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The impact of intimate partner violence on the child

Domestic violence has serious and, at worst, even lasting effects on a child's growth and development. The younger the child, the more serious the damage caused by witnessing violence against another member of the family. The effects are as damaging as if the violence was perpetrated on the child him/herself. In childhood, exposure to intimate family violence traumatizes the child, hindering the development of a balanced and well-functioning relationship to an adult. Violence in close relationships experienced in early childhood will have many damaging effects in adulthood. These effects are among other things lack of self-confidence, experiences of inferiority, anxiety and difficulty in forming lasting and trusting relationships.

Whenever domestic violence is directed at one of the parents, most often the mother, it is difficult for the abused parent to protect, care for, support, and defend the child in situations where violence is targeted at the child. When a child must witness violence against the adult who is the one caring for the child it arouses fear, anger, and anxiety in the child. The child can be left in between the parents and he or she may be used as an instrument of violence against the other parent in addition to being the victim. It is known that mental violence against a child is just as damaging, if not worse, than physical violence. A child is left alone in situations where he or she has no means to understand what is happening and has no possibility to cope on his or her own. In a family with violence the child is not a passive target or a sideline follower. They take an active role in between the parents, seeking to protect the other parent, calming down the violent one or seeking to control the situations by his or her own conduct thus hindering the escalation of violence.

Breaking away from intimate partner violence is not easy. The dynamics of intimate partner violence include the variation of different periods, which can be good or bad. However, good and peaceful times do not mean that violence has diminished or is over. At the beginning of a relationship, a close emotional connection is built between the couple, which includes affection and trust towards one another. Violence steps into the relationship either unexpectedly or gradually. The experience of the positive and lovable features are totally opposite from the dreadful things that your loved one is capable of doing.

The belief that your spouse will change is strong and long lasting despite all the violence and fear. Above all guilt, shame about the situation of the family, exhaustion and isolation from friends and other social relationships created in the course of time prevents the abused parent from leaving the relationship. The abused parent lives his or her life pulling through from one moment to the next, hoping to survive the upcoming violent acts.

The fear which is created by the thought of the possibility of disengaging yourself and leaving the relationship is often due to the anger, bitterness, intimidation and persecution of the spouse. How can you protect yourself and, above all, your children in a situation where you by leaving the violent relationship may place

yourself and your children in serious danger? The decision to break away from a relationship and a destructive family life is a long and multifaceted process. The abused parent may have a feeling that alternatives other than a violent relationship do not exist and the fear of what will happen after the separation is more frightening than a violent relationship. About 50% of violent partners continue with the violent behavior even after separation.

Stalking was criminalized in Finland in 2014. Every year about 600-700 crime reports are noted and more than 100 convictions are handed down. The most common punishment is a fine. Most of the stalking in Finland is directed at an ex-spouse. Post-separational stalking has been recognized in Finland as intimate violence and especially a significant factor that increases the risk of violence in identifiable situations. Since the beginning of 2018 the Support Center Varjo under the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelter has operated in Finland preventing post-separational stalking and focusing on improving the well-being and safety of the parties to post-separational stalking. Varjo has developed and improved working models for interventions in their client work. Multi-professional working models have been strengthened and the skills of various professionals have been strengthened nationwide. The Criminal Sanctions Agency has been a strong partner from the beginning. With the recent criminalization of stalking new convictions are noteworthy. It is important to look at how convictions will appear in prisons with the implementation of the new law. In addition, the execution of the sentence and the history of intimate partner violence provide an opportunity for a change in the behavior for the perpetrator but also opportunity for the victim to empower and better victim's safety.

Stalking is usually a continuum of violence and affects all parties in the family. Perpetrators are often characterized by a strong legitimacy of one's own actions, jealousy, owning ex-spouse and compulsiveness. These are combined by control over the ex-spouse. In the Support Center Varjo it has been stated that multi-professional work with all the parties at the same time with the same goal but separately is important. With this it is possible to identify stalking, stop unwanted behavior, strengthen the safety of the victim and strengthen the children's experience and voice. Family work in prisons is a good opportunity to look at the parenting relationship; rebuild or strengthen safe and functioning parenting so that it does not compromise with the safety of the other parent. In addition to biological parenting, it is important to assess the quality of parenting in relation to the child's needs.

Perpetrators are a heterogeneous group. Studies show that straightforward definitions of a stalker do not give reliable results. More than classifications, attention should be paid to environmental and circumstantial factors that have an accelerating effect on stalking behavior. Serving a sentence, structures keep behavior under control not only to support safe behavior but also support the safety of the ex-spouse and the children. On the other hand, imprisonment tends to reinforce feelings and behavior arising from the need and tendency to control.

It is particularly challenging to prevent and intervene in the phenomenon if the couple has joint custody of the children. Children are invisible victims of stalking who are exposed to a continuum of intimate partner violence in their relationships with both parents. A parent who has abused a spouse during family life may continue the violent behavior as stalking. The child can be the target of violence or the child may remain between the parents as an instrument of violence and acts of stalking. Parenting becomes vulnerable. Coercive control, especially related to stalking, is a mycelium between family members built on elements of fear and unpredictability. Its identification is significant from the perspective of the child's well-being and safety. A violent parent can create different perceptions of good parenting that as a child's real experience is frightening, especially when there are things in the parent's behavior that are triggers to previous violence. It is important to note that witnessing violence and living in a violent environment cannot be removed from a child's growth history.