

It IS a Big Deal



Youth responses
to being exposed
to domestic violence

STUDY GUIDE

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This program was directed by Hilary Pryor and produced by the **BC Society of Transition Houses**. The fictional scenarios are all played by actors.

Much of the material included in this study guide was adapted from and is designed to go with the manual *Violence Is Preventable: Building Partnerships Between Children Who Witness Abuse Programs and BC Schools*, (2007) produced by the BC Society of Transition Houses.

For more information:
BC Society of Transition Houses
Phone 604-669-6943
Fax 604-682-6962
Web www.bcsth.ca

STUDY GUIDE WRITER &
ADDITIONAL STILLS PHOTOGRAPHER

Judith Blackwell M.A. LL.B.

DESIGNER

Patrice Snopkowski, MGDC

PROJECT COORDINATOR

Shahnaz Rahman

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Shashi Assanand

Hazel Cardinal

Sally Davis

Kareen Hudson

Dr. Peter Jaffe

Elzbie Jazwinski

Dr. Sue Penfold

Shahnaz Rahman

Jan Sippel

Mark Stevens

Sarah Tong

Dr. Allan Wade

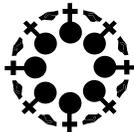
Dr. David Wolfe

YOUTH REVIEWS ON THE VIDEO

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about this video

The purpose of this guide to help you understand, present and discuss the material contained in the video. ***It Is a Big Deal*** looks at the issue of youth who are exposed to physical and emotional abuse at home. It is designed to be a tool to help break the silence on violence in the home, making it safe for teens to speak out, explore their feelings and ask for help. It is also intended to be used in the larger context of preventing dating violence and promoting non-violent community social attitudes.

This particular video is primarily designed for presentation to high school students in facilitated violence prevention education sessions. It might also be suitable for use in health and career education curriculum units or for students participating in group counselling sessions. Another purpose could be to help focus discussion with educators, counselling staff, and parents.

This video contains some disturbing scenes and is not intended to be shown without the presence of a Children Who Witness Abuse counsellor or other informed teacher or discussion leader. Leaders should refer to the educators' curriculum and resources available through the BC Society of Transition Houses, prior to showing the video. Viewers who have been exposed or are the direct victims of abuse may want to talk about their reactions and feelings and

This short educational dramatization serves as a tool for the Children Who Witness Abuse counsellors who work with youth in school settings. The Violence Is Preventable project (VIP) links Children Who Witness Abuse community programs with British Columbia schools. VIP is an initiative of the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH), a non-profit organization of transition houses, safe homes, second stage programs and other anti-violence agencies serving the needs of women and their children living with the effects of violence. The aim of the VIP project is to break the silence on violence in the home and make it safe for students to speak up in schools. It is also aimed at increasing awareness about violence against women and girls and the impact on youth's exposure by creating effective partnerships between schools and communities. VIP offers a number of educational and counselling services to help identify the problem, support child witnesses and reach those who may otherwise not receive support.

there must be ample opportunity for debriefing. Presenters should be well prepared to handle personal disclosures and requests for further help.

PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR YOUTH EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE IN THE HOME IS THAT THEY ARE NOT ALONE AND THAT HELP IS AVAILABLE.

defining violence against women

Violence Against Women is a *serious crime* that occurs in all socio-economic, cultural and racial communities. No particular culture sanctions violence. It comes in many forms from physical threats and physical assault to more subtle forms of psychological violence. Both men and women can be abused. But because men often have more cultural, economic and physical power than women they are more likely to use force, intimidation and fear to dominate women in relationships. Statistics show that in violent relationships many more women than men are seriously injured or killed.

All forms of violence aim to control women, wearing down her spirit and self-esteem. Over time the woman blames herself and often sees no way out. A mother may stay in or leave an violent relationship for the sake of her children. It is not easy to protect and care for herself and her children if she chooses to leave her partner. Many obstacles including cultural or religious values, unrealistic hope that her partner may change, lack of financial and emotional support, or fear for the safety of herself and her children can effectively prevent a woman from leaving. It is important for schools and helping agencies to be aware of the risks and difficulties such women face and to offer as much support as possible.

exposure to violence in the home

“EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE” MEANS BEING WITHIN THE VISUAL OR HEARING RANGE OF VIOLENCE AND EXPERIENCING THE EFFECTS OF THE AFTERMATH.

Youth exposed to violence at home tend to feel *guilty* and *responsible* for the conflict. They may be *ashamed* that their family is not a “normal”, happy one. They often feel *alone* because the abuse takes place in secret and they cannot share the problem with others. They may be afraid the abuser will punish them or child welfare authorities will take them away. They can experience feelings of *helplessness* and *self hatred*. In some cases they attempt to *intervene* and get hurt themselves. Youth who are exposed to violence against their mothers are often traumatized as those who are physically abused themselves.

CHILDREN/YOUTH WITNESS 40-80 % OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CASES AND MAY BE DIRECT TARGETS THEMSELVES.

the impact of exposure to violence in the home

Youth who are exposed to violence find ways of coping with their anxiety, fear and insecurity but many of these strategies develop into serious psychological and emotional problems. There are many different impacts but here are a number of signs or behaviors youth may exhibit:

- anxiety
- fatigue (sleep disturbance)
- neglected appearance (hungry, dirty, poorly dressed)
- school absenteeism (attributed to illness or need to look after mother and younger siblings)
- eating problems
- sickness (nausea, headaches, stomach aches)
- poor concentration, difficulty completing tasks
- aggression (“acting out”, bullying, anger, hyperactivity, tantrums)
- depression (sadness, lethargy, withdrawal, fantasizing)

- defiance (attention seeking, running away, substance abuse)
- immature or regressive behavior
- “perfectionism” (easily frustrated and always needing to be in control)
- responsibility beyond his/ her age

As they grow up, some children may model their behavior on their parents’ and are at risk of becoming either victims or abusers themselves. Without proper intervention, children may perpetuate the *cycle of violence* through successive generations without even realizing it.



school can be a difficult and lonely place when there is violence at home

IN EVERY CLASSROOM BETWEEN THREE TO FIVE STUDENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE AT HOME.

EDWARD: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

THE SCENES:

At school a minor incident has a major reaction. When another boy grabs Edward’s pen, he explodes to his feet and attacks the very surprised prankster. Then, ignoring the principal, he storms out of the room, sending a pile of books crashing to the floor. His anger and frustration have found a

destructive outlet with disastrous results for himself and other students. No one can learn in such an atmosphere. Earlier Edward had flashed back to disturbing events at home. There he had been trying unsuccessfully to do his homework while his father



was abusing his mother. When Edward tried to intervene to help his mother, his father reacted violently and spilled milk on his homework. It is very confusing to see someone you love abusing another loved one. Edward's natural but dangerous impulse was to try and protect his mother. As he grows up Edward becomes more physically capable of using violence. And he has learned that violence is an

.....
I was always trying to help her out and I'd just make the conflict worse... I just wanted them to stop... But there was nothing I could do...
– Cory, Child Witness
.....

acceptable way to solve problems or express anger. Power and dominance seem to be effective ways of getting what you want and Edward might see no need to take responsibility for abusive acts, no expectation of negative consequences.



Edward probably sees his father, and therefore men in general, as dominant and powerful while women are weak and submissive. Traditional Chinese values promote a strong respect for authority and hierarchical

family roles. As in many western and eastern patriarchal societies, his father, head of the household, has control and may abuse his position. Edward is in danger of repeating the cycle of violence in the course of his own life and he may fear he has no control over his reactions.

diverse backgrounds and cultural awareness

Mothers from diverse cultures, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual women or those with disabilities face many additional problems when leaving an abusive relationship. There may be language barriers, isolation, and fears about financial security and immigration status. Systemic racism is yet another burden.

In many cultures violence against women is not discussed and family and gender roles differ from those of the dominant western culture. Children from diverse backgrounds can have problems reconciling the values they learn at home with the messages about assertiveness and individualism communicated at school and in CWWA programs. When family needs are held to be more important than individual ones, child witnesses may feel uncomfortable with the idea that children are not responsible for their parents' problems.

Sometimes it is difficult for school staff to communicate with caregivers to find out what is going on. Children are often called upon to act as translators of the language and culture to their parents. This role reversal weakens parental authority and places the child in an awkward position, having to be obedient and conforming on the one hand while increasingly independent and powerful on the other. As the child rapidly learns English and adopts Canadian customs, there can be serious conflicts with parents. Mothers in abusive relationships may feel unable to leave because they would not be able to cope on their own with their children's evolving behaviors and values.

Violence against women is particularly distinct and acute within **Aboriginal** communities where children grow up with the effects of displacement and the sexual and physical abuse passed on through the descendants of residential school students. This multi-generational experience of violence and abuse within Aboriginal communities is not just a collection of individual family problems but a widespread systemic issue. As a result many Aboriginal people now distrust the mainstream school system. Many students drop out of school because they find it difficult to learn and participate in programs designed for the dominant culture. Different strategies are also required to deal with the impact of abuse. Aboriginal people may distrust the justice system which they view as racist and prefer to use legal and support services within their own communities. Aboriginal treatment methods focus on healing rather than the negative aspects of violence.

A great deal of helpful information and advice on the core values, beliefs and behaviors of diverse cultural groups is available through **Vancouver Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services** 604-436-1025. Aboriginal support can be found at: **Helping Spirit Lodge** 604-872-6649 www.helping-spiritlodge.org and **Pacific Association of First Nations Women** 604-873-1833 www.pafnw.com

PENNY: IS MOM GOING TO BE OKAY?

I was getting not so good grades. I couldn't concentrate. My friends were kind of getting mad at me cause I snapped at them.

– Lucy, Child Witness



THE SCENES:

At school Penny is withdrawn and distracted. She looks very distressed when Edward starts a fight with another boy. When Penny arrives home from school she finds the kitchen a mess and her young sister hungry, dirty and unattended. She finds her injured mother sobbing at the dining room table.

Home life is very unpredictable and Penny, still a child, is burdened with adult responsibilities. She suffers from depression, feelings of hopelessness and low self esteem. She may model her behavior on her mother and become passive, submissive and forgiving. Or she may learn to disrespect her mother for accepting the abuse.

Many young girls who are denied their childhood may later become rebellious and involved in substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors.



So I would always worry well, my mom... Is she gonna pass out? Is she gonna overdose? Is she gonna be okay? Cause, she suffers from a lot of things. And is she like, is she gonna be there when I get home?

– Lucy, Child Witness



.....

I didn't understand why [mom] just sat there and took it. I could see that scared look on her face.. maybe she deserved it... I see that look on my girlfriend's face sometimes...

– Cory, Child Witness

.....



it is a big deal: dating violence

GUYS LEARN THAT AGGRESSION IS THE WAY TO KEEP CONTROL, KEEP THE FAMILY TOGETHER. GIRLS LEARN THAT IT'S OKAY TO BE HIT.

EDWARD AND SUE

As they begin to form romantic relationships, teens may often imitate the behavior they see at home. *Dating violence means using emotional, physical and sexual abuse to frighten, hurt and maintain power over a boyfriend or girlfriend.* This covers a whole range of dominating behaviors from the



humiliating joke to physical or sexual attacks. Many girls judge their self worth on their ability to get and keep a boyfriend, regardless of his behavior. The adult women who are now live with the effects of violence were often girlfriends who experienced dating violence or abuse.

Nobody deserves to be abused and Sue needs to stop making excuses for Edward's rough treatment and start listening to her friends' perception that things are not all right and it is a "Big Deal". Edward is on the right



track when he apologizes to Sue for his behavior. She will have to decide whether he is sincere and can earn her trust by putting his abusive actions in the past. Counselling obviously has helped and he will have to continue to work on his resolve.

.....

I think it's really important to break the silence and seek help about what has happened to you and that way you can kind of move on in your life.

- Raheel

.....



you're not alone

THE SCENE:

Penny and Edward are among a class of students listening to a Children Who Witness Abuse *violence prevention presentation*. The VIP counselors provide broad general education and support without specifically identifying the students exposed to violence.

In a society that rewards powerful people, even students who grow up in non-violent homes can have trouble knowing what behavior is appropriate. Boys often express anger through violent behavior because displaying emotions such as sadness, fear and anxiety is considered passive and weak. At presentations students discuss alternative healthy family and dating relationships. They learn about the concepts of power and control as the root causes of violence and receive statistics and information about the law on violence in relationships. Students discuss the many forms of violence including sexual harassment, dating violence, and media violence.

One very important topic is how to handle a *disclosure by a friend*. A friend may disclose violence at home or within a romantic relationship. Students are encouraged to speak up if they or someone they know is physically or emotionally at risk. They learn that being silent and condoning or participating in violent behavior is not acceptable. Friends can listen, be supportive and reinforce the messages that it is not the victim's fault and she does not deserve to be abused. It is important to encourage the friend to develop a safety plan, get out of any abusive romantic relationship, and get outside adult help or call the police if necessary. Under no circumstances should friends intervene themselves if there is a risk of violence.

you're not to blame: getting help



ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS YOU REALIZE IN GROUP IS THAT YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE.

One of the hardest things to do is take the first step and ask for help.

Talking to an encouraging adult such as a teacher or counsellor may offer adequate support for some. Others benefit by being referred to a *Violence is Preventable Intervention Group*, a safe environment where students can process and understand the violence they have been exposed to. These sessions are offered by skilled CWWA counsellors in neutral school settings where security and confidentiality are critical. The main message, of course, is that *youth are not alone and not to blame* for the violence.

Groups cover many of the same topics as prevention presentations but tailored to the individual needs of the participants. Discussion and activities help them communicate better, solve problems and constructively express a range of emotions, including shame, guilt and loss. Students identify and learn how to recognize various forms of violence. They receive information about some of the community resources available such as shelters or Transition Houses. By the end of the session participants will have developed a stronger social support network, more self confidence and esteem as well as a practical safety plan. Many soon develop new and trusting relationships and even learn how to relax and have fun.





hope for the future

Youth who feel trapped in the cycle of violence express an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. But they need not deal with violence on their own. VIP programs make help available and can give essential hope to youth exposed to violence at home.



.....
I made the decision that didn't want to repeat the cycle. And I think with the help of my family and with the help of seeing a counsellor, that ended any chances of that being repeated. - Raheel
.....

discussion questions:

- What does Penny find in the kitchen when she gets home from school? What do you think her responsibilities are for her sister? How is Penny feeling?
- Why might Penny blame her mother for being a victim of abuse? Is it really the mother's fault? Why do women stay in abusive relationships?
- How does Edward treat Sue when he meets her outside the school? How do her friends react? What would you do if you saw a friend being abused? How can friends help?
- Should Edward intervene and help his mother? What else could he do to stop the abuse? What might happen to him if he called the police?
- Edward's parents are Chinese immigrants. Would that have an impact on their expectations for how well he does in school? How could Edward's Chinese heritage affect his relationship with his parents and with his friends at school? Why might it be hard for Edward to be honest about the abuse at home?
- In the group session, Edward owns up to angry violent feelings toward his girlfriend that he never thought he would feel. Does this make sense? Have you seen this pattern in your friends? Should Sue forgive Edward for pushing her? Was it a "Big Deal"?
- What are some of the early warning signs of violent behavior? How can you support someone you know who is being exposed to violence, abused themselves or violent towards others?
- What role can teachers play in supporting students exposed to violence?
- Discuss the family power structure. Does the traditional family structure support violence against women? Discuss male and female roles.
- What examples from the media might support violence against women in our society?
- Invite the audience to think of positive ways to stop violence in their own school setting and the community in general.
- What can schools do to support youth who have been exposed to violence?
- Why is there a stigma in speaking about violence and violence in our society?

Notes:
