



Assessing child exposure to adult domestic violence

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Received 4 October 2006; received in revised form 23 November 2006; accepted 17 December 2006
Available online 8 February 2007

Abstract

The emerging interest in children's exposure to adult domestic violence has brought about calls for better methods to assess such exposure. Currently no assessment tools exist that adequately measure the diversity of children's experiences with domestic violence. In this article we identify several factors affecting children's experiences and consequent outcomes, including concurrent victimization and various risk and protective factors. We then review several measures that include at least one question regarding adult domestic violence and that assess child exposure to and/or perception of domestic violence. We conclude that existing measures do not comprehensively identify factors related to child exposure and thus call for the development of new tools that more thoroughly and accurately assess child exposure to adult domestic violence.

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Keywords: Domestic violence; Child exposure; Conflict

1. Introduction

Child exposure to adult domestic violence has increasingly become a concern for both practitioners and researchers. For example, new research in child welfare systems has revealed that large proportions of children under protective supervision are exposed to adult domestic violence but that screening and investigation of the violence is often inadequate (English, Edleson, & Herrick, 2005; Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004). Juvenile and family courts struggle to understand and assess the significance of child exposure when making decisions concerning custody and visitation (Jaffe, Lemon & Poisson, 2003; Kernic, Monary-Ernsdorff, Koepsell, & Holt, 2005).

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Law enforcement leaders have questioned their own responses to children who are present when police respond to adult domestic assault reports (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1997). And, finally, battered women's shelters and other domestic violence prevention programs have increasingly recognized and expanded their responses to the needs of children in the families they serve (Saathoff & Stoffel, 1999).

Professionals working in these programs have little guidance and few tools to carefully assess exposed children so that they can target new policies and practices to best serve them. As a result, several investigators have developed instruments to measure the impact of exposure. For example, Graham-Bermann (1996) developed the *Family Worries Scale*, and Grych, Seid, and Fincham (1992) developed the *Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale*. These instruments measure the emotional and behavioral consequences of a child's exposure to adult domestic violence, but do not give information about the child's actual exposure experiences.

There are no existing measures of a child's exposure to adult domestic violence that both adequately measure it and have been subjected to rigorous psychometric testing. Hamby and Finkelhor (2001) examined a large number of assessment tools for use in monitoring child victimization but very few of these instruments were designed to monitor childhood exposure to adult domestic violence. Their review reveals that researchers and clinicians have most often adapted the adult version of the widely used Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to assess children's levels of exposure. These adaptations vary greatly and leave the field with no standard method of measuring prevalence or individual incidents of exposure (Jouriles, MacDonald, Norwood, & Ezell, 2001).

To fill this gap for practitioners and researchers alike, we undertake a review of the research on children's exposure to adult domestic violence with an eye towards understanding what is needed to develop a new assessment tool. To that end we discuss the pervasiveness of child exposure to domestic violence and the factors that contribute to children's unique experiences with and outcomes from this exposure. We review a selection of commonly-used measures that ask respondents at least one question about domestic violence exposure. We then discuss the degree to which these measures adequately assess the unique experiences of children exposed to domestic violence.

2. Overview of children's exposure to adult domestic violence

Researchers estimate widely ranging numbers of children exposed to adult domestic violence. Many of the estimates are derived by extrapolating from national surveys that were not designed to measure children's exposure. The two most widely cited estimates are those developed by Carlson (1984) and Straus (1992). Based on studies of the number of households experiencing domestic violence each year (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), Carlson estimated that "at least 3.3 million children yearly are at risk of exposure to parental violence" (p. 160). Straus (1992) estimated yet an even higher level of exposure using retrospective accounts by adults of their teen years. He estimated that there may be as many as 10 million American teenagers exposed to adult domestic violence each year. Carlson (2000) has more recently raised her estimate as a result of additional studies. She now conservatively estimates that from 10% to 20% of American children are exposed to adult domestic violence each year (Carlson, 2000). Based on recent US Census data (US Census Bureau, 2000), this would indicate that approximately 7 to 14 million American children are exposed to adult domestic violence annually. Finally, Thompson, Saltzman, and Johnson (2003) report that 33.2% of

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