Children’s Violence Exposure and Health: Why It Matters & How You Can Help

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Four Points to Remember

1. Childhood exposure to violence more common than most people think.
2. Childhood exposure to violence increases the risk for disease across the lifespan by actually changing children’s anatomy and physiology.
3. Given children’s “plastic” brains, childhood is a critical moment to intervene.
4. Health care providers (MDs and nurses) are in an ideal place to screen, intervene and help prevent the adverse health consequences of childhood violence exposure.
Anne’s story
Prevalence of Childhood Violence Exposure

- From OJJDP’s 2009 “National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence”, in the prior 12 months:
  - 1 in 10 children were abused
  - 1 in 10 children witnessed one family member assaulting another family member
  - 1 in 15 children were sexually victimized

- Children commonly subject to multiple violence exposures
Violence & Health Across the Lifespan

Health problems

Age

- Chronic pain, liver disease, mental health problems
- Heart disease
- Autoimmune disease
- Substance Use
- School Failure
- Obesity
- Depression, PTSD
- Asthma
- Under-immunization
Violence Exposure “Gets Under the Skin” & Changes Health

- Increasing evidence suggests that violence exposure fundamentally changes the way our bodies work.

- Our bodies were designed with a “fight or flight” response (i.e., running away from a bear in the woods):
  - Heart rate, blood pressure, blood glucose released.
  - This is a good thing in the short term.
Children exposed to violence LIVE in fight or flight mode

- This is not a good thing for the developing body
- Changes brain development and circulating hormones

RESULT = HIGHER INCIDENCE OF DISEASE
Healthy Child

Severe Emotional Neglect

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The Good News

- Children’s brains (and bodies) are “plastic”
- This devastating health trajectory can be reversed as their bodies are amazingly adaptive
- Emerging health related interventions hold promise in reducing childhood violence exposure and improving health
  - Early childhood home visitation
  - Primary care based interventions
- The promise of these interventions cannot be fully realized without continued support from you
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Bottom Line

- Violence exposure is a medical issue
- Health care providers are optimally positioned to screen and intervene to reduce family violence
- To save children’s lives (and reduce costs), we must invest in programs that support children & families
  - VAWA
  - CAPTA
- Money for these programs must be, at a minimum, preserved, and ideally increased.
“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”

--Fredrick Douglass