

Remarks of Prevent Child Abuse NY (PCANY) before the NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence's Listening Session, August 4, 2022

Thank you for having me here today. I am Maggie Dickson, policy assistant at PCANY.

I would like to speak specifically to the connection between domestic/intimate partner violence and child abuse, as well as to the impact that domestic violence has on children.

I will be using the term “domestic and family violence” throughout my remarks to signify the holistic approach PCANY takes to looking at and serving families, which reflects current data and research about the changing demographics of families and different family dynamics. For purposes of clarity, the term “domestic and family violence” includes domestic/intimate partner violence, elder abuse, child abuse, and animal abuse (since animals are seen as companions and are often deemed part of the family). PCANY’s use of the term encompasses these different types and forms of violence in order to allow for a more holistic frame, which will help those of us in the policy and program worlds to address families’ needs comprehensively.

Foundational to all of our work at PCANY is the development and support of healthy relationships from preconception through adulthood. Running through all relationships—parental, peer, partners, community— is the thread of connection. A Protective Factor, Social Connection can be fostered in positive, healthy interaction through intentional teaching about consent, respect, and boundaries. Connection is the antidote to power and control dynamics in relationships.

It is time for our State to make decisions—including how and where to invest resources—based on this lens. We cannot continue to silo families, providing support to parents/caregivers and to children in a vacuum. Instead, we must look at each individual involved as one piece of the puzzle— connected to each other and to their communities— and offer resources accordingly. It is PCANY’s hope that New York State can move toward a system of service and data interconnectedness— domestic and family violence is the perfect place to start.

Both the United Nations (2015) and the World Health Organization (2013) recognize domestic and family violence as a gender based phenomenon; while it is not always male to female perpetrated violence, domestic and family violence disproportionately affects women and children.

It is also important to understand that, when addressing domestic and family violence, the notion of trauma is usually not isolated to one generation. According to the American Psychological Association (2019), intergenerational trauma is expressed when the descendant of someone who experienced a traumatic event presents challenging emotional and behavioral reactions that are similar to their ancestor or relative – that is, the effects of trauma experienced in previous generations manifest in later generations, almost as if the child experienced the traumatic event themselves. Unfortunately, domestic and family violence can become a learned behavior– a cycle that repeats itself within a family.

The effects of domestic and family violence span multiple generations, an Adverse Childhood Experience, or ACE. I will dive into the brain science of ACEs in a moment.

According to 2020 data from the CDC, at least 15 million people experienced violence (including stalking) by a partner.

https://pritzkercenter.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Pritzker-Domestic-Violence-Report-Endnotes_final.pdf

Of those experiencing physical violence, 75% of survivors/victims reported having a minor child at home. (CA Women’s Health Survey 1997-2003)

According to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Center for Violence Prevention, self-reports by mothers who had experienced domestic/intimate partner violence found that 44% of their children had been exposed to that violence. Research also suggests that in an estimated 30-60% of families where domestic/intimate partner violence is identified, co-occurring child abuse/neglect is present, as well.

<https://violence.chop.edu/domestic-violence-and-child-abuse#.XvIrg2hKgdU>

Families that experience such violence are disproportionately involved in the child welfare system, which can further traumatize both parent and child. Often, this involvement stems from a “failure to protect” the minor child. (Luckily, in New York State, the Court of Appeals ruled in 2004 that a parent’s inability to prevent a child from witnessing abuse cannot be the only factor for removal of a child from the home.)

Still, witnessing abuse does impact a child. To understand how, we must first understand Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress. According to research from the 1990s, there are ten ACEs– negative experiences such as divorce, parental substance use, and child abuse/neglect that, in adulthood, can correlate to chronic health conditions like diabetes and heart disease. ACEs in childhood often

manifest as behavioral issues— acting out, not focusing at school, and interacting inappropriately with peers.

When an ACE or a traumatic event is experienced, the sympathetic nervous system, or “fight or flight” response, is activated and the body is taken out of the “rest and digest” state – respiration, heart rate, and circulation increase, and digestion slows, preparing the body for “survival mode.” In normal circumstances, when the threat or trauma subsides, the body is returned to a homeostatic state. When a child is exposed to repeated stress and trauma, Toxic Stress can result. Toxic stress is defined as prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2022).

Domestic and family violence is an ACE that, if it is ongoing, can result in toxic stress.

PCANY is committed to working with OPDV and other agency and non-profit partners to prevent and mitigate the ACEs caused by exposure to domestic and family violence. Our work this next year will focus on primary prevention—including investments in a dedicated funding stream for prevention programs and adoption of universally-offered home visiting. It is our hope that these efforts lay the groundwork for protective relationships and positive life experiences that will offset the effects and consequences of domestic and family violence that I have discussed today.

We hope that our partners will support this work and join with us to frame the issues of violence and abuse under one umbrella—domestic and family violence.