for children and victims
• Validates children’s perceptions and fears
• Provides an opportunity to play

The Role of CPS

Should a child’s exposure to domestic violence be defined as child maltreatment? Reporting is not mandatory in most states; providers make a decision based on:
– an assessment of potential for danger (threats, weapons, substance abuse)
– an assessment of mother’s ability to plan for children
– an assessment of supports/connections to the community
Mediating Factors

- Characteristics of the violence – chronicity and severity, proximity to the violence, familiarity with victim and/or perpetrator
- Developmental phase of the child
- Child’s cognitions and attributions
- The capacity of the family, school, and community to support the child
  - Best predictor of outcome for children following a traumatic event is the caregiver’s ability to cope with the trauma (Lyons, 1987)

Assessment of Risk to Children

- Proximity
- History of violence
- Severity and frequency
- Threats to child’s safety, i.e., kidnapping
- Child’s perceptions of violence
- Absence of support or safe havens for the child
- History of direct abuse of child

Dangerousness Assessment

- Severity of violence, injuries
- Weapons
- Substance abuse
- Excessive or obsessive jealousy, stalking
- Mental illness, esp. paranoia or delusions
- Suicidal, homicidal threats
Other areas of inquiry

- Does the child intervene with the domestic violence?
- Are the children demonstrating symptoms that are reasonably connected to the domestic violence?
- Does the victim believe the partner is dangerous?
- What is the quality of the abusive parent’s parenting?
- What is the quality of the victim’s parenting?
- Is the victim currently seeking protection?
- Are services in place? Are they reducing/removing the risk?

Massachusetts Dept. of Children and Families—DV Response

Promising Practices

Trauma-focused Counseling: Principles of Intervention

- Stabilize the environment for the child and family
- Devise strategies for reducing symptoms
- Elicit an understanding of the meaning of the trauma for the child
- Correct cognitive distortions about the event(s)
- Provide activities that promote a child’s development, self regulatory capacity, competence and self esteem
Child Witness to Violence Project

Stabilize the environment for the child and family

- Create and maintain a safety plan for child and family
- Provide advocacy, resource information, referrals and assistance.
- Educate parents and other providers about the importance of attachment relationships, stability, rituals and routines in a child’s life.

Devise strategies for reducing symptoms that interfere with daily living
Naming Feelings

Decreasing Sleep-related Problems

Help and support parents.
**Parent Guidance**

- Give parents information about child symptoms. Remind parents that their child’s reactions are normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Give the parents child development information and developmental guidance.
- If appropriate, assist parents in talking with child about the traumatic event.
- Encourage parents to listen carefully to the child’s fears and to develop a plan to help the child feel more safe.
- Encourage parents to provide a predictable and secure routine for the child.

**Working with the Offending Parent**

- Under what circumstances is it possible to involve fathers in our work with child witnesses?
- Child Witness to Violence Project survey:
  - 71% of abusing men were the biological fathers; 16% were partners; 4% were step-parents
  - 48% of children had at least sporadic contact with their fathers (defined as once a month or more).
  - 1/3 of the fathers were in jail.
  - Restraining orders existed in half the cases

**Variables that affect a father’s readiness**

- Capacity to take the perspective of the child
- Readiness to acknowledge the violence
- Ability to apologize
Potential goals for fathers’ involvement in treatment or visits

- Increased understanding of the child’s perspective of the abuse and the impact of the abuse on the child
- Acknowledgement of the abuse
- Reparation or restoration of the relationship

Treatment Strategy
The “Trauma Narrative”

Elicit an understanding of the meaning of the trauma for the child…

- “Tell me what happened”
- Offer a range of ways to “tell” the trauma story
- Note cognitive distortion in the “telling”
- Ask what was most frightening about the event
- Help the child anticipate his reactions to telling the trauma story
Treatment Strategy
Correct Cognitive Distortions
Correct inaccurate and unhelpful cognitions

- Listen carefully for distortions or inaccurate information in the trauma story
- Understand the meaning of the distortion for the child
- Give the child factual information when appropriate
- Be aware of the child’s need to be loyal to parents or other caregivers

Engaging “the village” to support children -- therapists with a small “t”

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Important messages for children

• “This must be scary for you.”
• “Who can you talk to about this?”
• “It’s not your fault.”
• “It is not your responsibility to solve the problem.”
• “We will do everything we can to keep you safe.”

Resources

• Contact information: betsy.groves@bmc.org
• Child Witness to Violence Project Website: childwitnessstoviolence.org
• National Child Traumatic Stress Network: nctsn.org
  Go to the children and domestic violence webpage
• National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/initiatives/council/
• Family Violence Prevention Fund: endabuse.org
• Minnesota Center against Violence & Abuse: http://www.mincava.umn.edu/