

hope and healing for children affected by domestic violence

by Andrea Polites, Karen Kuchar, and Shauna Bigelow

The work of the Children's Program at Family Shelter Service of Downers Grove, Illinois, is all about hope. Mothers and children affected by domestic violence arrive at the Shelter fearful and unsure of the future and leave believing in a brighter tomorrow. An extensive array of services helps both parents and children find a safe place to come to terms with feelings and learn new, healthier coping skills. Executive Director, Karen Kuchar, describes the mission of the program:

"Family Shelter Service is dedicated to serving the needs of victims of domestic violence; each family has a different story and a different path to a safe and healthy future. We have learned that the youngest victims often express their pain and hurt in unique ways. Our role is to provide a safe and healing environment that allows them to get back to the important work of being children. We offer help and then have the privilege of seeing lives change and hope restored."

A widespread problem

Domestic violence is a devastating social problem that leaves an enduring, negative impact on all family members, especially the victims and their children. The costs to children and to society as

a whole are enormous. Children who have witnessed domestic violence or have been threatened or abused by a parent are at great risk for emotional and behavioral problems. Until recently, medicine has focused primarily on physical trauma. The field of trauma psychology, however, has begun to expand our knowledge by studying different kinds of traumas such as child sexual abuse, witnessing violence, and growing up in an alcoholic family. Felitti and his colleagues (Felitti et al., 1998) call these kinds of traumas that affect children "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACE). Studies reveal a high correlation between ACEs and physical and mental health problems in adults. The relationship between childhood trauma and organic disease later in life is great, and is frequently correlated to early mortality.

Domestic violence is affecting children in schools and early childhood programs throughout the nation, whether or not the adults in these programs are aware. Even though they may spend significant periods of time with children, early childhood teachers and administrators are often unsure how to interpret problematic symptoms children display. Pediatricians may not be trained to screen for domestic violence, and statistics indicate they rarely inquire about it. Looking for

the presence of family violence is not routine when children are brought to mental health professionals because of problem behavior. As a result, children who exhibit challenging behaviors may receive inappropriate treatment because professionals are unaware of the cause of their symptoms and misdiagnose them with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

Andrea Polites, Director of Counseling and Children's Services Coordinator, describes how the work being done at Family Shelter Service has relevance for early childhood professionals in any setting:

"It is important for early childhood professionals to give children an environment that promotes the safe expression and release of feelings. At Family Shelter Service, we provide children with a safe place to talk about their experiences and process the abuse, violence, and its effect on their family. We offer support and reassurance that it was not their fault that these things happened. Interventions are designed to encourage children to develop a sense of mastery and feel good about themselves, enhance problem-solving skills, learn to keep safe, and increase self-efficacy. As children recover from trauma, they can



Moving to heal

Experts like Peter Levine, Ph.D. and Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D. write about the value of movement experiences for children who have become ‘frozen’ by traumatic events and need to release intense feelings of fear and anger. Here’s an example from Peter Levine (2009):

“Three little girls (described in *US News and World Report*, Nov. 11, 1996)

ous, purposeful movement experiences, as well as through calm, reassuring periods of personal contact. Again, every child will benefit from opportunities to engage in purposeful movement activities throughout the day; but for children who have experienced trauma, these activities are crucial. Children with ‘fight or flight’ chemicals still coursing through their bodies cannot be expected to sit still all day and focus on ‘learning experiences.’ Dr. Bruce Perry, Senior Fellow of the Child Trauma Academy, a non-profit organization in Houston Texas, writes:

“... the more threatened we become, the more ‘primitive’ (or regressed) our style of thinking becomes. When a traumatized child is in a state of alarm (because they are thinking about the trauma, for example) they will be less capable of concentrating, they will be more anxious, and they will pay more attention to ‘non-verbal’ cues such as tone of voice, body posture and facial expressions.” (Perry & Marcellus, 1997)

With statistics showing that approximately five million children experience some form of trauma each year, it is time to think carefully about providing appropriate opportunities for movement throughout children’s school years, at all age levels. This does not necessarily mean spending time on traditional playgrounds that are often filled with screaming children, and chaotic, darting movements. For children in various states of alarm, who are hypersensitive to noise and commotion, these types of environments can be counter-productive.

Natural healing

A more naturalized outdoor space can provide an alternative to the playground for traumatized children that allows them to move in ways that heal: walking or running on pathways through plantings, or dancing to soothing sounds made by rain sticks or an outdoor marimba. At Family Shelter Service, Mary

begin to experience a renewed sense of trust in their world and restoration of hope regarding their future.”

Effective strategies for helping children heal

It is important that programs for children who are living in domestic violence shelters provide safety, emotional support, skill-building, validation, and normalized routines. Making an effort to include these kinds of experiences in **every** early childhood program is an effective strategy for reaching children who are hiding the fact that they are affected by domestic violence at home. Of course, **all** children will benefit from routines and emotional support, regardless of their home circumstances.

Two types of interventions are especially effective for children who are experiencing trauma: Purposeful movement experiences, and deep connections with the natural world. (Again, these experiences are beneficial for **all** children so they can be effectively incorporated into any early childhood program’s daily routine.)

are sitting in plastic molded chairs in the hospital waiting room. They seem calm, betraying nothing of the horrors they experienced the night before. The children were tied up, the three-year-old threatened with a gun, and then they watched as their teenage sister was shot in the head (though not killed). They appear ‘calm’ on the outside, but their physiologies tell a very different story. Hearts still racing at one hundred beats per minute, their blood pressure remains high. Inside their heads the biological stress chemicals are saturating their brains. . . . These ‘frozen’ kids, while appearing calm (if not unresponsive) are still internally prepared for the extremes of activation necessary to initiate the flight or fight procedures they never had a chance to execute. Those chemicals are now turning against their very futures. . . . The essential biological ingredient of resolving trauma is missed — that is, completion of the thwarted fight or flight defensive procedures and the close human contact that is required to support this completion.

Teachers working with children who have unresolved trauma can offer ways to release stored energy through vigor-

Kay Inc. and the Mary Kay Foundation approached the shelter with funds to create a naturalized outdoor play space for their children. The outdoor space is filled with separate areas for planting, building with blocks, climbing, moving along pathways, digging in sand and soil, making music, dancing, and exploring and manipulating natural materials such as wood chips, pieces of tree branches, and small logs. Program staff attended a workshop to learn ways to use nature in children's daily learning, and the program has recently become a certified Nature Explore Classroom. Mary Kay Inc. and the Mary Kay Foundation, as part of their efforts to support families affected by domestic violence, and to provide opportunities for children to connect with nature, have also funded the creation of Nature Explore Classrooms in four other domestic violence shelters in New Jersey, Texas, Georgia, and California.

"We see these Nature Explore Classrooms as a critical tool in helping to end the cycle of domestic violence that so often passes from generation to generation," said Anne Crews, Vice President of Government Relations for Mary Kay Inc. and Mary Kay Foundation board member. "The classrooms will provide a safe, peaceful, and quiet place for children who have been abused or witnessed abuse to play, learn, and most importantly, to heal."

Shauna Bigelow, Shelter Children's Counselor, describes the benefits of connecting with nature on a daily basis for the children in the Family Shelter Service Residential Program:

"Nature provides so many lessons for us. As the children explore, they are learning about life cycles, change, uniqueness, responsibility, and stewardship.

"A young girl learning to water and care for a small plant is also learning to care

for herself. A little boy watching a resident killdeer protect her nest begins to explore family dynamics. These lessons open the children's minds and hearts, and the healing begins."

Numerous studies have shown the profound benefits that all children receive from connecting with the natural world. Children affected by violence are especially in need of the soothing benefits of nature. Children who witness traumatic events may feel helpless and experience the world as unpredictable, hostile, and threatening. Spending time in nature can provide reassurance through the predictable routines of the seasons, the gentle way leaves sway in the wind, and the comforting beauty of flowers in bloom. Children can also heal by engaging in caretaking activities. As children water plants or trees, pull weeds in a garden or feed the birds, they begin to define themselves as nurturing individuals — an antidote to the sometimes violent parental role models they experienced. Australian researcher, Almut Beringer (2000), who conducted research on how nature heals found that "experiencing healing through nature may initiate or strengthen an ethic of care for nature."

Creating a new definition of 'family'

At Family Shelter Service, meeting the needs of young children requires working with the non-offending caregiver (who is usually their mother), and often older siblings. Families receive a variety of services to help them understand the nature of domestic violence:

- Parents are helped to understand connections between children's behavior and disturbing episodes children may have witnessed at home.
- Mothers and children may attend family counseling together where the focus is on improving communication skills and healing relationships. As relationships improve, children begin

to regain trust and learn to see their mothers as capable leaders of the family.

- Group counseling allows children to connect with others who have had similar traumatic experiences. As children share stories, they unburden themselves of the damaging secrets of family violence that they may have been too ashamed or afraid to reveal before.

Mothers and children living at Family Shelter Service learn to provide support to one another. As children attend the daytime child care programs at the shelter, mothers can attend individual or group counseling sessions to address their own needs and issues, and discuss previously unspoken fears with others in like circumstances. The shelter staff reports that families begin to cook for each other, sharing favorite recipes and cultural traditions. Soon, children are experiencing what it is like to live in a supportive extended family.

Caring for program staff

Providing emotionally responsive, quality services for young children, whether in a domestic violence shelter, or in a school or child care center is not easy. It is almost inevitable that all providers will work with children affected by domestic violence, whether they realize it or not. Striving to provide nurturing, comforting, consistent, predictable experiences for children who may be angry, withdrawn, or acting out is not easy to do well day after day. Self-care is an important part of being an effective early childhood teacher. Shauna and Andrea describe how important it is for them to be able to talk to other team members about frustrations and successes. Finding time for activities outside of work that are rejuvenating and relaxing is also helpful, and a good laugh every day is a great stress-reliever. Above all, it is important for caregivers to be as gentle

and forgiving with themselves as they try to be with children.

Wings for the soul

Over the years the staff at Family Shelter Services has collected drawings from children and poetry from mothers. These have been published in a book called *Wings for the Soul*. In one poem called "She Taught Me to Respect Myself" a mother wrote these words about her counselor:

*Her faith in me became my own.
Her strength shone through my shame.
I found my courage in her eyes.
My freedom from self-blame.*

The book's introduction honors "a powerful transformation, from expressions of anger, isolation, and shame, to reflections of pride and hope. These women and children have learned to see themselves as the talented and valuable individuals they are." The work of the Children's Program at Family Shelter Service is all about hope.

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Resources

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children
www.APSAC.org

The Child Trauma Academy
www.ChildTrauma.org

Nature Explore Classrooms
www.natureexplore.org

Prevent Child Abuse America
www.preventchildabuse.org