

What about the Children?

by Rev. Dr. Aleese Moore-Orbih

In the sweet moment that I witness a happy, smiley face on a child, all is right with the world. Her happiness becomes my happiness. The smile on her face produces a smile on my face. The brightness in her eyes activates joy in my heart and hope in my soul. What is it about children that their sweet essence can overpower us? How has God made them both extremely valuable and dangerously vulnerable? How is it that without any training or prompting they teach us unconditional love, compassion, humility, trust, independence and dependence? And how is it that throughout history these bearers of grace have been the objects of disrespect, neglect, exploitation and harm?

Researchers estimate that 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year. “Exposure to domestic violence can include watching or hearing the violent events, direct involvement (for example, trying to intervene or calling the police), or experiencing the aftermath (for example, seeing bruises or observing maternal depression).”¹ In 1996, the National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect estimated that approximately 2.8 million American children were maltreated in that year. In 1999, studies found that co-occurrence, exposure to domestic violence and maltreatment occur 30–60% of the time with a median of a 40% overlap. Studies suggest that in 30% to 60% of all families where women are being beaten, their children are also the victims of physical and/or sexual abuse by the same perpetrator. A small but growing body of research also suggests that children who witness domestic violence, but are not physically abused, may suffer social and mental health problems as a result.”² Clearly, these statistics reflect the misuse of power, and my Christian faith tradition is very clear about the misuse of power and the hope of living in right relationship with God, includes honoring the least among us.

Jesus knew and understood the social and cultural oppression as well as the abuse into which children are often born. Jesus said to His disciples: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4). I understand those words to mean that when you are in the presence of a child, you can see what it’s like to be a part of God’s Kingdom. This part of human life called “children” is special to God, so special that Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Jesus makes quite plain His love for children, when He continues, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-6). Jesus clearly communicates that His liberating message and ministry is to those who are vulnerable to the misuse of power,

especially children. Although adults may think that children are their possessions—even property—Jesus makes it clear that we adults have Him to answer to for the safety and welfare of the least of these.

Children depend on their parents and guardians to provide for and protect them. When protection and provision are not available in the home, children should be able to find safety and welfare in abundance in God’s people and places of worship. Children should also have access to justice. As Marie Fortune has said on many occasions, “When harm is done by one person to another the church ought to be about justice making.” The church’s mission to continue the liberating ministry of Jesus is effectively demonstrated when we invite and receive children into a community of love, safety and justice.

Our faith communities can be sanctuaries for safety, healing and empowerment for all victims of domestic violence regardless of age. Children need the same type of support and advocacy that adult victims need:

- To be heard
- To be believed
- To be safe
- To be protected
- To be loved
- To be supported
- To have an advocate
- To have a safe, caring, nurturing adult friend or family member
- To know that the violence is not their fault
- To know there is hope
- To know God is present: God sees, God loves, God cares and God is acting on their behalf.

Early on in the battered women’s movement Joy Bussert wrote, “We need [. . .] to begin articulating a faith that will provide women with resources for strength rather than resources for endurance. We must articulate a theology of empowerment rather than a theology of passive endurance.”³ The same is true for children who witness or are the victims of domestic violence. Just as we have insisted “wives submit to your husbands” is not meant to be a tool to oppress and abuse women, the virtue of obedience and honor can no longer be used to keep children silent and secret about the abuse in their homes. Children need a deeper theology and youth ministry experience than one that only teaches them not to “sin.” Children also need to be taught how to protect themselves from those that would sin against them.

Certainly our faith communities alone cannot help 10 million children any more than they can help the hundreds of thousands of women who are battered every year. This is why we at FaithTrust Institute are committed to training both religious leaders *and* community advocates on the religious issues of abuse. An effective and sustainable response to children exposed to

domestic violence can only happen with community collaboration. Just as most domestic violence programs and shelters began at the grass roots level, our continued response requires all faith communities, faith-based and secular advocacy programs, and various other safe family and children's community programs must work together to succeed. Working together we can create prevention and intervention strategies to respond to children who are exposed to domestic violence.

My prayer as I join FaithTrust Institute is that through our efforts with our many partners, the happy, healthy faces of children will increase, and that we all will continue to say "Yes" to the sacred work that is before us. May we continue to work on children's behalf, strengthened in our faith traditions and raised up by one another.

¹ Fantuzzo, J.W. and Mohr, W.K. (1999). "Prevalence and Effects of Child Exposure to Domestic Violence" in *Future of Children*, 9(3), 22.

² Graham-Berman, S.A. and Edleson, J.L. (Eds.) (2001) *Domestic Violence in the Lives of Children: The Future of Research, intervention, and Social Policy*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 332pp.

³ Bussert, Joy M. K. (1986) *Battered Women: From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment*. Division of Missions in North America, Lutheran Church in America.