



Do trauma symptoms mediate the relationship between childhood physical abuse and adult child abuse risk? ☆, ☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Although the intergenerational transmission of family violence has been well documented, the mechanisms responsible for this effect have not been fully determined. The present study examined whether trauma symptoms mediate the relationship between a childhood history of child physical abuse (CPA) and adult CPA risk, and whether any such mediation was similar for women and men.

Method: Female and male US Navy (USN) recruits ($N = 5,394$) and college students ($N = 716$) completed self-report measures of their history of child abuse (i.e., CPA and child sexual abuse [CSA]), exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV), current trauma symptoms, and adult CPA risk.

Results: As expected, there was a strong association between a childhood history of CPA and adult CPA risk. This association was significant even after controlling for demographic variables and childhood exposure to other forms of violence (CSA and IPV), and the strength of the relationship did not vary depending on demographics or exposure to other forms of violence. However, the association between a history of CPA and adult risk of CPA was stronger for individuals high in defensive avoidance compared to those low in defensive avoidance. The association between a history of CPA and adult CPA risk was largely, although not entirely, mediated by psychological trauma symptoms. Mediation was observed for both women and men in both the USN and college samples.

Conclusions: Trauma symptoms associated with a history of CPA accounted for a substantial part of the relationship between a history of CPA and adult CPA risk in both women and men.

Practice implications: To the extent that trauma symptoms are a mechanism by which the intergenerational transmission of child abuse occurs, intervening to reduce trauma symptoms in CPA victims has the potential of reducing their risk of continuing the cycle of violence.

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Introduction

Children who are physically abused by their parents are at risk of numerous short- and long-term consequences. Apart from the possibility of physical injury and death (Brittain, 2006), physically abused children, relative to non-abused children, are more likely to experience a range of psychosocial problems, such as cognitive deficits, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, psychological distress, relationship problems, re-victimization, and adult psychopathology, including anti-social behavior and PTSD (e.g., Borger, Cox, & Asmundson, 2005; DiLillo, Perry, & Fortier, 2006; Dube et al., 2001; Farrington, 2005; Feerick, Haugaard, & Hien, 2002; Hetzel & McCanne, 2005; Jaffee et al., 2005; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas, & Taylor, 2007; Johnson et al., 2002; Pittman & Buckley, 2006; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007). Further, abused children are at increased risk of engaging in high-risk behaviors, such as smoking, overeating, using alcohol or illicit drugs, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, and running away (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2005; Smith, Davis, & Fricker-Elhai, 2004; Tyler & Johnson, 2006).

Children who experience physical abuse, compared to non-abused children, also are at increased risk of perpetrating violent behaviors. Although there are exceptions (e.g., Neller, Denney, Pietz, & Thomlinson, 2005), child physical abuse (CPA) has been identified as a risk factor for several types of interpersonal violence, including peer aggression (Benda & Corwyn, 2002; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Yexley, Borowsky, & Ireland, 2002), intimate partner violence (IPV) (Merrill, Hervig, & Milner, 1996; Reitzel-Jaffe & Wolfe, 2001; Riggs, O'Leary, & Breslin, 1990; Smith & Williams, 1992; Wekerle et al., 2001; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001), serious juvenile offenses (Crooks, Scott, Wolfe, Chiodo, & Killip, 2007; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008), violent crime (Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005), and adult sexual assault (Merrill, Thomsen, Gold, & Milner, 2001).

In addition, an association between the experience of CPA and adult risk of perpetrating CPA (commonly referred to as the intergenerational transmission of CPA) has been reported. Although there are exceptions (Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999; Haskett, Johnson, & Miller, 1994) and mixed findings (Doumas, Margolin, & John, 1994; Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999; Milner & Foody, 1994), most studies have found an association between the childhood experience of CPA and adult CPA risk. This association has been reported in undergraduate samples (e.g., Crouch, Milner, & Caliso, 1995; de Paul, Milner, & Mugica, 1995; de Paul, Perez-Albeniz, Paz, Alday, & Mocoroa, 2002; Litty, Kowalski, & Minor, 1996; Narang & Contreras, 2000; Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2003), in a Navy recruit sample (Merrill et al., 1996), in parent samples (e.g., Balge & Milner, 2000; Craig & Sprang, 2007; de Paul & Domenech, 2000; DiLillo, Tremblay, & Peterson, 2000; Hall, Sachs, & Rayens, 1998; Ornduff, Kesley, Bursi, Alpert, & Bada, 2002; Rinehart et al., 2005) and in a mixed non-parent and parent sample (Crouch, Milner, & Thomsen, 2001).

Social learning theory and attachment theory have been used to explain why physically abused children, as adults, are at risk of abusing their own children. Both theories focus on the impact of early social experiences on later interpersonal relationships. According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1973, 1977, 1986; Heider, 1958; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Mischel, 1973) social behaviors are learned through observing and imitating the behavior of models, such as parents. Thus, children who are exposed to verbally and physically abusive parenting behaviors may learn these behaviors and use similar behaviors when they become parents. In support of the social learning perspective, Bower-Russa (2005) found that parenting attitudes partially mediated the relationship between a childhood history of physical discipline and later acceptance of severe parental physical discipline. Bower-Russa, however, did not examine the childhood experience of CPA or the risk for or perpetration of adult CPA.

Compared to social learning theory, attachment theory focuses less on the learning of specific behaviors than on the formation of cognitive models of relationships that guide the selection of behaviors. According to attachment theory, children form internal working models of the self and others based on early interactions with their parents (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Hill & Safran, 1994; Main & Kaplan, 1985; Ryle, 1985; Shirk, 1998; Stern, 1985). These internal working models provide expectations about relationships and guide relationship behaviors. From an attachment perspective, the intergenerational transmission of child abuse occurs because children who are abused develop negative models of themselves and/or others, which increase the likelihood that they will display negative or abusive behaviors toward others, including their own children. However, in a test of this hypothesis, Merrill et al. (2005) found no evidence that adult internalized models of self and others mediated the relationship between CPA and adult CPA risk; instead, interpersonal schemata independently predicted adult CPA risk separate from the predictive power of CPA history.

As an alternative to social learning and attachment perspectives, some authors have proposed trauma-based models to explain the intergenerational transmission of violence. Trauma-based models (e.g., Dutton, 1998, 1999; Dutton & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997; Neller et al., 2005; Pomeroy, 1995) suggest that individuals who experience violence are likely to develop trauma symptoms, and that it is these symptoms that increase the likelihood of later violent behavior by the victim. For example, with respect to spouse abuse, Dutton and Holtzworth-Munroe (1997) argued that psychological sequelae (e.g., poor self-concept, emotion dysregulation) resulting from traumatic childhood experiences may better explain IPV than social learning theory. Supporting this perspective, Wekerle et al. (2001) found that trauma symptoms mediated the relationship between child maltreatment and dating violence for women. For men, however, child maltreatment and trauma symptoms were independent contributors to dating violence. Although this study of dating violence is informative, no study was found that examined whether trauma symptoms mediate the relationship between childhood experience of CPA and adult CPA risk.

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