



Parents who hit and scream: Interactive effects of verbal and severe physical aggression on clinic-referred adolescents' adjustment



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ABSTRACT

The goals of this study were first, to delineate the co-occurrence of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression toward clinic-referred adolescents, and second, to examine the interactive effects of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on adolescent externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. This research involved 239 referrals of 11- to 18-year-old youth and their dual-parent families to a non-profit, private community mental health center in a semi-rural Midwest community. Multiple informants (i.e., adolescents and mothers) were used to assess parental aggression and adolescent behavior problems. More than half of clinic-referred adolescents (51%) experienced severe physical aggression and/or high verbal aggression from one or both parents. A pattern of interactive effects of mother-to-adolescent severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on adolescent behavior problems emerged, indicating that when severe physical aggression was present, mother-to-adolescent verbal aggression was positively associated with greater adolescent behavior problems whereas when severe physical aggression was not present, the links between verbal aggression and behavior problems was no longer significant. No interactive effects were found for father-to-adolescent severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on adolescent adjustment; however, higher father-to-adolescent verbal aggression was consistently linked to behavior problems above and beyond the influence of severe physical aggression. The results of this study should promote the practice of routinely assessing clinic-referred adolescents and their parents about their experiences of verbal aggression in addition to severe physical aggression and other forms of abuse.

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Numerous studies using samples of preschool and school-age children, adolescents, and adults from the general population exist on parental use of physical aggression, ranging from relatively common acts of corporal punishment (e.g., spanking on the bottom) to rarer acts of severe physical aggression (e.g., hitting with fist; Miller-Perrin, Perrin, & Kocur, 2009; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993). This maltreatment literature clearly indicates that higher rates of both severe physical aggression and verbal aggression negatively impact the psychosocial development of children into adulthood (Gross & Keller, 1992; Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008; Petrenko, Friend, Garrido, Taussig, & Culhane, 2012;

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Schneider, Ross, Graham, & Zielinski, 2005; Shi, 2013; Solomon & Serres, 1999). Violence and maltreatment between family members is also a key risk factor for behavior problems in adolescents (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Osofsky, 2003; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Straus, 1994), but research on risks of parental severe physical aggression and for teens' psychological adjustment is scarce compared to other age groups. In particular, no empirical literature exists on the interactive effects of parents who hit and scream on behavior problems exhibited by adolescents referred for mental health services, despite that this population may be especially in need of intervention services aimed at family violence. The current study examines the co-occurrence of parents' use of severe physical aggression and verbal aggression toward clinic-referred youth and linkages between parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression and adolescent externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.

For the purposes of this study, parental *severe physical aggression* toward adolescents is conceptualized as physically violent acts by a primary caregiver (i.e., parent) with the intention of causing physical pain and injury to the youth (Centers for Disease Control, 2002). These acts include hitting with a hard object somewhere on an adolescent's body beside the bottom, throwing or knocking down, hitting with a fist, choking, and threatening with a knife or gun. Physical acts by parents that in most cases are not severe enough to cause injury, such as "slapping" or "spanking" with an open hand, and are used predominately for purposes of correction or control of an adolescent's behavior (Straus, 1979) rather than to cause physical pain and injury were not included in this study. A variety of labels used in previous research to describe physically violent acts (e.g., physical abuse, physical maltreatment) will be referred to as *severe physical aggression*. Similarly, multiple labels describing child maltreatment of a non-physical nature (e.g., psychological maltreatment, emotional abuse) have been used in the literature and vary across geographic locations making it difficult to ascertain which parental behaviors are being addressed. Broadly speaking, psychological maltreatment includes acts of commission (e.g., verbal aggression) and omission (e.g., withdrawal of love, social isolation) (Glaser, 2011). For this research, we focus on parental *verbal aggression* as a type of psychological maltreatment (Davis, 1996) consisting of verbal attacks and threats toward adolescents by a primary caregiver. Omission behaviors or acts of psychological or physical neglect were not included in this study.

Co-occurrence of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression

Empirical research on the co-occurrence of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression is largely limited to adults' reports of lifetime childhood maltreatment experiences, which may be biased by retrospective recall or distorted perceptions of childhood events. Still, moderate correlations between parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression have been documented based on adults' retrospective reports (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988). Only one peer-reviewed study could be located that directly documents rates of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression during adolescence, rather than adult children's recollections of their parents' use of aggression years later. Specifically, McGee, Wolfe, and Wilson (1997) examined adolescents with open child protection (CPS) cases and found that 94% of teens reported experiencing a combination of two or more aggressive experiences (i.e., physical, verbal, sexual, exposure to parental violence, and neglect) with the most commonly reported pattern including both physical and verbal aggression from parents. The first aim of the current study is to contribute to the extant literature by documenting empirically the co-occurrence of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression in a clinic-referred sample of adolescents.

Interactive and unique effects of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression

Although some studies have established links between the frequency and/or severity of parental aggression and adjustment outcomes (e.g., Higgins & McCabe, 2003), surprisingly scarce empirical literature has directly examined whether adolescents who have experienced both severe physical aggression and verbal aggression by parents exhibit greater behavioral and emotional problems than those who experience one type of parental aggression. Only two empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals could be located that directly examined the interactive effects of both parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on an adolescent population. One study involving 160 adolescents with open child protection cases found that verbal aggression "potentiate[d]" the contribution of severe physical aggression to variance in internalizing and externalizing such that a link between severe physical aggression and adolescent behavior problems was found only when verbal aggression was taken into account (McGee et al., 1997). Another study including adolescents from a Child Protection Services (CPS) database with confirmed abuse and an equal number of nonabused adolescents from the community revealed no interactive effects of severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on adolescent adjustment (Butaney, Pelcovitz, & Kaplan, 2011). The current study aims to build upon this scant and inconsistent literature by directly examining the interactive effects of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression on clinic-referred adolescents' adjustment.

Several studies examining the unique effects of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression using national (e.g., Gross & Keller, 1992; Higgins & McCabe, 2003; Vissing et al., 1991) and CPS (e.g., Butaney et al., 2011; McGee et al., 1997) samples have highlighted the deleterious negative impact of verbal aggression beyond severe physical aggression. Thus, in the event that interactive effects of severe physical aggression and verbal aggression are not substantiated in the current study, our third and final aim is to document the unique effects of parental severe physical aggression and verbal aggression in families of clinic-referred adolescents.

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