

Long-Term Impact of Family Arguments and Physical Violence on Adult Functioning at Age 30 Years: Findings From the Simmons Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To prospectively examine the extent to which an increase in family arguments by age 15 years and the occurrence of family physical violence by age 18 years are related to deficits in key domains of adult functioning at age 30 years. **Method:** The 346 participants were part of a single-age cohort from a predominately white working-class community whose psychosocial development has been traced since age 5 years. Family arguments and violence were assessed through self-reports during adolescence. Developmentally relevant areas of current adult functioning were measured by self-reports, structured diagnostic interviews, and clinical interviewer ratings. **Results:** Both family arguments and physical violence were significantly related to compromised functioning across multiple areas of adult functioning. Although many associations were somewhat attenuated after controlling for sex, other early family adversities, and family history of disorder, most relations retained statistical significance. Both risk factors were linked with later mental health problems and deficits in psychological and occupational/career functioning. Family violence was also linked to poorer physical health at age 30 years. **Conclusions:** Findings underscore the potential long-term impact of troubled family interactions and highlight the critical importance of early intervention programs for youths experiencing either verbal conflict or physical violence in the home. *J. Am. Acad. Child. Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2009;48(3):290–298.

Key Words: family conflict, family violence, adult functioning, prospective.

Family environments characterized by verbal conflict or physical violence often have a detrimental influence on the psychosocial development, mental health, and well-being of the youths living in those environments.^{1–3}

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However, research tracing the long-term impact of these exposures is less extensive. Based on current evidence, it is unclear whether the impact of family conflict and violence diminishes by adulthood or can be explained by the effects of other aspects of the family environment. Using data from a prospective longitudinal study, we sought to clarify the nature of these relations by examining the associations between verbal conflict (measured as increased arguments) and physical violence in the family and problematic outcomes across multiple areas of adult functioning. A more refined understanding of these relations has direct application to programs of early intervention for youths experiencing conflict and violence in the home.

CROSS-SECTIONAL COMMUNITY-BASED STUDIES

To date, most evidence about the relation between early family conflict and violence and adult functioning comes from cross-sectional studies of mixed-age groups

of adults.^{4–10} Although these investigations have generally found significant independent associations between verbal conflict or physical violence and poor adult outcomes, cross-sectional studies have several well-known limitations. Inherent problems, such as potential biases in the retrospective recall of childhood and adolescent family interactions, reduce the ability of such studies to provide definitive conclusions.^{11,12} A more long-term developmental understanding of these relations is needed. Yet although multiwave prospective designs are better suited to trace the impact of negative childhood and adolescent family environments on later functioning, such studies are rare.

PROSPECTIVE STUDIES

Results from some prospective studies support the conclusion that the impact of family conflict extends into adulthood and is independent of the effects of other family risk factors. Although this may be particularly true for problems such as violence directed toward the child,¹³ there is also a suggestion that less severe forms of troubled family interactions may have long-term implications. For instance, in a study of several U.K. birth cohorts followed prospectively to ages 26 and 33 years, Stewart-Brown and coworkers¹⁴ found that parent–child discord in mid-adolescence was significantly linked to later adult physical health problems after controlling for sex and family social class. In a 17-year study of marital instability, Amato and Sobolewski¹⁵ reported that children exposed to marital discord were at a significantly increased risk for poor psychological well-being in adulthood (ages 19–40 years), such as lower self-esteem and less life satisfaction. These associations were found to be independent of the effects of other factors such as sex and parental divorce and educational level.

In contrast, other prospective studies support the competing notion that the impact of early family conflict diminishes over time and/or can be largely explained by other aspects of the family environment. For instance, a series of follow-up studies of the children of depressed and nondepressed parents showed that parent–child discord (i.e., arguing, fighting, tension) was significantly associated with major depression in young adulthood (average age 28 years)¹⁶ but not in later adulthood (average age 34 years).¹⁷ Reports from a multiwave longitudinal study of a New Zealand birth cohort revealed that witnessing violence between parents

(ranging from verbal threats to physical violence) by mid-adolescence was associated with several negative outcomes in unadjusted analyses, including panic attacks and panic disorder,¹³ violent and criminal behavior,¹⁸ and perpetrating violence against their own partners.¹⁸ However, after controlling for other aspects of the family environment (e.g., socioeconomic disadvantage, adverse family life events, parent alcohol disorders, criminal behavior), witnessing interparental violence during adolescence was no longer significantly related to compromised functioning in these areas.

The divergent results of previous prospective studies may have resulted from methodological variations across investigations. Definitions of troubled family interactions have differed across studies, and it is possible that the long-term influence of less serious forms of dysfunctional interactions, such as parent–child or interparental discord, may vary from more serious problems, such as physical violence. Existing investigations have also differed in their ability to control for the confounding influences of other negative family characteristics. Additionally, much previous work has typically included information on only a limited number of adult outcomes. Conclusions concerning the influence of early family verbal conflict and violence may therefore have resulted because of differences in the types of outcomes that were assessed.

PRESENT STUDY

The current work builds on previous studies with this community sample illustrating that family arguments and violence were related to depression occurring during late adolescence¹⁹ through the transition to adulthood.²⁰ In this study, we examined two research questions: to what extent are increased family arguments by age 15 years and family physical violence by age 18 years related to problems in current functioning at age 30 years across multiple domains? and do family arguments and physical violence predict poor adult functioning after controlling for other early family adversities and family history of mental disorders? We selected these two aspects of troubled family interactions because they are potentially modifiable or amenable to intervention efforts and reflect extremes of a continuum—verbal arguments and physical violence. This enabled us to determine whether long-term functioning was differentially affected by various types of dysfunctional family interactions.

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