



POSITION ON CHILDREN EXPOSED TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

ACWS believes all systems need to acknowledge the impact that exposure to family violence has upon children and develop responses and protocols that ensure that the best interests of the children are given priority. ACWS supports and encourages:

- Development of appropriate cross-training curricula and opportunities
- Development of collaborative, coordinated, community-based response models, and policies
- Best practices committed to the safety and support of victims, holding batterers accountable and to allowing children to remain with the non-offending parent whenever possible

Children exposed to family violence refers to “Children and adolescents seeing, hearing or being aware of violence/abuse against one parent figure that is perpetrated by another parent figure.”¹

“In 1999, children in almost half a million Canadian households heard or saw one parent assaulting another in the previous five years (Dauvergne & Johnson, 2001). In 70% of these cases, the assaults were perpetrated by fathers on mothers and, in most instances, the mother feared for her life. The children, themselves, were harmed or threatened in 10% of these cases. Children exposed to these events are at increased risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence themselves.”²

Interest in and concern about the substantial impact and needs of children exposed to family violence has only been given due recognition since the 1990's. ³ Previously, it was not acknowledged because the violence was not seen as direct abuse. In reality, however, watching, hearing or later learning of a parent being harmed by a partner can have serious short-term and long term effects on children that may include the following:

- Experience increased emotional and behavioral difficulties
- Develop traumatic stress reactions (sleep disturbances, intensified startle reactions, constant worry about possible danger)
- Increased risk of experiencing physical injury or childhood abuse

¹ Peter Jaffe, Susan Loosley in “Children Exposed to Family Violence: A Handbook for Alberta Shelter Workers”.

² Achieving a Violence-Free Alberta is Everybody's Business: Regional Workshop Guide & Workbook, Government of Alberta, 2004 pg. 20

³ Paths of Change: Children's Groups, Jean Dunbar, Liz Leroux, 2003 pg. 8

- Experience strong ambivalence toward their violent parent due to the coexistence of feelings of affection and feelings of resentment and disappointment
- Model and learn the attitudes and behaviors when intimate partner abuse occurs
- Become desensitized to aggressive behavior which can lead to aggression becoming the “norm”
- Live in constant fear for their lives
- Develop a unique set of emotional needs because the perpetrating parent is unsafe and the battered parent may be emotionally unavailable due to her own trauma.
- Suffer cumulative losses when they must leave their home to seek safety. ⁴

Responsibility for prevention, intervention, protection, outreach and follow-up belongs to all of us and includes:

- Raising awareness of the reality of violence against women and its devastating impact on children involved
- Educating people about the behaviors and signs that may be indicators for the existence of violence in families and providing guidelines for what they can do
- Establishing policies and protocols for dealing with disclosure by children
- Developing and implementing appropriate curricula for cross-training of personnel in the various disciplines, service sectors and social systems
- Developing and implementing multidisciplinary, collaborative, community-based response models that will “support victims, hold batterers accountable and allow children to remain with their non-offending parents whenever possible.” ⁵
- Understanding that women and their children are at higher risk when separating from an abusive partner and ensuring appropriate intervention practices are in place.
- Screening for family violence when considering custody and access issues

“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”⁶ The right help at the right time can make a world of difference.

⁴ List of impacts adapted from Children Exposed to Family Violence Handbook for Shelter Workers, Peter Jaffe and Susan Loosley, 2002 and Paths of Change: Children’s Groups, Jean Dunbar, Liz Leroux, 2003 p 8 - 10

⁵ NCSL State Legislative Report, Jan 2002, Vol.27, No. 1 pg. 6

⁶ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 3