

# The Web of Violence Affects Bedford Residents of All Ages A Commentary

Violence within Bedford families affects all generations, from great-grandparents to the newborn. A single act of violence or one violent relationship can be reflective of past violence in the family. It is also indicative of the risk of violence in other relationships. It can lead to violence in future relationships with family members in generations both older and younger than the current perpetrator. The “cycle of violence” in families is more than the passing down of violence as a way of life. It is a devastation of all that nurtures and enables family and community life and has profound effects on all generations and our community as a whole.

The cycle of violence is in fact a web of violence, touching all those connected with it. Studies have shown that 70% of parents who abuse their spouses also commit violence against their children; Those who were abused as children are 11 times more likely to be abusive to their own families than those who were not abused. Girls who witness abuse of their mother are more likely to be battered as adults. Violence also occurs when children commit abuse against their mother’s abuser. In fact, 63% of males under 20 who are in prison are there for murdering their mother’s abuser.

While these horrifying facts about spouse and child abuse are well known, few are aware that this web of violence extends to those in older generations. Adult children are the most frequent perpetrators of elder abuse, with 37% of all abuse situations falling into this category. Abuse by spouses and other family members accounts for another 22%. While little information is available about the previous relationships of those who abuse elders, data about the pervasiveness of violence in the lives of those who witness, experience or perpetrate violence indicate that at least some of these abusive relationships reflect long histories of abuse among many generations.

How does violence affect those of varying generations in ways not yet considered? How much harder is it for a battered wife and mother to leave an abuser when she sees her own mother trapped in an abusive relationship for decades? In some cases, abused children are placed in grandparents’ homes. But what if the parent learned violence in the same home in which the child now has been placed? Many elders in need of alternative housing, including those who must leave a violent household, turn to adult children for shelter. Where will they go if the same violence is perpetrated in their next home by their own children?

How does this web of violence affect others in the family? Children who witness violence are at greater risk: for doing poorly in school; for grave psychological problems; for physical harm when they try to protect the abused spouse; for being kidnapped when the battered parent tries to leave the relationship to create a safe environment for the children; and for being the victim or perpetrator of violence in later years. Elders who are abused are not able to provide the support and child care so essential in many families. They may become more frail due to violence-related injuries and may also experience depression and a resulting loss of independence, in addition to other ill effects that can indirectly affect their family members and caregivers.

Communities also suffer from this web of violence. The most obvious result is the expenditure of resources needed to cope with the aftereffects of violence. Schools must provide special services; doctors, hospitals and social service agencies must offer care for the physical and emotional wounds sustained; emergency services must respond to calls for police and ambulances; neighbors must contend with the challenges of living in the vicinity of violence. Beyond these effects are those that are even more profound for our community: the loss of the wisdom of elders, of the gifts of well-cared for and loved children, and of parents who can contribute their talents to the community. In addition, tolerance of violence in even one home diminishes the safety and spirit of community for all.

What can Bedford as a community do to help families caught in the web of violence to escape from it?

First, we must all be aware that each member of our community is precious and we must view violence against one person as violence against many. When, as businesspeople, neighbors, teachers, clergy, social service or health care providers, or concerned community members, we suspect violence against a child, an adult, or an elder, we must ask what help other family members may need as well as this individual. Unless all members of the family, even extended members who may not live in the household, are offered assistance, all will remain in the web.

Second, we must as a community, support families as a whole, including those who care for the special needs of children or elders in their families. Neglect is a form of violence that differs from physical abuse but is also devastating to the child or elder who experiences it, and can also lead to violence. In some cases, neglect results when a parent or family caregiver of an elder is unable to cope with their overwhelming responsibilities or when respite is not available for them to receive counseling or rest. Whether neglect exists within a family or not, being a good neighbor can mean occasionally offering to baby-sit, sitting with an elder while a caregiver takes an afternoon off or just letting the family know that you are willing to listen. Neighbors should always be cautious, however, about intervening personally in situations that may involve violence so that they themselves do not become victims.

We can, as a community, continue to declare that Bedford is a place in which no level of violence will be tolerated. Signing the Violence Prevention Coalition covenant, speaking out publicly when violence is discussed, and even talking about the importance of non-violence informally with friends and neighbors all can help to create an environment in which violence is not an option. To those of all ages who have always lived in violent families, the idea that violence is not an acceptable form of relating may not be truly understood. For victims to hear from those with whom they live in the community that they do not deserve violence and for abusers to know that they cannot count on the silence of neighbors and others with whom they and their victims come into contact may be an essential first step to stopping violent behavior.

Finally, education in non-violent conflict resolution is just as essential to adults as it is to children. The Bedford schools have participated in programs to teach our students how to resolve differences through talking and other positive behavior. Other family members also need this education from the organizations with which they have contact in order to break habits that have been decades in the making. We can all incorporate this information into our contacts with others and model non-violent conflict resolution

whether as counselors, customer service workers, friends and neighbors, and in other capacities.

Violence behind closed doors destroys all generations of a family and spills out onto the streets of Bedford. We can, as a community, recognize the need to serve all those who may be caught in a family's web of violence and work to bring peace to our homes, our neighborhoods, and our communities. The Violence Prevention Coalition invites you to join us in this endeavor.

Those who are experiencing violence or who know of violence that is taking place should contact the Police Department at 781-275-1212 or, in an emergency, 911. Those who are aware of violence against an elder may also make an anonymous report by calling the Protective Services Unit of Minuteman Home Care at 781-272-7177.

*Keeping the Peace is sponsored by the Violence Prevention Coalition of Bedford, a representative group of citizens interested in ending violence in families, communities, and beyond. Carolyn Bottum is the Director of the Bedford Council on Aging, a constituent member of the VPC.*

*The VPC meets the first Tuesday of each month at 7:30 a.m. at the First Church of Christ Congregational, 25 The Great Road, Bedford. For more information call 781-275-7951.*