

OPENING THE DOOR

Listening for the child's voice in domestic violence

BY GAYLA MARTY

"I WAS ABLE TO REMEMBER episodes of crying and crying," says David, now 20, reliving his early childhood.

"I was afraid to tell the truth and didn't say anything for awhile," 10-year-old Lucia confides, her voice wavering.

"At the shelter...I was supposed to talk to the psychiatrist about my trauma," complains Alex, 15. "I hated it."

David, Lucia, and Alex are the voices of child survivors of family violence. The violence in David's family began before he was born, and he still suffers severe depression. Lucia's father stepped on her arm when she tried to intervene in a fight between her parents, causing an injury that drove her to the school counselor the next day. Alex once saw his stepdad beat his mother, but now he is using his experience to do something about violence among his peers.

You can hear these three young voices, read their diaries, and see remnants of photos that describe their lives on a new website. David, Lucia, and Alex are composites of many children's stories, but they are all true. They represent the lives of the estimated 5.5 million U.S. children who witness or experience violence in their homes each year.

Honor Our Voices, a website to increase awareness of how domestic violence affects children, debuted in September. The main audience is service providers. In the first two weeks, nearly 6,000 visitors came to the site, and the project gained international media attention.

Jeffrey Edleson, professor and director of research at the School of Social Work, has been working in the field of domestic abuse response and prevention for 30 years. Honor Our Voices was developed under his leadership.

"It turns out that the majority of residents in battered women's shelters are children," he says, "but until recently, we rarely acknowledged that or even thought about the children."

About 15 years ago, things began to change. Edleson also noticed a shift when visiting colleagues in countries that had not only signed but ratified the international Convention on the Rights of the Child, something the United States has not yet done.

"That lens of children's rights is not nearly as strong in the U.S.," he says. "You look at child protective services, domestic violence services, and you begin to think, 'Where are the child's rights? Where is the child's voice?'"

Then, at a national summit two years ago for people working in the domestic violence field, a child's voice was heard. Casey Keene from the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence took the podium with her own mother. Keene began to read from diaries she kept when she was 12,



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Up to 275 million children worldwide are affected each year by violence, according to a United Nations study.

when her father was beating her mother, and as she and her mother sought safety in a shelter for battered women.

“She would read an entry, then she would reflect on it, and then her mother would reflect on what she was going through at the same time,” Edleson remembers. “It just clicked. So that’s where Honor Our Voices came from—the little diaries.”

Edleson immediately talked to a program officer for the Avon Foundation for Women, which had sponsored the summit. It took a year to fund the project and another year to produce it.

Edleson’s career reflects the progress of domestic violence research and practice as a field. He came to it as an undergraduate at Berkeley in the early 1970s, when a friend prompted him to take a class from a professor interested in cognitive behavioral approaches. The friend expected Edleson would hate it.

“It was controversial at the time,” he says with a smile. “But cognitive and behavior approaches made total sense to me.”

Edleson became the pioneering professor’s undergraduate research assistant, worked at several sites in the Bay Area, and majored in social work. From there, he went to graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, then to Israel for a year of postdoctoral research.

The path led several years later to Minnesota because the state was a leader in social services to aid domestic violence victims and to help perpetrators change. But domestic violence was a very small area of work in 1981.

“I extended my job interview to two days and met with all the agencies in town,” he remembers. “I decided that when I came here, I was going to work with one of those agencies to help evaluate their programs and develop their services.”

That’s exactly what he did, teaming up with the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP), a United Way-funded agency, to conduct collaborative research and translate it into continually improving practices. First he volunteered at DAP, co-leading groups for men who batter and helping to organize reporting data for funding agencies. Together with DAP staff and his students, he analyzed the data being generated. Edleson became a member of DAP’s administrative team, developing collaborative approaches to build a high-quality, decades-long research program informed by practitioners in the field.

“It was always a true partnership,” says DAP director Carol Arthur. “With any research, we’d sit down with him to determine the questions and later to analyze the results. He’s held us accountable to tell the truth, and we’ve held him

Honor Our Voices

Honor Our Voices, a new online learning tool, tells three children’s stories of domestic violence through their diaries.

Meet David, Lucia, and Alex at www.honorourvoices.org.



accountable to do research that matters and make sure it’s safe. He’s always been incredibly generous, working with us as co-researchers and co-authors, and sharing the recognition for it.”

By 1989, the tenth anniversary of the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, nearly a hundred nations had agreed to be bound by its provisions.

In the United States, the Violence Against Women Act was passed in 1994. The national crime survey that tracked personal and household victimization was also continually revised to better track domestic abuse.

In the early 1990s, a statewide survey revealed that many professionals across Minnesota were working with survivors and perpetrators of violence, but few had any training for it. So in 1994, the state legislature appropriated funds to establish a center at the University to improve the quality of higher education related to violence.

The center was planned to be part of student services, but at the last minute the administration decided it should be located in an academic unit. Edleson was a coauthor of the proposal, and his department, the School of Social Work, became the home of what would eventually be called MINCAVA—the Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse.

When state funding ended, Edleson merged several related research, education, and outreach projects within MINCAVA. Today the center is headquartered on the main floor of Peters Hall on the Twin Cities campus in St. Paul with Edleson, three other full-time staff members, and 10 graduate students. MINCAVA continues to conduct original research, translate it into effective practices, disseminate information, and educate students. The interdisciplinary, University-wide undergraduate minor in family violence prevention (FVP) was originally designed in MINCAVA and is now housed in the School of Social Work.

27.7 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds in a recent national survey reported exposure to domestic violence during their childhoods.

On a sabbatical in Singapore in 1991, Edleson conducted research that showed similar rates of domestic violence in a culture very different from the United States.

“But the way cultures respond to domestic violence differs,” he says, “from housing policy to legal systems.”

His optimism stems from the growing evidence that violent behavior is learned and can be unlearned, and new, nonviolent responses can be learned. Research is showing what kinds of interventions are effective at reducing violence.

Research is also shedding light on aspects of violence not considered before. One significant finding is the devastating power of a child’s exposure to violence and abuse: witnessing domestic violence may itself constitute grave danger to a child.

This is a key reason that Edleson and colleagues have testified to the U.S. State Department and in the Netherlands on the 30-year-old Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Today, more than two-thirds of the “abductors” are mothers fleeing with children to their home countries.

“If there’s documented evidence that a child has been beaten or sexually abused, most of the time judges will not return the child,” Edleson says. “But if the mom has been abused and the child has not, in 80 percent of the cases we studied, the kids were returned to the abusive father or husband. Yet the beating of the mom can have as much of an impact on that child as direct physical abuse. We have 20 years of social science to back that up now.”

One of Edleson’s current projects is collaborating on a guide for Minnesota judges to help them gain a better understanding of what is at stake and the discretion they lawfully have to safeguard children. A copy was sent to the staff they met at the Hague, who are now considering new global strategies to aid judges on the issue.

“We hope our guide will be a model,” he says.

In a single generation, the field of domestic violence has expanded beyond agencies and service organizations to efforts in health care, education, and the justice system. Minnesota has been at the forefront of the movement, and so has Edleson.

He teaches and advises students, oversees research, writes, edits two series of books on domestic violence for Sage Publications and Oxford University Press, gives expert testimony, speaks to local and national groups, and

collaborates with colleagues around the world. Last year he was named by the U.S. Attorney General to the National Advisory Committee on Violence Against Women and this fall agreed to chair its subcommittee on evidence-based practice.

The next project on the horizon is both practical and far-reaching.

“We know that children and battered women turn to family members and friends first,” Edleson says. “Yet the professional field of domestic violence intervention does virtually nothing to enhance and support that social network of family and friends who are first responders.”

Those first responders—perhaps a teacher or a best friend’s parents—may be scared or frustrated as well as concerned about a child who’s been exposed to domestic violence.

Similar to Honor Our Voices, the new website will be interactive, a safe place for family and friends to go to understand the issue, understand what their role can be in supporting or helping the child, and learn about ways they might link the child to a service that’s out there. The center’s work on the project is supported by a new organization, Makers of Memories Foundation, established by a social media entrepreneur from New York who was exposed to domestic violence as a child.

Edleson envisions the issue of child exposure to domestic violence integrated into education, counseling, and social work training—every profession encompassed by the college.

“Domestic violence started out being portrayed as an adult-to-adult issue, but the children have always been there,” he says. “Going forward, I can see a time when, as any of us come face to face with a child who’s been exposed to violence, we’ll be alert to it, we’ll understand some of the impacts on the child, and we’ll be able to support that child and make links for that child to the services and expertise they need.” +

Read more online:

“Global justice: Do international custody laws harm domestic violence victims?” *Connect*, spring 2011,

www.cehd.umn.edu/Connect/2011Spring/Justice.html

MINCAVA: www.mincava.umn.edu/

School of Social Work: www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/

Edleson’s faculty and personal webpages:

www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/people/profiles/EdlesonJ.asp

www.tc.umn.edu/~jedleson/