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The predictive impact of domestic violence on three types of child maltreatment[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: This exploratory study investigated the co-occurrence of domestic violence and three types of child maltreatment: physical child abuse, psychological child abuse, and child neglect.

Method: A sample of 2544 at-risk mothers with first-born children participated in a home-visiting child abuse prevention program. A longitudinal design using multiple data collection methods investigated the effect of domestic violence during the first 6 months of child rearing on confirmed physical child abuse, psychological child abuse, and child neglect up to the child's first 5 years.

Results: Logistic regressions revealed significant relationships between domestic violence and physical child abuse, psychological child abuse, and child neglect. These effects were significant beyond the significant effects of known risks of maltreatment, as measured by the Kempe Family Stress Inventory (KFSI). Domestic violence occurred in 59 (38%) of the 155 cases of confirmed maltreatment. Domestic violence preceded child maltreatment in 46 (78%) of the 59 cases of co-occurrence, as indicated by independent home observations and child protective service records.

Conclusions: The findings indicate that domestic violence during the first 6 months of child rearing is significantly related to all three types of child maltreatment up to the child's fifth year. Domestic violence and risks factors measured on the KFSI continue to contribute to all three types of maltreatment up to the child's fifth year. Prevention programs would be wise to provide services to at-risk families until the child is at least 5 years old. Addressing concurrent problems during treatment may enhance intervention. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Domestic violence; Child maltreatment

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Introduction

Two decades of empirical research provide overwhelming evidence that domestic violence and physical child abuse are linked within families. The average co-occurrence rate for violent families is estimated to be 40% (for complete review see Appel & Holden, 1998). Little is known, however, about the co-occurrence of domestic violence and other types of child maltreatment such as psychological abuse or neglect (Appel & Holden, 1998). Each type of child maltreatment is usually studied independently, and integrative research studies across child maltreatment types are rare.

To address this issue, this exploratory study empirically investigated the temporal relationship between domestic violence and three types of child maltreatment. Using a longitudinal design, this study examined the effect of domestic violence during the first 6 months of child rearing on subsequent physical child abuse, psychological child abuse, and child neglect during the child's first 5 years.

Physical child abuse has been the predominant focus of co-occurrence studies. Definitions of abuse have ranged from mild acts to extreme acts of aggression. Data have been drawn from varied sources; both prevalence and incidence rates have been reported. Data derived from a sample of battered women revealed a 100% co-occurrence rate, based on lifetime prevalence rates (Kruttschnitt & Dorfeld, 1992). Data derived from official reports of physical child abuse demonstrated a 26% rate of co-occurrence based on 6-month incidence rates (Sternberg et al., 1993). Data from a nationally representative sample supported a co-occurrence rate of 5.6%, based on a lifetime referent period (Gelles & Straus, 1988).

These studies establish that domestic violence and physical child abuse have co-occurred in a variety of samples, using various measurement methods. Differences in study samples (shelter sample, national sample) and differences in the methods used to confirm physical child abuse and domestic violence (retrospective parental report vs. official confirmation) have combined to produce highly divergent rates of co-occurrence (5.6–100%). This variability in co-occurrence supports the need for more research.

Noticeably absent in co-occurrence research is studies of psychological child abuse. Psychological child abuse encompasses mental injury, ridiculing, threat of harm, emotional abuse, and emotional and mental neglect. These acts may not cause immediate physical harm but may cause long-term mental health problems that are just as damaging as physical abuse or neglect (Egeland & Erickson, 1987; Hart & Brassard, 1987). According to a national incidence study psychological abuse accounts for 28% of all abuse cases, and is over five times more likely to occur in families making less than \$15,000 per year compared to families with more adequate incomes (Department of Health and Human Services, 1988). Self-report surveys have shown the overall rate of psychological abuse to be as high as 63% (Vissing, Straus, Gelles & Harrop, 1991). Although psychological abuse can occur alone (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991), many researchers suggest that psychological abuse is a core component, and perhaps the most destructive factor, in all forms of child maltreatment (Brassard & Gelardo, 1987; Brassard, Germain & Hart, 1987; Garbarino, Guttman & Seeley, 1986; Navarre, 1987).

Child neglect is another important type of child maltreatment. Child neglect includes lack of supervision, medical neglect, failure to provide food or clothing, inadequate shelter,

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