

Children : witnesses and victims of intimate partner violence (IPV)



When a dynamic of intimate partner violence (IPV) is present in a family, children are directly involved and impacted by the situation. This is why we no longer simply consider them to be "witnesses" but rather as being exposed and therefore directly victimized by the presence of IPV.

1 IPV as a form of psychological abuse of children

To develop normally, children need to be physically and psychologically safe. Growing up in a world where one parent is violent towards the other creates a situation of extreme insecurity and is, in itself, a form of violence and psychological abuse against children.

In addition, it is important to remember that when there is IPV in a family, direct psychological, physical or sexual violence against the children themselves, as well as IPV exercised "by proxy", through the child (see SOS-INFO volume 8), are often also present. We can therefore speak of a dynamic of family violence, in addition to the dynamic of IPV by one parent towards the other parent.

2

What do children understand of IPV ?

IPV is a complex issue that is difficult to identify and understand for the victims themselves, for their loved ones and even for professionals. Therefore, we cannot expect children to be able to see it clearly, especially when they are young. Children talk about IPV in their own words and with the references they have in their limited life-experience. For example, a child might talk about IPV by saying that the victim "got picked on" or "got in trouble".

Although they are not able to conceptualize IPV clearly, children are very good at sensing power in relationships. For example, they quickly sense who is "popular" and who is "rejected" in a schoolyard. When there is IPV in a family, children sense that there is a "boss" who has power and a "lower" parent who is in danger. Children adjust their own behaviour to these unequal power relationships, in order to protect themselves from the violence of the "boss" and to avoid "getting in trouble" like the victim. Some children may then refuse the victim's authority, refuse to comply with her instructions, and may even throw tantrums, hit or bite in order to do so. **When children react this way, it is not because they are "imitating" the abusive parent, but rather because they are trying to adapt to the situation and protect themselves from it.** It's a "runaway" reaction that is normal, and it's neither the child's fault nor the victim's fault... although they usually both feel guilty about it.

SOS VIOLENCE CONJUGALE GIVES ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR CHILDREN OFFERED IN SPECIALIZED RESOURCES THROUGHOUT QUEBEC.

* Although most victims of intimate partner violence are female, it can also affect some men and members of the GLBTQ and non-binary community.

Children and IPV (continued)

3 Consequences

In addition to the impact on a child's sense of security and on the power relationships within the family, IPV has many other effects on children. They face major and repeated crises that frighten them terribly. Children fear for themselves, for their siblings, for the victim and for the integrity of their family. They may even fear for the life of a parent or for their own lives. They face an increased risk of injury and stress-related health problems. They may be very confused about how they feel about the victim and the abuser. They may feel responsible for protecting the victim or think that they caused the violence. They may have behaviour problems, have difficulties at school or in their social relationships. They may have difficulty building a good self-image, self-esteem, or self-confidence.

Children exposed to IPV are often in a state of post-traumatic stress but are at risk of receiving other labels or diagnoses that do not take into account the exposure to IPV: difficult, demanding, hyperactive, troublemaker, delinquent, etc.

If they report IPV (or violence against themselves) and refuse to see an abusive parent, children may not be believed and, in some situations, may be perceived as "alienated". They may then be forced to maintain contact with an abusive parent, which becomes a significant re-victimization for a child already traumatized by the violence.

Children are also at risk of facing negative views and prejudices about IPV. Some children, boys in particular, may fear becoming violent because they have been repeatedly exposed to this stereotypical image of boys whose fathers were violent.

4 What can we do to help ?

In order to help a child who was exposed to IPV, the first step is to support the victim in regaining control over her life. We must believe the victims and their children, put in place effective means to improve their safety, and take into account the presence of IPV and family violence in all interventions with them. We can help restore the power relationship between the child and the victim by ensuring that we do not exercise undue power in the relationship with the victim, by avoiding judging her in her parental capacities and by validating with the child that she is worthy of his love, respect and trust.

The recovery of an exposed child can also be fostered by remaining available to them, by providing a space for self-expression, by offering comfort, pleasure and respite, or simply by taking care of them. It is important to remember, however, that the non-violent parent is the best person to help a child, and that whereas a family member, friend or worker can help, they should be careful not to take their place.

Since IPV can evolve into post-separation violence (see SOS-INFO volume 9), strategies must be put in place to protect children and victims over the long term. For example, we must avoid at all costs that the child ends up becoming the parents' "spokesperson". The child who speaks for the victim could receive violence from the abusive parent... and the child who speaks for the abuser could become the tool of his violence against the victim.

SOS VIOLENCE CONJUGALE IS AVAILABLE 24/7 ACROSS QUEBEC, AND PROVIDES ACCESS TO ALL THE APPROPRIATE SERVICES AND RESOURCES FOR VICTIMS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) AND ANYONE WHO IS CONCERNED ABOUT A SITUATION OF IPV.