Exploring the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children's Mental Health and Academic Achievement

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Abstract

This literature review investigates the impact of domestic violence on the mental health and academic outcomes of children. By analyzing household dynamics and socioeconomic factors, the paper reveals how such environments significantly elevate the risk of both visible and invisible forms of abuse. The narrative exposes the deeper, often overlooked emotional, verbal, and psychological abuses, further complicating detection and intervention efforts. It critically evaluates the extended consequences of such exposure, including cognitive impairments, heightened anxiety, behavioral disruptions, and academic disengagement, casting a long shadow over children's educational journey and social development. The discourse extends to the pivotal role educational institutions play in mitigating these adverse effects through targeted support systems, preventive education, and comprehensive staff training. Concluding, the review advocates for a nuanced, multi-faceted approach to combat domestic violence, emphasizing the creation of supportive educational environments. This approach addresses the immediate challenges and fosters children's holistic development, ensuring their well-being and academic success amidst adversities.

Introduction

Homes are where children should feel most safe, but, for many, it is where they become silent victims, suffering abuse at the hands of their supposed guardians. The repercussions of this abuse create ripples that affect their mental health, relationships, and education. Domestic abuse is a global and complex issue that affects one in five children, hindering their social and academic lives. (Brown, 2023) Another issue is that its signs are not always apparent and visible. While many equate domestic violence with

physical abuse, it extends beyond this to encompass many forms. Domestic violence can be verbal, mental, and emotional and often goes unnoticed because it does not always leave visible marks. In fact, one in four children experience child abuse or neglect in their lifetime. (Brown, 2023) "Of maltreated children, 18 percent are abused physically, 78 percent are neglected, and 9 percent are abused sexually" (Brown, 2023). This clearly shows that many children experience abuse, and some of them experience multiple forms of abuse and neglect throughout their lives. This literature review explores the complex relationship between domestic violence and its impact on children's mental health and academic performance. It highlights the importance of addressing domestic violence within household dynamics to create effective educational strategies that enhance children's academic, mental, and social well-being.

Influence of Household Dynamics and Environment on Domestic Violence

Household dynamics and living environments exert a significant influence on the causes of domestic violence, and households that contain more children are more likely to experience heightened family conflict and child maltreatment. (Bullinger et al., 2021), Directly correlating the size of households with the frequency of domestic violence incidents. This translates into an elevated risk for children, encompassing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic limitations. (Zhao and Zhao, 2022).

The challenges in accommodation and meeting the diverse needs of family members, particularly in larger families, often become obstacles to cultivating a secure and nurturing environment. This issue is further exacerbated when financial support is lacking, leading to heightened demands for space, attention, and emotional support, which can precipitate family disputes.

In particular, children raised in dysfunctional families are less likely to succeed at school due to the emotional and psychological effects of witnessing domestic violence, including verbal, mental, and physical abuse. These forms of abuse contribute to a hostile environment that impairs not only their academic pursuits but also their personal and social lives. Additionally, the impact of domestic violence extends beyond internal familial conflict and household makeup. "Those leaving domestically violent homes face the additional threat of temporary homelessness or overcrowded accommodation" (Lloyd, 2018). Such housing instability and the transient nature of their accommodations severely impact children's ability to fully engage in school, both socially and academically.

Moreover, children living in shelters due to domestic violence face unique challenges. "Children living in a refuge are additionally vulnerable to being teased and bullied at school due to the stigma associated with refuge accommodation" (Lloyd, 2018).

These children face considerable obstacles, such

as inadequate study space and limited access to necessary resources like computers for homework, which heighten anxiety and stress. Moreover, the constant exposure to conflicts, both within their homes and at school, precipitates increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The emotional well-being of these children deteriorates, casting a long shadow over their self-esteem and overall mental health. In turn, this diminishes their capacity to form healthy relationships, communicate effectively, and regulate their own emotions.

Impact of Domestic Violence on Children's Mental Health and Educational Outcomes

Exposure to domestic violence can have negative effects on children's mental health, impacting various aspects of their lives, including education. The effects often result in lowered social and emotional competence, lowered academic performance, and fear of abuse. They will exhibit signs of anxiety, fear, and insecurity, which can hinder their ability to form healthy social relationships and engage effectively with their peers at school. This anxiety and fear, stemming from their home environment, directly affect their interactions and learning at school.

Also, other violent actions may put the child and their peers in danger. One example might be a reliance on alcohol and drug usage. As these children develop unbearable stress and anxiety from home and social rejection from

school, there will be no place where these children can trust and rely on. Behavioral problems resulting from the abuse can possibly cause "regressive behavior, having inhibited independence" (Hill, 2022) or make them want to rebel or do anything that creates an escape hole from what they are experiencing. Getting into bad habits and hanging around the wrong people may cause the children to overdose on alcohol or drug usage without limitations, "Stress and trauma placed on youth are more likely to affect neurodevelopment and potentially may lead to alcohol usage" (Llyod, 2018). These behavioral issues, in turn, exacerbate their challenges in school and social settings.

Causing constant problems in school, the inability to fit in, and again experiencing violence at home will force children to think that it's their fault that they are put into these situations. This "self-blame can lead to feelings of guilt, worry, and anxiety that significantly affect their academic output and healthy social interaction"; in turn, this may cause "temper tantrums, frequent fighting, and threatening of other students." Especially for younger children, the level of stress they receive is greater; "younger children lack the ability to understand the dynamics of interparental violence and thus may blame themselves" (McGaha-Garnett, 2017). These emotional and behavioral responses significantly disrupt their learning process and classroom behavior.

With repeated exposure to traumatic events, a

proportion of individuals may develop disorders, as seen in children who are exposed to domestic violence and struggle with witnessing violence within their homes, developing many disorders that could really affect their mental health. Thus, the ability for social interaction and emotional openness decreases. The distress and anxiety that children experience can significantly impact their ability to concentrate on attendance rates, leading to difficulties in classroom settings. This may lead to reduced motivation and challenges in social settings such as school. The cumulative impact of these challenges demonstrates the extensive toll domestic violence takes on children's educational experiences.

Furthermore, children who witness domestic violence may develop a fear of abuse, both at home and in other settings. This fear can become a continuous source of stress, creating a state of heightened anxiety. As a result, children might avoid certain activities, including social interactions and extracurricular activities, which hinder a child's development socially and academically. Furthermore, "Other issues exhibited by these youth in classrooms are eating problems, concentration difficulties, generalized anxiety, and increased physical complaints" (McGaha-Garnett, 2017); the mental toll these children receive degrades them from living a normal school life as they are constantly confronted with problems like eating disorders, not being able to concentrate, simple things like this are stripped away from them due

to the trauma. These difficulties highlight the importance of addressing domestic violence not only for the well-being of the affected children but also for their overall development and future prospects.

The Broader Educational and Health Implications of Violence on Children

Violence has detrimental effects on the academic performance of children. Building on the mental health implications discussed earlier, we now turn to how violence specifically hinders academic performance in children. It affects the student experiencing violence at home as well as indirectly impacting their peers at school. When a child is exposed to violence and an unhealthy living environment, they are prone to many mental issues that lead to poor academic performances. According to one paper, children living in impoverished neighborhoods who observe parental violence amidst various other social hardships experience the consequences of domestic abuse. These consequences include emotional disturbances like anxiety and depression, challenges in academic achievement, disobedience, nightmares, and a decline in physical health. All these factors collectively contribute to a negative impact on their educational engagement and participation in school activities. (Zhao and Zhao, 2022). These children suffer emotional and psychological distress and struggle to concentrate and engage in their studies, ultimately leading to poor academic performance. Violence at home can

cause an inability to self-regulate and manage emotions effectively, leading to behavioral incidents and disruptions that can hinder the learning process not only for the affected children but for their peers as well. "Students living in communities with higher levels of violence have lower academic achievement than their peers from safer environments. Such disparities are measured through coursework and standardized tests." (O'Brien et al., 2021) This finding suggests that violence in the community contributes to diminished academic engagement and a short-term increase in absences. The disengagement and the prevalence of violence create an environment where children struggle to focus on their studies and maintain consistent attendance, both of which are critical for academic success. If students are not regularly attending school, then they are not utilizing the opportunities they are given at school, whether they are academic or teachers and students willing to aid them. "According to Kenni, academic performance reflects the capabilities of students to assimilate, retain, recall, and communicate their knowledge (Kenni 2020). However, exposure to violence will only lead to "depressive symptoms or intrusive thoughts that could interfere with motivation, concentration, and memory functions that are critical to learning and academic performance." (Lepore & Kliewer, 2013) Not only does violence affect the motivation and engagement of students, but it also hinders the actual cognitive ability of

these children to communicate their knowledge. This communication barrier further impacts their ability to understand and process educational material. Lastly, according to the Sleep Foundation, experiences of trauma during childhood can profoundly affect the development of a child's brain and can even have long-term impacts on their health as they grow older. Research indicates that adverse childhood experiences are linked to an increased likelihood of both mental and physical health issues in later life. These health problems can range from psychological conditions like depression and anxiety to physical ailments such as heart disease (Sleep Foundation, 2023). All of which would have a negative effect on a student's capacity to succeed in an academic setting. Ensuring a stable and peaceful home environment is, therefore, crucial for the full realization of a student's academic potential.

The Role of Educational Institutions in Supporting Children Affected by Domestic Violence

The role of schools, teachers, and policy interventions in supporting children from violent homes is vital, given the substantial academic and mental challenges children from such backgrounds face. Children who directly witness domestic violence "[suffer] from worse academic outcomes while children who may be in contact with them might experience 'reduction in children's ability to self-regulate, causing more behavior incidents and class

disruptions." The violence they experience has a detrimental effect on children's mental health and well-being. It involves building trust with children, implementing comprehensive prevention programs, staff training, and collaboration with trusted organizations. Moreover, with the potential for academic difficulties and the stigma of homelessness and refuge accommodation, ensuring a supportive school environment becomes even more imperative. Through coursework, standardized testing, and other forms of academic measures, "students living in communities with higher levels of violence have lower academic achievement." (O'Brien et al., 2021)

Teachers building trust with young people is, therefore, of vital importance. As shown, building trust is essential because it allows students to feel comfortable sharing their concerns, which is a step further in helping these children. Building trust is foundational in supporting children from violent homes. When children trust their teachers, they are more likely to open up about their challenges, including those related to domestic violence. This trust is the keystone upon which support can be built. Additionally, research, such as the evidence synthesis conducted by NIHR CLAHRC West in their IMProve study, has shown that group-based psychoeducational interventions for children and non-abusive parents are found acceptable and beneficial (Howarth et al., 2016). However, these interventions need further robust research to

confirm their efficacy fully.

Prevention programs should be integrated into school policies and practices as well to provide a solution for domestic violence in a more structured and effective way. According to a study conducted by Harne and Radford, prevention programs in school are more effective when they are promoted through whole-school policies and practices rather than through single-component programs or individual teachers." Given the findings that children from unstable homes often face academic and social participation challenges, especially when in non-permanent accommodations, lowering "school engagement overall by increasing absenteeism" (Harne and Radford, 2008). Integrating prevention programs into the entire school environment creates a more effective support system. These programs in school policies and practices ensure that students are consistently exposed to the guidance and education needed to change attitudes and behaviors related to domestic violence. "Program evaluations also show that while one-off education initiatives have some value in raising awareness of domestic violence, attitudinal change is better sustained when learning is revisited and reinforced in subsequent years (Harne and Radford, 2008)."

To further support children from violent homes, it's crucial to provide effective staff training. Consistent training not only improves educators' understanding of children's emotional needs but also ensures a

comprehensive and uniform approach to handling the nuances of children's experiences. These trainings should be implemented in teacher education and through continuing professional development. There is a demand for efficient training for educators, encompassing both their initial preparation and ongoing professional development, with a specific focus on incorporating school nurses into this process. (Lloyd, 2018) This training is essential for creating a safe and supportive environment overall. Engaging in partnerships with external facilitators, such as specialized organizations, can play a crucial role in improving the expertise of the staff. These collaborative efforts, coupled with the suggested policy interventions, can pave the way for a nurturing educational environment that mitigates the adverse effects of domestic violence on children.

Conclusion

Through this literature review, we've examined the complex effects of domestic violence on a child's mental and academic well-being. It's clear that the family environment plays a crucial role in this. The type of household can influence the extent of domestic violence a child might face. This violence, in turn, deeply impacts their mental health and their ability to thrive in school settings.

We've explored how stress, trauma, and a decline in self-confidence, which often stem from such violent environments, can significantly hamper a child's academic and social interactions. In wrapping up, it's starkly evident that the influence of domestic violence reaches far beyond the immediate physical effects. The emotional and psychological impacts are profound. They affect the child's learning as well as their ability to form meaningful relationships.

Thus, understanding and addressing domestic violence is critical. As well as an intervention, we need to foster environments that support the holistic development of children affected by such experiences. Recognizing and tackling these challenges is key to ensuring that children in these situations can still achieve their full potential, both in their personal and academic lives.

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