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Attributing responsibility for child maltreatment when domestic violence is present[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine factors that influence how child welfare workers attribute responsibility for child maltreatment and child safety in cases involving domestic violence.

Methods: The study used a factorial survey approach, combining elements of survey research with an experimental design. Case vignettes were constructed by randomly assigning characteristics to vignettes believed to be related to assessments about responsibility for child maltreatment. Public child welfare workers were systematically sampled and asked to rate vignettes on male and female caregivers' responsibility for child maltreatment and concerns for safety.

Results: The presence of domestic violence significantly affected workers' assessments of the attribution of responsibility and concern for child safety, more so than variables related to child maltreatment. Responsibility for exposing a child to domestic violence differed for males and females, with more factors explaining female responsibility. Substance use by either caregiver was significant in attributing responsibility for physical harm, not watching the child closely enough, and concern for child safety, but not for exposure to domestic violence.

Conclusions: Domestic violence appeared to heighten workers' assessments of responsibility for child maltreatment and concerns about child safety, taking precedence over the characteristics of the child maltreatment itself. Battering tends to work against the domestic violence victim in terms of the attribution of responsibility. A greater number of factors affect female responsibility for exposing a child to domestic violence than male responsibility, even though in every case the male was the designated domestic violence batterer.

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Introduction

The child welfare field is increasingly aware of families coming to the attention of child protection agencies that are also experiencing domestic violence. The field is slowly beginning to understand that the fundamental assumption of child protection—the expectation that parents must protect their children from harm—may be complicated in situations where parents are also being victimized by their partners. A recent review of studies on the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment found rates between 30 and 60% (Edleson, 1999). Child protection responses to the co-occurrence of child maltreatment and domestic violence have raised tensions between child protection workers and battered women's advocates regarding the rights and safety of children versus the rights and safety of battered women (Fleck-Henderson, 2000; Magen, Conroy, & Del Tufo, 2000). Child protection systems have been criticized for holding only mothers responsible for the protection and safety of children, while fathers have remained “invisible” in the child protection system (Edleson, 1998).

In families where domestic violence is present, this “legally sanctioned gender bias” is even more apparent (Davis, 1995). As Mills (2000) notes, child welfare workers have strong views about battered women's responsibilities; they view the mother as the primary caregiver and often hold her to a higher level of responsibility than her husband or partner to protect her children. Domestic violence advocates feel this higher standard finds battered women being held *unfairly* responsible for failing to protect their children from exposure to the batterers' violence against them and/or from the risk of the batterers' direct physical abuse of the children (Davidson, 1995; Davis, 1995; Magen, 1999).

When looking at the attribution of responsibility for child maltreatment when domestic violence is present, evidence supporting advocates' concerns that battered women are being held responsible for failure to protect their children from the batterer's violence comes from qualitative interviews with workers (Beeman, Hagemester, & Edleson, 1999) and anecdotal observations of cases (Hartley, 2004). One of the few empirical studies available found that even after domestic violence training, a substantial proportion of child protection workers (40.5%) held women responsible for the child's safety and stopping the batterer's violence against them (Saunders & Anderson, 2000). This study did not identify which characteristics of the cases affected workers' attribution of responsibility.

More recently, Coohy (in press) found that among the small proportion of child maltreatment incidents involving failure to protect a child from domestic violence, child protection workers were less likely to substantiate an allegation of exposure to domestic violence if the domestic violence victim engaged in protective behaviors that ended contact between the batterer and her children. This same study determined that all the batterers investigated who were in the caregiver role at the time of exposure to domestic violence were substantiated. These findings, while encouraging, are based on 31 cases in one mid-western county. The purpose of the current study was to examine factors that influence how child welfare workers attribute responsibility for child maltreatment and child safety when domestic violence is also occurring in a family, using an experimental survey design methodology with a large sample of cases.

Attributing responsibility for domestic violence to the victim occurs frequently in the general population. In addition, alcohol use and the combination of race (Black) and alcohol create more victim-blaming (Harrison & Esqueda, 2000). Bias occurs even among professionals (police and social workers), with police placing more blame on victims than social workers, however male social workers attributed more responsibility to victims than female social workers (Home, 1994).

Attributing responsibility for child maltreatment appears to be affected by the presence of domestic violence. A domestic abuse victim's perception of the seriousness of the domestic violence can impact

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