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## Research article

# The mitigating effects of maternal social support and paternal involvement on the intergenerational transmission of violence

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood maltreatment is a strong risk factor for subsequent violence, including violent behaviors in young adulthood and offspring maltreatment after becoming a parent. Little is known about the specific circumstances under which supportive relationships may help disrupt this cycle of violence throughout the life course. We conducted two complementary analyses to assess whether maternal social support in early childhood, and also paternal involvement in middle childhood, could prevent the intergenerational transmission of violence, using data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children ( $n = 11,384$ ). We found that higher levels of maternal social support in the postpartum period reduced the odds of offspring maltreatment at ages 0–8 years ( $OR = 0.95$ , 95%  $CI$  0.93–0.96). When classifying mothers according to their abuse history, this protective association of social support was observed among mothers with no history of childhood maltreatment and among those with only childhood maltreatment (and not postpartum intimate partner violence [IPV]), but not among mothers who reported IPV since the child's birth. We then extended our analysis of these offspring forward in time and found that paternal involvement at ages 9–10 years was associated with a reduced risk of offspring self-reported violent perpetration at ages 18–20 years ( $OR = 0.85$ , 95%  $CI = 0.77$ –0.94). This protective association was generally apparent among all subgroups of children, including those with a history of childhood maltreatment. Together these results highlight the protective influence of supportive relationships against the intergenerational transmission of violence, depending on abuse history, context, and timing, with important implications for the prevention of childhood maltreatment and mitigation of its negative effects.

## 1. Introduction

Childhood maltreatment is a strong risk factor for subsequent violence, including violent behaviors in adolescence and young adulthood and offspring maltreatment after becoming a parent (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; Schofield, Lee, & Merrick, 2013; Widom, 1989). However, this “cycle of violence” is certainly not universal, with some studies failing to find continuity in violent behaviors across generations (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012). Even among those studies where intergenerational transmission of violence is observed, the majority of individuals who experienced maltreatment in their childhood break free of violent behavior in their own adulthood (Dym Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015; Jaffee, Bowes, Ouellet-Morin, Fisher, Moffitt, Merrick, & Arseneault, 2013).

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Supportive relationships may help to disrupt this cycle of violence and promote resilience among individuals with a history of abuse (Dym Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015; Herrenkohl, Klika, Brown, Herrenkohl, & Leeb, 2013; Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone, & Ruchkin, 2003; Wilson, Kimbrel, Meyer, Young, & Morissette, 2015). In particular, safe, stable, nurturing relationships (SSNRs) have been found to protect against the perpetuation of harsh discipline and maltreatment (Conger, Schofield, Nepl, & Merrick, 2013; Herrenkohl et al., 2013; Jaffee et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2013; Thornberry, Henry, Smith, Ireland, Greenman, & Lee, 2013). SSNRs may include relationships with parents, other caregivers, siblings, peers, and other adults, including romantic partners (Merrick, Leeb, & Lee, 2013), as well as particular dimensions of those relationships, including warmth, communication, attachment, satisfaction, and emotional support (Schofield et al., 2013). Although direct protective effects of various SSNRs on childhood maltreatment have been found, the particular contexts in which SSNRs may buffer maltreated individuals against further violence need to be investigated further (Conger et al., 2013; Herrenkohl et al., 2013; Thornberry et al., 2013). In particular, different types and aspects of social relationships may be important at different stages of the life course (Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010). The specific context of prior abuse experiences, including the timing of maltreatment and continued involvement in abusive relationships (Jaffee et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2013), may also lead to differential impacts of SSNRs on other outcomes. Finally, the role of SSNRs in disrupting the continuity of violent behaviors in general, not just maltreatment, has not been fully explored.

Social support among mothers reflects SSNRs in adulthood that may be important for the continuity of violence across generations. The perceived availability of emotional and instrumental support to mothers in the postpartum period may be an important determinant of offspring abuse and neglect (Price-Wolf, 2015; Sidebotham, Golding, & ALSPAC Study Team. Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, 2001). Mothers who can rely on partners, relatives, and friends for help may be better able to respond to a young child's demands and difficulties with positive parenting and patience, and may be protected from other factors like financial hardship and poor mental health that also increase the risk of offspring maltreatment (Dym Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015; Jaffee et al., 2013; Oh et al., 2016). Through its stress buffering effects, social support may particularly protect mothers who have experienced childhood maltreatment against perpetuating the cycle of violence in their own households (Dym Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2015); however, few studies have assessed the particular circumstances under which maternal social support protects against offspring maltreatment.

Relationships during childhood may also be important for disrupting the cycle of violence. Parent involvement, ranging from supervision to frequency of communication to attachment and warmth, has been found in some studies to promote resilience among children exposed to violence, in terms of reducing their risks for delinquent behaviors, substance use, and other adverse outcomes (Pearce et al., 2003). Parent-child relationships may serve as buffers against the intergenerational transmission of violence specifically, as they promote attitudes and beliefs about responding to stress and conflict in non-violent ways and serve as a source of emotional and instrumental support during difficult times (Bandura, 1977; Herrenkohl et al., 2013; Pearce et al., 2003; Thornberry et al., 2013). Fathers (including non-resident biological fathers) and father figures (including mothers' partners) may exercise particular protective powers over children at risk for problem behaviors through a variety of mechanisms, including increasing trust and expectations among youth, providing additional supervision over youth activities, and providing financial and emotional support (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004; Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). However, little is known about whether paternal involvement during childhood protects against later violent perpetration among children who have been maltreated and whether such effects may vary by offspring gender.

The objectives of this study were to examine the potential for supportive relationships, represented by maternal social support and father-child interactions, to protect against violence and to evaluate whether supportive relationships may have a differential impact depending on an individual's prior abuse experience. As illustrated in Fig. 1, we first examine the role of maternal social support in the perinatal period as potentially protective against subsequent offspring maltreatment through age 8 years (see Fig. 1). We also consider the differential impact of maternal abuse history (including maternal childhood maltreatment and postpartum intimate partner violence [IPV]) on this protective process. We then extend our analysis of these same offspring to investigate whether

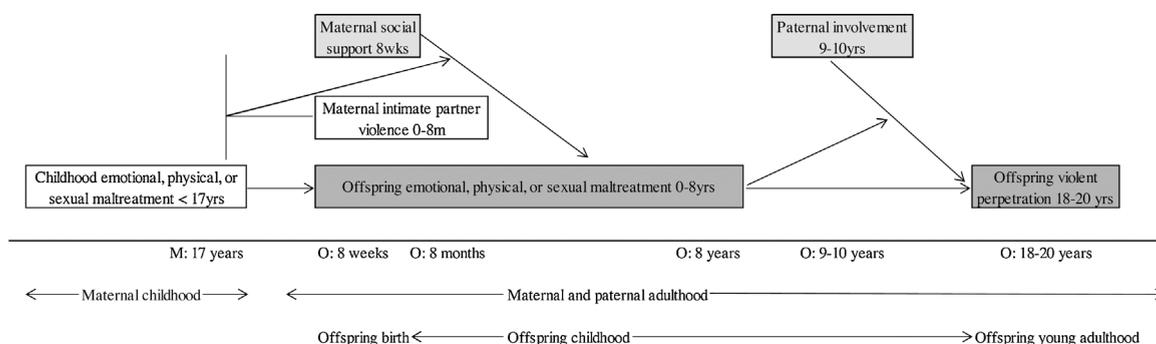


Fig. 1. Visualization of the measures included in the study analyses. We first consider the effect of maternal social support (in light gray) on offspring maltreatment (in dark gray), with the combination of maternal childhood maltreatment and postpartum intimate partner violence (in white) as a potential moderator. We then consider the effect of paternal involvement in middle childhood (in light gray) on offspring physical violence perpetration in young adulthood (in dark gray), with offspring maltreatment (in dark gray) as a potential moderator and controlling for maternal childhood maltreatment, IPV, and social support.

Note: 'M' indicates maternal age, 'O' indicates offspring age.

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