



# Domestic violence: Protecting children by involving fathers and helping mothers<sup>1</sup>

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Maybe you know Mackenzie, Tony, and Sierra, or children like them.

They are exposed to domestic violence and have been reported to child welfare authorities. Their parents have always had a hard life. Their families are poor, isolated, and struggling with physical or mental illness and often with drug or alcohol addiction. When Mackenzie, Tony, and Sierra are reported to child welfare authorities, caseworkers have to intervene at several different levels. For mothers to be able to protect their children, they must feel safe themselves. For mothers to feel safe, their partners have to stop being violent. Prevention means working to give children a life free of fear and violence.

## Figures speak volumes

In Canada, an estimated half a million children witness domestic violence or spousal abuse.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that 30–60% are also maltreated themselves.<sup>3</sup> The more severe the domestic violence, the more serious the child abuse and the more serious the children's problems may be.<sup>4</sup>

## Impact on children: Essential facts

- Spousal abuse is frequently associated with child neglect.
- Children whose parents are in a violent relationship are more often neglected and also psychologically and physically abused.
- Exposure to domestic violence combined with maltreatment is a greater risk factor in child development.

## Reports of child maltreatment rising all over Canada

Two Ontario studies on maltreatment reported to child welfare authorities, done in 1993 and 1998, show that the number of children in trouble is on the rise. In the five years between the two studies, the number of investigated reports went up by 44% in Ontario and the number of substantiated cases doubled. Exposure to domestic violence, considered to be psychological abuse, is a major problem.<sup>5</sup>

## Protecting children from the effects of domestic violence

Children can be protected from domestic violence under Section 38 of the Quebec Youth Protection Act, which states that a child's security or development is considered to be endangered if the parent's "behaviour or way of life creates a risk of moral or physical danger for the child."

# Child maltreatment and domestic violence: Results of two Quebec field studies

Two studies based on data gathered as part of the 1998 Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment, and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS) compared two groups of children reported to child welfare authorities:<sup>6,7</sup>

- children whose cases were investigated by child welfare authorities and for whom the presence of domestic violence was identified for one of the parents living with them
- children whose cases were investigated by child welfare authorities but in whose families the presence of domestic violence was not observed.

## Children and parents: General picture in figures

- A total of 1,203 children, or 25% of the 4,774 reported and investigated as part of the QIS, live in families in which domestic violence was identified by a caseworker and there are a number of reasons to believe that this is an underestimate.
- In families in which the child lives with both parents, 90% of the victims of spousal abuse are the mothers and 2% are the fathers. In 7% of the families, both parents are victims of spousal abuse.
- Parents in violent relationships are more likely to have been maltreated themselves as children (48% versus 29% for parents in homes where domestic violence was not identified).

## Child maltreatment: Some figures

Children of couples in which domestic violence was identified often experience several forms of maltreatment:

- psychological abuse, especially exposure to spousal abuse, for 36.5% of children
- neglect, especially “failure to protect the child from potential physical harm,” for 42.1% of children
- physical abuse for 18.2% of children.

Children’s exposure to spousal abuse was identified as psychological abuse in only 27% of cases. Although violence between the parents was noted by a caseworker, the child’s development was not always deemed to be endangered. The caseworker’s professional judgement was guided by a number of factors.

## Difficult family living conditions: Some figures

- Parents who experience domestic violence tend to be less educated and poorer: 84% of them earn less than \$25,000 or receive welfare benefits, as opposed to 69% of parents in families where domestic violence was not observed.
- Parents who experience domestic violence are much more likely to have a number of personal problems:
- Twenty-one percent have at least five personal problems (poverty, alcohol or drug addiction, separation or divorce, social isolation, and mental health problems) compared with 6% in families where domestic violence was not observed. Caseworkers identified alcohol or drug abuse as a problem in 52% of families.
- Caseworkers identified problems related to separation and divorce in 50% of families. More of these couples were involved in child custody disputes (12.8% versus 7.5%), which indicates that they have legal issues to contend with as well as marital problems.

## What happens when domestic violence is identified by child welfare authorities?

### Assessing children’s risk

Children living in families in which domestic violence has been identified are more often considered to be in need of protection than children in families without this problem (56% versus 45%). It should be emphasized that these children are younger on average (7 years old) than those who are not living in families affected by domestic violence (10 years old).

Protecting children: Is it up to the mother?

Mothers, who are more often the victims of spousal abuse, are also considered to be mainly responsible for protecting their children from their partners' violence.

“Failure to protect against potential physical harm,” which is one of the eight types of neglect identified by caseworkers, concerned mothers in 66% of cases. Yet battered women are afraid, usually poor and financially dependent on their abuser, in an intimate relationship with their abuser, often depressed, and lacking the self-assurance needed to find the energy and hope to change things. Shouldn't fathers and mothers be equally responsible for providing a safe environment for their children?

How can we get fathers involved, help mothers, and protect children without placing the sole responsibility for protection on the mothers?

Observations on referrals for families

Specific services to help parents in violent relationships solve their problems were noted for only 13% of families in which spousal abuse was identified:

- Services to help parents, such as social worker services (60%), programs to improve parenting skills (54.4%), and psychological or psychiatric services (43%), tend to focus more on the individual.

- Services to help children living in families in which domestic violence was identified are similar to those recommended for children who do not witness domestic violence: 53% are steered to social worker services, 32% to stimulation programs, 29% to psychological or psychiatric services, and 27% to academic support.
- Children in homes in which domestic violence was identified are no more likely to be taken into care than those from homes in which domestic violence was not identified.

#### **Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS)**

The QIS is based on data collected from all reports received by the Youth Protection Branch between October 1 and December 31, 1998, in 16 of 18 child and youth protection centres in Quebec. The final QIS report was published in June 2002.

The QIS report can be ordered by telephone or using a form available from the Centre jeunesse de Montréal website.

Website: [http://www.mtl.centresjeunesse.qc.ca/bibliotheque/pdf/bon\\_commande.pdf](http://www.mtl.centresjeunesse.qc.ca/bibliotheque/pdf/bon_commande.pdf)

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### **Domestic violence and child maltreatment services: Building bridges**

Historically...

- Domestic violence programs developed around women's shelters, community resources for violent men, and community health-care and social-service centres, while child maltreatment programs have been the responsibility of child welfare authorities.
- Theories, conceptual models, research traditions, policies, and practices developed in a fragmented fashion in different institutional settings.
- Until quite recently, the impact of spousal abuse on children's health and welfare was poorly understood, both in clinical and research settings.

Recent research has shown that domestic violence is very often associated with child neglect and that affected families are extremely vulnerable. *It is essential to develop services adapted to those children and their families and to create links between all the professionals who help and support them in a variety of practice settings.*

- 1 This information sheet was peer reviewed by experts in the field of child welfare.
- 2 Statistics Canada. (2000, July 25). Family violence. *The Daily*. (Electronic version.) Available from <http://www.statcan.ca:80/Daily/English/000725/d000725b.htm>
- 3 Apple, A.E. & Holden, G.W. (1998). The co-occurrence of spouse and physical child abuse: A review and appraisal. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12(2), 578–99.
- 4 Bowker, L.H., Arbitell, M., & McFerron, J.R. (1988). On the relationship between wife beating and child abuse. In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- 5 Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Bartholomew, S., Ortiz, J., et al. (2002). *1998 Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS 1998)*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.
- 6 Lavergne, C., Chamberland, C., & Laporte, L. (2001). *Importance and characteristics of child maltreatment reports assessed by child protection services in Quebec (Canada) where domestic violence has been identified*. Paper presented at the 7th International Family Violence Research Conference, Portsmouth, NH, July 22–25, 2001.
- 7 Chamberland, C., Laporte, L., Lavergne, C., Tourigny, M., Mayer, M., Hélie, S., et al. (in press). Psychological maltreatment of children reported to youth protection services: A situation of grave concern. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*.

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