



# Children's exposure to intimate partner violence: A meta-analysis of longitudinal associations with child adjustment problems



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Children's exposure to IPV is linked prospectively to future adjustment problems.
- The link between IPV and children's adjustment problems becomes stronger over time.
- Associations are stronger when IPV is conceptualized broadly, rather than narrowly.

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## ABSTRACT

This meta-analysis reviewed 74 studies that examined longitudinal associations between children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and their adjustment problems. Results indicated that children's exposure to IPV is linked prospectively with child externalizing, internalizing, and total adjustment problems. Moreover, the magnitude of the association between IPV exposure and child externalizing and internalizing problems strengthens over time. In addition, associations are stronger between IPV exposure and child externalizing and internalizing problems when IPV is conceptualized broadly rather than narrowly (physical IPV + psychological and/or sexual IPV versus physical IPV only), and when information on IPV and child adjustment problems is obtained from the same source, rather than independent sources. When IPV exposure is measured at younger ages, compared to older ages, the association between IPV and child externalizing problems is greater. However, when child adjustment problems are measured at older ages, compared to younger ages, the association between IPV and child internalizing problems is greater. Child sex, sample type, and whether only the male partner's violence or both partners' violence was measured did not predict the association between children's exposure to IPV and later adjustment problems. The findings have both research and clinical implications regarding the long-term adjustment of children exposed to IPV and the conceptualization and measurement of resilience subsequent to IPV.

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Approximately 15.5 million children in the US are estimated to live in two-parent households in which intimate partner violence (IPV) has occurred within the previous year (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006), and about 16% have witnessed IPV at least once during their lives (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). Meta-analyses suggest that children's exposure to IPV, defined as children living with parents who report occurrences of IPV, correlates with a variety of adjustment problems, with an effect size in the small to medium range (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). These reviews, however, have focused primarily on cross-sectional associations. Important questions about links between children's exposure to IPV and their adjustment problems, which require longitudinal data, remain unanswered. For example, it is not clear whether children's exposure to IPV predicts later adjustment problems, or whether the strength of the relation fades over time. Since the publication of these prior meta-analytic reviews, longitudinal research has accumulated that permits an analysis of prospective associations between exposure to IPV and child adjustment problems, hopefully providing a clearer and more conclusive understanding of how children's adjustment may be related to exposure to IPV. The primary purpose of this study is to conduct a meta-analysis examining the question of whether children's exposure to IPV predicts later adjustment problems, and whether the magnitude of the association changes over time.

On the basis of theory, it could be reasoned that children's exposure to IPV can set in motion a chain of events that have long-lasting effects on child development and, in particular, the emergence of adjustment problems. These events might include processes internal to the child, such as the development of cognitions about interpersonal relationships (e.g., enduring negative beliefs about how individuals act toward one another), or biological changes that influence the child's ability to regulate emotions. They might also include events external to the child, such as the mother experiencing symptoms of trauma and depression, or the mother seeking refuge with her children at a shelter because of the IPV. Many investigators have documented prospective associations between children's exposure to IPV and later adjustment problems. Indeed, several studies indicate that the relation between exposure to IPV and child adjustment problems is evident for periods of 10 years or more (e.g., Narayan, Englund, Carlson, & Egeland, 2013; Yates, Dodds, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2003).

One form of long-term influence has been denoted a "sleeping effect": an effect that is weak or undetectable early on, but which strengthens and becomes clearly evident at a later point in time. For example, a child might initially experience some adjustment difficulties (e.g., an "adjustment reaction") after exposure to IPV, but rather than gradually dissipating, the difficulties later worsen. Similarly, children who appear to adapt well, despite their exposure to IPV, may later develop problems related to the IPV. Sleeping effects might emerge for a variety of reasons, including the obvious one that some child problems simply take time to unfold and crystallize following exposure to IPV. The implications of sleeping effects can be profound, however, particularly when attempting to understand resilience among children exposed to IPV (Howell, 2011).

In contrast to sleeping effects, some have suggested that the association between children's exposure to IPV and certain adjustment problems is likely to weaken or fade over time (e.g., Ware et al., 2001). In

much of the early research on children's exposure to IPV, the "violent" or "exposed" samples were often help-seeking samples, many recruited from domestic violence shelters. Living at a shelter can be highly stressful for both mothers and children. This is due not only to the timing of many shelter stays—immediately after a recent experience of IPV—but also due to having to physically move away from home, the general uncertainty about the family's future, and, often for the children, changing schools and peer groups. Given this convergence of highly stressful events and circumstances, child adjustment problems might generally be expected. However, with some distance from the events and circumstances, child behavioral and emotional functioning might be expected to return to its previous level. Results from several prospective studies suggest this indeed might be the case (e.g., Lohman, Neppel, Senia, & Schofield, 2013; Ware et al., 2001).

There are methodological advantages to focusing on longitudinal studies for making conclusions about the relation between children's exposure to IPV and their adjustment problems. The temporal ordering of events is less ambiguous in longitudinal research. Although IPV is often assumed to have a unidirectional effect on children's mental health problems, for decades researchers who study family processes have also suggested that child adjustment problems increase tension between parents, heightening the risk for interparental conflict and IPV (e.g., Neiderhiser, Marceau, & Reiss, 2013; Patterson, 1982; Rutter, 1994). Consistent with this are findings that children's behavioral dysregulation (e.g., aggression, misbehavior, or self-harm) is associated with marital discord one year later (Schmerhorn, Cummings, DeCarlo, & Davies, 2007).

Longitudinal studies can also mitigate the inflationary effects of common method variance (CMV)—systematic variance shared among variables due to the methods used to measure them—on estimates of the strength of the relation between IPV and child adjustment problems (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012). In research on IPV and child adjustment, CMV can be especially problematic when information about both variables is obtained from the same source (e.g., the child's mother), which is common in much of the research on this topic. Although CMV can be a problem in longitudinal research as well, there are more potential factors contributing to CMV in cross-sectional research. To offer a concrete example, if data on children's exposure to IPV and their adjustment problems are both obtained from the child's mother at one time point, it is plausible that reports on both measures may be biased by certain transitory variables, such as the mother's mood at the time of the assessment, her level of fatigue or alertness, or events that happened the day before. In addition, the mother's responses to an IPV measure can bias her reports of child problems, or vice versa.

In this review we also examine how conceptualizing and operationalizing IPV in certain ways can influence its association with child adjustment problems. Specifically, most studies on children's exposure to IPV conceptualize IPV as acts of physical aggression (Evans et al., 2008; Kitzmann et al., 2003). However, some researchers have begun to broaden the conceptualization of IPV to also include acts of psychological and/or sexual IPV (e.g., Huang, Wang, & Warrenner, 2010; Jouriles, McDonald, Vu, & Sargent, 2015; Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996; Schnurr & Lohman, 2013; Zarling et al., 2013). Theoretically, a broader conceptualization of IPV may allow for

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