



Mutuality, severity, and chronicity of violence by Father-Only, Mother-Only, and mutually violent parents as reported by university students in 15 nations[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2013
 Received in revised form
 23 September 2013
 Accepted 10 October 2013
 Available online 16 November 2013

Keywords:

Aggression
 Children
 Mothers
 Fathers
 Violence
 Domestic violence
 Witnessing violence
 Dyadic types

ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide a more complete description of the violence between parents experienced by children than is usual in research and to suggest the practicality and importance of doing so. It presents results on the percent of parents in each of three *Dyadic Types*: Father-Only (the father assaulted the mother and the mother did not assault), Mother-Only (mother assaulted and the father did not assault), and Both-Assault; and on differences between these three types in the chronicity and severity of assaults. Questionnaires were completed by convenience samples of university students in 15 nations ($N = 11,408$). Violence between parents was measured by the short form of the Conflict Tactics Scales. Fourteen percent of the students reported one or more instances of physical violence between their parents, including 6% who reported a severe assault. Cross classification of assaults by the father and the mother to identify Dyadic Types found 25% Father-Only, 22% Mother-Only, and 52% Both-Assaulted. The percentage in each Dyadic Type based on reports by male or female students were similar. They were also consistent with percentages found by previous studies identifying the Dyadic Types of violent couples. In respect to chronicity, when violence between parents occurred, in 82% of the cases, it occurred more than once. Research on children experiencing violence between parents, and prevention and treatment of inter-parental violence, are likely to be enhanced if it takes into account that Both-Violent is the most frequent pattern to which children are exposed and that Mother-Only is about as frequent as Father-Only. Consideration of the severity, and chronicity, of the inter-parental violence needs to replace simply classifying parents as violent. Achieving this is possible using instruments which take only three to five minutes and which can be completed by only one of the parents or by the child.

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There have been a large number of empirical studies of children exposed to physical violence between their parents, but only a few provided data on which parent assaulted the other parent or compared the effects on children of growing up in what, in this article, are called *Dyadic Types* (DTs). Data on three DTs are presented: Father-Only, Mother-Only, and Both-Assaulted. This is a descriptive article with two objectives: The first and main objective is to present data on the following

[☆] Revision of a paper presented at the International Family Violence and Child Victimization Research Conference, Sheraton Harborside Hotel, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, July 8–10, 2012. This article is one of a series reporting results of the International Parenting Study directed by Angele Fauchier angele.fauchier@unh.edu, and the Dyadic Types Research Program. Papers can be downloaded from <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mas2>. The work was supported by National Institute of Mental Health grant T32MH15161, and the University of New Hampshire.

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questions: (a) What percent of samples of university students in 15 nations grew up with parents who were physically violent to each other? (b) Among those who experienced inter-parental violence, what percent of cases were in each of the three DTs? (c) How severe and chronic were the inter-parental assaults to which these students were exposed?

The second objective is to draw attention to the value of not simply identifying if a child has been exposed to violence between parents but also identifying the severity and chronicity of the assaults and which of the three DTs the child has experienced. It is argued that taking into account the DT of violence between parents is likely to improve research and treatment and also prevention steps to reduce the exposure of children to violence between their parents. Methods of obtaining the information needed to classify parents into the Father-Only, Mother-Only, and Both-Assault types that are feasible and practical for almost all caseworkers and researchers are identified.

Importance of dyadic measurement of inter-parental violence

Identifying whether the child was exposed to violence by both parents, or by only one, whether it was the father or mother, needs to be taken into account in theories about the effects of exposure to parental violence and in prevention and treatment efforts. Yet, as was mentioned, few studies obtain this information, and it is virtually absent from the theoretical and clinical literature. Therefore, one objective of this article was to give the phenomenon a convenient name (DT), identify studies which have reported the percent of cases in each DT, and present new cross-national data on the prevalence of each DT. The hope is that this study will further use of the DT typology, perhaps making it a standard part of intake diagnosis child abuse.

One reason information on which DT the child experienced is needed is that previous studies that have classified cases of partner violence into DTs have tended to find that, of the three types, the Both-Assault type tends to be about half the cases, and among the other half, Male-Partner- and Female-Partner-Only types tend to occur equally (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012; Straus, 2013a). This finding is probably contrary to what most professionals concerned with exposure to inter-parental violence would expect. Consequently, additional data are needed to clarify this issue.

Information on the prevalence of DTs is also needed because previous research suggests that which type a child experiences is associated with differences in behavior problems of the child. For example, Straus (1992) studied 20 child behavior problems and found that of the 17 for which there were significant differences between the three DTs in the level of problems experienced by the child, for nine (60%) of them, the Mother-Only type had the strongest relationship to child behavior problems. Further research on differences between DTs in their effects on the child is needed, but it is not the purpose of this article, which is simply to describe the prevalence of the DTs and differences in the severity and chronicity of violence associated with each DT. We believe the needed research on differential effects is more likely if the research community is aware of the percentage of children who experience each of the three types. Similarly, we believe that clinicians working with children exposed to inter-parental violence are more likely to take into account which of the DTs the child has experienced if they have information on the prevalence of each DT and differences between DTs in the severity and chronicity of the violence.

The value of explicitly categorizing inter-parental violence as DTs is also suggested by a study by McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, and Green (2006). They presented data on the percent of children exposed to violence by the father (13%), mother (18%), and either parent (21%). This represents an advance over the typical pattern because, as they point out, little is known about how, or whether, male and female violence differentially influence children's adjustment.

However, *either parent* is not a measure of Both-Assault. Suppose, for example, the 21% in the either parent group consisted of 10% in which the fathers assaulted and a *different* 10% in which the mothers assaulted. In such a situation, 20% of the children would have experienced violence between their parents, but *none* would have been in household in which both parents assaulted. The importance of identifying children in the Both-Assault type is that those relationships are more likely to involve severe assaults, more likely to be chronic (Straus & Gozjolko, in press; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007), and to have the most adverse effects on children (Straus, 1992, 2013b).

In addition to identifying the Both type of parents, DTs unambiguously identify cases in which the father is the only parent who assaults and the mother is the only parent who assaults the other parent. This information about the violence to which children have been exposed is theoretically and therapeutically crucial.

Severity and chronicity

Although an essential first step is to determine if the aggression is Father-Only, Mother-Only, or Both-Assault, as previously noted, information about other characteristics of the inter-parental violence are important and often mentioned but rarely empirically investigated. For this study, we investigated the severity and the chronicity of the assaults perpetrated by parents in each DT. Chronicity is the frequency of assault among those who assault.

A study which did distinguish between severe and less severe violence between parents (Park et al., 2012) found that severe violence between parents was a much stronger predictor of criminal behavior by the child than exposure to less severe violence between parents. The chronicity of assaults between parents is also rarely analyzed, even though it is reasonable to assume that children who experience inter-parental violence repeatedly are more likely to be harmed.

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