



The presence of a stepfather and child physical abuse, as reported by a sample of Brazilian mothers in Rio de Janeiro[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Substitute fathers are often reported to commit child abuse at higher rates than birth (i.e., putative genetic) fathers. Due to the paucity of studies, especially in developing countries, and to some conflicting results from developed countries regarding the identity of perpetrators of less extreme forms of physical abuse of children in stepfamilies, the aim of this study was to assess whether the presence of a stepfather would constitute a risk factor for violence against Brazilian children, as reported by their mothers.

Methods: Three hundred eighty five women with a current male partner and a child aged 1–12 years were interviewed. Child physical abuse was assessed using the *Conflict Tactic Scales Parent Child*. Data were analyzed through multiple logistic regressions.

Results: Physical abuse (including severe physical abuse) was reported for 34.0% of the children with stepfathers ($N = 54$) versus 17.6% of those living with putative genetic fathers ($N = 331$). When adjusted for income, education, ages, whether the child was the first born, number of siblings, number of people in the household, how much time the man spent with the child, how many years he resided with the mother, and alcohol abuse and drug use by the mother and her partner, the adjusted odds ratio was 2.7 (95% CI: 1.2–5.9) for stepfather households over 2 genetic parent households. Surprisingly, the elevated risk to stepchildren was due to alleged abuse by the interviewee herself rather than her partner.

Conclusion: Brazilian mothers professed to abuse their own children at substantially higher rates when their male partners were stepfathers to the focal child as compared to genetic fathers.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment is internationally recognized as an important problem from a public health, a child protection and a children's human rights perspective (Gilbert, Kemp et al., 2009; Gilbert, Widom et al., 2009; MacMillan et al., 2009; Reading et al., 2009). Children suffer physical abuse all over the world, in developed and developing countries. Most often they are assaulted by their own parents (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Bordin, Paula, do Nascimento, & Duarte, 2006; Briere & Elliott, 2003; Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; de Moura, Moraes, & Reichenheim, 2008; Finkelhor & Dzuiba Leatherman, 1994; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Kim & Ko, 1990; Machado, Goncalves, Matos, & Dias, 2007; MacMillan et al., 1997; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005; Mcree, 2008; Moura & Reichenheim, 2005; Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, & Kotch, 2001; Reichenheim, Dias, & Moraes, 2006; Sariola & Uutela, 1992; Straus & Gelles, 1986).

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According to many studies, stepparents, especially stepfathers, often abuse children at higher rates than their birth parent counterparts (Daly & Wilson, 2008). Although there is evidence that elevated abuse risk in stepfather households is not an artifact of economic status, birth order, maternal age, or household size (Daly & Wilson, 1985), other possible confounds such as parental alcohol and drug abuse have not been simultaneously controlled.

There have been several reasons posed to explain the relationship between stepfather presence and elevated rates of child physical abuse. Recently, Berger, Paxson, and Waldfogel (2009) reviewed the major theories in this area as well as the existing body of research. One view is that stepfathers, on average, are less attached to the unrelated children of their partners than genetic fathers to their own children. From an evolutionary perspective, men's investments in children are influenced by genetic links. From a family economics perspective, genetic fathers may expect that their children will care for them in old age, while stepfathers may not share these expectations. In addition, stepfathers and children may compete for mothers' time, energy, attention, or affections. All of these suggest that genetic fathers may make higher quality investments in children than stepfathers; accordingly, stepfathers have a higher probability of physically abusing children (Berger et al., 2009). "An alternative view is that social selection produces an association between maltreatment risk and children's exposure to social fathers or daters. That is, the presence of unrelated men may be correlated with other, often unobserved, factors that elevate maltreatment risk" (Berger et al., 2009).

In addition to elevated abuse risk from stepfathers, it has been found that mothers themselves are also more likely to abuse the children if their partners are stepfathers (Sariola & Uutela, 1992). A single mother who marries can reap financial and social benefits, but there are also stressors associated with stepfamily formation and stepfamily life (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Flouri, 2008; Hofferth, 2006; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008), stressors that may be associated with elevated risk of underinvestment and mistreatment by both parents.

Parental affection and care presumably evolved in the service of promoting parental fitness, and hence to promote the welfare of one's own children rather than the welfare of any child. These considerations suggest that caring for stepchildren is motivated by inclinations to invest in the new marital relationship rather than in the children themselves (Anderson, 2000), and that such care will be less reliable and "selfless" than care for one's own children, an hypothesis for which there is abundant support (Daly & Wilson, 2008). How much of the newly formed family's resources will be invested in children of prior unions is thus a contentious issue, and there is evidence that treatment of the children is indeed a much greater source of marital conflict in stepfamilies than in those in which the children are products of the present union (Hobart, 1991; Messinger, 1976). Such conflicts are presumably relevant to the elevated risks of both divorce (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977) and violence against wives (Daly, Singh, & Wilson, 1993) in stepfamilies, but the conflict may instead be resolved by the birth parent's acceptance of the stepparent's perspective and a devaluation of the stepchildren by both parties.

In fact, children are several times more likely to be victims of extreme abuse and homicide in the hands of step than genetic parents (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Although this so called "Cinderella effect" was convincingly demonstrated regarding homicides and registered cases of extreme child abuse (Daly & Wilson, 1998), few studies looked at non-fatal, non-registered physical abuse victimization (Gelles & Harrop, 1991; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Kim & Ko, 1990; Sariola & Uutela, 1992). Hashima and Amato (1994) and Kim and Ko (1990) found higher prevalence of physical punitive behavior in stepfamilies, according to the reports of the parents and of the children respectively, but did not report whether the perpetrator was the (step) mother or the (step) father. Based on the reports by the children Sariola and Uutela (1992) also found violence to be more common in stepfamilies. Yet, when only violence used by stepparents in these families was regarded, the differences were not statistically significant. They reported that mothers used severe violence toward their genetic children more in stepfamilies (8.6%) than in 2 genetic parents' family (3.9%). Gelles and Harrop (1991) found that stepparents were not more likely to admit physically abusing their stepchildren than genetic parents their children. The limitations of the evidence concerning the non-fatal physical abuse of stepchildren were identified by Adler-Baeder (2006), who concluded the following in her review: "It should be clear that there is no conclusive answer to the overrepresentation question for stepchildren among physical abuse victims. In fact, it may be surprising to some readers that so little empirical attention has been given to this issue, despite some strong debate on the topic. . . ."

Due to the paucity of studies, especially in developing countries, and to some conflicting results from developed countries regarding the identity of perpetrators of less extreme forms of physical abuse of children in stepfamilies, the aim of this study was to assess whether child physical abuse, as reported by a sample of mothers in Rio de Janeiro, would differ according to whether the mother's current partner was the genetic father of children in the home or was their social or stepfather. A secondary aim was to assess the extent to which physical abuse by either parent is exacerbated by various characteristics of the family and their circumstances in relation to type of parental family.

Methods

Study population and settings

This cross-sectional survey was conducted in two public outpatient paediatric services in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, between September 2006 and January 2007. While mothers and children waited for a doctor's appointment, trained interviewers administered a multidimensional face-to-face questionnaire to mothers who had children aged 1–12. A number of criteria determined whether a mother would be interviewed or excluded from the study. The exclusion criteria were as follows: child under age 1 or over age 12; child with chronic disease; child spent fewer than 6 "periods" per week with the mother's

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