



## Exposure to domestic violence: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

This study used meta-analysis to examine the relationship between childhood exposure to domestic violence and children's internalizing, externalizing, and trauma symptoms. Results from 60 reviewed studies revealed mean weighted effect size *d*-values of .48 and .47 for the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and childhood internalizing and externalizing symptoms, respectively, indicating moderate effects. A larger mean weighted effect size *d*-value of 1.54 was obtained for the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and childhood trauma symptoms, though this figure was based on only six studies. Moderator analyses for gender showed that the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and externalizing symptoms was significantly stronger for boys than for girls. Further analyses examining age, age by gender, and recruitment setting variables revealed no significant effects. Descriptive information obtained from this meta-analytic review suggests that more recent research within this area is beginning to address some of the significant methodological limitations of past research. Recommendations for future research in the area are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Each year, approximately 4.8 million acts of physical or sexual aggression are perpetrated against women while 2.9 million physically aggressive acts are perpetrated against men in the United States (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). What makes these figures even more disturbing is the realization that many of these incidents take place in the presence of children. In fact, researchers estimate that between three and 17.8 million children are exposed to at least one incident of domestic violence each year (Carlson, 1984; Holden, 1998; Straus, 1992). Moreover, studies using adults' retrospective reports indicate that 20% to 40% reported exposure to domestic violence during childhood or adolescence (Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Turner, & Bennett, 1996; Maker, Kemmelmeier, & Peterson, 1998).

Despite high prevalence of children exposed to domestic violence, researchers have only recently begun to investigate the effects of this exposure. While the first case study examining the negative impact of childhood exposure to domestic violence was published over thirty years ago (Levine, 1975), the first empirical studies did not appear until the early 1980's (Porter & O'Leary, 1980; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). This "first generation" of research, published from 1980's to the early 1990's, was primarily concerned with documenting the association between male-perpetrated violence towards females and various types of childhood symptomatology (Graham-Bermann, 1998). In 1989, Fantuzzo and Lindquist published a qualitative review of this first generation of empirical literature. Their summary highlighted inconsistencies and methodological limitations, including little precision in describing the types of violence to which children were exposed, the use of unstandardized measures of exposure to domestic violence, and a failure to assess moderating variables such as age and gender (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989). This review, along with the equivocal results of the previous literature, spawned a second generation of research, primarily published since 1990. These studies employed more sophisticated research designs and tested models that included mediating and moderating variables. The most recent empirical studies have continued these trends by extending investigations to young children and adolescents while continuing to address the limitations of the research methodologies employed in previous studies (Graham-Bermann, 1998).

### 1.1. Defining "exposure to domestic violence"

Different terms have been used to describe children who have been exposed to domestic violence. Early research often described children as being a "witness" or "observer" of such violence; more recently, however, researchers have begun to use the term "exposure" to domestic violence (Holden, 1998). Within the empirical literature, however, few studies articulate what is meant by "childhood exposure" and many do not report information about the type or extent of violence to which the child is exposed. Thus, to date, no standardized definition of childhood exposure to violence has emerged (Mohr, Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2000). Despite such lack of consensus, most researchers agree that *exposure to domestic violence* occurs when children see, hear, are directly involved in (i.e., attempt to intervene), or experience the aftermath of physical or sexual assaults that occur between their caregivers (Edleson, 1999; Jouriles, McDonald, Norwood, & Ezell, 2001; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). Additionally, while much of the research surrounding childhood exposure to domestic violence has focused on male-perpetrated violence (Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998), researchers studying family violence must recognize that children may also be exposed to violence in which their mother is the perpetrator or to bidirectional acts of violence between caregivers.

### 1.2. Effects of exposure to domestic violence

Studies have found that children exposed to domestic violence experience a range negative outcomes, including increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Rossman, 1998; Sternberg et al., 1993). More specifically, children exposed to domestic violence report more depressive symptoms, anxiety, and worry than those who have never been exposed to such violence (e.g., Graham-Bermann, 1996; Spaccarelli, Sandler, & Roosa, 1994; Sternberg et al., 1993). These children also appear to be more prone to physical aggression and have higher levels of general behavior problems when rated by parents and teachers (Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman, & Abbott, 2006). Exposure to domestic violence may also lead to trauma symptoms in the form of intrusive re-experiencing of the events in dreams or flashbacks, hyperarousal or an exaggerated startle response, and emotional withdrawal (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998; Kilpatrick & Williams, 1998; Lehmann, 1997; Rossman, 1998; Margolin & Vickerman, 2007). Evidence for this connection comes from findings that children who have been exposed to domestic violence score higher on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) scales (Rossman, 1998) and often meet diagnostic criteria for PTSD (Kilpatrick & Williams, 1998). Interestingly, despite these indications, to date, no meta-analyses have examined this relationship.

Despite findings such as those above, outcomes across studies have varied and not all studies have found associations between exposure to domestic violence and childhood adjustment problems (e.g. Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981). For example, some studies have found several different patterns of outcomes associated with exposure to violence, including: multiple symptoms (both internalizing and externalizing problems; Cummings & Davies, 1994), internalizing problems only (Hughes & Barad, 1983), externalizing problems only (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985), and no problems in adjustment (Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald,

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