

Paint the town purple

Deborah Matthews, Ph.D., Director of Crisis Services & Clinical Operations

Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut, Inc.

The New Canaan Domestic Violence Partnership is painting the town purple. The 130 purple ribbons you see around trees throughout town represents each of the 130 times our New Canaan neighbors called for police help with family disputes this year. Look closer and attached to the ribbons you'll see a laminated card explaining that 78 children were in these homes at the time the police were called. 32 of these children were directly involved in the dispute.

When violence exists in a family, children are a captive audience. Instinctively, they know that their own safety and security hangs in the balance when one parent attacks another. We know there are lifelong consequences when this loss of basic security interferes with crucial family relationships because these very relationships set the foundation for a child's sense of self and trust in others.

Similar to children's reactions to many different types of extreme stress, violence at home can make children feel isolated and alone, ashamed, or even at fault themselves. They might exhibit psychosomatic symptoms such as frequent headaches or stomachaches for no apparent reason. Behavioral reactions might range from complete social withdrawal to overachieving tendencies. More likely than not, however, children will fall somewhere in between.

At school, children exposed to domestic violence might have a hard time concentrating on work, completing tasks and interacting with others. Similarly, children may lack in interest in socializing at all – be that with family members or friends – or they may even withdraw from activities that previously gave them pleasure. Younger children may seem extra-clingy with caregivers, and those of all ages might display aggressive behavior, exhibit other signs of depression and low self-esteem, or express feelings of guilt.

The opener for the New Canaan Domestic Violence Partnership's October awareness campaign promoting awareness of domestic violence in our own community was Judy Neville, New Canaan's First Selectman, reading a proclamation against domestic violence at New Canaan High School. An abbreviated proclamation was read at Saxe Middle School. You'll see Town Hall draped in a domestic violence awareness month banner throughout October. You early morning train commuters may have been greeted October 4 by a crew distributing awareness materials: sports coaches, members of the girls' soccer team, members of the NC Police Department, NC Youth Services staff, the KIC student outreach counselor, the school resource officer. Look in the local newspapers for related articles throughout the month as well as the NCDVP full-page ad. Middle and high school students are wearing purple bracelets exclaiming "Love is Respect" as well as the teen DV hotline phone number. Local businesses can look for inserts included in a Chamber of Commerce mailing explaining what they can do to stop domestic violence in our community.

Thankfully this community has resources to support domestic violence victims, especially those with the littlest voices. If you suspect that a child is dealing with violence at home, you can contact the Connecticut Department of Children and Families or a resource such as the Child Guidance Center, Domestic Violence Crisis Center or any other member of the New Canaan Domestic Violence Task Force, right here in the community. We're here to help, and we're only a phone call away.