

Episode 80 - Dr. Jeffrey Edleson: Domestic Violence in the Lives of Children (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF. A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 150000 downloads to date thanks to all of you. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Hi from Buffalo. Yes we just did host the National Chicken Wing Festival but we also held our terrific Elmwood Avenue festival of the arts. I'm Peter Sobota. Can you imagine an end to domestic violence. And does the work you do make contributions toward ending it all. This work starts with accurate and current information in this first of a two part podcast. Dr. Jeffrey Edleson discusses two decades of his own work as well as work of his colleagues in the field in studying and influencing practice on domestic violence and the children who exposed to it.

[00:01:57] In this episode Dr. Edleson defines domestic violence its scope and what we know about children who are exposed to domestic violence including protective factors and resilience. He reveals some surprising insights related to the conventional wisdom in the field by highlighting the significance of context in research and thinking about domestic violence. He provides numerous examples about the difference in how perpetrators and victims perceive their behaviors and the reporting differences with children involved. He addresses the longstanding honeymoon period in the cycle of domestic violence and notes how apologies are few and far between. As the cycle continues Dr. Edleson concludes part one by discussing a number of resources they can to aid in screening and intervention with children. Dr. Jeffrey Edelson Ph.D. is professor and the director of research at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work. He is also the director of the Minnesota Center Against Violence and abuse and one of the world's leading authorities on children exposed to domestic violence. He has published countless articles and 12 books and he possesses many prestigious national appointments and is a sought after expert by media outlets for his knowledge of domestic violence. Dr. Margaret Coombes Ph.D. is a regional office project associate at the Office of Child and Family Services in Rochester New York. Dr. Coombes interviewed Dr. Edelson by telephone Good afternoon. This is Dr. Margaret Coombes. And with me today is Dr. Jeffrey Edelstein. Hi Margaret. Glad that you're here with us today. We're very excited about this. It's a tough topic and very excited to talk with you today. Thank you for having me. Thank you for coming. Can we start off with something basic.

[00:03:50] Could you please explain what is meant by domestic violence and discuss the various terms to describe it. Generally. We talk about domestic violence when we're talking about adult to adult violence. So family violence is usually the term that encompasses many different things like child abuse and elder abuse as well as domestic violence but domestic violence in North American context at least is generally used to focus on adult to adult violence and intimate partner relationships so sometimes we call it IPV or intimate partner violence. And in fact the CDC used the official term the Centers for Disease Control is IPV. Other people use the term domestic violence and those are generally used interchangeably. First of all that's our definition of terms. But then I wanted to add a piece about that that really in recent years we've gone from defining domestic violence as an incident of violence. You know the police will charge somebody with a

domestic assault around a specific incident and courts will usually act on cases around specific incidents. But in the social science literature I think there's been an effort to redefine domestic violence to look at some type of pattern of use of violence and other forms of control in an effort to control and intimate partner. The current term that's widely used is coercive control. So it's a pattern of coercive control that may include violence but it may include a variety of other types of controlling behaviors that together form a pattern that are intimidating create fear in their victims and sometimes without violence can create the same kind of impact on a victim as it can when violence exists.

[00:05:47] The two key authors around sort of thinking have been Mary and that and then more recently Evan Stark in a great book that he wrote called coercive control called coercive control how men and trap women in personal life and they think that that broader definition of a pattern of coercive controlling behavior is what is currently becoming the primary definition of what we call domestic violence or intimate partner violence. And we're looking at a larger issue than simply incidents of domestic violence. That are reported by the police. It's just hard to take incidents out of their context and I think the effort to redefine and broaden the definition is a pattern of behavior that has an impact on victims. It's an effort to put those individual incidents of violence and threats and other forms of control into a larger picture context of looking at the perpetrator and his or her victim and seeing what kind of impact that pattern of behavior has. So yeah it is an expansion somewhat of what we've traditionally considered and what most of the legal definitions and law enforcement agencies use which are really focused on individual incidents. And I do think this needs broadening definition will over time have an impact even on how law enforcement and the courts start to think about domestic violence or intimate partner violence. So that's expanded what we think about domestic violence. Can you talk about the scope of the problem of domestic violence in the United States in Canada. Because we've expanded our definition. I don't think the data that we have on domestic violence or intimate partner violence has kept up with this expanded definition. Generally the surveys that we have the national surveys see somewhere between 3 and 4 percent of American women.

[00:07:56] And I'd also probably add Canadian women as victims of severe domestic violence. And then if you broaden that definition to include a variety of these other behaviors sometimes it goes somewhere between 11 and 22 percent on an annual basis and then even higher. If you look over a lifetime exposure. So it is high and higher than most people would estimate. And I think that's just because it's dramatically underreported and often even victims don't necessarily consider themselves a battered woman or a victim of domestic violence until you start asking them the specific behaviors that we'd use to define that. And then the answer yes. This happens to me but they don't define themselves as battered women or domestic violence victims. So yeah I think even among victims and perpetrators there's an underestimation of the level of domestic violence in couples lives. So they may not even recognize it as domestic violence. Right. And I think in particular perpetrators of domestic violence my experience has been is that they minimize their own behavior. Edit their thinking about it in certain ways to minimize it. And so in particular perpetrators of domestic violence will dramatically under report compared to victims some of the studies over the last several decades have shown that women will report about twice as much domestic violence in their relationships as well. Men in surveys reporting about the same relationship. So there's a dramatic underreporting particularly among men who are perpetrators of domestic violence. Do some men think that it's ubiquitous that it's all over the place. Everyone's doing it because they're doing this. Is there some kind of thinking that happens.

[00:09:51] Yeah in fact that with a research group that I worked with out at the University of Washington we've just published this paper recently that men who are batter are generally overestimating the level of domestic violence in the general population. Pretty dramatically. So they are thinking you know many more people are doing it just like me when in fact it's a lower

percentage than the perpetrators of violence are estimating it could be. So it sounds like somehow they justified in their own minds. They're not the only ones. I agree. You know that's a way of minimizing or denying that their behavior is any different than anybody else's. And that helps them. I think that helps them cope with the violence and the perpetration of it. And also another piece that I've experienced in working with men who batter is that they have a very difficult time understanding the impact of their behavior. So having empathy for the victims both the adult and child victims in a family and that tends to then help them cope with it and basically ignore the impacts that they're having on others and their families. So this image sometimes we see on TV I'm always apologizing afterwards may not necessarily be so may not necessarily be so. And I think over time less and less of those types of apologies tend to happen that it as it becomes chronic in a family he feels less of a need to make those apologies so in the original conceptualization of domestic violence that it was the cycle of violence.

[00:11:31] Lenore Walker talked with her honeymoon period afterwards where there's apologies in the shelter battered women shelters giving flowers sent to the woman and all kinds of apologies. And I think that does happen. But my sense is that over time as the violence becomes chronic that happens less and less and that becomes just the tension filled relationship with periodic uses of violence and other coercive behaviors with very little of that apologizing going on as time goes forward. So can you explain to us is domestic violence more prevalent in some cultures and ethnic groups or is there a type of family that you would identify that's more likely to have domestic violence. Well I've worked around the world. I've worked in Asia. I've worked in the Middle East and I've done a lot of technical assistance in many other countries as well. And my sense as well as national surveys that have been published around the world is that there are similar levels of domestic violence occurring around the world in many different types of communities. So I think one lesson from those data are that it doesn't differ that much from country to country and in many different cultures. But what I have found is that the response of each community differs greatly so depending on the courts and how the legal system around family law is structured depending on housing systems and even how government policy is designed in terms of promoting families and family residences. And what they allow for divorced or single adults has an impact on how people in their own lives handle domestic violence and how able they are to escape from violence. So two examples that I often think of as one is my experience working in Israel that the family law is often lodged in religious courts.

[00:13:36] So if you're Jewish you're going to a Jewish religious court if you're a Muslim you're going to a Muslim one and Christian to a Christian one. And in those courts often for example in the Jewish courts rabbi is usually Orthodox rabbis or ruling on some of these cases. So my experience when I worked in Israel was that many of that battered women's programs were trying to quickly lodge any kind of assault complaints in the civil courts which are not religious as an assault case. So that they get a better hearing and then when they were in the religious courts under the Family Law system. So the civil and family law systems were handled very differently. Family lobbying religious and civil being civilian nondenominational responses. And so they felt they got better responses in those civil court cases and would move quickly to try to get that case lodged in the civil courts so that created all kinds of dynamics that we would never think of really in the U.S. or Canada. Another experience in Singapore was that housing and most people live in publicly supported housing that they buy from the government but the government controls who can buy those properties. And many of those public housing apartments and areas of the city were restricted at least at the time I worked there were restricted to families that have husbands and wives and children in them. And so if you became single or if you were divorced it became difficult in some areas to get access to housing as families would have access to it. So I ended up having somebody I work with in Singapore where he was living with his new girlfriend and his wife.

[00:15:23] They were engaged in forced process but she was living in one of the bedrooms in their

apartment because they couldn't find housing to be separate from each other and that obviously created a very bad situation for the wife who had been abused by him and unhealthy all the way around for him as well. So it was an interesting twist on housing policy and how it had an impact on how families responded to very difficult situations. I think in our country the data that we have is often that race does not necessarily have a big impact on levels of domestic violence in relationships. But when you account for socioeconomic differences so class plays a much more important role than does race ethnicity and poor families do record somewhat higher levels of domestic violence and a lot of interpretation of that data is that they just don't necessarily have access to the resources and the interventions that families with more income have. So there are more limited in the responses they can create to the violence in their families and resources they can access and you tend to then see much higher levels of poor families using battered women's shelters and other publicly supported services across the country. So poverty can be a factor. I absolutely think that poverty poverty and the lack of resources and the lack of access to resources transportation a whole variety of issues that trap battered women into relationships. You know even access to an independent income is less likely if you're poor than if you are middle class or upper middle class and have educational skills to go out and get a job and create an income that is independent of your partner.

[00:17:28] So to me that's understandable why you would find higher rates among lower income groups in the country. I don't think those rates are dramatically different. So while there is a higher level of domestic violence among poorer families it happens across all socioeconomic groups and the rates do not differ dramatically and the only thing that you've clearly said is that the community response has a major effect. Absolutely and that's true not just in foreign countries I mentioned but in the U.S. certainly. How coordinated the responses of the law enforcement system the legal system and then the social service system are in response to both perpetrators and victims certainly will have an impact on how the family fares through this difficult period. And sometimes women can be discriminated against because of the violence if they're single living alone. Like the example you gave those Singapore. Sometimes it may impact them long term. Absolutely I think it'll impact them long term and sometimes the police will come in and they'll do what they call a mutual arrest. So even though she may have been defending herself and adult domestic violent confrontation her partner is beating her up and she's pushing him back to get away. They may then because she pushed him arrest both of them and she may be snagged into the legal system as a perpetrator in that instance. So there are times when are mandatory arrest policies which are well-meaning and I think have really contributed significantly to controlling violent men's behavior can be turned sort of upside down and used against the victims of domestic violence.

[00:19:30] And it's unfortunate when that happens it's due usually to poor training of the police officers involved in national office on violence against women through the Department of Justice has done a lot in the last 15 years to really focus on training of police officers and prosecutors and judges and a variety of other key players in our coordinated community responses to domestic violence. So I think we've improved a lot but there still is a lot of room for improvement and there are certainly individual locations and individual practitioners who think they're doing what they're supposed to be doing but they end up having really poor unintended consequences especially for victims of domestic violence. So again that need to educate the community and education for law enforcement is so crucial where social workers. And I think it's also really important for social workers including child welfare workers to be alert to domestic violence but dynamics of it how it plays out what it is how often that occurs. Other things we've been talking about I think there's a whole series of individuals in professional roles who come into contact on a daily basis with battered women and their partners and their children that are probably not as well trained about the issue as they could be and it leads to some poor outcomes for those families and poor safety for children and adults. Since we're talking about safety and the impact on these families can you talk about what we know about the children exposed to domestic violence. And this is an area that I've

really devoted almost the last two decades of my career to.

[00:21:15] And we're lucky that just two years ago David Finkelhor at the University of New Hampshire and his colleagues carried out really the first national survey we've ever had on children's exposure to violence. And they looked broadly at the multiple ways in which children are exposed to violence. They did a random sample telephone survey across the United States interviewing I think it was about 4500 children and their caregivers so if the children were 13 or younger their caregiver was interviewed as the children were 14 to 17 years old. They were interviewed directly. And it was really interesting because they asked about domestic violence about violence between adults in your household. And they found that 27 percent of the teenagers 14 to 17 year olds and these were the only ones they directly talked to the children in these. 27 percent of those kids said that they had been exposed to some kind of violence between one adult against another in their household during their lifetime. And that was much higher than we've ever seen in any prior estimates of domestic violence exposure among children. So that's more than one in four American children being exposed sometime over their lifetime to adult domestic violence in the past year. It was six point six percent of the children reported. And that's all children including their caregivers reporting about the younger children. Six point six percent had been exposed to domestic violence sometime in the last year. Very high. So it's gotta have an effect. So can you talk about the short and long term risk or consequences of domestic violence to the children. Sure. We have a growing literature on the impact of domestic violence on children. The difficulty with the research is that we don't have experimental controls where we randomly assigned kids to be exposed or not.

[00:23:21] We're not going to have a kind of data set somewhat like smoking research where it's correlational studies. And among these studies are probably well over 100 now that only about a third of them have really tried to separate out the impact of domestic violence on children compared to the impact of child abuse child sexual abuse child physical abuse direct victimization versus indirect exposure in those studies. They do show that even when you sort out the impact of direct victimization the indirect exposure does have an impact on child development and that can have a very serious one to the point where in several recent studies they've found that indirect exposure is not any different the impacts are not that much different than direct child victimization child maltreatment physical or sexual abuse. That the findings are that they don't differ. The impacts are not that different and aren't significantly different. So children exposed to domestic violence can have as serious impacts as those children who are physically or sexually abused. Now the caveat to that is that we also find when we look within the group of exposed children in many of these studies that many of them are not showing up any different than the kids who haven't been exposed to domestic violence. My argument that that data is that really it's there's probably great variability among children exposed to domestic violence and that variability is certainly the violence they've been exposed to the violence that's going on in their family the kind of coping skills they bring to the violent events. What kind of risk factors other risk factors exist in their life like happens in the house. Substance abuse among caregivers.

[00:25:12] Poverty as we talked about and the protective factors are are there protective adult caring adults in their lives. One example would be a battered mother who even though she is being beaten she may be a very protective parent who is taking a lot of steps to try to protect her child. There may be aunts and uncles neighbours best friends parents teachers as another group that I've heard frequently mentioned by adults who had experienced domestic violence as children. So it really I think there is great variability among this group of children exposed we shouldn't think of them as a monolithic group but they have some kids have enough protective factors that balance out and sort of buffer them from the worst impacts of the exposure and they move through life doing OK and can survive those experiences pretty well. But other kids and we call them you know may be resilient kids and there's a whole literature and resilience. But the other children maybe don't have

those protective factors that have a lot of other risk factors present don't bring very good coping skills to the table and end up being severely affected by those experiences. And look like a severely physically abused or sexually abused child. In terms of their developmental progress. So I think we can't assume anything about a child who has been exposed to domestic violence and we need to really do a more careful in-depth assessment and decide what are what are the child's experiences and what are the impacts of those experiences and then decide what's the best intervention with them and notice that some of your research over the last couple of years in terms of both screening and assessment.

[00:26:59] It sounds like it's very important still to do that. Can you talk about that. Why it's important. Definitely one of the pieces I've worked on in the last decade has really been focused on developing a screening tool that child exposure to domestic violence scale because there is really a gap other than a few questions on structured decision making models in risk assessment. Tell welfare and a couple of other places there really have not been good assessment tools to do an in-depth look at all the things we've just been talking about the risk factors the multiple risk factors the way a child is exposed how much they're exposed to and then even do they intervene in the violence. And we know from my research and others that children frequently intervene to try to protect their mothers and stop the violence. And often in our study we found that 25 percent of the children were injured intentionally by the perpetrator when they intervene to protect others. So they are being physically harmed from other children and a third were threatened with physical harm. And mothers who try to intervene to protect their children from being physically abused were 50 percent of those are the mothers told us that they had also been abused when trying to protect their children. So there is a deep level of involvement of children many times especially older boys who are now feel like they're big enough to try to intervene and stop what's going on and fight their dads are stepdad's or their moms boyfriend physically inserting themselves into these violent events which is very dangerous for these children. So we sought out to develop assessment tool CDV and it's free online on my Center's website.

[00:28:47] And we developed thirty three. I think it's a 33 item questionnaire itself administered to children. So they usually have to be over ten to be able to read it and so about that they answer it on their own about the kind of violence going on that they've been exposed to how they've been exposed to it and whether they've intervened or not what they've done in response. And also what other risk factors exist in their lives. And so with the child exposure to domestic violence. Scale CDV scale and it's on my center is called the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse better known as MINACA on our Center's website which is easy to find on the web we have a section called The CDV scale and we have all the materials there's a free copy of a free User's Guide and several articles we've written about it to establish the psychometrics of the measure. So we have all of that available and it's basically a self report screening not even screening really it's a self report in depth about a child's exposure to domestic violence and other risks. And the goal is to sort of fill this gap that once you identify that a child has been exposed. Then let's do a deeper assessment of that and try to learn the nature of that exposure and and what the child done in response to it and hopefully it helps when it is completed by the child. It helps a practitioner work with them and understand their exposure in greater depth and then work with them on safer responses than perhaps they've used in the past.

[00:30:39] So it may help keep them safe because there is now an awareness of the violence they may have been exposed or that is ongoing. But also you're saying practitioners can use to decide on treatment. Well that's our hope that practitioners would use that information to then say OK now I have a deeper understanding of this child's exposure how how deeply they get involved in these violent events and then try to craft a good response to that. We were frustrated by a lot of the screening measures out in child welfare and elsewhere that task one or two questions. Yes. No. Was the adult involved in domestic violence. Yes no. Is there a history of domestic violence in this

family. Yes. No. And often the screenings or assessments stopped that. So we thought OK if you get an affirmative answer to questions like that is there a tool you could then take and ask the child to complete and get more complete information about that child's experience. We haven't gone to adapt to that for younger children. We do have some of it translated into other languages as well but it's sort of in development. It's still a work in progress from our point of view. It doesn't predict risk which a lot of child welfare workers want to do. But that's really not what we have in mind. We had in mind that if you have a hunch or you get an affirmative answer on one of these simple yes no questions then this is a way to go deeper and get deeper information about the child.

[00:32:17] And and I would say any practitioner regardless of age of working with the child just looking over the measure and being aware of the types of questions that we're asking you know what kind of violence is going on. What is your exposure and what is your involvement what's your response to those types of questions and adapting them for whatever population you're working with. I think would be a big step towards a better understanding of these children's experiences and children report very differently than adults do. There is research to show that children report different experiences different knowledge of experiences of domestic violence in the household. They'll usually report more violence than parents will report that their children have been exposed to and they will report different impacts than adults will report as impacts on these children. So it is important to ask children I guess the caveat to that would be I'd be very careful about where you record that child's responses because if they are subpoenaed and they get in the hands of the perpetrator there can be consequences for that child for reporting that violence to a professional. So I think we have to be very careful about data security as we expand our discussions with children about domestic violence because it can come back could be dangerous for them. Having told you or somebody else their priority is to keep the children safe and excelsis. They're telling it from their point of view their story. Absolutely. So you don't want them then physically punished for doing that at a later date. So you really do need to be careful. It's true of battered women's reporting into it.

[00:34:03] You just have to be very careful that this data is going to be kept secure in a way that keeps the child or the adult victim who report it safe and that's not always the case. Sometimes files will be subpoenaed and the perpetrator will have access to it through his or her attorney. And so it's really important that we be careful with what we do with these data once we start asking children these kinds of questions. So the legal system doesn't inadvertently harm the Yeldon any sort of an unintended consequence. And I'm big on being very careful about unintended consequences of good policies. And from your research and from the information you shared there are long term consequences for these children that many children are affected into adults. Absolutely. And that we really didn't talk about the impacts of all that other than in general terms but on the short term we see that children do show significantly more developmental problems than children are exposed to domestic violence even when you account for their direct victimization as a child physical or sexual abuse victim. So for example boys you tend to see more externalizing behaviors that would be aggressive being aggressive physically aggressive towards other kids in the case acting out in school having discipline problems in school all types of what we would call externalizing behaviors. And then girls tend to show more internalizing behaviors which would be something like anxiety depression sleep disturbance and the like. So somebody wrote an article I forget who it was but it was a great title of an article boys are warriors and girls are worriers. And I think that's what you see in this literature.

[00:35:53] It's probably not only this literature but in the child exposure literature you see boys sort of warring and externally and girls worrying more internally in terms of the impacts of the violence on them. Now that's short term looking longer term there are several longitudinal studies that have followed children and their families over decades. And a few of them have recently looked at early domestic violence exposure and they find all the way through adulthood even into early 30s impacts of exposure to domestic violence. So a lot of these problems we just talked about have been shown

to continue into young adulthood. Among college age populations. And then even into things like your success in your career around age 30 has shown an impact of early exposure to violence as a child. And so I do think they're both short term immediate as well as long term impacts on children. Can you expand on that what you mean by impacting your career around the age of 30. This is a study published two years ago by Parodi P.A. RBD. Yes and I believe what it showed and they followed people who had been exposed very early to domestic violence showed that even into their 30s those who were exposed early to domestic violence showed up as being significantly different than not not unexposed children that weren't exposed in their career success not sure you know the dynamics of that and how that process would occur. But it is something that they've reported in a recent study. You've been listening to Dr. Jeffrey Edelson discuss domestic violence in the wives of children on living proof work for part two of this discussion in a future episode. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

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