**Violence & children**

BY K I S H W A R E N A M 2021-12-14

PARENTS think that fighting behind closed doors does not affect their children.

The fact is that arguments, fights and violence between parents or caregivers affects children whether it`s done in plain sight or not. It not only causes emotional and behavioural problems in children but also hinders their physical and psychosocial development. Even if they don`t see the violence, they can hear it and feel it.

Often parents are unable to recognise these problems until it is too late. Children either blame themselves for the rift between the parents or try to channel this anger, frustration or sadness building up in them by some other means. Exposure to violence in childhood has been linked to low self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, aggression, violence and delinquency.

Domestic abuse or intimate partner violence has been defined as a `pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another`. This definitionalsoincludesviolencebyotheradults living in the house, including relatives and in-laws. Domestic violence can be verbal, physical, sexual or psychological. Children in the household are often caught in the line of fire and are abused physically and emotionally. But even just witnessing the violence has a huge impact on a child`s mental health. Domestic violence is not only dangerous for children but also babies who are still inside the wombs of their mother.

Domestic violence is pervasive across the world and the aggressor can be male or female. Living in a patriarchal society in Pakistan, the victim is almost always the female. It is usually learned behaviour; a boy will see his father being violent to his mother and a girl will learn to expect violence from her spouse. While for some children, realisation of the insidious nature of domestic violence prevents them from repeating it with their own children; for others, the violence overshadows their normal emotional and behavioural development, and they end up repeating the mistakes of their parents.

Becoming a parent is a huge responsibility. A child observes and learns, which means you are a role model for another human being. Violence in the house teaches them that this is how conflicts are resolved.

Boys become aggressive and can develop a dependence on alcohol and drugs to counter their issues. Girls usually become withdrawn and can suffer from anxiety, depression and eating disorders. The ability to learn is greatly inhibited in children living amidst violence; they are unable to focus, and their school performance deteriorates.Adverse Childhood Experiences, a landmark study published in the 1990s, examined the relationship between child abuse, neglect and household dysfunction with future health and well-being in mind. It showed that children who experienced a traumatic event in their childhood including domestic violence had higher risk of behavioural and mental health issues. They also tended to have various physical ailments during adulthood and many experienced premature death.

To all the parents out there who engage in domestic violence, who think that violence is their right, who refuse their spouse respect, who cannot control their anger, who are careless with the impact on their child`s psyche, it is time to think again. It is time to raise awareness that violence cannot be accepted at any cost. It is time to teach our sons that violence is not the answer to conflict; and to teach our daughters that they should never expect violence.

For the victims of violence, it is time to stop justifying domestic abuse by their partnerand understand that it not their (the victims`) fault.

Instead, it is time to reach out for help through friends, helplines and professional experts.

Let`s teach our children to be ready to compromise fortheir relationship but never at the expense of their honour, values and dignity. This is why it is important to let them complete their education so they can be independent.

And not make them more vulnerable to violence by marrying them off when they are still children.

To be a man is not to show your physical strength or the acidity of your words, it is to bring peace in your child`s life. It is to provide a stable environment in the house where a child can thrive and grow to his or her potential. Continuous fear promotes the development of the part of the child`s brain which is responsible for fight and flight. And the part of the brain responsible for focus, self-regulation and learning remains underdeveloped. Your role is to support your children, not to crush them.

Please think carefully before you decide to become a parent. But if you are one, take responsibility by reflecting on your own issues and your mental health and reach out for treatment. This is the best gift you can give to your child.  The writer is a paediatrician at the Aga Khan University Hospital.