

WHEN WOMEN ARE ABUSED, THEIR CHILDREN SUFFER, TOO

Editorial, Monday, November 3, 2003

St. Louis County is making the safety net stronger.

"After he hit my Mom, he made me touch him in private places. He said that I was his good girl and not to tell anyone."

With more than 4,000 petitions for orders of protection filed in St. Louis County last year, we know there are thousands of children affected by domestic violence. More than two decades of studies of domestic violence show that in families where women are abused, children suffer as well. Many children are abused or neglected by the same abusive family member.

Abused children suffer from more developmental, cognitive, emotional and behavior problems, including depression and increased aggression toward others. And how do these physically or emotionally neglected children fare? Poorly. They have a host of social and behavioral problems, including some that may influence their lives well into their teenage and adult years. Even if they themselves are not maltreated, children from abusive homes suffer from seeing and hearing their mothers or other family members being abused.

"They were fighting, and then he picked her up off the bed and threw her against the wall. Then I shut my eyes."

The impact of witnessing violence varies from child to child. Some children have more developmental problems; others seem to be more resilient and do not experience the same types of problems. So each child must be evaluated carefully, and any harm must be established clearly before agencies and courts determine how to intervene. Battered women (and men) who have children also face an excruciating dilemma: If they report abuse and seek help, they may end up losing custody of their children.

"My baby woke up in the middle of the night with an ear infection and temperature. My husband screamed, 'Shut her up. I'm trying to sleep.' I was trying to comfort her, but nothing worked. He got up, took her from my arms, and whacked her. She had a black-and-blue rear end. Now what should I do? If I take her to the doctor, they'll take her away from me because I'm the mother and I allowed this."

Unfortunately, many communities treat the abuse of a woman and maltreatment of a child in the same family as separate events having little to do with each other. But St. Louis County is an exception to the norm. For three years, it has been using federal funds to develop more effective ways of dealing with domestic violence against adults and children in the same household.

The so-called Greenbook Initiative brings together the courts, the children's service division and domestic violence programs to provide safety and stability for children and their mothers. Instead of trying to resolve complex problems with fragmented services working at cross-purposes, the Greenbook Initiative concentrates on building trust, cross-training and true collaboration.

Last month, thanks to leadership provided by the late County Executive George R. "Buzz" Westfall and the County Council, 35 municipalities and school boards observed Domestic Violence Month.

The cycle of domestic violence and child abuse is simply not acceptable. The people, communities and institutions of St. Louis County are working to demonstrate their concern and caring.

For additional information on the work of the St. Louis County Domestic and Family Violence Council, log onto