

break the silence

STUDY GUIDE



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ABOUT BREAK THE SILENCE

This educational dramatization is a resource for Children Who Witness Abuse (CWWA) Counsellors undertaking violence prevention activities within schools through the Violence Is Preventable (VIP) Program. The VIP program links CWWA community programs with BC schools. The aim of the VIP project is to break the silence on violence against women and girls and provide safe spaces for students to speak up about violence at home in schools. VIP offers free educational prevention presentations to educators, caregivers and students and links school aged children and youth to free CWWA counselling services and other programs that support children and youth exposed to violence at home.

VIP is an initiative of the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH), a nonprofit association providing support to its membership comprised of Transition Housing and Children Who Witness Abuse programs for women and their children fleeing and/or living with the effects of violence.

Break the Silence follows brother and sister, Riley and Julie, who are exposed to violence at home. After participating in a VIP presentation at school, Julie contemplates breaking her silence about violence against her mother and seeking support for her brother Riley. Intertwined in this short video are other factors that stem from children's and youth's exposure to violence against their mothers. Dating violence, harassment and the impact that exposure to violence has on education while promoting non-violence pro-community social attitudes are evident.

This video is intended to increase awareness about violence against women and the impact of children's and youth's exposure to violence at home. ***Break the Silence*** is primarily designed as a presentation resource to older middle school and high school students in facilitated violence prevention education sessions. It may also be suitable for use in health and career education curriculum units as well as for students participating in CWWA group counselling sessions. This video is not intended to be shown without the presence of a Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellor or another informed discussion facilitator. Facilitators should refer to curriculum and resources available through BCSTH prior to showing the video.

Facilitators must keep in mind that viewers who have been exposed to violence and/or are the direct victims of abuse may want to talk about their reactions. Ensuring ample opportunity for debriefing and follow up is critical. Facilitators should be well prepared to handle personal disclosures and requests for follow up support.

The message of this video is that children and youth exposed to violence against women are not alone and that help is available.

STUDY GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to help Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellors, present and discuss the material contained in the ***Break the Silence*** video. The guide will pose a series of discussion questions brought forward through the relationships portrayed in this video that may be helpful for facilitators in the classroom.



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Defining Violence Against Women

There are many definitions of Violence Against Women. At BCSTH, Violence Against Women refers to gender based violence against women which both reflects and perpetuates women's subordinate status in society. Violence against women includes physical, emotional, economic, financial, sexual, and spiritual abuse due to their gender. Violence against women in intimate relationships may also be referred to as "domestic violence", "family violence", "intimate partner violence", and "gender-based violence".ⁱ

Understanding Children's and Youth's Exposure to Violence

What is exposure to violence?

Seeing, hearing, being told about, or seeing the aftermath of abuse and coercive control used against a parent.ⁱⁱ

Children and youth living in families where domestic violence occurs may be exposed to violence and abuse in a number of ways. They may be direct witnesses to abuse, may suffer harm incidental to the domestic abuse, may have their lives disrupted by moving or being separated from one or both parents. They may be used by the abuser to manipulate or gain control over the victim, and they themselves are more likely to be abused.ⁱⁱⁱ

One North American study found that children who were exposed to violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average. 40% of child abuse victims report domestic violence in the home.^{iv}

Children living with conflict and abuse will actively interpret, predict, assess their roles in causing a "fight", worry about the consequences, engage in problem solving and/or take measures to protect themselves or siblings, both physically and emotionally.^v



Impact of Youth Exposure to Violence Against their Mothers

In every classroom 3-5 students, on average, will have been exposed to violence at home.

Being exposed to Violence Against Women can have a profound impact on the classroom. Youth may demonstrate their distress at violence against their mother through school truancy, dropping out, and/or running away from home. It is common for them to have trouble focusing on the future. Involvement in criminal activity is more common among youth who have been exposed to the abuse of their mothers. Depression and suicide are also more common among youth who have been exposed to violence against their mothers.

As they grow physically larger and stronger, teens may choose to intervene in incidents and even risk injury. Youth may feel embarrassment and a strong desire to hide the abuse from those outside the family. They may feel concern for the well-being of their mother and responsibility for taking care of younger siblings and perhaps their mother as well. They may feel vengeful towards the abuser and may have anger aimed at either or both parents. Youth have access to a wider range of coping strategies than do younger children. Some of these techniques are effective at solving the immediate problem, such as running away or using substances to numb the emotional pain.

Some youth exposed to violence against their mothers will experience violence within their own relationships. For girls, this may be the first opportunity to make decisions about how to respond to threats or violence from boys. Modelling their father's behaviour, some boys handle their frustration by assaulting their mother, siblings, and/or girlfriends.

The collective experience of anti-violence advocates shows that the most important factor in the wellness of children and youth is their mother's wellness. Respecting and supporting mothers with women- and mother-centred practices is vital in our work with children and youth who have been exposed to violence. This begins the process of enhancing mother-child bonds and by restoring the respect and confidence undermined by violent fathers/father-figures. By treating the family as a unit and recognizing and supporting mothers we are best able to support children and youth who have been exposed to violence.

Sources

Barbeau, Elizabeth (2009). *Best Practices for the Children Who Witness Abuse Program*.

Cunningham, Alison & Baker, Linda (2007). *Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children as they Grow*.

Sudermann, M., & Jaffe, P. (1999). *A handbook for health and social service providers and educators on children exposed to woman abuse/family violence*. Ottawa, ON: Health Canada.

Discussion Questions

A. Is Mom Going to Be Okay?

When Riley and Julie arrive home from school, they hear their mother crying. When they enter, their mother is crying, the kitchen is a mess and their mother is trying to clean up what was going to be dinner.

Riley is angry that their mother continues to make excuses for their father's behaviour. Julie is quick to defend her mother for not wanting to talk about violence at home.

The next day, Julie breaks her silence about what is happening at home in fear of the violence escalating.

- Riley's mother does not want to talk about the violence at home with her children. What are some feelings that Riley may be having about not being able to talk about the violence at home with his mother?
- What do you think are some reasons why Riley and Julie's mother does not want to talk about the violence at home and continues to stay in a violent relationship?
- What does it mean when Julie says that she is worried that the violence may get worse at home?

B. Dating Violence

Through *Break the Silence* we see a relationship between Riley and Jess. As youth begin to form dating relationships, youth may imitate behaviour they see at home. For example, Riley has learned how to express his anger through aggression and yelling as a way to control Jess. Some girls learn that it's okay to be hit or yelled at but Jess thinks otherwise.

Dating violence can also mean using emotional, physical and sexual assault to frighten, hurt and maintain power over a boyfriend or girlfriend. This covers a whole range of behaviours from humiliating jokes, physical or sexual attacks and harassing text messages like in Riley's case.

- How does Riley treat Jess when they meet in the hallway?
- What could you do if you saw Riley treat Jess like the way he did in the hallway scene?
- Riley tells Cheryl that he is nothing like his dad. In what ways are their behaviours similar and what are some ways Cheryl can support Riley in changing some of his behaviours?
- What do you think it means when Jess talks about Riley's obsessive text messages? Is this a healthy way to communicate? Why or why not? How do you know when communication is healthy or obsessive?



C. You're Not Alone

Julie listens to a Children Who Witness Abuse violence prevention presentation. Cheryl's last words seem to resonate with Julie. Cheryl reaffirms to Julie that she is not alone when they meet the next day.

- Riley tells Julie not to talk to anyone about the violence happening at home. Why might it be hard for Julie to be honest about the abuse at home? Why might it be hard for Riley?
- Why do you think there is a stigma in speaking about abuse and violence in our society?
- How else can we let youth know that they are not alone?

D. You are Not to Blame for the Fighting

Often children and youth feel that the fighting at home is their fault. This is because they often over hear their names being brought up during the violence. Violence against their mother is never a child/youth's fault and there is help available. One of the hardest things to do is take the first step and ask for help. Talking to a safe adult such as a teacher like Mr. Lee may be enough support for some. Others, like Riley and Julie, may benefit from a referral to a Children Who Witness Abuse Group or Counselling. One of the most impactful things by seeking support is realizing that you aren't the only one that violence in the home is happening to and that violence isn't your fault.

- What are some ways that can assist youth in knowing that violence is not their fault?
- Julie talks to Cheryl about violence in the media. What are some examples of violence against women have you seen or heard in the media (famous people, TV/movies, songs, video games)? What are challenges of the media's portrayal of violence against women? What are some things we can do when we see/hear violence against women in the media?

E. Impact at School

After helping her mom clean up after a fight, Julie has trouble concentrating on her homework and sleeping. Her teacher Mr. Lee catches Julie nodding off and asks if everything is okay at home.

Julie's experience is normal for children and youth exposed to violence in the home. There are many different impacts but here is a small sample of the impact that exposure to violence has on children and youth:

- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Neglected appearance
- School absenteeism

- Eating problems
 - Sickness
 - Poor concentration
 - Aggression
 - Depression
 - Defiance
 - Immature or regressive behaviour
 - Perfectionism
 - Responsibilities beyond their developmental age
- What are some other ways that Riley can express his anger?
 - What are some ways Cheryl and Julie can discuss violence at home and Riley's anger?

F. How Support Can Help

Cheryl and Mr. Lee are some examples of support that Julie and Riley accessed in this video.

- Besides a teacher, who are other safe adults students like Julie or Riley could talk to about the violence at home?
- How can you support someone you know who is exposed to violence in the home or in an abusive relationship?
- What are some positive ways to stop abusive behaviour in your own school setting?

G. How Educators Can Help

Mr. Lee is the first adult to ask Julie what is going on at home and if she would like to make an appointment to talk to Cheryl. Teachers are often the only safe adult that children and youth have as they spend most of their time at school.

- What support from teachers do you think Julie and Riley would like or benefit from?
- What are some ways you would like to see your school support youth who have been exposed to violence in the home?

ⁱ BC Society of Transition Houses. (2011). Foundations in Violence Against Women Online Training.

ⁱⁱ Cunningham, Alison and Baker, Linda. (2007). Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children as They Grow. Centre for Children and Families In The Justice System.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Advocates for Human Rights, Stop Violence Against Women, Effects of Domestic Violence on Children. http://stopvaw.org/Effects_of_Domestic_Violence_on_Children.html

^{iv} UNICEF. (2006). Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children.

^v Cunningham, Alison and Baker, Linda. (2007). Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence Against a Mother Shapes Children as They Grow. Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System.