

The Role of Teachers in the Detection and Treatment of Child Victimization in the Context of Spousal / Partner Violence

Stella P. Papamichail

Sociologist- Criminologist, PhD

Scientific Associate

University of West Attica

Greece

Abstract

Children who experience violence in the family as witnesses of their mother's abuse by her husband / partner have been recognized by the international community in recent years also as victims of domestic violence for whom special interventions need to be developed. In many modern western culture countries according to the legislation, persons who identify these victims have to cooperate with police and prosecution authorities for the criminal investigation of cases. Within the educational community, cases of domestic violence are often revealed. Teachers are called upon to cope with them, often based only on their instinct or experience, without the support of a wider organized mechanism, or a network of services for support and guidance. This article develops a discussion on the role of the educational community in early detection of this form of child victimization, while the review of the literature highlights the critical points of intervention.

Keywords: Child exposure to domestic violence, school programs to combat domestic violence, school policies for domestic violence, education in domestic violence.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence has a horrible face and many victims. Many theories have been developed to explain the causes of the phenomenon. Contemporary empirical research focuses on interpretations of power and control by the perpetrator of abuse on the victim who is usually a woman in cases of marital / partner violence. At the same time, they dissociate domestic violence from anger management (for the perpetrator), revealing that men who practice violent behavior against spouse / partner women in order to subdue and control them are not violent in general or in other relationships (Stoeber, 2014: 525). So it seems that the remnants of patriarchy haunt modern societies with the great struggles and the conquests of the women's movement. One of the most common and major threat of domestic violence, apart from gender inequality, is its intergenerational effect through its observation and reproduction. Children - witnesses living in abusive environments suffer from their exposure to violence and are also a special category of victims of domestic violence.

2. Children - Witnesses to Domestic Violence: An "Invisible" Group Asks for Our Attention

For many decades' children - witnesses of domestic violence have remained "invisible" victims for the legislator, state care, specialists, and social consciousness itself. As the research on women abuse has developed, the victimization of children witnessing their mother's violence has also come to light and has been given a boost to their study. However, it should be noted that the phenomenon of children's exposure to domestic violence still remains in the shadow of female and child abuse. Although children-witnesses of domestic violence have been studying since the 1970s in the United States and Europe, only in the last 15 years has been a separate reference to them in texts of jurisprudence, constitutional Treaties and laws. Modern legislation has allowed this special form of child abuse to emerge in the public debate, but this does not mean a direct connection with the design of specific interventions and the development and implementation of actions to address the phenomenon. The scientific study demonstrates that children's exposure to domestic violence often affects their development, physical and mental health, and has a catalytic effect on the relationship they will develop in the future with violence. Consequently, children-witnesses of domestic violence must be treated autonomously as separate entities and not as an extension of their battered mothers, as they have different needs that also require specialized intervention (Papamichail, Savvidis, Katsaros, Liaskou, 2018).

The problem of children witnessing domestic violence does not remain within family boundaries, but it is transferred and affects all areas where children live and grow: at school, in the neighborhood, and ultimately in the wider society. Especially teachers are often recipients of messages emitted through the behavior of their students and are linked to domestic violence. Children spend very much of their time in school daily, and often have more contact with their teachers than with their parents. At school, with the valuable help of the teachers, the children's behavior can be observed (including symptoms of exposure to parents' violence) and can be properly addressed. Also, the school is an area in which programs for the prevention of domestic violence can be implemented by informing parents, teachers and children. Training to prevent domestic violence must start early. There is awareness in this direction, but the applied programs seem to suffer. As very well noted by Stoeber (2014:528) «... *society has failed to approach the goal of prevention with the same tenacity with which the criminal justice system carries out its objectives of punishment and accountability*».

Thereinafter the interventions in the field of education that are encountered in the international bibliography and the important role of the educational community in the prevention and treatment of domestic violence are presented.

3. The Effects of Witnessing Domestic Violence on Children

Children live in societies where violence is scattered in everyday life (media, school, interpersonal relationships, etc.) However, scientific research shows that domestic violence is more traumatic to children than any other violence. This is probably due to the fact that children have emotional ties to the perpetrator and the victim of domestic violence (are usually their parents), the persons from whom they are expecting love and protection (Polillo, 2003:179).

Published studies report the link between exposure to domestic violence and the existence of problems in children's lives, but also in their later lives as adults. Only 1/3 of these studies distinguish child abuse from exposure to parental violence, demonstrating the strong impact of the experience of witnessing domestic violence has on children (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2004:19).

The impact of witnessing violence on children is great and depends on children's age, gender, the severity and duration of the violence (Ohlsson, 2010:7). A general conclusion of relevant research is that children exposed to domestic violence face more social, emotional and behavioral difficulties than their peers who are not in contact with this form of violence.

Children exposed to violence may exhibit more aggressive and antisocial behaviors, or fearful and anxious behaviors. Also, exposure of children to violence causes increased anxiety, sadness, and mental trauma (Byrne & Taylor, 2007).

Children-witnesses of violence may experience signs of neglect and delay in their development. They may also have behavioral problems, poor social skills, low school performance, unwillingness to participate or withdrawal from school life, delinquent behavior (theft, vandalism, substance abuse, etc.) (Lauren, 2015; Summers, 2006). School children who are witnesses of domestic violence may have learning and emotional difficulties. Their behavior has fluctuations and their school performance transitions. They may have low self-esteem, reduced self-confidence and pessimism for the future. As many disagreements in the family environment that can cause violence are associated with child upbringing, children may feel responsible for the violence, or for failing to prevent it.

The guilt and self-accusation can play an important role in the emotional reaction of children to violence. These children swinging between their desire to reduce the shame they feel and their hope that someone could discover their experiences and help them. Because of the isolation often imposed on families living with domestic violence, these children may have few opportunities to develop friendships or extra-curricular activities (Polillo, 2003:181). Children in adolescence create relationships and ties with non-family members by conveying and applying the communication models and the perception of gender roles learned by their family. Here, one can find the reflection of the parental family. If the teenager comes from a violent environment, he/she can reproduce the pattern of violence he/she has experienced. Often in adolescents, we see strong stereotypical perceptions of masculinity (aggression / strength) and femininity (weakness / passivity) (Cousins & Callary, 2009). The anger, shame and betrayal teenagers feel from abuser environments may manifest behaviors such as non-compliance, deviation, running away from home, school abandonment, sexual promiscuity and use of addictive substances.

Also these adolescents experienced a greater extent than other peers who have no contact with domestic violence, of fear, loneliness and isolation, depression that can lead to suicidal tendencies. On the other hand, there is the risk of acceptance and tolerance of violence due to their long-term exposure to it. Children living in violent families form the distorted impression (mainly through the process of social learning and imitation of models) that violence is a solution to differences in interpersonal relationships and is an integral part of them. It is very important to note that in modern multicultural societies, the impact of domestic violence on children of migrant families should be examined with particular interest. These children are likely to face the same problems as the native children living in abusive family environments, but they also have to face other challenges related to the experience of migration and the acceptance and integration of the family into the new environment. Often the mother who is the victim of domestic violence, and at the same time a migrant and a member of a minority ethnic group, encounters obstacles in seeking help, as well as other barriers based on cultural standards, linguistic barriers, social isolation, racial discrimination, distrust against the legal and welfare system, etc (Baker & Jaffe, 2006:7).

4. Indicators for Detecting Domestic Violence in the School Environment

School can be a place where stories of domestic violence can be revealed, either because of the awareness and organized action of educational staff, or because child victims seeking for help from people of trust. In any case, when there are sensitized and trained teachers, is almost impossible not to identify these incidents where exist. Usually the children who suffer the trauma of exposure to domestic violence have obvious signs in their behavior at school.

As already mentioned, children who live in the intensity of violence often exhibit behaviors that are diametrically opposed. For example, they can be aggressive and externalize their intensity with violence and deviant behavior. But they can also internalize these experiences and withdrawn from school life, be distant and avoid interactions. The following are some of the signs that a teacher or counselor may notice in the school environment (Derbyshire Education Improvement Service, 2018; Elliott & Elliott, 2011; Cousins & Callary, 2009):

- a. Physical indicators: fatigue in school, poor personal hygiene, regression, self - injuries, increased resistance to pain, substance abuse, complains for pain (often psychosomatic problems) and frequent absences due to illness.
- b. Emotional indicators: shame (especially when disclosing the violence), anxiety and fear of what might happen to him/her and his/ her mother, helplessness and hopelessness, guilt and responsibility for the malfunction of family, suicidal thoughts, intense emotional transitions.
- c. Behavioral indicators: frequent or unjustified anger, aggression, as demonstrated by the hard / risky playing, intimidation, or just the opposite behavior, i.e. passivity, withdrawal, isolation, denial of school attendance, reduced attention in class, poor school performance or participation in extracurricular activities¹.

In particular, adolescents can manifest behaviors in the school environment that reflect their feelings of anger, shame, betrayal and weakness related to deviant and "high risk" behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, substance abuse, dating violence and suicide attempts (Cousins & Callary, 2009:12).

In conclusion, there are many and varied indications about the existence of domestic violence. It is very important to note that the indicators mentioned above are general and may be related to other problems faced by a child other than domestic violence (e.g. parental separation, loss - death, etc.). For that reason it is crucial for teachers or educational counselors not to make risky assumptions, but seriously investigate a case that raises their suspicions by either approaching and discussing with the child, or addressing specialized professionals who can help.

5. The role of the Educational Community in the Prevention of Domestic Violence

The school environment, mainly through teachers and counselors, when operating on the basis of equality, respect and protection of the rights of its members, can work counter-productively in a family, abusive environment and support the children living in it, help them to free themselves from a traumatic situation.

¹ Sometimes is the exact opposite: children engaged in excessive extent in extracurricular activities as they try to prolong their time away from home (Elliott & Elliott, 2011).

At the same time, it can highlight "healthy" patterns of interpersonal relationships and conflict management. Therefore, the role of the school is twofold and equally important in preventing and addressing domestic violence against children. Interventions and initiatives to prevent domestic violence in school can reduce the risk and increase protection for students, witnesses and victims of domestic violence. Teachers can play the role of a loving and caring adult who can make a difference in the lives of these children (Baker & Jaffe, 2006). The teacher is a very important adult in child's life. His/her daily relationship with the students enables him/her to come close to them and develop a relationship of trust that will make children feel safe. Moreover, teachers are able to observe the behavior and the feelings of the child, as well as possible changes on them, which may cause concern and worry. Teacher should be able to detect clues in the child's overall attitude, which may indicate that the child is in some form of abuse. And once he/she can identify it, it is necessary in some way to intervene to mobilize the broader mechanism for the protection of physical and mental health of the child.

The legislation of many modern countries includes the recognition of witnesses of marital / partner violence as victims of domestic violence on one hand and the responsibility and obligation of the educational community to denounce the incidents detected within the school environment², on the other. Although legislation has moved on to this level, practice has been left far behind and it should not be taken for granted that appropriate interventions in the school environment for this purpose have been developed in countries with the corresponding legislative provision. Thus, although in schools cases of domestic violence and abuse are revealed, there are many times when teachers are called upon to cope with them, based on their instinct, pedagogical knowledge and experience. Without proper training and links to a wider supportive network of professionals and practitioners, they often feel inadequate in handling the domestic violence and are discouraged from taking initiatives and responsibility. A very important issue is teachers' proper training in the subject. As Kenny had stated in his survey (2001) teachers have little training in child abuse and domestic violence before and after taking up duty, and seem to have relative ignorance of the legislation and the support system for victims of violence. In addition, several teachers believe that they should not be obliged to report child maltreatment and the school administration would not support them if they do so (Kenny, 2001: 87 – 88).

In addition, teachers often have to oppose and overcome the obstacles posed by a dominant concept in more traditional societies, preserving the family's privacy. Finally, they often feel fear about the negative consequences that can bring the disclosure of a case, as is the fear of retaliation on the child or fear for their personal safety.

On the other hand, the role that the school environment can play in the prevention of domestic violence is crucial. In addition to the legal duty of schools to care for and secure children, schools play an important role in shaping role models and establishing gender-related values. School is a universal experience for children and young people and is therefore able to reach a whole generation of people. Through education is possible to transmit the values of equality, respect, non-discrimination and social solidarity to children and their families. Preventative work with children and young people in schools and other settings, in relation to gender equality and from a young age, has been identified as important in changing damaging attitudes before they harden in the teenage years (Derbyshire Education Improvement Service, 2018).

One key "preventive contribution" is for the schools to ensure that they provide quality relationships education, integrated into their educational curriculum, which supports the development of positive, safe and healthy relationships with others. In 2011 the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) came into force. Important themes of the Convention include Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Substantive law and Monitoring. In particular, Article 14 of the Convention, and in particular the role of education, states that « *Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education* » (Council of Europe, 2011).

² For example, in Greece, Law 3500/2006 on Domestic Violence obliges teachers, when they realize that a child is being abused, to inform the school principal and refer the case to the competent authorities. Specifically, in accordance with Article 23 N. 3500/2006 « *Teachers of primary or secondary school who in their work note or find out that the crime of domestic violence has been committed against a student must inform without delay the director of the school. The school director shall immediately notify the competent prosecutor* (Pilisis, 2014:47-48).

It should be noted that a whole school approach, with consistency and stability is necessary. Tackling abusive behavior and sexist attitudes that perpetuate violence and abuse in relationships should be addressed on a continuing basis as part of the whole school culture and not just a one-off exercise.

6. Interventions: What Schools can do to Prevent and Tackle Domestic Violence and Abuse

The important role that school can play in preventing and tackling domestic violence has been recognized worldwide. Some countries have put in place specific interventions in their education policy to highlight the role of the school in a concerted effort to tackle the phenomenon, as well as to educate younger generations to create interpersonal relations free from violence. The school has the obligation to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical well-being and development of pupils. Teachers therefore need to be equipped with the skills required to teach young people about domestic violence, identify those who may be affected by domestic violence and create an environment that facilitates and encourages young people to disclose abuse whilst also ensuring their safety.

6.1. Managing incidents of domestic violence:

Detecting domestic violence is not an easy task, especially when the investigation is carried out with the participation of the children experiencing it. The children, as mentioned above, feel fear, shame, anger and great tension, and are often confused trying to understand the cause of violence. They do not easily trust strangers, show faith and devotion to the family and fear that if they reveal the violence they will be separated from it. For this reason, establishing trust between a teacher and a child-witness of domestic violence is of paramount importance for an effective intervention. Especially, for teachers it is necessary to improve their knowledge and skills in managing this special population of their students.

As the school community plays a very important role in managing cases of domestic violence, teachers or school counselors (where they exist) can act as crisis managers when violence is revealed. In their intervention they should be aware that students' disclosures may be done deliberately and intentionally or by accident. Any disclosure must be treated with the same caution. The emotional state of a child is not always predictable. Teachers must accept children's emotional state, be not critical, and encourage the child to talk without directing the conversation themselves. They should also show real interest, use the appropriate language, according to the child's developmental stage, so that they can be understood and not give promises they cannot keep (Derbyshire Education Improvement Service, 2018; Elliott & Elliott, 2011).

At the same time they should have the ability to manage their own feelings and stay calm. Disclosing domestic violence can cause anger and pain even to the person to whom it is revealed. A dispassionate approach is appropriate to create a climate of trust and security.

After evaluating the information the child shares with the teacher, he / she should assess the available resources and know where and how he / she will turn to appropriate professionals and agencies to seek for further help. It is also very important not to exceed his/her role and give priority to the safety of the child and the other victims who may be affected by domestic violence (e.g. mother, siblings), following the school's policy and possible cooperation protocols. For that reason, the teacher should not approach the parents directly, without guidance, particularly the offending parent as this could place the student and his/her family in greater danger (Cousins & Callary, 2009).

In the period following the disclosure of a case of domestic violence, the student will need support from the school environment. Possible advisory intervention should be undertaken by a specially trained professional. The school cannot provide counseling services to victims of domestic violence, but through its sensitized staff it can help the child in everyday life (non-stigmatization from the environment, enhancing the child's participation in school life, etc.).

6.2. Prevention of domestic violence

Teachers play an important role in advocating for, implementing and sustaining school-based violence prevention (Baker & Jaffe, 2006:23). School is an ideal place where education on interpersonal relationships, gender equality and conflict management skills without violence can be developed. The design and implementation of programs for the prevention of domestic violence, as well as the formation of healthy, free of violence interpersonal relationships, should be part of the educational policy and the principles of each school's operation. This implies that the education of students must begin early, be continuous and consistent.

A study of educational programs by the University of Warwick has shown that relevant training should be addressed on a continuing basis otherwise its effect evaporates within a year. As the British Union of Teachers notes (www.teachers.org.uk) tackling home violence should therefore be part of the whole school culture and not a “one-off” exercise.

Education in the relevant subjects should not be limited to classroom teaching. Messages in the curriculum about healthy relationships need to be consistent with values within whole school policies and practices. Healthy and respectful relationships and role models within the whole school culture are essential (Derbyshire Education Improvement Service, 2018).

In order for teachers and school managers to implement domestic violence prevention programs integrated into the school's philosophy and curriculum, they need to be trained on domestic violence, its impact on children and its management in the school environment. Their knowledge and awareness must be a daily practice of school life. Staff working in the school environment, including teachers, should have access to basic child protection training that will give them the knowledge and skills to recognize and be able to respond properly to their students' safety and security needs.

In this respect, helpful initiatives might be the development of school practices that are inclusive and promote students' sense of belonging and availability for learning, the implementation of rules of respect for the personality of the other within and outside the class, the development of inclusion activities for all pupils promoting the creation of cooperation, solidarity and friendship. Very creative and effective are also initiatives to organize and / or support special violence awareness events for students. The teaching of nonviolence should be incorporated into the teaching of all courses, with simple examples tailored to the curriculum of each lesson and its subject.

School is a living organism of a society and especially of the community in which it operates. It is therefore very important to connect and communicate effectively with other community agencies. In order to prevent and deal with domestic violence, building cooperation with domestic violence victim support agencies (e.g. counseling centers, hostels), the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Police and the Bar Associations is a critical point of effectiveness of the intervention. The existence of cooperation protocols between agencies facilitates and complements their intervention, for the benefit of victims of domestic violence.

Conclusions

In modern societies, domestic violence continues to be a major social problem with serious implications for both victims' lives and public health and safety. Addressing it requires strategies to prevent, protect victims and repair the damage. Although serious efforts have been made with satisfactory results in the protection of children and women victims of domestic violence, the area of prevention and the repair of the harm it causes is far behind.

Societies face many challenges with regard to domestic / partner violence. One of these concerns the fact that the approach of many countries on the issue remains disproportionately focused on its criminal treatment, at the expense of prevention and effective early intervention (REFUGE, 2009). It is a fact that progress has been made in understanding and responding to violence by professionals in the field. They work hard and effectively to provide immediate relief to victims from the obvious harm of violence. Often, due to the seriousness of some incidents on the health and safety of the victims, the attention of professionals is directed to addressing them immediately. In this way, energy can be trapped and their perspective is limited to the "narrow" context of managing an incident, keeping them away from the "big picture" and interventions of a long and holistic approach (JTAI program, 2017).

Also, there are still inadequacies and obstacles in the field of cooperation between the various professional groups and agencies, including school units. There is still a lack of clarity about the exchange of information between actors involved in the management of cases of domestic violence, and their actions seem to be not coordinated towards the development of cross-sectoral cooperation (Byrne & Taylor 2007). Finally, societies are still confronted with social prejudices and myths that surround domestic / partner violence. Tolerance in domestic violence and its perpetuation rests on social values / norms that are durable in time and concern male and female gender stereotypes, male entitlement, the desire to have power and control over another and the belief that intimate relationships should be entirely private. Secrecy surrounding domestic violence precludes early intervention, isolates those being victimized, and perpetuates patterns of violence (Stoeber, 2014:533). As often refers to many social issues, “prevention starts with education”.

The World Health Organization (2010) recommends the use of “universal multi-component” school-based programs to prevent spouse/ partner violence against women, which include curriculum-based teaching, training teachers in behavior management strategies, educating parents, and using peer mediation.

School and teachers can and should play an important role both in the prevention and in dealing with domestic violence that mainly affects children. Starting with their own awareness and training on legal and social support issues for victims of domestic violence, they can develop and support long-term education programs of the new generation in preventing and tackling this kind of violence. School programs should focus on shaping or changing the perceptions of young people about interpersonal relationships and the interaction of family members on the basis of gender equality and the aversion of violence in every form. In this way, the school can provide supportive responses to young people through the development of their personal, social and emotional capabilities. Challenging student’s attitudes will only work if schools address this issue on an ongoing basis, otherwise the impact of teaching soon will evaporate. If it is not combined with the development of community ties and cooperation between actors and practitioners, then every effort will be doomed to die in its birth.

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