



Type of violence, age, and gender differences in the effects of family violence on children's behavior problems: A mega-analysis ☆

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Received 1 July 2005; revised 15 December 2005
Available online 15 February 2006

Abstract

A mega-analytic study was designed to exploit the power of a large data set combining raw data from multiple studies ($n = 1870$) to examine the effects of type of family violence, age, and gender on children's behavior problems assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). Our findings confirmed that children who experienced multiple forms of family violence were at greater risk than children who experienced only one form of abuse, and witnesses of inter-parental violence were at similar risk as victims of violence. Age moderated the effects of family violence on externalizing behavior problems, but not on internalizing behavior problems. No main or interaction effects involving children's gender were evident. These results underscore the need to take children's age, type of violence, and type of outcome into account when examining the effects of family violence on children's behavior problems.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

☆ The authors are grateful to the researchers who provided data for inclusion in these analyses: Dante Cicchetti, Robert Emery, George Holden, Honore Hughes, Ernest Jouriles, Milling Kinard, Laura McCloskey, Tim Moore, Maura O'Keefe, Kathy Ritchie, Robbie Rossman, Suzanne Salzinger, and Penelope Trickett. We also thank Jessica Norris for assistance preparing the data for reanalysis and are especially grateful to Jack McArdle for his advice regarding the mega analytic technique. Unfortunately, Kathleen J. Sternberg died before completion of this report.

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Keywords: Child abuse; Spouse abuse; Family violence; Child adjustment; Behavior problems

In the last few decades, researchers have made remarkable progress understanding family violence and its effects on children's development. Links between exposure to family violence and a broad range of behavioral, emotional and social disorders have been explored using a variety of research designs and methods. Despite substantial progress, however, it remains unclear how different forms of victimization (e.g., being a victim of physical child abuse, observing spouse abuse, and being both a victim and observer of physical abuse) affect behavior and development when the effects of other factors are controlled. It is unclear, for example, whether witnessing violence between parents has different effects than being the direct victim of violence, whether being both a victim and a witness of violence adds to the negative effects of experiencing only one type of violence, or whether the effects of different types of family violence vary depending on the age and gender of the child. The present study was designed to explore these questions using the mega-analytic method (McArdle & Horn, 2002) to analyze a large data set compiled by many researchers.

Developmental psychopathology provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for attempting to understand the dynamic multidimensional processes whereby family violence affects children's behavior and emotional adjustment (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Mash & Dozois, 1996). Abnormal and unusual circumstances, especially violence within the family, disrupt the normal course of growth and adaptation because experiences with caregivers at one developmental period affect children's adaptation to subsequent developmental issues. Children who fail to develop interpersonal trust, receive little affection from others, or have authoritarian parents (all common characteristics of abused children), miss important socializing experiences and often fail to develop adaptive attachment strategies, which in turn makes emotional and behavior problems more likely (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). Furthermore, children learn emotional regulation naturally through the emotional expressions and explanations given by their caregivers. Children living in families with violent histories live in a world of emotional turmoil and extremes, making it difficult for them to understand, label, and regulate their own internal states appropriately. Thus, the emotional and behavioral problems shown by abused children may reflect their inadequate attempts to regulate strong emotions (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989).

As this framework would predict, children who have witnessed spousal violence or have been direct victims of physical abuse or both have more behavioral and emotional problems than children without such experiences. Reviews of research on the psychological adjustment of physically abused children and child witnesses of spousal abuse suggest that all types of family violence are associated with diverse psychological problems including aggression, anxiety, depression, aggressive peer relationships, poor school performance and a host of other cognitive, social and emotional difficulties, although associations between abusive acts and specific psychological outcomes are sometimes quite weak (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Edleson, 1999; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Kolko, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996; Margolin & Gordis, 2004; Salzinger, Feldman, Ng-Mak, Mojica, & Stockhammer, 2001; Silverman & Gelles, 2001; Sternberg et al., 1993; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003; Wolfe & McGee, 1994).

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