



## **Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence**

### **Podcast Transcript**

**Season 3 Episode 3: March 3, 2021**

### **Adult Children & DV: Telling Your Children About Abuse**

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and  
Nouchee, Dual Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Advocate

NOUCHEE: Hello, and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop, a podcast that shares helpful insight for survivors, community members, and service providers alike. The Women's Center is based out of Waukesha, WI; we welcome and serve survivors of all ages, races, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, nationalities, and immigration statuses. The mission of The Women's Center is to provide safety, shelter, and support to empower all impacted by domestic abuse, sexual violence, child abuse and trafficking. Each episode will feature instruction on a healing topic. Today, our topic is Adult Children & Domestic Violence (DV): Telling Children About Abuse. We are your hosts; my name is Nouchee, I'm the Dual Domestic Violence/Sexual Abuse Advocate with The Women's Center.

MARISSA: Hi, my name is Marissa, I'm the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here with The Women's Center. So, to get this conversation started, I think it's helpful to provide a quick refresher on what domestic violence is; it can be emotional, verbal, physical, or sexual abuse within a romantic or familial relationship. Abuse is used for one purpose and one purpose only: to gain and maintain total control over another person. Abusers use fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear their partner down and try to keep them under their thumb.

Isolation and manipulation are also very common tactics of abuse, and they can be used to destroy a family unit; we'll be talking about this in more detail today. Abuse thrives in silence, and abusers use this silencing and isolation to prevent you from reaching out and getting help from others. Abusers often don't just manipulate one person, they can use their charm or "good behavior" to convince those around you that you're making it up, or that you deserve it. And as a reminder, I cannot say this enough, those things are not true. There is nothing that a person can do that makes them deserving of abuse. Nobody deserves abuse.

NOUCHEE: Your first step might be disclosing abuse. We understand that it isn't easy telling others about abuse that we've endured. It can bring upon feelings of shame and we aren't really sure if our loved ones will be supportive. Telling our children can feel even more daunting and exacerbate those feelings. You might not know where to start, but you're not alone.

To get the conversation started, try to talk with your children in-person. And if this is not possible, due to distance or pandemic restrictions, try to get together via video chat or phone to talk to them. Reiterate to them that you are still a family and will be there to support them however they need. Just like abuse isn't your fault, remind them that this isn't their fault, either. This is going to be emotional, and that's okay. Be gentle with yourself, you are doing the best that you can, and you did what you had to do to survive and support your children. Marissa will explain a couple of common reactions adult children may have to receiving this news from parents.

MARISSA: Yes! This is something that's really complex, and there's really no right or wrong way to feel, but we can try to understand what our adult children may be going through when they're hearing this news. They may be struggling with loving both parents; it can be really shocking to receive the news that one beloved parent has been hurting another beloved parent, especially if this is the first we're hearing of it.

There are a couple of affirmations that can be helpful to validate their emotions: It's okay to love and want to spend time with the person who was abusive, it's also okay to feel mad at but still love the person who was abusive, it's okay to feel more than one emotion at the same time (such as anger and love,) it is normal to feel angry at either or both parents when violence happens, you can love someone and hate that person's behavior, and it's okay to love both parents at the same time.

With those feelings, they may also be struggling with who to believe. This, again, can feel really complex and confusing. They might pull away from you, they could have also been manipulated by the abuser and have been taught to blame you or themselves. This isn't your fault either, and is indicative of the manipulation your abuser has used to control and destroy the family.

NOUCHEE: If your adult children have recently learned about the abuse, there can be a lot of different feelings that need to be processed. They could be struggling with feeling at fault. They might be questioning, "Could I have stopped the abuse if I had known about it? Should I not have left home? Were my parents trying to stay together for my siblings and I? And are we the reason why my parents didn't get help?"

They could, again, also be struggling with who to believe. They may feel the need to defend the other parent, possibly in front of you. And this is normal, but it can still be

hurtful. What feels like you telling the truth about the abuse might, to them, feel like you “ganging up on” their other parent; this doesn’t make what you went through any less valid, and speaks to the complexity of these thoughts and emotions.

They may feel frustration or shock with the abuse being kept a secret. Though this can be difficult to navigate, it is normal. Hearing that a parent has abused another is traumatic, and they may need time and space to fully process this. They might not fully understand why you waited to disclose, but show them that you still do care for them, regardless of what you had to do for your safety.

MARISSA: Absolutely true, and there are some things that could come up too if they have witnessed the abuse in their childhood. Something that parents will need to consider is trying to come to terms that your child may have seen the abuse. When we don't come to terms with this, we might minimize it, saying things like “they didn't know or understand what they were seeing, they were at school, they were asleep,” and so on. When we minimize, we run the risk of invalidating the experiences our children have, and though it is difficult, it's so necessary to accept that they may have been exposed to the abuse too. Remember that it is not your fault that this happened, and it's not theirs either; you went through something traumatic together, and that will take time and space to heal.

If your children have witnessed abuse in their childhood, we may need to expect additional disclosures as well. Your kids might have stories of their own that you did not know about. This can be especially difficult to hear, but just like you're hoping they don't fault you for a late disclosure, try not to fault them for not telling you either. Again, abusers use intimidation to silence victims, and it's hard to break that silence for the first time.

This leads into the concept and conversation that we want to have next about primary and secondary victims/survivors. You as a parent are likely the primary; your children, secondary. You may have all primarily survived abuse together too. Nouchee is going to explain this a little bit more in depth.

NOUCHEE: So primary victim/survivor versus a secondary victim/survivor: the primary victim has been directly victimized by another person (for example, an abusive partner,) the secondary victim has likely witnessed the violence and has been impacted by it too, just indirectly.

As a primary victim, it's okay and encouraged to set boundaries with your children at any age. It's okay to not have all the answers to the questions they ask, you also might not have the capacity to fully support them how they need. There are resources that can support them, and you too.

If they're trying to rescue you, you can say “no”, and handle the situation in the way that you see fit. Your feelings are valid, and this is difficult. If they have chosen to side with the abusive parent, you have to respect that decision and avoid rescuing them too. This acceptance can be really difficult, process your emotions and mourn if you need to. We can't say whether they'll come around, but know that this does not make what you went through any less valid.

MARISSA: Absolutely. And I think something to mention, too, is that this doesn't make you a bad parent. Surviving abuse doesn't make you a bad parent, and you did what you had to do to survive and keep surviving. On a similar note, I want to talk about intergenerational trauma. So just to define that quickly, intergenerational trauma is what happens when the effects of a traumatic event are passed down through multiple generations. We see those effects by way of maladaptive coping tools—so, things that we do to soothe ourselves that aren't quite healthy, like avoiding the issue, self-criticism, or self-harm, just to name a few—as well as possible physical health problems or mental health conditions, and even the repetition of abuse in later generations. We'll include a link to an article explaining more from Break The Silence Against Domestic Violence (BTSADV).

Something that is very important to do as we move through each new generation is trying to intercept this intergenerational trauma, and then trying to make sure that its effects are not passed down. A good way of thinking about it is like “breaking the cycle” of abuse. Part of that involves unpacking the guilt and shame. Again, I know we sound like a broken record, but this is so important: nobody is at fault for abuse besides the abuser, and that is the only person that needs to take accountability for the abuse. If the guilt and shame isn't addressed, this self-blame or guilt can be passed down and contribute to this intergenerational trauma.

Another really important way of intercepting this is getting support for the trauma when you need it. So open up the conversation, talk about it! Once again, abuse thrives in silence, and talking with your family members who have also experienced abuse, whether directly or indirectly, can bring you closer together in healing. Getting support also looks like developing healthier coping skills to teach your children or even grandchildren, so education on healthy boundaries or relationships, grounding techniques, positive affirmations, utilizing therapy, things like that. I know that is a big, tall list with things that might not sound within reach right now. That is okay. You can get support from advocates, counselors, friends; if you're in the Greater Milwaukee area, we can be a resource to start getting those conversations going, but it is so important to get that support when you need it.

NOUCHEE: Moving forward, even though you may not be co-parenting in the legal custody or placement sense with adult children, there will likely be times in which you

will both be acting together to support your children. For example, weddings, birth of a grandchild, navigating college, things like that. Safety plans can be incredibly important for your physical and emotional well-being. We have other episodes such as Safety Planning in Relationships and Self-Care and Emotional Safety Planning that relate to this as well.

You may need to cope with the possibility of not being a part of those things, or not being able to support your child in this capacity. And this is not your fault, and you are not a bad parent for this. You can try to offer other ways to support your children, like having to skip a baby shower or wedding shower but planning an individual visit to drop off gifts and celebrate together without your abuser. And again, they might not fully understand why you need to take these steps, but try to explain as best as possible and reiterate that you love and support them.

MARISSA: Absolutely true. And I know a lot of these things are easier said than done, but you don't have to navigate this alone; there is support available.

Thank you so much for joining us to learn about Adult Children & Domestic Violence: Telling Your Children About Abuse. Our next session will be the second part of this series, focusing on what happens when our adult children are our abusers.

The Women's Center focuses our work in partnering with clients to overcome barriers and gain a life free from violence. Our work is grounded in equity, upheld by inclusion, accountability, self-reflection, and continual growth.

We believe that it is important for survivors to feel seen and heard. We believe that Black Lives Matter because we cannot end violence without addressing the distinct injustices that Black and Indigenous People of Color face. We know that all forms of oppression are ultimately connected, and when we center individuals most impacted, we are also supporting survivors who have faced any form of violence. While we are not experts in anti-racism work, we aspire to be allies in this movement; we all have a responsibility to contribute to unlearning racism and intersecting forms of oppression that take place in our communities.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience with abuse, please call our 24-Hour Hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at [www.twcwaukesha.org](http://www.twcwaukesha.org), and find the resources mentioned on this episode by clicking Media & Events, then Podcasts on our website.

Thank you and be well.