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No Refuge
By Andrew Malekoff

There are more than a million documented episodes of domestic violence in the United States every year. In Nassau County, over 16,000 domestic violence calls were reported to the police one year ago. Nevertheless, only 25% of domestic violence incidents are reported to the police, according to a 2009 report by the Children's Defense Fund. The collateral damage in these violent encounters is three to ten million child witnesses who feel alone and vulnerable.

What is domestic violence? It is an abusive pattern of behavior that is used by one intimate partner to gain control over another. Domestic violence consists of physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats that influence a partner. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, terrorize, threaten or hurt an intimate partner. Although there is a higher incidence of domestic violence against women, men are also victimized at times.

Domestic violence is a community problem that, according to Jim Morin of the Wakefield Alliance against Violence in Massachusetts, "fills our emergency rooms and our morgues...keeps employees from being able to work...makes children fearful and interferes with their ability to learn... contributes to crime on our streets [and] destroys homes and families."

Children who witness domestic violence may show signs of crying, irritability, aggressiveness, sleep disturbances, bedwetting, nightmares, digestive problems and developmental delays. These are also children who are more likely than their peers from non-violent homes to commit suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, be unemployed or, later in their lives, to commit violence against their own partners.

For children living in violent homes, there is no refuge. There are only adults, terrifying abusers and terrified victims, locked in a perpetual cycle of violence, who are emotionally unavailable and incapable of offering protection. Although children are usually innocent bystanders, they often feel that they are to blame for the brutality that they witness in their homes. They then carry the shame and self-hatred that blaming oneself generates.

Children who witness violence need to learn how to keep safe when a violent incident happens and need to feel that they did not cause their parents' problems and the violence that ensues. They have to understand that they are victims. They need to know that being a child is important and that it is their job to play, learn and make friends, as opposed to prevent, defuse or repair a violent relationship between adults in their lives. If you know a child who lives in a violent home, you can help.

According to Lundy Bancroft, author of “Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse,” if you know children who are suffering from exposure to violence, you can ask them how they are feeling and name possible feelings for them if they cannot name them, to reinforce what they tell you about their exposure to violence. Tell them, “I know this is hard to talk about. You are so brave and I am so proud of you.” Tell them that it is not their fault and that they are safe when they are with you.

When it becomes necessary to take action, do not confront the alleged abuser under any circumstances. You are unlikely to stop him. If you initiate a confrontation, it will likely lead to retribution against the child for betraying the family’s conspiracy of silence. Instead consult with local resources that can provide you with expert advice and guidance.

If you know a child who is living in such a home, call the Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence 24/7 Hotline at 516-542-0404 and ask for help.