



Case outcomes of child welfare-involved families affected by domestic violence: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

There is emerging evidence to suggest that children who come to the attention of child protective authorities are more likely to experience out-of-home placement if their families are affected by domestic violence than other reasons for investigation. To develop a better understanding of child welfare-involved families that are exposed to domestic violence, this article provides a comprehensive review of research examining the effects of domestic violence on the likelihood of out-of-home placement and family reunification. A search of the literature resulted in 16 articles that met the study's criteria. Data suggested that domestic violence may be negatively related to out-of-home placement depending on the sample type, and marginally related to family reunification. Recommendations and implications related to future research are presented.

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1. Introduction

As many as 15.5 million U.S. children live in households in which domestic violence (DV) occurred at least once during the past year (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006); this violence is overwhelmingly directed at their mothers (Edleson, 1999; Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997; Straus, 1992). Mothers affected by DV are burdened by risk factors across several ecological domains that negatively influence their parenting (English, Edleson, & Herrick, 2005; Kohl, Edleson, English, & Barth, 2005; Kohl & Macy, 2008). Children exposed to DV are at higher risk of many negative outcomes, including physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse (Kernic et al., 2003; LaViolette & Barnett, 2000; Straus, 1992). Given this connection, many children affected by DV become involved with child protective services (CPS). Between 14% and 60% of families with CPS child maltreatment cases indicated DV as a risk factor for that maltreatment (Kohl, Edleson, English & Barth, 2005; Whitney & Davis, 1999).

An emerging body of child welfare literature has examined the case outcomes of families that experience DV; however, there have been no published reviews that critically assessed specific results and scientific rigor related to this topic. Rather, reviews examining this population have primarily focused on defining child witnessing of DV (e.g., Edleson, 1999) and identifying risks associated with child exposure to DV (e.g., Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan,

2008; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Because information on the case outcomes of child welfare-involved children affected by DV is not efficiently integrated into the literature, it may be difficult to conclude whether out-of-home placement is an issue for these children; and, once in out-of-home care, whether they are able to safely reunify with their family of origin. Therefore, the current study provided a review of research related to the case outcomes of DV-exposed families involved with CPS. Before presenting our specific goals, we discuss the existing research on the effects of DV and its relation to out-of-home placement.

1.1. Effect of domestic violence on children

In addition to increased risk of child maltreatment, researchers have linked DV exposure to poor child psychosocial outcomes and negative environmental risk factors. One study (Wolfe et al., 2003) found that 40 of the 41 studies included in their meta-analysis suggested that DV exposure had a negative effect on children (overall effect size of $Z_r = .28$). Negative effects included internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency, and conduct problems) behaviors, posttraumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, low levels of perceived competence, and self-blame. Some researchers have found that these negative effects were intensified by the co-occurrence of child abuse and DV exposure (Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Wolfe et al., 2003). On the other hand, researchers have found no significant difference in outcomes between children who were solely exposed to DV compared to children who were physically abused or both physically abused and exposed to DV (Kitzmann et al., 2003). Although these findings conflict, it is clear that the negative outcomes associated with DV indicate CPS-involved

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families that experience DV warrant significant attention. Therefore, CPS agencies have attempted to intervene on behalf of these families by providing appropriate services whenever DV is identified. Despite efforts to appropriately handle DV cases while keeping the affected family intact, some DV cases result in out-of-home placement due to determination by the caseworker that the child's safety cannot be ensured if he/she remains in the home.

1.2. Domestic violence and out-of-home placement

Caseworker decisions to place children with DV backgrounds vary greatly. Scholars have reported that the overall percentage of DV cases that resulted in out-of-home placement ranged from 5% to 86% (Kohl, Edleson, et al., 2005; Rees & Selwyn, 2009). These estimates varied depending on several factors, including the study's sample characteristics (e.g., infants vs. school-age children), who reported the DV (e.g., self-report vs. case report), and the level of data (e.g., geographically based vs. nationally representative). Although it may be assumed that children living in violent homes are safer when placed in out-of-home care, the act of being separated from one or both parents may be more traumatic than or just as traumatic as experiencing DV. Recent research using advanced statistical methods to approximate findings similar to RCTs indicated that children in foster care were either at greater risk of adverse outcomes (i.e., high delinquency rates, high teen birth rates, and less earning; Doyle, *in press*) or were no better (Berzin, 2008) than similar children who were involved with CPS but remained at home.

CPS officials have increasingly recognized the necessity of investigating the service needs of families with co-occurring problems, such as mental illness, drug abuse, homelessness, and DV. In the case of DV, its detection during CPS investigations should be followed by provision of appropriate DV services (Kohl, Barth, Hazen, & Landsverk, 2005). Receipt of DV services is designed to reduce the risk of out-of-home placement for these families; however, several factors such as caregiver risk factors (e.g., English et al., 2005; Kohl, Edleson, et al., 2005) and caseworker characteristics (e.g., Magen & Conroy, 1998; Postmus & Merritt, 2010; Yoshihama & Mills, 2003) influence final placement decisions.

Although family preservation is a goal of CPS, greater emphasis is typically placed on child safety (Barth & Jonson-Reid, 2000). Traditionally, CPS workers believe that their duty to protect children takes priority over victimized caregivers' wishes to remain with their children. Alternatively, DV advocates believe that CPS workers revictimize caregivers by being insensitive to issues of DV and making caregivers choose between their children and the perpetrator (Aron & Olson, 1997; LaViolette & Barnett, 2000; Shepard & Raschick, 1999). It may be argued that limited understanding among CPS providers of how to respond to DV has led to unnecessary out-of-home placements for families affected by DV. Whether this is the case remains uncertain given current efforts by CPS agencies to lessen the divide between DV and child welfare systems by training staff about DV; having guidelines about reporting DV; working closely with DV service providers to address co-occurrence issues; and implementing policy with clear criteria outlining situations in which children can remain with nonabusing parents or caregivers who experienced DV (Banks, Dutch, & Wang, 2008).

1.3. Goals and overview of the current study

The purpose of this review was to summarize and synthesize research on out-of-home placement among children with caregivers who experienced DV. This review focused on studies that examined (1) the relationship between DV and out-of-home placement and (2) likelihood of reunification among foster care children with a history of DV. In addition, we critically examined the research methods used in each study. Focusing on these aspects of the literature may

help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers determine the gaps in knowledge and interventions for families affected by DV and involved with CPS.

2. Methods

Because of the methodological variance in research on case outcomes of families exposed to DV, it was difficult to compare findings across studies. Therefore, to avoid erroneous effect size calculations and adopt a conservative approach, we conducted this review using an integrative review framework. This framework uses review methods to summarize the literature in a manner that provides a comprehensive understanding of a particular topic (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The methods in this study were guided by Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) recommended strategies to enhance the rigor of integrated reviews. We chose this strategy because, unlike other recommended strategies which primarily side with systematic review and meta-analysis methods, it provides an explanation of how to analyze and present information from diverse data sources.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Recognizing that the U.S. child welfare system operates differently from child welfare systems in other countries (e.g., Fernandez & Barth, 2010), we limited the studies selected for this review to studies using U.S. based samples. This was done in an attempt to make studies as comparable as possible. In addition, we sampled only empirical studies using quasi-experimental designs. To the best of our knowledge, there were no published DV studies that used a randomized controlled trial design. Finally, studies had to be written in English and published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Two inclusion/exclusion criteria related to DV, out-of-home placement, and family reunification were established to help ensure that the studies captured in the review were relevant to the research goals. First, studies were included only if they had a sample of CPS-involved families affected by DV. Studies also had to include a comparison sample that did not experience DV. DV studies included studies that reported on the DV experiences of biological caregivers or children. DV was defined as any report that indicated a caregiver had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional abuse within an intimate relationship. Children's DV experience included reports of whether the child was exposed to DV. Any study in which DV was assessed based on the experiences of foster or adoptive parents was excluded.

Second, studies had to examine the relationship between DV and (a) out-of-home placement or (b) family reunification. Out-of-home placement types included kinship or nonrelative foster care, group home, shelter care, residential treatment center, or correctional facility; however, studies in which it was clear that the placement arrangement was made without social services involvement were excluded. These studies were excluded because it proved difficult to determine whether the families in these studies were involved with CPS. Furthermore, studies were excluded if children were described as being in "state custody" but still living with their birth parent(s). Such cases may include instances in which a child is considered to be in state custody but is allowed to (1) live with the nonoffending parent or (2) remain at home with the offending parent under the condition that the family receives child welfare services. Family reunification studies included any study that measured whether children in out-of-home care returned home to their family of origin.

2.2. Search strategy

An extensive review of the extant literature for empirical studies on out-of-home placement and DV was conducted by searching the following academic databases: PsycInfo (1887–October 2012), PubMed

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