

By Barbara Holden

If you think family abuse is someone else's problem, think again. At least 52 percent of all crimes against persons in Shelby County involve domestic violence.

The intended victim, usually a woman, suffers at the hand of a control-seeking abuser with seemingly no way out. But there are also the unintended victims -- the children -- witnessing, hearing and fearing it all.

In fact, the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence reports that children ages 0 to 5 are significantly more likely to be present during single and recurring domestic violence.

Nearly 80% of your child's brain will develop by age three, so while positive experiences like cuddling, eye contact and nutrition help his brain develop, traumatic experiences like exposure to domestic violence quite literally erode his brain's development.

Consider the cycle of abuse created by this scenario. Countess studies have shown that children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely to be victims of abuse themselves, and are more likely to abuse their own children.

Early exposure to the trauma of family abuse can lead to social and emotional impairment, risky sexual behavior, physical and mental health issues, incarceration and even early death.

While these horrific truths extinguish all hope for many people, they fuel the fire for a new public-private partnership called the Family Safety Center of Memphis and Shelby County.

When it opens next year, the center will essentially provide a one-stop shop for a victim and her children to find the civil legal, law enforcement, health and social services she needs to leave her abuser for good.

"Memphis is fortunate to have so many wonderful resources available for women and children, but they'll likely travel to a minimum of five to eight locations across the city to find them," said Family Safety Center director Connie Ross, who has spent 30 years practicing law and teaching law here in Memphis.

According to Ross, the majority of family abuse victims have no income or financial resources, no transportation or network of personal support. Furthermore, making the decision to leave your abuser doesn't come easy and takes a great amount of guts.

"It's a hard road for women to leave an abusive relationship and making it easier gives her the support and strength she needs to believe she can and should escape it," Ross said.

“The last thing she needs is to get up the courage to leave only to walk into a fragmented system that is sure to overwhelm and discourage her.”

Much like the model used by the local Child Advocacy Center, the Family Safety Center model will be multi-disciplinary, which puts all of the community’s social, legal and law enforcement experts are just steps away from each other.

Not only is it more convenient for the experts and the victims they serve, research shows that this team approach is highly successful.

“Greater community engagement and system coordination offer the possibility of overcoming institutional barriers that commonly stand in the way of creating safety for battered mothers and their children,” says the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

“We need to continue to develop multiple pathways into services and multiple responses by social institutions if we are to adequately address the needs of these children and help them to grow into emotionally and physically healthy adults.”

The bottom line: When 52 percent of all crimes against Shelby Countians involve domestic violence you are on your way to establishing a social norm that family abuse is acceptable here.

Family violence is a crime that has long lasting impact on mothers, their children and our community. I applaud the Family Safety Center for taking a multi-disciplinary, intervention approach to stop abuse today and prevent its cycle in the future.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other caregivers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.