A photograph of a baby in a car seat, overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The baby is wearing a light-colored outfit and is secured in the car seat. The text is centered over the image.

Family Violence : Impact on Pregnancy, Infancy and Early Childhood

Medical Society of DC Taskforce on Family Violence

Presentation by Task Force Members

Infant Mortality Summit

September 2, 2010

What the audience will learn

1. Contributing role of family violence on infant mortality
 - a) Impact on Mothers
 - b) Impact on Infants
 - c) Impact on Children
2. What concerned professionals can do

Introduction

Family violence is the most popular violent crime in America. According to *Physical Violence in American Families*, "just over 16%, or one in six, American couples experienced an incident involving physical assault during 1985"

Robin Elise Weiss, ed. (online article)

- Bringing the data up-to-date
- Family violence, including child physical and sexual abuse, child neglect and maltreatment, intimate partner violence, and elder abuse, takes place in homes across the country every day. Exposure to such violence has a devastating impact on both children and adults in those households and communities, whether they are direct victims of abuse or witnesses to it. In May 2000, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) published a report based on data from the 1993-1998 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). This Special Report found that, between 1993 and 1998, the average number of victims of intimate partner violence who lived with children under the age of 12 was 459,590 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).¹

- The NCVS gathers data about crimes using an ongoing, nationally representative sample of households in the United States. However after publishing that report
- NCVS found that "Rate of family violence dropped by more than one-half from 1993 to 2002"
- We can impact this serious problem.

Family violence often begins during pregnancy

Abuse of pregnant women is not rare. The prevalence of physical assault of women during pregnancy has been estimated at 8% in a random sample drawn from public and private prenatal clinics,¹ and between 7% and 11% in nonrandom samples drawn from university obstetric clinic services.^{2,3} Rates of overall violence against pregnant women gathered by the Second National Family Violence Survey were as follows: 154 acts of violence per 1000 during the first 4 months of pregnancy and 170 acts of violence per 1000 women during the fifth through ninth months. (Pregnant women's risk of what was characterized as "abusive violence" was 60.6% greater than that of nonpregnant women in this national probability sample of 6002 households.

Abuse of Pregnant Women and Adverse Birth Outcome

Current Knowledge and Implications for Practice Eli H. Newberger, MD, Susan E. Barkan, PhD, Ellice S. Lieberman, MD, DrPH, Marie C. McCormick, MD, ScD, Kersti Yllo, PhD, Lisa T. Gary, MSW, Susan Schechter, MSW *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 267, No. 17, May 6, 1992, 2370-2372.

Dr. Eli Newberger et.al.

- The primary outcome of violence on pregnant women is low birth weight
- The low birth weight delivery can be the result of direct trauma or verbal intimidation and abuse resulting in maternal stress
- Low birth weight contributes to infant mortality

Dr. Eli Newberger et.al.

- What can we do?

A safety plan should be developed with the woman. There should be collaboration with medical and nursing staff to provide care for the woman and her children, including attending all case conferences and participating in hospital discharge planning. Services provided would include: (1) housing advocacy with shelter and emergency housing transfers; (2) court accompaniment; (3) referrals for legal and medical care; and (4) referrals to counseling support groups. The goals of such an effort are to empower women to better protect themselves and their children and to develop networks of support in the community.

Impact on Infants and Young Children

- Failure to Thrive
- Brain Development
- Post Traumatic Stress, social and emotional development
- Toxic Stress

Experience drives development

- A young child's brain is made up of thousands of neuron connections. The brain grows and develops by increasing those connections. These connections change and develop or modify their pattern of connection in response to a child's experience.
- Whether the experiences that cause the specific neural connections are good or bad has little effect on the fact that connections are created. That unique reflection of the experience that sparked the neural connections has been created. This reflection is the basis of learning

Stress

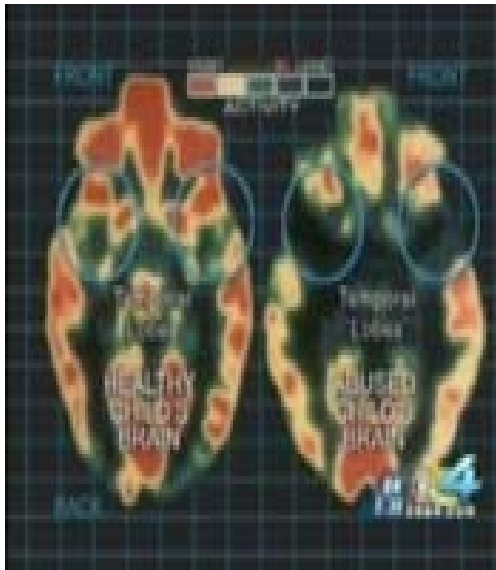
- When there is disruption of the timing, intensity, quality or quantity of normal developmental experiences there may be a devastating impact on neurodevelopment – and, thereby, function. For millions of abused and neglected children, the nature of their experiences adversely influences the development of their brains. However for children experiencing chronic stress there may be an equally devastating impact on neurodevelopment.

- These interactions that cause this type of stress can be seen when observing parental distress that results in parental disengagement (e.g. depression, mental illness, substance abuse, violent tendencies or lack of ability to parent). Researchers (McEwen 2000, Essex, Klein and Coho 2002) documented the impact of these stressful early interactions and their relationship to maternal depression and the impact on later problems related to elevated cortisol levels in early childhood.

[1]

- [ii] National Council on the Developing Child, "Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain" Summer 2005

Stress and Brain Development



The scan on the left shows the brain of a child who has been nurtured or loved, notice how the one on the right has much less mass shown.

- Although a number of researchers have described what happens when children experience or are exposed to stress; the learning here is that the stress experienced by parents and other caregivers can be expressed through interactions with the children in their care and can affect the child's developing brain. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University described toxic stress as [\[i\]](#) "strong, frequent or prolonged activation of the body's stress management system. Stressful events that are chronic, uncontrollable (by the child) and or experienced without the child having access to support from caring adults tend to provoke ...toxic stress responses."

- [\[i\]](#) The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard University

- Questions and Comments
- Thank You

