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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Intimate partner violence during pregnancy and behavioral problems in children and adolescents: a meta-analysis<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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### KEYWORDS

Intimate partner violence;  
Prenatal;  
Behavioral problems;  
Child development

### Abstract

**Objective:** To evaluate the association of intimate partner violence during the gestational period and the development of externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems in children and adolescents.

**Source of data:** A meta-analysis of cohort and case-control studies was performed, using studies selected from electronic databases. Eligible studies included women who experienced intimate partner violence during pregnancy and their children's behavioral problems. These problems encompass two groups: externalizing problems (expressed by hyperactivity, aggressive and challenging behavior, and delinquency) and internalizing problems (represented by depressive moods, anxiety, and somatic symptoms). The risk of bias was assessed by the Newcastle-Ottawa Quality Assessment Scale (NOS) and the quality of evidence by the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE). RevMan 5.3 software was used for the meta-analysis.

**Data synthesis:** Of the 687 eligible articles, only seven met all inclusion criteria and consisted of 12,250 mother/child pairs. The age range of the assessed children varied from 10 months to 16 years. The odds of internalizing problems in children exposed to prenatal violence were two-fold higher (OR = 2.10, 95% CI: 1.17–3.76) and that of externalizing problems were 1.9-fold higher (95% CI: 1.28–2.83), when compared to children of unexposed mothers.

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Violência por parceiro íntimo;  
Pré-natal;  
Problemas comportamentais;  
Desenvolvimento infantil

**Conclusion:** The results of this study are consistent with the hypothesis that women's exposure to intimate partner violence during pregnancy may be associated with behavioral problems of their children, emphasizing the need for greater understanding about the vulnerability of children to adversity in early ages.

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## Violência por parceiro íntimo na gravidez e problemas comportamentais de crianças e adolescentes: uma metanálise

### Resumo

**Objetivo:** Avaliar a associação da violência por parceiro íntimo durante o período gestacional e o desenvolvimento de problemas comportamentais externalizantes e internalizantes de crianças e adolescentes.

**Fontes dos dados:** Foi realizada metanálise de estudos de coorte e caso-controle, selecionados em bases de dados eletrônicas. Os estudos elegíveis incluíram: mulheres que sofreram violência pelo parceiro íntimo durante a gravidez e problemas comportamentais de seus filhos. Esses problemas englobam dois grupos: os problemas externalizantes (que se expressam por hiperatividade, comportamento agressivo e desafiante e delinquência) e os internalizantes (representados por humor depressivo, ansiedade e sintomas somáticos). O risco de viés foi avaliado pela Newcastle - Ottawa Quality Assessment Scale (NOS) e a qualidade da evidência pelo "Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluation" (GRADE). O software RevMan 5.3 foi usado para a metanálise.

**Síntese dos dados:** Dos 687 artigos elegíveis, apenas sete apresentaram todos os critérios de inclusão e formaram 12.250 pares de mães e filhos. A faixa etária das crianças analisadas variou de 10 meses a 16 anos. A chance de problemas internalizantes das crianças, expostas à violência pré-natal, foi duas vezes maior (OR = 2,10; IC 95%: 1,17-3,76) e de problemas externalizantes, foi 1,90 vezes maior (IC 95%: 1,28-2,83), quando comparada com filhos de mães não expostas.

**Conclusão:** Os resultados deste estudo são consistentes com a hipótese que a exposição da mulher a violência por parceiro íntimo na gestação pode estar associada a problemas comportamentais dos filhos, destacando a necessidade de maior compreensão sobre vulnerabilidade das crianças a adversidades precoces.

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## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) during pregnancy is a global issue with high prevalence rates among low-income women of reproductive age,<sup>1,2</sup> with serious consequences for health of women, the fetus, and the child.<sup>3,4</sup> The consequences for women, in addition to physical injuries<sup>5</sup> and homicide,<sup>6</sup> includes psychiatric morbidity, with a higher risk of common mental disorders,<sup>7</sup> post-traumatic stress disorder,<sup>8</sup> and postpartum depression.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the children, most of the studies show the physical consequences, including low birth weight, prematurity, miscarriage, and neonatal and perinatal mortality.<sup>1</sup> Reviews published to date on IPV exposure during pregnancy<sup>4,9</sup> have shown physical consequences, but have not reported the association with behavioral problems of children and adolescents.

While there is a growing body of research on children's exposure to IPV suffered by their mothers,<sup>10-12</sup> little is known about the long-term consequences of prenatal exposure to violence regarding the child's mental development.

Studies have been conducted to understand how IPV, a proven stressful event during pregnancy, hinders the

development of children's emotional and behavioral regulation systems.<sup>13</sup> Prenatal stress has been shown to be mediated by maternal and fetal cortisol levels, which alter the programming of fetal neurons,<sup>14</sup> and may play an important role in the child's social and emotional development.<sup>15,16</sup> There is evidence that exposure to IPV may predispose to externalizing problems that include antisocial behavior, conduct and impulse control disorders, which can be expressed by hyperactivity, aggressive and defiant behavior, and delinquency.<sup>17-20</sup> The internalizing symptomatology is represented by depression, anxiety, introspection, and somatic symptoms.<sup>17-19</sup>

The objective of this review was to assess whether IPV is associated to the development of behavioral problems of children and adolescents in the long term.

## Methods

The description of this review followed the parameters of the Meta-analysis of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (MOOSE)<sup>21</sup> and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA),<sup>22</sup>

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