

1 in 4 children exposed to domestic violence, new study shows

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Published Tuesday, November 1st, 2011

A national study shows one in four children has seen or heard a parent or caregiver hit, slap, push or verbally threaten someone else in their home -- a higher number than expected, said a local researcher.

"You don't realize it's such a common experience," said Sherry Hamby, a researcher through the University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center and a Tennessee professor.

According to the study "Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence and Other Family Violence," about 69 percent of the time, domestic violence in the home comes from a male parent or caregiver.

But 11 percent of the perpetrators were boyfriends of mothers, males who don't live in the home.

This study exposed how far-reaching domestic violence has become by focusing on kids in different home environments and not just traditional homes, said Hamby, who teaches at Sewanee: The University of the South.

It's "not really a 'Leave It to Beaver' world," she said.

Hamby said she is about to release more research that will show the negative effects such hostile environments have on children. Kids in the study revealed they were more frightened when their parents fought than when they were bullied or personally victimized, she said.

"It's scarier to kids to see parents in fights than to be abused themselves," she said. "[This] shows how much they rely on family for support."

While Family Crisis Center Director Tara Hampton agreed that one in four children exposed to family violence seems high, she said the center helps many children when their mothers seek shelter from an abusive relationship.

Workers at the shelter, which serves Dade, Catoosa, Chattooga and Walker counties, will teach the children to find a safe place during abusive fights and to call 911, Hampton said. "[We teach] don't get in the middle of it," she said.

But that's the first response of nearly 50 percent of children who witness domestic violence, the study shows. About half the children in the study said they yelled at a parent to try to stop the fight. Only 26 percent of children in the study said they called for help.

Researchers hope the study will help coordinate better efforts to work with both the parents and the children in the home, Hamby said.

One goal is to keep the children in the home, she said.

"There's substantial evidence that removing children from the family does cause harm," Hamby said. "[It] should only be used in more extreme cases."