

## Reckless and Wrong: Real Talk About Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence

By Lonna Davis

The [statements](#) Ohio Senate Candidate JD Vance made about marriage and domestic violence are reckless and harmful. These are fighting words to all the survivors and single parents out there doing whatever they can to protect and care for their children.

When Vance says people experiencing domestic violence are obligated to stay in violent marriages for the sake of their children, he is minimizing the grave harm violence causes to both adults and children and perpetuating the idea that a child's wellbeing relies on an intact marriage (however violent or abusive it may be) of a man and a woman. Those ideas are deeply offensive to survivors of violence and to single parents who care for and protect their children.

Here are the facts: Between one in three and one in four women experiences domestic violence in her lifetime – and millions of children experience the trauma of growing up in a violent family.

Sadly, children in the U.S. are exposed to violence more often than adults. According to a national survey, 25% of children are exposed to domestic violence, and many more are exposed to other forms of violence in school or in the community (Finkelhor et. al 2009).

The consequences of being exposed to domestic violence as a child are well documented and very serious. They depend on many factors such as the child's age, how often she or he is exposed, the relationship the child has with the person using violence and the degree of the violence they witness, and the aftermath of the violence. Some children see their mom cry all the time or with a bruised face and/or a cast for weeks.

In my almost 40-year career working with children and their parents who survive domestic violence, I can attest to the harm children experience. I've heard it in their stories, seen it in their small faces and behaviors, and read it their writings. Besides the trouble they can have in school and forming friendships and intimate relationships, they can suffer from shame and low self-esteem and mental health problems. Some end up using violence and repeating the cycle of abuse in their own adolescent and adult relationships.

Healing is possible. I know many adults who have found peace with their childhood experiences and found love and stability in the families that they have created. I know countless young people who have become leaders in their communities, mentoring younger children about healthy relationships. I've seen, in my own extended family, truth telling about abuse that has opened real talk and commitments to breaking cycles of abuse.

There are multiple pathways to healing but they all require courage. The courage to leave or stay in a marriage. The courage to ask for help. The courage to tell the truth in our families and communities. The courage to apologize if we've harmed someone. The courage to create the conditions and experiences that children and their families deserve to thrive. The courage to choose adult survivor *and* child survivor safety and wellbeing, instead of pitting survivors against each other.

The courage to say "no" to JD Vance and all those who hold his reckless, wrong views.

After 40 years, I still have courage and hope. Join me.

*Lonna Davis the Director of the Children and Youth Team at Futures Without Violence*