

Greenwich House Annual Report
Children's Safety Project

In an ideal world childhood is a time of happiness, exploration, and hope – a foundation for the future. But we don't live in an ideal world, and for too many of our children childhood is not a happy time. It is a time of fear and pain.

Fear can take many forms. A child who witnesses violence in the home will be frightened not only by the violence itself, but also by the people who are there to stop the violence, such as police officers. Seeing a parent, or relative arrested for domestic abuse can add to the trauma of the initial violence.

And of course there are the children who are abused by an adult in their home – abused sexually, physically, and emotionally. Studies show that the effect of violence and abuse on children has far reaching consequences and that these consequences do not end with the cessation of specific acts. They reveal a relationship between mistreatment and oppression in childhood and criminal violence in adulthood – a cycle of violence. As a society we are all handed the bill.

Expressing fear and pain in a constructive way is one way in which human beings can learn to cope with trauma and prevent it from taking over our lives. But because children don't view the world in the same way adults do, expressing that fear means using a safer, non-verbal language – the language of art.

Dr. Roberta Shafter, the coordinator of the Children's Safety Project, knows only too well how many children have to discover this art language in order to be in an emotional place that is safer than home.

The way a child represents things in his or her environment can help the therapist identify children's concerns that they cannot express verbally. Through the use of art the therapist can help the child talk about the pictures they draw as a third person narrative, rather than speaking about themselves directly. In this way the child can externalize his experiences and feelings.

Deciphering the drawings of a traumatized child takes the understanding interpretation of trained and dedicated staff. To the untrained eye some of the drawings can look like those of any child – a house, a tree, mothers, fathers, siblings. But look carefully because very quickly you will see that the drawings are far from innocent or ordinary – a house is on fire, the child is in the tree watching the house burn, a figure of a child is in a box, one of the figures is dead, one of the figures is much smaller than the others and one is much, much larger. The therapist also notes the way in which a child draws – heavy strokes, for example. Such are the indicators of trauma and abuse, and the family histories bear witness.

“These are the ways children tell us they hurt,” says Dr. Shafter.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. And for those children who have no words to describe fear, pain, or despair, a picture may be the only way to get them to say anything.

To reduce the trauma of domestic violence situations, authorities need to pay special attention to children from the police investigation to the courtroom. But as a whole, the family needs to rebuild itself and restore its basic family functioning, says Roberta Shafter, director of the Greenwich House Children's Safety Project, a private, independent organization helping children and families who are victims or witnesses of crimes.

"Everybody in the family has suffered," said Shafter. "All the shit that was simmering below the surface now comes out full blast. Once the bad perpetrator is no longer in the picture, people say they have to be family, but don't know how."