

**THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LIFE
AND WELL BEING AMONGST STUDENTS VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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Abstract

A variety of problems are present on school campuses. Students may display behaviours including poor academic performance, aggression towards others, frequent absences, severe withdrawal, depression, and anxiety, etc. Although these may have numerous explanations or causes, one the most frequently overlooked causes is the existence and extent of violence at the homes of these students. Approximately more than five million children witness domestic violence each year. School counselors need to understand the dynamics of domestic violence, learn the most effective assessments of violence in the lives of their students, and be familiar with the interventions that can be implemented. External stresses on the family do not appear to influence the mental health of children as much as the internal stresses caused by a dysfunctional and violent family.

Often, witnesses to domestic violence have been forgotten as prevention and intervention has been focused on spouses only. Additionally, family therapists in particular have been accused of colluding with perpetrators (perhaps inadvertently) by focusing on patterns of interaction, hierarchies, family of origin, and other related concepts, depending on their theoretical orientation. It is time to identify violence at its source, hold perpetrators accountable, and find ways to reach children. Counselors need to enlist the help of others in discovering the extent to which violence has permeated student's lives. Parents need to be held accountable, but also need to acquire the skills that help them to become more effective in their roles.

Keywords : *Counselors, victims, domestic violence, intervention*

Introduction

Various kinds of problems can be evinced on the school campus. Students may display behaviors including poor academic performance, bullying, unkempt appearance, aggression towards others, bunking or absences, depression, anxiety, aggression towards others etc. There may be numerous reasons or causes for such behaviors and the usual pattern followed with such students in school is referral to a counselor and teachers feel that by doing this they have done their duty. Counselors will also try to fathom about the “whys” of this behavior as it is evinced. But, the point that such students may be witnesses to domestic violence is frequently overlooked.

More than 3.3 million children each year witness domestic violence (Barrett, Blankenship, & Smith, 1998). A staggering 95 percent of marital violence is perpetrated by men (Avis, 1992). A study in Canada showed that in an affluent community in Ontario, nearly 23 percent of all school children had witnessed the "assault of their mothers\ by their fathers or male partners" (Avis, 1992, p. 226). Additionally, though drug abuse is definitely a factor and can result in more severe injury, not all abusers batter their partners and not all batterers abuse substances. (Barrett, et al.)

Domestic violence knows no boundaries, crossing the barriers of race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Due to the societal changes happening at a very rapid pace, school counselors need to understand the dynamics of domestic violence, the most effective assessments of this violence in the lives of students, and interventions that can be implemented. Lack of awareness may be the biggest obstacle: in research for this paper, not many articles or research studies were available pertaining to student victims of domestic violence, nor any about the role of the school counselor with these students.

The Cycle of violence

Those in violent homes are caught in a cycle that starts with one partner who is jealous, possessive or controlling, who may be "looking" for a fight. Following abuse or violence (that can be physical, verbal, sexual, or emotional), a crisis period ensues that includes remorse, forgiveness, blame, and even acceptance. This then turns to a sense of renewed intimacy between

couples, and finally a "business as usual" posture. Over time tension and stress begin to build again and the cycle continues. The nature of partner violence crosses many domains and can include: control of money; isolation from friends and family; and restriction from pursuing outside interests (jobs or social activities). In addition, the violence can take many forms: intimidation; threats; physical abuse; emotional abuse; and sexual abuse (Barrett, et al., 1998).

Children are often caught in this cycle, either as witnesses or victims themselves. Indeed, they see and hear much of the conflict, experience lower levels of family support and nurturance, and therefore can display adverse effects in both the short-term and over time (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995). External stresses on the family (i.e. poverty) do not appear to influence the mental health of children as much as the internal stresses caused by dysfunctional, violent family. Furthermore, the mere threat of violence may be enough to profoundly influence coping skills for victims that persist into their adult lives (McCloskey, et al., 1995). Researchers have not confirmed that witnessing differs from the actual experience of violence, except that "... Perhaps the experience of observing spouse abuse affects children by a less direct route than physical abuse, with cognitive mechanisms playing a greater role in shaping the effects of observing the violence than the effects of being its victim" (Sternberg, et al., 1993, p. 50).

Case Study

This girl, (Sonia , name changed) aged 16 came for counseling for some personal relationship issues she was facing. During conversation, many psychological issues also came up which had been bothering her ever she could remember.

She said that she had seen her mother crying all the time, since her childhood. She was never close to her mother as she was all the time busy in house hold work, trying to please her husband and inlaws, yet they would berate at her in the child's presence, scold her, intimidate her, shout at her and what not. Sonia shuddered as she recalled and narrated her childhood memories. Then she broke into tears and through sobs and sniffs along with various verbal encouragements she revealed that during all this time her father's married brother used to sexually abuse her. The

abuse started since she was 8 years old and she was forbidden to tell anyone about it on the threat that if she will open her mouth, her father will kill her mother. Sonia said that the fear of losing her mother was so real that the moment her uncle would approach her (grab her lustily), all her resistances used to vanish while being thoroughly disgusted with the act.

Some excerpts from the conversation:

“So , when did you tell your mother?”

“Just yesterday.”

“why so late? After all these years?”

“ I was so scared that my father will kill my mother.”

“How did your mother react when you told her?”

“She started crying”/

“And”

“She said that she wished that I had told her earlier. She would have somehow stopped this abuse.”

“Has your father been told?”

“ No, she told me not to tell my father.”

“Why?”

“Its been so many years now. Nothing can be changed. And the father will hit my mother with a vengeance now when he will come to know about this.”

“Why will he hit your mother?”

“Because she failed to protect me when I was small.”

“What do you want now?”

“I have already had three broken relationships. I realize it was all my fault that we broke up. What is wrong with me? I just cannot trust my boyfriends and then I shout at them and then they leave me. Oh..... its such a vicious cycle. What do I do? Please help me? My mom told me to meet the counselor. That is why I have come here.”

“ so, counseling is a magic that will help you?”

"No, but at least you can help me to find out what is wrong in me that all my boyfriends leave me. It has happened with me 3 times already. I am in a fourth relationship and already there are many cracks in our relation?"

"whose fault is that?"

"I guess, its me", she remarked ruefully.

"That is why Doc I have come to you, to help me help myself".

Many a sessions were required and various psychotherapeutic techniques from CBT to spiritual psychotherapy were used to help her come to terms with her present developed self and gradually she got stabilized in her relationships. Yet, she could not find the t=courage to inform her father , still having fears about his unpredictable volatile behavior. Her mother's supportive role in the therapy ensured subsequent success of the therapeutic process.

Related reviews

Some studies have explored the relationship between witnessing violence and experiencing parent-child violence. Whereas both males and females can develop either aggressive or depressive symptom otology (external/internal), when parent-child violence was low, the witnessing of inter parental violence had a significant and adverse effect on adjustment(O'Keefe, 1996). O'Keefe theorized by contrast that those who experience violence from apparent directly (i.e. instead of merely being its witness) "...are so preoccupied with their own safety that they are numb to further violence, especially when they are not the direct targets of the violence" (p. 65).

In their review of twenty-nine recent empirical studies dealing with the effects on children of witnessing domestic violence, Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman (1996) found that these children are "...at risk for maladaptation in one or more of the following domains of functioning: (a) behavioral, (b) emotional, (c) social, (d) cognitive, and (e) physical" (p. 282).

The most significant findings point to a correlation between witnessed violence and emotional and behavioral development. The authors conclude, though, that the "...relationship between

witnessing domestic violence and developmental problems is far from clear-cut" (p. 289). Researchers and helpers (counselors, therapists, other support providers) must continue to examine the extent to which violence (witnessed or direct) affects the development of children. Indeed, "...witnessing threats to one's mother, and receiving threats to one's own physical safety, extracts a serious toll on emotional stability...dread of violence might disrupt psychosocial development more than the event itself; the ways children cope with this persistent fear might lead to locked-in patterns of coping in their lives" (McCloskey, et al., 1995, p. 1258).

To sum up

Ideally, interventions should focus on children of spousal victims instead of only the spousal victims.. Often, witnesses to domestic violence have been forgotten as prevention and intervention has been focused on spouses only. Additionally, family therapists in particular have been accused of colluding with perpetrators (perhaps inadvertently) by focusing on patterns of interaction, hierarchies, family of origin, and other related concepts, depending on their theoretical orientation. Nichols & Schwartz (1998) point out that many family therapists have been challenged in their systems orientation for seeing violence as "...the outcome of cycles of mutual provocation... (and) they themselves might be part of the problem by excusing or minimizing wife-beating" (p. 329). The challenge then becomes to remove our therapeutic "blindness," identify violence at its source (usually the husband/father), hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, and find ways to reach the children who are least witnesses, if not victims of violence. Nichols & Schwartz make an interesting comment that "as family therapists become more sensitive to family violence, they will encounter it more often" (p. 329).

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