

Family Advocacy Program: Impact of Domestic Abuse on Children

Episode transcript

Introduction:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

Today, we'll discuss domestic abuse and its impact on children. Straight away, let me just say that this podcast episode discusses domestic abuse and child abuse. And with these sensitive topics, you may want to use headphones. And if you or someone you know is experiencing abuse and is in immediate danger, please go ahead and call law enforcement or dial 911. And with that, let's bring in our guests for today. I want to introduce to you Pamela Rhodes. Pamela is a child counselor at Naval Base Kitsap. Julia Kates is also joining us. Julia is a clinic counselor at Patuxent River Naval Air Station. Welcome to the both of you.

Julia Kates:

Thank you.

Pamela Rhodes:

Thanks, Bruce.

Bruce:

Before we get into this, let's learn a little bit about you and what you do. Pamela, let's start with you. You're at Naval Base Kitsap.

Pamela:

I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist and a child mental health specialist. And I've been doing that for about 16 years. And about four more years onto that, I got actively involved in teaching parenting classes here in Kitsap County. And so, I love the work, it's kind of a passion project.

Bruce:

Excellent. Well, it's great to have you with us. Julia Kates, welcome. Tell us a little bit about yourself please.

Julia:

Thanks for having me. I've been working as a child counselor for the Navy a little over a year. I worked in juvenile probation for over 14 years, where I conducted comprehensive psychosocial evaluations with juvenile offenders and their families. But working with children and families in the area of mental health has spanned my entire career. And I am a licensed clinical professional counselor.

Bruce:

It's great to have the both of you with us. You both seem like the ideal people for this conversation. Let's just jump into it. We're going to talk about the impact on children, but let's get some definitions out there first. Define for me domestic abuse or intimate partner violence. What are we talking about with these terms?

Pamela:

Well, there's a lot of specifics to the definition. But basically, it's a pattern of abusive behavior used to gain power and control by one partner over another.

Julia:

And when we're talking about domestic abuse, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, they're all used pretty interchangeably. Domestic abuse involves any physical, emotional, neglectful or sexual abuse by an intimate partner. So domestic abuse does go beyond physical abuse because some people, that's the most visible one, the bruises and things like that. And, most commonly, it's associated with domestic abuse. But domestic abuse is also sexual and emotional abuse, repeatedly withholding funds, not allowing the partner to come and go at their own will, name-calling, degrading. And many people do not think a married person can sexually assault their spouse. But in all situations, sex of any kind must be consensual.

Pamela:

Yeah, absolutely. No, I think it's also important to mention that a lot of domestic abuse relationships have a bi-directional quality, bi-directional patterns, so where both partners are equally aggressive or maybe one partner is more aggressive and the other is responding primarily in self-defense or retaliation.

Bruce:

OK. With that in mind, how might children be impacted if one of their parents is experiencing abuse?

Pamela:

This question, we'll probably have to break down a little bit, but a child's relationship with their parent is going to be impacted whether the parent is identified as the offender, the victim or if the domestic abuse is bi-directional. The child might believe that aligning with the more aggressive parent will keep them safe from being the target of abuse or they may believe it's their responsibility to protect the victim parent. And

when the domestic abuse is mostly bi-directional, the child may really be struggling with conflicted loyalty between the parent.

Bruce:

So, maybe to re-ask the question, we need to look at the various stages that children go through and the world views that they have in each of those stages. And so, what are they seeing during those stages, those various stages when they're seeing abuse in their home?

Pamela:

The younger the child, the more limited life experience they have, right? Very young children will engage in this thing that we call "magical thinking," where they're blending fantasy and reality. So, when a conflict happens between their parents, they don't quite understand the context of what their parents are arguing about or what's caused the fighting, they just start filling it in so it makes sense to them. School-aged children will engage in this thing called "black and white" thinking, where their primary focus is trying to sort out what is right and what is wrong. So, this may be a really difficult stage for that conflicted loyalty, trying to figure out which parent is right, who they should be aligned with.

And with our teenagers, they're in a developmental stage called "identity formation." They should be preparing to launch from the family home. And so, they're shifting from this "we" thought process to this "I" thought process. Like younger children will say, "In our family, we do this." And then teens are shifting more towards, "I prefer this or I want to do it that way." If the family dynamics require so much of their focus and attention, then they're worried about safety at home, they're worried maybe about caretaking younger siblings. It kind of gets in the way of them shifting that thought process to "I."

Bruce:

As they're going through various stages and they're experiencing or witnessing abuse, how is that impacting a parent's interaction with their children?

Julia:

Children may become fearful or resentful of their parents. They may be angry at one parent or both, or they may align with one parent more than the other. Parents may feel guilty or shameful; therefore, they may overcompensate or avoid their children. Parents may neglect their children's emotional and physical needs because they're too focused on their own unhealthy relationship.

Pamela:

Absolutely. Yeah. All the focus on that high conflict begins to consume so much time and attention. Children begin to feel lost or forgotten.

Bruce:

It's time and attention taken away to children who are growing, developing all the time. So, what are we looking at with regards to the effects on the development of a child? We're looking at the social effects, the emotional effects, physical, cognitive, what the effect of domestic violence is having on a child as they're in these highly formative years.

Julia:

There may be various responses to it. But, for instance, they may be acting out in school because they have difficulty processing their anger, sadness or fear responses. Socially, they may be withdrawn from peers or they may be aggressive or bully peers due to having emotions they don't know how to deal with and not feeling like they can express their feelings to their parents. Emotionally, they may show signs of depression or anxiety. They may appear to have symptoms of ADHD, such as inattention or difficulty sitting still, but these behaviors could actually be trauma reactions.

Physical effects could be like difficulty with eating, overeating, sleep problems, headaches or other somatic physical complaints. Studies actually show that repeated exposure to trauma, which includes domestic abuse, can cause adverse changes to the brain, which put the brain in a constant state of being on guard or not relaxed. Also, those with repeated trauma show higher rates of physical health problems into adulthood.

Pamela:

Absolutely. Julia, there's all of this research on the impact to the brain when children are in high conflict environments. And with our Zero to Three, that attachment and bonding is so important. And some of the things that we were talking about with the relationship between the parents and the children, if the parent time and attention is taken by the abusive relationship, they're not physically present for the child. But even when they are, they may not be mentally present, and the child will feel that.

The health effects that you were talking about, I mean, we're going to see a lot of those in our school-aged kids because they have language, but they don't have the right words. And so, they somaticize their symptoms, meaning it comes out in their body, headaches, stomachaches, sleep disorders, eating problems, things like that.

Bruce:

Interesting. Now, that's looking at abuse that's happening over time. What if the abuse happens only once?

Julia:

My thought is, if a child witnesses a domestic abuse event one time and let's just say they're removed from the domestic abuse situation, such as one parent leaving the abusive relationship and the child feels cared for and protected, then chances are, there

won't be lasting negative effects that occur with repeated exposure to violence or repeated exposure to trauma.

In regard to a child being very young and not remembering domestic abuse, people will say of a 1-year-old, "Oh, they're not going to remember it," or a 2-year-old, "They're not going to remember." I always say to people, "The child may not remember the abuse, but the brain does," because the effects on the brain, so the effects of trauma on the brain.

Pamela:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the variables that may influence the impact, proximity and severity of the violence. A lot of times children are not physically present during a violent incident, but they are in the home with disrupted furniture, or a hole in the wall, or parents who are tense and not speaking to each other. So, I mean the number of violent disruptions, the age, the sex of the child, may matter, the relationship to either the abuser parent or the victim parent, how the child is perceiving a loss if parents separate, the relationship of the violent act to the child's daily routine, all kinds of different variables.

Bruce:

What do these effects look like as a child grows into adulthood?

Julia:

Like we had just mentioned about the brain, the effects may lead to impairments in the development of the brain involving logical thinking and memory and interim problems with regulating emotions, making decisions and managing stress. And, also, studies show that physical health problems are more often present in those with repeated exposure to trauma. The brain can be altered to the point of being in a constant state of fear as the child grows up. But the brain can change and adapt, so the areas that may be affected, it can be strengthened over time. The impact also depends on the genes, like which may predispose them to be more or less resilient to stress events, and what environment they're in. Are they now in a healthy environment? Are they continuing to be in an unhealthy environment?

Bruce:

Does the parents' denial of domestic abuse impact their children?

Pamela:

Very often, parents want to believe that their children are unaware of the abuse. Again, the child may not have been present or directly witnessed it, and so, in order to engage the child and have a conversation about what occurred, the parent would then be accepting some responsibility for their part in it and recognizing that it's not a safe environment for the child. And that's really difficult to do. It's really distressful to have those conversations. And many times, parents don't know how to open that conversation or have it or they have some mistaken beliefs, like, if we talk about it, it'll

make it worse. “It happened a month ago, they’ve probably forgotten. Can’t we just move on now that things are better?” But the child doesn’t have any closure, a resolution or understanding.

Bruce:

How can a parent who is still in an unhealthy or an abusive relationship protect their children?

Julia:

In this situation, the child may feel very out of control of their life. Parents can provide their children with opportunities to spend time with healthy friends and family, provide them with opportunities to be involved in extracurricular activities, exercise and relaxation time. Perhaps the child can attend counseling and the parents can make a decision whether it would be in the child’s best interest to live elsewhere with another friend or family member.

Pamela:

And, for that sense of feeling out of control, I think it’d be really helpful if they have a safety plan. The child has a predetermined set of things that they’re going to do if another incident occurs.

Bruce:

Is there anything that parents, caregivers or loved ones can do to support children or teens who may be affected?

Julia:

I would say, listen more often and don’t talk at them when they are talking. Do not offer advice or try to fix the problem unless they’re asking for that. Like I just mentioned, provide them with opportunities to participate in activities outside of the home. Offer them opportunities to make decisions so they not only learn how to make decisions, but feel some sense of control in their life.

Pamela:

Yeah. Most children who have experienced domestic abuse within their home can heal from that experience. One of the most important factors on how well they’re going to do is a strong relationship with a caring, nonviolent parent, mentor, grandparent, a caring adult who can promote the child’s recovery, and show interest in them, and encourage them to engage in healthy activities, role model healthy social skills.

Bruce:

We’ve covered a lot of ground and I really appreciate your help on this topic. I would like to note that in the program notes, we have a link to the National Domestic Violence Hotline; we have help for finding victims of domestic abuse. There’s our domestic abuse Victim Advocate Locator. There’s really good information in there that you can explore

on your own. But I want to just say to the both of you, thank you for joining us today, and I welcome final thoughts on the topic.

Pamela:

Thank you for inviting me to do this today, Bruce. I have enjoyed having a forum to get the information out. I think that if parents reach out for support, they'll feel more confident in supporting their children.

Julia:

Agreed. Thank you so much for having me. And much like she said, reach out for help. There's so much help out there, nonjudgmental help that is there just to support the person who needs help, the adult, and their children.

Bruce:

Again, Pamela Rhodes, Julia Kates, we really appreciate the both of you being with us today to get into this very, very important topic. I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We hope to hear from you. There is a link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, or an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.