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## Adolescents' perceptions of attachments to their mothers and fathers in families with histories of domestic violence: A longitudinal perspective<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The effects of both childhood and teenage experiences of domestic violence on adolescent-parent attachments were examined.

**Method:** Israeli adolescents ( $M = 15.9$  years) who were either victims of physical abuse, witnesses of physical spouse abuse, victims and witnesses of abuse, or neither victims nor witnesses of abuse were questioned about attachments to their parents using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment [IPPA; Armsden, G. C., & Greenberg, M. T. (1987). The inventory of parent and peer attachment: Individual differences and their relationship to psychological well-being in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 16, 427–454].

**Findings:** Abuse status 5 years earlier was unrelated to the adolescents' current perceptions of their attachments whereas current abuse status predicted the adolescents' perceptions of attachment to their mothers. Adolescents who were victims of physical abuse reported weaker attachments to their parents than adolescents who were not abused or who had solely witnessed interparental physical abuse. Attachments to mothers were weaker whether or not mothers were the perpetrators of abuse.

**Conclusions:** These findings suggest that victimization adversely affects children's perceptions of relationships with their parents, but that changes in the exposure to family violence are associated with changes in relationships

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with parents. These findings suggest that intervention can have positive effects on parent-child relationships despite violent histories.

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## Introduction

Attachment theorists have argued that the quality of child-parent attachment relationships powerfully affects social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy, 1994; Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999). According to Bowlby (1969), positive relationships with sensitively responsive caregivers play a crucial role in healthy adjustment and many researchers have reported evidence consistent with this hypothesis (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001; Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990; Meeus, Oosterwegel, & Vollebergh, 2002; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999; Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995). The goal of the present study was to assess the effects of family violence on the quality of relationships between adolescents and their parents. By conducting our study in Israel, where domestic violence is not as closely associated with single parenthood as it is in the United States, we were able to recruit a sample of two-parent families of comparable socioeconomic status in which either spousal or child abuse had either occurred or not occurred. We were thus able to explore adolescents' attachments to both abusive and nonabusive parents and to determine whether the adolescents' perceptions varied depending on whether or not the specific parent had been violent. Furthermore, because we could specify the types of abuse experienced, we were able to investigate the separate and combined effects of child and spouse abuse on the adolescents' attachments to both of their parents. Finally, because the participants in this study were first interviewed when they averaged 10.6 years of age and were then recontacted nearly 5 years later, it was possible to assess and compare the effects of earlier as opposed to later experiences of violence on the adolescents' attachments.

According to attachment theory, children develop Internal Working Models (IWMs) of their relationships with others on the basis of their experiences and interactions with them (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). These IWMs constitute rudimentary conceptual representations of self and others, and as a result, individuals' perceptions of their attachments play a crucial role in later psychological and psychosocial functioning. IWMs are usually considered to be fairly stable over time (Bowlby, 1973; Cassidy, 2000; Fraley & Shaver, 2000), in part because the quality of interaction is presumed to remain the same and in part because IWMs are believed to direct attention selectively to representation-consistent information and to interpret new experiences in ways that are consistent with those representations (Ainsworth, 1989). Nevertheless, IWMs are also viewed as dynamic representations that can be updated, elaborated, or replaced as life circumstances change (Bowlby, 1973; Thompson & Lamb, 1988). In particular, the IWMs formed in infancy and early childhood assuredly become more complex and sophisticated as children develop more abstract cognitive abilities and reflect upon a wider range of interactions with attachment figures such as their parents (Bowlby, 1969; Thompson, 1999). Young children's IWMs are thus likely to include simple information about the parents' availability and responsiveness, whereas older children's IWMs are apt to include more detailed and elaborate information (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990).

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