



connections



Alberta Home Visitation
Network Association

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Family Violence: A community issue

By Lavonne Roloff

Family violence is an issue that many home visitors confront in families they work with. The home visitation program, funded through the Alberta Children and Youth Services ministry, worked with over three thousand families in 2008-09. Approximately 8% of these families are dealing with family violence. This issue of Connections is dedicated to domestic violence. Many of the articles focus on the impact it has on children.

We know that children who grow up in homes with violence are more likely to be victimized or to experience abuse and neglect. Often the response to family violence is short-term intensive services designed to reduce or eliminate immediate risk. But families in these circumstances require a long-term commitment designed to address their complex needs. These may include immediate safety concerns, food, housing, income, employment and educational opportunities, medical assistance, child care, and legal aid.

Home visitation is an early intervention service or model that targets families with multiple risk factors. Home visitors provide a strength-based approach that helps young

families avoid the harmful consequence of family violence. Home visitation may also reduce the likelihood that Alberta's children will require protection or foster care placement, or end up in the young offenders system. Alberta's commitment to early intervention services for at-risk

families means that families who would normally avoid talking about family violence are empowered to seek assistance from community-based services. This reduces the burden on children, families, and the community.

In addition, these families require time and commitment from the community to strengthen positive parent-child

interactions. These actions will reduce the likelihood of the children repeating this cycle of violence in adulthood. When communities are committed to creating safety, the long-term outcomes for children are significantly improved. Through programs such as home visitation, we are able to support families. These offer hope for children and families living with family violence.



Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director for the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

Early Intervention: Applying parenting and conflict resolution skills

By Connie Lemay

The first eight years of a child's life are critical for establishing interpersonal and social relationship patterns.¹

Exposure to aggression or non-responsive family environments has detrimental and long-lasting effects on these patterns. Children exposed to family violence are more likely to experience a number of physical, psychological, and emotional consequences leading to relationships where they are withdrawn, helpless, hostile, and aggressive and where they may become victims or perpetrators of violence. In their research (2003), Ehrensaft et al found that exposing young children to violence between parents poses the greatest independent risk for them becoming a victim in any act of partner violence.²

The reality for many home visitors is that they will be working with more than one generation of children who have witnessed, or been a victim of, family violence. Some parents are the childhood victims of family violence. Despite a young person's pledge to never live in an abusive relationship, some grow up to repeat the cycle of violence. This occurs particularly if the family did not receive early intervention services.

The challenge for home visitors is to help parents recycle through their own childhood issues while simultaneously helping their children. Parents that experienced family violence will require education and programs to develop new patterns of parent-child interactions and intimate and social relationships, significantly different from those they experienced in childhood.

Working through the cycle of violence

The following statements underline the issues, challenges, or goals for parents as they work through their current parenting practices and their childhood experiences with violence. Parents need to

- resolve couple conflict without hostility, aggression, or violence
- recognize that infants and children are affected by parental hostility and violence
- develop parent-child interactions that are responsive, warm, and caring
- regulate their own emotions and frustrations while being responsive and caring towards their child's needs
- understand that children can be disciplined without hostility, aggression, or coercion
- re-evaluate hostile expectations they have about relationships with their children, parents, and other social relationships
- recognize their own sense of loss or grief for their own childhood
- understand the anger, guilt, and shame they may have towards their family of origin and/or themselves
- nurture a belief and hope in their ability to change the cycle of violence for their children and themselves.

Early childhood family relations—especially parenting and the relationships between parents—influence the capacity for self-regulation of emotions, behaviour, and expectations. Research over the past 30 years has clearly demonstrated that children who are exposed to family violence, either as witnesses or victims, are at a significantly higher risk for developing a number of difficulties in child- and adulthood:

- addictions
- conduct disorders
- depression
- disruptive behaviours
- failure to thrive issues
- gang affiliation
- injuries
- learning difficulties
- low birth rates
- mental health concerns
- separation anxieties
- sleep problems
- suicide ideations

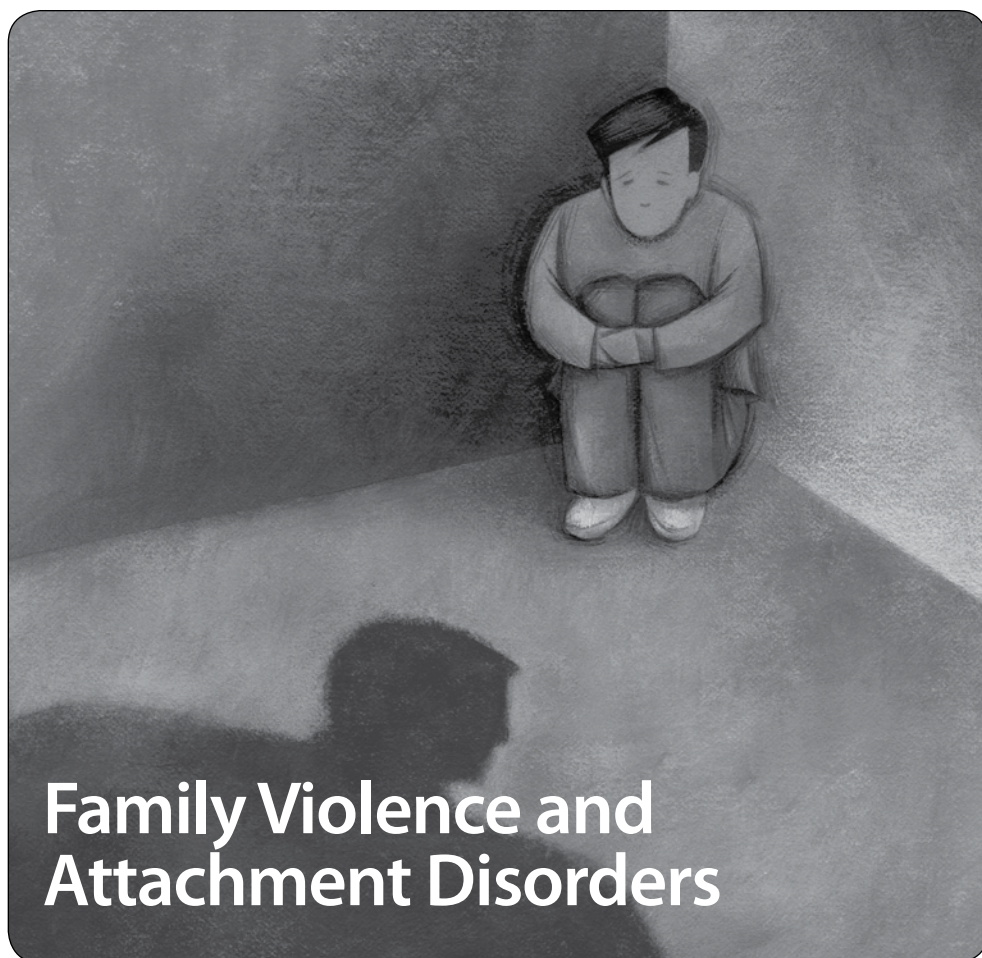
The research is clear. Parents exposed to violence as children are more likely to continue to have intimate relationships with partners who are aggressive or violent. They may have a high parental threshold for hostile, coercive, and aggressive parenting behaviours. Therefore, their own propensity to aggressive and non-responsive relationship patterns may be much higher than normal. The work of Ehrensaft et al (2003) points to the promise of early intervention programs that focus on parenting and conflict resolution skills to aid in the prevention of family violence for future generations.

Home visitors working with at-risk families have opportunities to change this pattern of intergenerational family violence. They are well equipped to help parents in the area of parent-child interactions and positive discipline skills. Parents who have experienced violence as children may require further intervention. One of the most important referrals a home visitor can make is to programs or services that address conflict resolution. Learning conflict resolution skills can reduce or eliminate the hostility or violence between couples and ultimately to the violence that children witness.

Connie Lemay is a consultant with Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

References

1. Ehrensaft, M.K., Cohen, P., Brown, J., Smailes, E., Chen, H., & Johnson, J.G. (2003). Intergenerational Transmission of Partner Violence: A 20-Year Prospective Study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71:4, pp. 741-753.
2. Ibid. p. 742.



Family Violence and Attachment Disorders

With over 30 years' experience in mental health, addictions, and criminal justice work, Dr. Kathryn Seifert, Ph.D., is the author of numerous articles on family violence and trauma. She lectures on the topics of violence, risk assessment, suicide prevention, and stress management. Seifert is the founder of Eastern Shore Psychological Services, "a multidisciplinary private practice that specializes in working with high-risk youth and their families." She also created the Juvenile CARE2 (Chronic Violent Behavior Risk and Needs Assessment). The following conclusions were drawn from her study, "The Association of Family Violence with Behavior and Psychiatric Problems in Children and Teens."

- "Groups of people with Psychiatric Disorders, Substance Abuse Problems, Sexual Offending, and Violent Offending had a high percentage of youth or adults who had experienced childhood trauma or were from families with histories of violence."
- "Violent youth or adults are significantly more likely to have attachment disorder resulting from childhood neglect or exposure to family violence with a family environment that is characterized by low family warmth and high conflict."
- "Family violence is related to the abuse and neglect of children. When the abuse or neglect occurs in the preschool years, it is associated with attachment disorders or problems. Attachment problems are then exhibited by enuresis, impulsivity, lack of empathy, early behavior problems, paranoia, and aggression."
- "When family violence or neglect occurs later in childhood, it results in conduct problems that are probably learned behaviors coupled with poor problem solving, social skills, self-soothing, and anger management."

Reference

Seifert, K. (date NA). Family Violence with Behavior and Psychiatric Problems in Children and Teens. *The Official Guide to Abuse and Recovery*. Retrieved on November 15, 2009 from www.selfgrowth.com/articles.

Types of Abuse

Verbal Abuse occurs when one person uses words and body language to control or intimidate another person.

Physical Abuse occurs when one person uses physical pain or the threat of physical force to control or intimidate another person.

Psychological Abuse (also known as mental abuse or emotional abuse) occurs when one person controls information or puts another person down by name calling or insults.

Social Abuse occurs when one person is isolated or kept from seeing or talking with others. The goal is to control the information and support that the abused person can access.

Sexual Abuse of children or adults includes any sort of unwanted sexual contact perpetrated on a victim by an abuser.

Neglect occurs when a person fails to provide for the basic needs of one or more dependent victims he or she is responsible for. Basic needs include adequate and appropriate food, shelter, clothing, hygiene, and love or care.

Financial Abuse occurs when one person controls the money by withholding money as punishment. Financial abuse also occurs when one person does not allow the other to have their earnings or hold a job.

Exposure to Family Violence: Potential impact on children

By Susan Patenaude

In the past two decades, research has consistently demonstrated potential long-term consequences for children exposed to family violence. Still, many professionals and families continue to believe that if children do not witness the abuse—actually see or hear it—they will not be affected. Increasingly we recognize that exposure to or living in the presence of abuse (emotional, psychological, sexual, or physical) is sufficient to impair the cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological development of children.

Impact of exposure to violence on the fetus

Petersen, et al (1997) report literature that shows a fetus exposed to abuse of the mother is at risk for

- low birth weight
- impaired brain development
- nervous system disorders
- developmental delays.

The mother's experience of stress, trauma, inadequate pre-natal nutrition, and substance use, in addition to physical violence affects the fetus. Severe blunt trauma can lead to

- spontaneous abortion
- fetal death
- placental abruption
- preterm labour and delivery
- fetal injuries including skull fractures, intracranial hemorrhage, and bone fractures.

inadequate nutrition, depression, or injuries. Feeding and sleeping problems are common and children may be seen as lethargic or distractible.

These authors further described the social interactions of preschoolers exposed to abusive behaviours to be characterized by aggression, boundary confusion, and unhealthy ways of expressing feelings. Regression of skills such as toileting, speech, and independent feeding also occurred.

As children develop, they may present with learning problems, anxiety, and poor social skills. Some become parentified, taking on responsibility for the care of siblings, and often the home, in an attempt to manage their chaotic environment.

By adolescence, these children are more at risk for maladaptive behaviours such as running away, gang involvement, substance abuse, promiscuity, and suicide. In addition, the likelihood that they will be abused, or abusive, in a dating relationship is significant.

Impact of exposure to violence from infancy to adolescence

In 2002, Baker, Jaffe, Berkowitz, and Berkman explored the impact of exposure to violence from infancy through to adolescence. They identified that infants and toddlers often experience physical and emotional neglect when the parents' capacity to care is diminished due to substance use,

Responding to a child at risk

In Alberta the *Child, Youth, and Family Enhancement Act of 2004* states,

"A child is in need of intervention if there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that the survival, security, or development of the child is endangered because of any of the following: physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, or emotional injury."

Emotional injury includes **exposure to domestic violence or severe domestic disharmony** as well as rejection, neglect, and exposure to chronic substance abuse, among other behaviours.

Probable signs of relationship abuse

Some signs that a parent may be in an abusive relationship include

- being reluctant to have service providers do home visits
- having injuries that do not seem to align with the explanation given
- appearing to be chronically tired or poorly nourished
- not returning phone calls and cancelling or missing appointments
- giving inaccurate contact information
- trying to either charm or bully service providers
- trying to deflect attention away from the child—minimizing concerns.

If you have any reason to believe that a child may be at risk, consult with an intake worker with the Alberta Children and Youth Services in your area. For more information on children and family violence, call the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-KIDS (5437). More information at www.child.alberta.ca/home/programs_services.cfm.

References

- Petersen, R., Gazmararian, J., Spitz, A., Rowley, D. et al. (1997). Violence and adverse pregnancy outcomes: A review of the literature and directions for further research. *Am. J. Prev. Med.* 13:5, pp.366-73.
- Baker, L., Jaffe, P., Berkowitz, S., & Berkman, M. (2002). *Children Exposed to Violence: A Handbook for Police Trainers to Increase Understanding and Improve Community Responses*.

Susan Patenaude is the Provincial Coordinator for Alberta Network for Safe and Healthy Children at Stollery Children's Hospital, Edmonton, AB.

After Domestic Violence: Rebuilding relationships with children

By Shirley Piedt

Neurobiology studies show that early exposure to ongoing violence may lead to maladaptive brain development. Children exposed to domestic violence often exhibit a variety of symptoms: external (anger, aggression, defiance) or internal (depression, anxiety, headaches, stomach aches).

In these violent situations, we need to focus on the relationship mom has with her children. Mom's need to keep herself and her children safe may have compromised creation of a stable child-parent attachment. So, when they leave the abusive partner, this parenting bond often needs help.

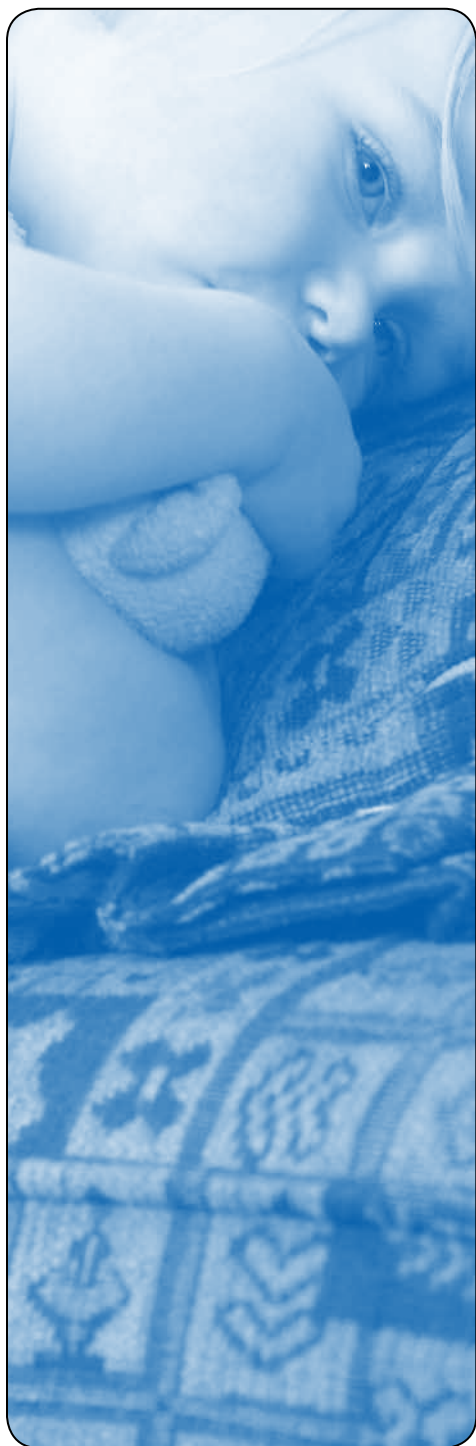
Children in these situations may take on some of the controlling ways of the abuser. They may view mom as inadequate, stupid, and unable to provide safety and security. Mom is often uncertain about how to parent on her own. Old patterns, such as looking to the children for her own support, need to change to a healthier boundary where children learn to look to mom for support.

How then can we assist mom to rebuild a strong and healthy relationship with her children?

- **Ensure safety for each family member.** When the family is free from chaos, and safety has been established as the norm rather than the exception, we can move to assist mom in rebuilding her relationship with her children.
- **Provide** information about how children are affected by living with family violence. Parents may believe an infant or toddler is too young to be affected. We know that exposure to violence, even without witnessing it, is still damaging. The parent may think that since the children are acting normally and not talking or bringing up the violence, that they have forgotten what they saw, heard, or felt, and this should be left in the past. All family members need to express their feelings about the violence they have experienced.
- **Teach activities that are nurturing and fun.** Play games that involve rocking, cuddling, moving, singing, and touching (rock-a-bye-baby, this little piggy, ring around a rosy).
- **Respond to older children with age-appropriate activities** (back rubs, manicures, and pedicures, hair brushing, taking trips to the park, thumb wrestling, playing board games and sports). These help build trust correcting the relationship so that children can expect mom to be their support.
- **Encourage mom to set reasonable, appropriate limits.** Children need to experience both nurturing activities and limits to feel safe. They need to learn that mom is able to help them with their own out-of-control emotions and that they no longer are expected to be her emotional support. Home visitors can help mom find other adults to fill that role.
- **Help mom connect to other supports in the community** (family, spiritual groups, clubs and sports groups, or schools) where caring adults can be models for healthy relationships. Encourage her to spend some individual time with each of her children, perhaps at bedtime to hear about the child's day or provide a cuddle or back rub, and encourage her own self-care until she is ready to take on more.

Shirley Piedt, MSW, RSW, is an instructor in the Social Work Program at Grant MacEwan University.

Eds. Note: This article speaks to a mom's perspective in rebuilding trust relationships with children. Dads may also be victims of domestic violence and thus the reader should also view this from a single dad's perspective.



Women who use Violence in Their Intimate Relationships With Men

By Richard Amaral

The issue of women abusing men has received much attention within the last several years. On one end of the debate are those who feel the issue of women abusing men is a serious social problem. On the other end are those who believe it is not nearly as significant a problem as men's use of violence towards women.

Those arguing that men and women are equal in their rates of perpetrating intimate violence typically use data derived from the Conflict Tactics Scale. This scale counts the number of blows delivered from one person onto the other within a year (i.e., how many times have they pushed, slapped, punched, or thrown something at the other person). This method of assessing violence, however, ignores the motivations, contexts, meanings, and intentions behind violent behaviours. Furthermore, despite similar prevalence rates of men's and women's perpetration of intimate violence, women still incur a greater number of injuries and are the victims of more controlling forms of abuse than are men.

Viewing women solely as "victims" places them into submissive roles and ignores their attempts at resisting abuse.

Counselling interventions now suggest therapists address women's victimization issues in conjunction with strategies for eliminating aggression.

Diversity in circumstances for women using violence

Research suggests there is great diversity in the circumstances, contexts, and motivations for women using violence in their intimate relationships with men. Some of the more common motives reported in the literature are for reasons of self-defence: women use violence to protect either themselves or their children from further harm.

Violence an attempt to be understood

My research suggests women use violence as an attempt to be understood—to be heard—by their partners. After qualitatively analyzing the interviews with nine women, I found these women used aggression and violence as a means of **expressing a variety of painful emotions**. These emotions resulted from

- being treated unequally by their partners
- feeling "trapped" and isolated in their relationship
- retaliating for an abusive comment or behaviour
- feeling hopeless in verbal communication with their partners.

"He never listens to me," or "I just want him to know how I feel" were common statements heard in the interviews.

Other research is revealing that abusive and violent women also have a history of victimization at the hands of previous partners. For example, some women arrested for hitting their male partners have also received services for being victims of abuse in the past. Therefore, counselling

interventions now suggest therapists address women's victimization issues in conjunction with strategies for eliminating aggression.

Studies on women's use of violence point to the complexities of the problem. We should not ignore the topic, however, because of the small number of men who report severe injuries at the hands of women. Additionally, we should not render women's violence justifiable because of the reasons they provide. Doing so would support the position that women's violence is not a serious problem, and that men are not vulnerable to female-perpetrated aggression. Furthermore, viewing women solely as "victims" places them into submissive roles and ignores their attempts at resisting abuse.

It is important to explore the contexts within which women's violence takes place, in a manner that allows women to provide their own reasons in their own words. If workers model openness, understanding, and empathy, and set healthy parameters within their professional relationships, clients will experience how healthy, non-abusive relationships look and feel. They will feel less judged and possibly more motivated to attend counselling programs. By doing so, the work we do will be of greater benefit to their lives and can lead to changes in the entire family unit, especially for children exposed to such violence.

Richard Amaral, Ph.D., is completing his registration as a psychologist in Alberta. He is a program coordinator at the Tsuu T'ina Health Centre on Tsuu T'ina Nation adjacent to Calgary, Alberta.

Dealing With Domestic Violence

Women who are victims of family violence face several difficult decisions. Referral to a family violence professional such as Women's Shelters in Alberta can help women with the answers to the following questions:

- Who can I confide in about the violence?
- How can I protect myself and my children from further physical harm?
- How will I provide for myself and my children?
- Where will I find housing and food safety if I leave?
- Who will take care of my children if I must work?
- How will I manage further contact with my partner?
- What if I am new to Canada and have few supports. Who can help me?
- Who can help me if language and cultural issues are a barrier to accessing services?

For information about women's shelters in Alberta, please visit the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters at www.acws.ca/map.php.

Reference

Schechter, S. & Knitzer, J. (2004). *Early Childhood, Domestic Violence and Poverty: Helping Young Children and Their Families*. Retrieved on November 15, 2009 from www.uiowa.edu/~socialwk/SeriesIntro.pdf.

More Signs of Abuse

- **Partner described** as jealous, having two different sides, being overly sensitive or reactive to noise or anything they find stressful
- **One partner quick to take the blame** when something goes wrong
- **Isolation of the mother and children.** "He does not like it when I have people to the apartment. Can we meet at your office?"
- **Injuries to the parent or children** go unexplained or the explanation does not make sense
- **Cancels or changes** appointments at the last minutes
- **Limited access to money** despite adequate income
- **Hides injuries** by wearing concealing clothing
- **Unwilling or unable** to make a decision on small things. "I will have to check with David to see if it is o.k."
- **Parental depression or anxiety**
 - Children overly **disruptive or withdrawn**
 - Children are **fearful** of other adults or situations.

Quick Facts About Domestic Violence: The current situation

From the Alberta Council of Women's Shelter

The following statistics summarize the current situation for women in domestic violence situations in Canada and U.S.

- One in four Canadian women is a victim of domestic violence.¹
- Of those experiencing domestic violence, 51% have experienced either physical or sexual assault since the age of 16.¹
- 21% of abused women were assaulted during pregnancy.¹
- Women are seven times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than by a stranger.¹
- Aboriginal women are three times more likely to be victims of family violence.¹
- Aboriginal women have nine times higher spousal homicide rates.¹
- Women between the ages of 20 and 24 are at greatest risk for domestic violence – an age when many women are having children.²
- Women in the lowest income levels are seven times more likely to be victims of domestic violence.²

¹ Statistics Canada, *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*, (2005, 2006).

² Rennison, C.M. & Welchans, S. (2000). *Intimate partner violence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Program, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters

- More information at www.acws.ca
- Resources and links to articles on domestic violence at www.acws.ca/public_resources.php

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on Grief and Loss. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by January 30, 2010.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions, and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, by phone at 780-429-4784 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

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Meet our Board!

We continue to introduce you to some of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association board members.

Laura Cunningham-Shpeley

Born and raised in Ardrossan, Laura spent a year in London England working with youth, and over two years travelling throughout south-east Asia, New Zealand, Australia, and South America before finishing her bachelor degree in social work. Travelling taught her many lessons in how to live, communicate, and appreciate people from all walks of life. Working with families in Edmonton's inner city for several years helped her see that there are no easy answers or solutions in life and that supporting people to live to their fullest capacity can be rewarding and exhausting. Since working with Health Canada, Laura has seen parts of this province that she never knew existed! Through the development of a Home Visitation program for First Nations Reserves, Laura has been able to ensure people have the tools and support they need to do the brave work of effecting change within their communities and the families that compose them.



As part of the ATCO employee donation program, Hayley Romanic has chosen to support the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. Hayley Romanic makes a presentation to Lavonne Roloff, Provincial Director.



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