

Chapter 47

Early Exposure to Domestic Violence and Implications for Early Childhood Education Services: The South African Microcosm

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ABSTRACT

This meta-analysis drew statistical data from the Victims of Crimes Survey (VOCS) and gleaned empirical insights from the literature to present a comprehensive discussion about the extent of early childhood exposure to domestic violence and the effects on children's developmental trajectories. Bandura's social learning theory and the intergenerational transmission of violence were adopted as guiding theoretical perspectives to highlight the dangers of early exposure to violence and to elucidate the importance of raising children in safe and stable homes and schooling environments. Findings show that many South African children are severely affected by domestic violence, with far-reaching implications for their future holistic development and life chances. The chapter recommends that universities should ensure their early childhood education qualifications are socially relevant and contextually grounded. Similarly, practitioners should initiate and play a leading role in multi-stakeholder preventive interventions on domestic violence.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5598-2.ch047

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to violence is an all too familiar experience for most children growing up in the regions of sub-Saharan Africa. From political violence to varied forms of street violence and crime, young children become witnesses to graphic scenes that have the potential to shape their views about society and life itself. Although young children may be protected from violence exposure by caring parents, they may be left vulnerable when the home becomes the source of violence and conflict. Unlike street violence, domestic violence involves people in the child's immediate environment, thus making the experience more personal and more susceptible to retention and reproduction. Although domestic violence is a complex subject, for the purposes of this chapter it is simply defined as any violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, typically involving the physical or verbal abuse of a spouse, a child or both. The focus of this chapter is not so much on domestic violence per se, but on early childhood exposure to it, hence a simple definition has been adopted. More complex and subtle forms of domestic violence may not be noticeable to anyone except the victim, and children may not be directly exposed to them.

This chapter reports findings from a meta-analysis study that investigated the extent of early childhood exposure to domestic violence in South African homes. The meta-analysis drew statistical data from the Statistics SA's (2016) Victims of Crimes Survey (VOCS) and gleaned key empirical insights from both local and international literature to present a comprehensive discussion about the extent of early childhood exposure to domestic violence and the effects on children's developmental trajectories. Two salient theoretical perspectives on violence as a learned behaviour, either intentional or unintentional, were adopted to elucidate the importance of raising children in safe and stable environments, with a particular emphasis on home and school settings. Findings from the meta-analysis are presented and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework, the implications for the early childhood education (ECE) sector, and the responsiveness of university programmes to the needs of ECE practitioners. Lastly, the chapter draws key conclusions and recommends some directions for future studies.

BACKGROUND

Domestic violence continues to be a huge problem in South Africa, despite concerted efforts by the government, community formations and the non-profit sector to prevent the root causes. It is widely observable that the vast majority of domestic violence cases are perpetrated by men and their victims are women and children, as reflected in the statistical data compiled by the South African Police Service (SAPS, 2017), the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) (2012), and the national statistical agency, Statistics South Africa (Statistics SA, 2016; Statistics SA, 2017). A recent survey conducted by Statistics SA and SAMRC at the beginning of 2017 revealed that one in five women over the age of 18 years reported having experienced violence at the hands of a male partner (Statistics SA, 2017). The same survey revealed that 40% of men assault their partners daily, and that three women in South Africa are killed by their intimate partner every day. Similarly, a study conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) found that 65% of women in South Africa had experienced spousal abuse a year before the study was conducted. Although children may not be directly involved all these violent acts, they witness some of them – hence the deliberate use of the term 'exposure' in this chapter to denote the direct and indirect impact of domestic violence on children.

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