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Admiration to Abuse: The Line Between Childhood and Adulthood

The dangerous “cooties” outbreak could possibly be the most uncomfortable situation to occur when you are a small child. The thought of a boy and girl touching, or even just looking at each other, is the grossest idea that could cross your mind. But eventually the “cooties” threat ends and the dynamics change. When I was a little girl there was a boy in my first-grade class who I found rather annoying. He would tease me, throw balls at me at recess, and say rude comments. I did not take his behavior too personally, as the boys I went to school with had always been that way. But as his aggressive behavior continued, the adults around me would justify it by saying, “Oh Maggie, he must have the biggest crush on you!”

That innocent comment was supposed to make me feel better about what could have been harmful, and was supposed to make me think aggressive behavior was acceptable. As we grow up and watch relationships between couples, we should learn that taunting and physical harm do not mean affection, but mean violence. Between couples, it is called domestic violence, a serious crime and issue today. We fail to see the transition into violent relationships when those couples are young adults, old enough to be in college. Domestic violence toward women in university-aged couples needs to be openly identified and discussed so that we can teach young people the signs of domestic violence, how to handle situations, and how to prevent it overall. By educating students, as well as learning how young people address domestic violence, we can figure out the best way to solve this prevalent problem.

To discover how domestic violence comes about in relationships between young people, we need to look at childhood events and relationships. Although physical violence is most thought of when discussing domestic violence, the American Overseas Domestic Violence Crisis Center also categorizes sexual, emotional, spiritual, and social abuse as domestic violence (Researching Gender Violence). These forms of physical, mental, and emotional abuse can have a major impact on a child's behavior for the rest of his/her life.

When a child is vulnerable and impressionable, choices that his/her parents make can determine what that child believes and accepts for the rest of his/her life. When a child watches his/her parents abuse each other, that behavior will be learned as acceptable for the future. According to that same source, children who witnessed domestic violence during childhood are at a much greater risk of being abusers toward their partner later in life. Not only this, but parents often blame their children for problems at home. In fact, 58% of households claimed that their children were the leading problem, which lead to more disputes (Researching Gender Violence).

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services examined more problems than direct aggression, mentioning that children can develop learning difficulties and anxiety (Fazzone, 17). Ideally, parents are supposed to raise a child in a healthy and positive environment. But in households with violent or aggressive behaviors there is an incredible amount of damage to children. If these parents are already blaming their children for their problems, it follows that when the child develops even more issues, the parents will blame and totally ignore flaws in their own relationships. Relating back to influence, as the child grows up to be a young adult, he/she has no reason not to blame his/her potential violence on others because that is what he/she were raised to believe. If the parents are blatantly blaming the child for problems, and problems lead to violence, it would be difficult for the child not to believe that the two are causal.

A study on childhood experiences identified that as children were exposed to more and more violence as they grew, their own developing aggression increased as well. What made this experiment different from the average study on domestic violence and children was the addition and acknowledgment of community violence, as well as to violence in the home. As young adults, children who lived in more violent neighborhoods had a higher amount of aggression. An important point about the influence and effect of domestic violence on children's lives is the fact that they do not even have to be the direct victim. Just being physically present in a violent situation can have huge consequences later in life, leading to an inability to handle any sort of confrontation or stressful situation without violence acting as the primary solution (Feroz).

When we see other's children acting a certain way, we know immediately that those actions had to be influenced by the parents. But sometimes we fail to acknowledge that relationship with the children in our own lives. Parents need to be extremely cautious with communication and actions as they are scientifically proven to influence children for their whole lives. If we accept, or fail to fix, problems like domestic violence, we are simply encouraging it instead. By educating parents and children about the signs and potential solutions to these issues, we can drastically change actions and attitudes when those children are in serious relationships, around college age.

No perfect solutions exist to change the lives of children in domestic violence situations. And we have so many young people coming from this type of background into the university setting. Although we can start to understand how these young adults think and what their feelings are relating to their own home situations, their current relationships, and domestic violence. Domestic violence is known to be harmful, but many people may say that domestic violence is not a major issue that should take time and resources away from other issues.

But to really understand where university students stand on the importance and impact of domestic violence, we can ask the students! A study conducted by an assistant professor at Turgut Ozal University wanted to go straight to the source and determine attitudes about domestic violence against women from university students at her school. Near the beginning of her study, she mentions some societal concepts that can be related to domestic violence against women. In society, all around the world, men are either consciously or subconsciously treated as more superior. The family unit revolves around the husband/boyfriend/father as he serves as the leader and, most often, primary source of resources and income (Aktas). A woman is pressured to be economically dependent on a man, which can prevent her from leaving an abusive relationship if she believes she cannot survive without him. In violent relationships with this same economic dependence, the woman may think she cannot live without his income, but risks her life everyday just by being in that relationship.

For a general census of the people she was surveying, the coordinator asked the subjects if they had been victims of domestic violence (few of them had been), if it can ever be justified, and if domestic violence should be talked about with others. The majority of respondents thought that domestic violence was never acceptable and should be less taboo, but there were some that disagreed with the majority (Aktas). Those people are the most interesting to understand. To better educate about domestic violence we need to understand why some feel people that is it acceptable. Although the average acceptance of domestic violence was found to be low, Aktas says 30% of people still believed that the aggressive partner had a justifiable reason to abuse their partner. Most of the respondents who did not completely oppose domestic violence were found to be men, correlating with the idea of men most often being the abuser as well as gender roles in society (Aktas).

These outcomes show us the extreme importance of making a change in how domestic violence is addressed in society today. Educating goes farther than teaching the abusers that what they are doing is wrong. These attitudes explain that educating society as a whole is just as important as educating abusers and victims because negative feelings from society can instill fear into the victims about speaking out, thus shoving the problem aside and dismissing its truly negative impact. Young people and students in new relationships feel pressure from many different sources, but speaking up about concerns and fears should not be as scary as it is currently.

The problem of domestic violence is not necessarily as simple as identifying the abuser as a terrible, overly violent person. It is a problem that has multiple layers of acceptance and even encouragement by everyone, whether we notice or not. A fraction of people in the world can be categorized as domestic abusers, but a much larger fraction might be identified as encouragers or acceptors, or even just apathetic bystanders. As a society, we have the power to implement these gender roles and “rules”, so we must also have the power to change them. Sitting back and letting these crimes happen without change means we are encouraging violent actions, without punishment. Education, and change implemented throughout several different sources, can implement positive change and make a huge difference in attitudes regarding gender roles and beliefs and the rights of every person.

Of course, domestic violence is not only a problem in the United States. All around the world women are seen as inferior and easily vulnerable. Women in the United States have made the choice to fight for greater strides in equality, but women in some other countries are not as fortunate and are still constantly being discriminated against, often with the use of violence. In some countries violence is simply more common and acceptable solution to solve intrapersonal

problem. An example is a study from University of Pretoria, using students in South Africa as respondents. South Africa is already extremely violent due to its history of racial discrimination. Since history proves this fact, domestic violence is assumed to be common between partners, definitely more common than it is in less violent countries, like the United States.

Although the survey done by University of Pretoria provides more than just data on domestic violence from students, it shows how witnessing domestic violence affects identity development. It can be difficult to prove just how physical, emotional, and psychological violence will affect someone as they grow up, but the survey found some evidence that indicates it does have impact. The researchers found that South African students who witnessed or were victims of domestic violence had a low, skewed pattern of identity development compared to the students who had not been exposed (Makhubela).

After discovering this, we should be able to take this data and apply it to potential solutions. By understanding the drastic changes domestic violence can make on a teenager's life, we can develop educational guides and provide resources to stop these trends from continuing. Continuing a path of violence is the last course we want, if it can be prevented. Already violent nations cannot solve their violence problems overnight, so we should start with the young adults who can identify that they want change. These young adults will understand how negatively their lives were affected by domestic violence and will be eager to make a change and influence those around them, hopefully in a positive way.

All we have learned leads us back to the importance of education. Children go to school to learn the most common subjects like math, science, history, and English. And while some communities and some school systems are working toward teaching children and young adults the importance of healthy relationships, there is still a long way to go for society in general. To

come up with great means of education to make a difference in children's lives, we must understand which techniques and tools are most successful. Offering optional programs will most likely attract people who are already advocates for less domestic violence, scaring away many who may be new to the information.

A book targeting how domestic violence influences our society creates discussions of how this process of determining programs works and succeeds. The authors analyzed programs in the United States and compared them to programs offered in the UK, and then contrasted the two. According to this section, "Reviews of this US research base have highlighted that studies are more likely to show attitudinal change but little or no behavioral change," (Butler, 66). It seems that researchers are much more concerned about finding statistics to prove a pattern than encouraging change.

If we simply show teenagers the effects of domestic violence, they will more likely connect it to their own lives and feel differently. Unfortunately, these studies are not telling young people how to address the issue and change their behavior or change how they react to the behavior of those around them. Less obvious forms of education seem to be more popular in society as compared to blatant education on domestic violence prevention. One way I have seen this is in political cartoons. One cartoon shows a woman wearing a NFL jersey, covering her black eye and bruises with makeup (NFL Wives). This image refers to the now familiar news of professional athletes abusing their wives, often without any legal punishment. The message behind this political cartoon is obvious. People who support these abusive NFL players may have an attitudinal change as they see the two sides of the story. Although attitudinal changes count as something, the behavioral change is what matters overall.

We implement tactics such as legal power in our society to prevent domestic violence. As it is commonly known, domestic violence is a crime, so special laws are put in place of prevention, but do not educate. Regulations like the Family Violence Program discussed from a set of public records are put in place so family violence can be treated by the criminal justice systems and the victims can be counseled (Mann, 7).

While it is good to have these laws so abusers can be removed and punished, often nothing happens while that person is incarcerated. The abuser might not learn anything from his/her experience, or acquire any new relationship skills, and continue their behavior once they leave jail or prison. However, not every law completely ignores the abuser's future. A domestic violence sourcebook mentions comprehensive programs as an alternative action, offering group treatment and interventions, but does not teach abusers how to break a cycle of domestic violence in a productive way (Berry, 198). Teaching teenagers that their negative actions have consequences may change their actions, out of fear of not wanting to go to prison, but that probably will not teach them why domestic violence is wrong and unhealthy. Talking their problems out surely must help them, but there must be better options with more productive outcomes.

For researchers studying domestic violence education, the two-dimensional field of attitude versus behavior is enough, but so much more must be explored and identified. When trying to change a person's physical actions, telling him/her that they need to change works for some, but not all. We teach young people daily, in a wide variety of environments, and should be applying those skill sets and techniques to teaching about domestic violence. One researcher and educator, Krista McQueeney, is already making strides in dissecting education to make the most powerful impact possible. In this article, the professor at Merrimack College is discovering new

and engaging ways to teach domestic violence to invoke the most change. In her teaching, she uses three key techniques - “promoting difference-consciousness, complicating gender-only power frameworks, and organizing for change”. The author wants us to recognize differences in each other because, in the case of domestic violence, we are not exposed to the same amount of violence. Students who are fortunate to live in areas with less violence can learn from the experiences of those who are in areas of high violence and are given resources to affect change (McQueeney). Understanding how we are different from others encourages empathy and a desire to make a difference for those who are not as privileged as some. We see privilege as a social justice concept and how it is used to separate people on their dominant and salient social identities. Coming together and talking about our experiences will make differences less uncomfortable to talk about and make change seem less scary.

McQueeney transitions into the next step, which is how effectively teaching domestic violence is to switch the focus on gender inequality. Women are stereotypically the victim and men are stereotypically the abuser. But we need to look past those stereotypes. We need to switch our focus from teaching women how to protect themselves to teaching everyone not to abuse, and empowering women to stand up in a society that oppresses them (McQueeney). One way that I have seen this “traditional” technique in my life is when I experienced it directly. In early high school, they rushed the girls into the gym to teach us self-defense, while the boys stayed in class to get the education I was missing. McQueeney would agree that having a program for everyone on how to combat violence as a group, and fighting stereotypes within domestic violence, would have been much more practical.

The last step that the author uses for her productive plan is “organizing for change”. This is related to the concept of attitude versus behavior. The previous two steps are great to help

students understand underlying problems and the causes of domestic violence, beyond the basic physical abuse between male abuser and female victim. McQueeney encourages students and offers the first steps to organizing change by asking students “to see leadership as a process of building bridges among groups working to end violence” (McQueeney). This gives students the motivation to be leaders and lets them know that they have the power to make changes themselves. They likely feel relieved knowing that they are not alone in their efforts to change the world. The previous two steps play a huge part in their motivation to be leaders, as they are educated on how working to change the face of domestic violence will affect more than just themselves. Advancement will positively affect those with less dominant social identities and those who experience any amount of violence.

Educators and researchers are doing their part, as influencers and everyday citizens, to change the world for the better. They have the resources to get to the root of the problems and come up with ideas to fix them. But people from all backgrounds and walks of life are doing the same. When problems like domestic violence become more relevant in the media, we see how advocates are advancing in solutions. An anonymous university student who was a victim of domestic violence speaks up about her experience in college and what she did to make a difference for other victims. After feeling objectified, scared, and embarrassed of being in the situation she was in, the author decided to step forward and make her situation known. She found the confidence that many victims lack, understandably. She speaks out on her campus to offer comfort and resources to other victims and to show that “the truth of domestic violence knows no boundaries of age...” (Anonymous). Since she was also so young, brand new to university, and a student, other students will be able to relate and be cautious of the signs she discussed. Of course, we should never expect every victim of domestic violence to speak up about his/her

experience, as every story differs and each one is so personal. But those who feel comfortable speaking out help others empathize. A first-hand account of exactly how and why a domestic violence situation evolved is so impactful.

After analyzing what domestic violence looks like and how it affects young adults, we are now able to be productive and make a difference. We cannot continue with these societal trends of abuse being excusable, acceptable, and a part of daily life. By using educational programs and introducing skills we encourage young people to transition from knowledge to real action. These actions will change the world for the better. These techniques will influence everyone so we no longer teach that teasing and taunting, or even violence, are signs of affection. Playgrounds will be for playing and homes will be for children to learn safe and healthy relationship skills.

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