

Risk Factors Associated with Exposure to Violence



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Table of Contents

Definition	3
Common Indicators	4
Misconceptions	5
Case Study	6-7
Strategies That Help	8
Common Barriers	9
Resources for Victims	10-11
References	12-13

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What is Violence?

Perhaps the best way of defining such a concept as it relates to this subject is to take a look at the "Things I have Seen and Heard" evaluation scale, used to determine a child's exposure to violence via self-report (Richters & Martinez, 1990). This tool considers verbal confrontations, beatings, stabbings, and shootings to be acts of violence.

Sadly, we easily see that children can be exposed to violence across all aspects of life: home, school, and community. It is the consequences of this exposure that we must focus on in order to determine ways we can remedy the detrimental effects. Through research we have discovered, exposure to violence puts children at risk for a variety of disadvantages, some of which can be long-term.

Common Indicators

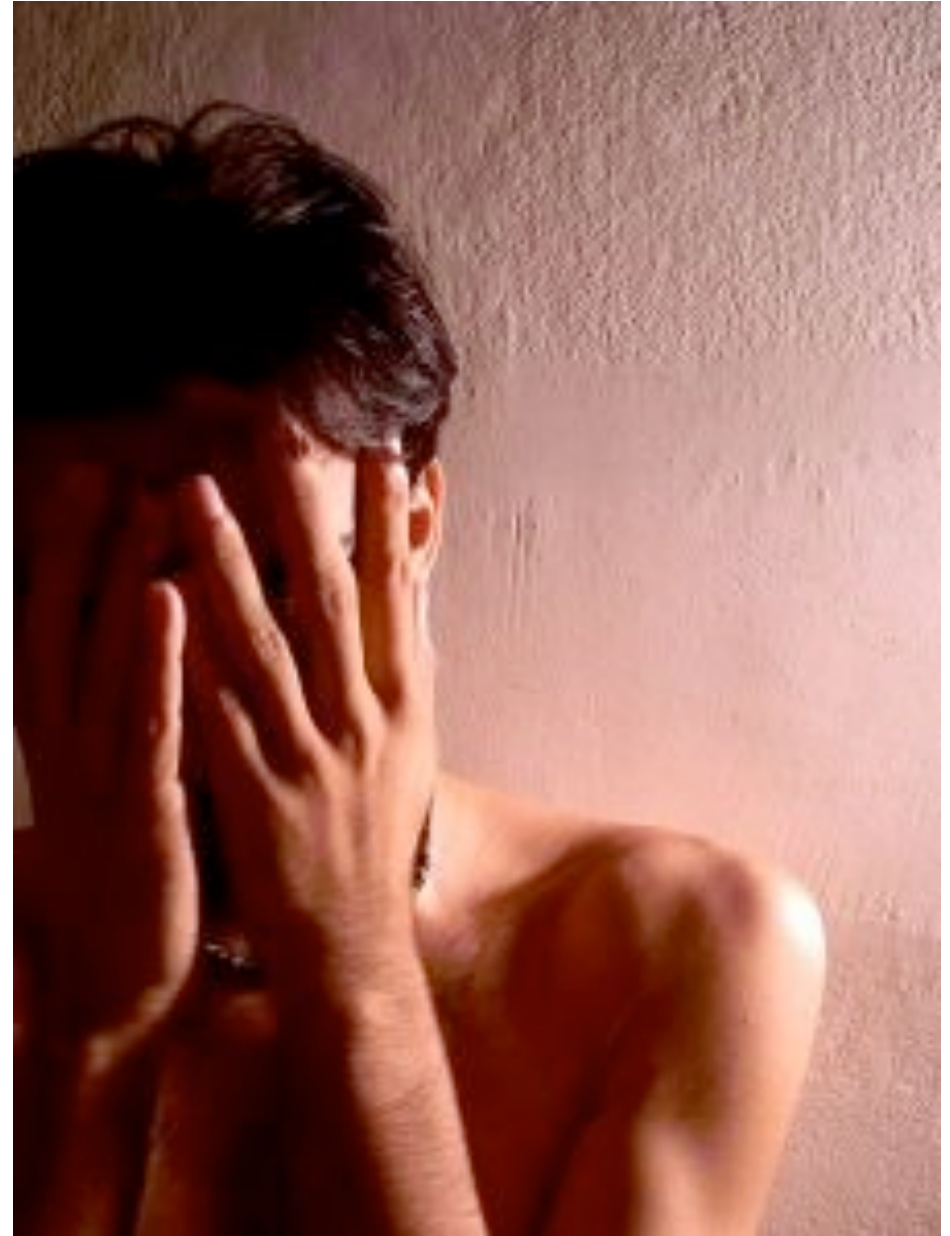
Children and adolescents exposed to violence are more likely to suffer consequences. These effects can be separated into two different categories: internalizing symptoms and externalizing symptoms (Kelly, 2010).

Internalizing symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Mood disorders
- Academic disturbances
- Behavior disorders

Externalizing symptoms:

- Abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Engaging in violence
- Be the victims of violent crimes
- Have physical health problems



Resources for Victims

www.ncvc.org

www.kidsvoice.org

www.nationalgangcenter.gov

www.ncadv.org

www.naehyc.org

www.rainn.org

Misconceptions

Due to the sensitive nature of violence as perceived by society, there are several common misconceptions that exist. These fallacies include:

-Children exposed to violence will always be the perpetrators of violence as adults.

-Children living in violent communities will join gangs.

-Children living in homes where domestic violence occurs are low-income.

-Children who are victims of violence bring it on themselves.

-Children who act out due to witnessing violence around them are “bad”.

Case Study

Nick is a fifteen year old white male born and raised in Southeast Washington, D.C. He has never known his father and was raised alone by his mother. She is a drug addict, who is usually unemployed. Throughout his childhood, Nick's mother would bring different men in and out of their various apartment homes, many of which would beat her in front of Nick. He has always lived in low-income neighborhoods. Since the age of nine, he has repeatedly been approached to join the neighborhood gang. Drug deals, shootings, beatings, and muggings are daily occurrences in Nick's neighborhood. When Nick was ten, his four year old brother was struck by a stray bullet in a drive-by shooting and died while Nick was alone at home with him.

Nick has always been thought to be intelligent by his teachers and was even in a gifted program in elementary school. In middle school his grades plummeted and have been poor ever since. He is constantly getting into fights, engaging in verbal altercations with teachers, and walking out of class.

Nick's school was chosen to be part of a research study in which students who were labeled as "problem students" received individual and group therapy for several months during the school day. The criteria was that the student must have witnessed at least one violent or traumatic event. Nick was chosen for the study.

At first Nick refused to talk to the therapist, but after several sessions

Common Barriers

Unfortunately, while many positive strategies can be implemented to help these at-risk children, there are an equal amount of barriers that prevent such interventions from transpiring (Margolin & Gordis, 2004). Some common obstacles include:

- Limited access to counseling/therapy services
- Limited resources both in the home and community
- Little to no parental involvement
- Poverty
- Inadequately trained school personnel
- Lack of extracurricular school activities and community outreach programs

Strategies that Help

As we have seen in the case study with Nick, children who display maladaptive behaviors as a result of their exposure to violence are not lost causes. There are numerous interventions that can facilitate change in these youth and allow them to achieve their true potential. Such strategies include:

- Assessments
- Individual therapy sessions
- Group therapy sessions
- Parental support and involvement
- School staff who are trained in the ability to recognize children susceptible to gang influence and warning signs of abuse
- Recreational programs that provide safe outlets for children as well as keeping them off of the streets
- Self-esteem building workshops

he began to open up. He talked about the loss of his brother, the fear and rage when his mother was abused by her boyfriends, and the anxiety he feels every time he steps out of his apartment building. He discussed his former interest in school and how it didn't seem important anymore after his brother died. He even disclosed a dream of one day getting away from the city all together and moving to a location where he would be able to race dirt bikes.

When the therapist thought he was ready, Nick was introduced to the group sessions. Initially on the defense, the group slowly but surely began to share stories and jokes, and started to get along with one another. Nick's grades began going up in school and the incidents where he walked out of class without asking decreased significantly. He even asked his therapist how he could get involved in the Big Brother Big Sister program. He appeared to be turning over a new leaf in school.