



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 26 (2002) 277–288

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Interactional effects of marital status and physical abuse on adolescent psychopathology

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Received 4 May 2000; received in revised form 14 September 2000; accepted 24 September 2000

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore the interactional effects of parental marital disruption and physical abuse on risk for adolescent psychopathology in a nonclinical sample with a randomly selected control group.

Method: The sample was drawn from 99 community-based adolescents indicated as physically abused by Child Protective Services and 99 randomly selected controls. Nonabused adolescents whose parents were married, abused adolescents whose parents were married, nonabused adolescents with a parental marital disruption, and abused adolescents with a parental marital disruption were compared. Outcome was psychopathology as measured by psychiatric diagnosis based on a best-estimate procedure subsequent to semistructured diagnostic interviewing.

Results: Interactional effects of marital disruption and abuse were found for risk for lifetime Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), with parental marital disruption and having been physically abused combining to increase the risk 15 times for diagnosis of lifetime ADHD. Parental marital status alone was not a significant risk factor for adolescent psychopathology, but physical abuse was a significant risk factor for several diagnostic categories.

Conclusions: Future divorce research should include abuse history as a possible confounding variable. Possible reasons for the findings are reviewed and clinical implications are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Marital disruption; Divorce; Physical abuse; Adolescent psychopathology

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Introduction

The impact of divorce on children has become a focus of increasing attention by mental health clinicians and researchers. With more than one million children having experienced a family divorce each year in the US since the mid-1970s (Shiono & Quinn, 1994), this surge in focused study is clearly merited. Although there is variation in individual children's reactions, marital conflict, separation, and divorce are undoubtedly stressful events in the life of a child and his or her family (Behrman & Quinn, 1994; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kasen, Cohen, Brook, & Hartmark, 1996).

Each year in the US approximately 1.5 million cases of child abuse are reported. Physical abuse of children and adolescents is reported to occur at a rate of 5.7 cases per 1000 children (Lewis, 1994). Physical abuse of adolescents accounts for 43% of substantiated cases of physical abuse of females and 28% of those of males in the US (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1994). The negative impact of abuse on children and adolescents has been well documented, with child abuse having been designated a "national emergency" by the US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1990).

One of the many variables that mediates the impact of divorce on children and adolescents is the level of interparental conflict and family discord that existed before and continues subsequent to the divorce (Amato, 1994; Berhman & Quinn, 1994; Johnston, 1994). The type and intensity of these conflicts have become a research focus (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Johnston (1994) concluded, that as a group, children in families where there have been high conflict divorces, and particularly boys, are significantly more likely to have more emotional and behavioral disturbance than on national norms. These conclusions are based on studies of families with histories of high levels of interparental conflict after the divorce, as defined by verbal and physical aggression, overt hostility, and distrust between the parents (Johnston, 1994). Cummings and Davies (1994) provided a comprehensive analysis of the effects of marital conflict on children. They emphasized the need to "link exposure to specific types of conflicts with specific responses in children and, in turn, relate specific response processes with clinically significant child outcomes" (p. 81).

Review of the literature indicates, that although still in its initial stages, the inquiry into the effects of high level marital conflict and high conflict divorce on children has been limited to a focus on the conflict between the parents. Children have been viewed as witnesses to this conflict, and the subsequent impact on them has been described in the literature on marital conflict (Cummings & Davies, 1994), high conflict divorce (Johnston, 1994), and child witness to domestic violence (Pelcovitz & Kaplan, 1994). Harold and Conger's (1997) recent work included a finding that marital conflict produces increased hostility toward an adolescent child. However, there have not been studies on children or adolescents as the direct victim of physical abuse in the context of high levels of interparental conflict. This is an important issue in light of the fact that research on domestic violence and its impact on children indicates that children in homes with interparental violence are significantly more likely to be victims of abuse themselves (Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Turner, & Bennett, 1996). Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found that in families where there was spouse abuse, there was a 129% greater chance of child abuse. Various forms of family violence often coexist (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995).

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