



Severe domestic violence and child maltreatment: considering child physical abuse, neglect, and failure to protect[☆]

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Abstract

This study examined differences between families in which less or more severe domestic violence and child maltreatment were present compared to families in which only child maltreatment was known to be present. Both child physical abuse and neglect were examined using a child maltreatment reports involving parental perpetrators. The study found a higher percentage of neglect, specifically lack of supervision, and less child physical abuse in the more severe domestic violence compared to the child maltreatment only and less severe domestic violence groups. More mothers were found responsible for lack of supervision and fewer fathers were responsible for child physical abuse in the severe domestic violence group. Child protection workers also reported a higher level of concern for cases involving domestic violence. However, a closer examination of the qualitative characteristics of the domestic violence cases revealed that quantitative findings do not accurately present the whole story. Both mothers and fathers engaged in serious acts of physical abuse against their children. In addition, many mother were held responsible to ‘failure to protect’ their children from the father’s domestic violence. Implications for child welfare practice and policy and future research directions are addressed.

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1. Introduction

Research on the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment wades in to some difficult areas. Clearly, a relationship exists between adult intimate partner abuse and child maltreatment. Recent reviews of co-occurrence studies found rates between 30 and 60% (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999). Given these high rates, it is crucial for child protection workers to understand how child maltreatment and domestic violence interrelate (Mills et al., 2000).

However, there are risks to how increased knowledge about this relationship might affect child protection worker's interactions with battered women and their children. As Mills (2000) points out, child welfare workers hold strong views about battered women's responsibilities; they view the mother as the primary caretaker and often hold her to a higher level of responsibility than her husband or partner to protect her children. This higher standard finds more battered women being held responsible for a 'failure to protect' their children from exposure to domestic violence or from the risk of direct physical abuse by the batterer (Davidson, 1995; Davis, 1995; Magen, 1999).

Yet questions about the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment remain. Not all reported child maltreatment cases in families with domestic violence involve failure to protect due to this violence in the home. In some cases, children are being physically abused or neglected by one or both parents, meaning that domestic violence and child maltreatment can be two simultaneously occurring abuse events affecting families. Thus, we need a more in-depth understand of the relationship between these often co-occurring types of family violence (Edleson, 1995). We also need to look at a more expanded definition of child maltreatment, as many of the previous studies have focused only on the relationship between domestic violence and child physical abuse. As the following review of the literature shows, little is known about the relationship between domestic violence and child neglect.

1.1. Domestic violence and child physical abuse

Intimate partner aggression is generally thought to be associated with child physical abuse (Coohey & Braun, 1997; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Silvern et al., 1995; Straus, 1994). The literature on physical abuse has found both father-batterers and mother-victims to be responsible for child physical abuse, although findings are somewhat contradictory. Some studies found that in families in which the mother was battered, children were more likely to be abused by the father (Bowker, Arbitell & McFerron, 1988; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Straus (1990) found that only fathers who frequently abused their wives had higher rates of physically abusing their children; whereas the battered mothers' rates of child abuse were at least double that of mothers not assaulted by their husbands.

It does appear, however, that the severity of the battering and the severity of the physical abuse differ between parents. Saunders (1995) and Straus (1990) both found child physical abuse to be a risk marker of severe wife assault. Ross (1996)

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