

Child welfare practice and policy related to the impact of children experiencing physical victimization and domestic violence

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Abstract

The impact of family violence on children seen in a children's aid society was investigated. Three groups of maltreated children were investigated: those exposed to domestic violence against women, physically abused, and children who experienced both. Child outcomes reflected behavioral and school-related problems, delinquency, and elevation in overall risk. There was considerable variability on the effects of exposure to children. Children exposed to domestic violence against women and children who were physically abused did not differ on a variety of child outcomes. Children experiencing the combined effects of physical maltreatment and exposure to domestic violence experienced the poorest adjustment reflected in grade repetition, involvement in delinquency, and on overall risk compared to physically abused or children exposed to domestic violence against women alone. Implications for child welfare practice and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Child protection services in Canada have experienced dramatic increases in referrals and admission to care over the past decade. (Trocmé et al., 2001). Ontario, Canada's largest provincial jurisdiction governing child protection services, doubled their funding commitment to child welfare between 1998 and 2004 to support children's aid societies, from 400 million to 1.2 billion dollars over this six-year period. An increased awareness of childhood trauma resulting from the exposure to violence within the parental home has been identified as one major factor related to this increase (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Copp, 2002). However, as indicated by several authors (Edelsen, 2004; Magan, Conroy, & Del Tufo, 2000), there is considerable debate regarding the practice of admitting to care children who experience exposure to violence without being vulnerable to direct physical maltreatment. The purpose of this study was to explore a variety of child outcomes related to family violence within a sample of children seen in one large urban child welfare agency in order to more fully appreciate the needs of children who experience exposure to domestic violence and are referred to a child welfare agency.

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1.1. Extent of family violence within children's aid society referrals

Many families served by child protection services (CPS) experience either exposure to or victimization by violence (Rittner, 2002; Trocmé et al., 2001). It is estimated that vicarious trauma experienced by children through family violence exposure occurs in 30%–60% of families where there is either child maltreatment or domestic violence against women (Edleson, 1999). Since the mid 1990s, Ontario's Children's Aid Societies (CAS) experienced a dramatic increase in agency referrals as well as admissions to care, in part reflecting this increasing awareness of the damaging effects of family violence on children (Trocmé et al., 2001).

1.2. The impact of physical victimization on children

Experiencing physical maltreatment as a child is associated with a variety of negative outcomes that go beyond immediate physical injuries. Victims report numerous physical, psychological, and behavioral sequelae reflecting both internalizing (e.g., depressive, suicidal thoughts) and externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggressive behavior (poor school performance, delinquency, and drug and alcohol abuse) (Trickett, 1997). Other studies report victims of maltreatment exhibit more problems in adjustment, and difficulty in peer relationships compared to children who are not maltreated (Cicchetti, Toth, & Rogosch, 2000; Pelcovitz, Kaplan, DeRosa, Mandel, & Salzinger, 2000). Wolfe and McGee (1994) report that the negative effects of maltreatment experienced as a child are experienced well into adulthood.

1.3. The impact of partner violence on children

In samples of mothers who have experienced partner violence, between 75% and 100% report that their children have witnessed the violence (Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Pagelow, 1990; Wildin, Williamson, & Wilson, 1991). There is consensus that children witnessing violence are inherently abusive (Echlin & Marshall, 1995). Some US states and Canadian provinces have legislated the witnessing of domestic violence as a form of criminal child abuse (Kantor & Little, 2003). Further, between 45% and 70% of children exposed to domestic violence are also victims of physical abuse (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999).

Witnessing violence is linked to emotional and behavioral dysregulation and subsequent psychopathology in children (Cummings, Davies, & Campbell, 2000). Children exposed to domestic violence demonstrate increased behavior problems and psychopathology (Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996; Fantuzzo et al., 1991), more delinquent acts against property (Statistics Canada, 1999), and increased rates of depression and aggression (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995), compared to children from nonviolent homes. Academic difficulties in children exposed to domestic violence relate to impaired concentration and achievement and significantly lower scores on measures of verbal, motor, and cognitive skills (Kinard, 2001; Kolbo et al., 1996). Groves, Zuckerman, and Marans (1993) suggest that children who witness domestic violence have unique emotional needs because the battered parent may be emotionally unavailable due to coping with her own trauma.

1.4. Developmental considerations related to trauma

Children's levels of understanding and coping difficulties related to violence differ with age. Younger children may be disproportionately exposed to partner violence and particularly vulnerable to it (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriam, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997). Preschool age children are more likely to show signs of health problems and physical ailments, emotional problems and aggressive behavior (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson et al., 1990) while behavioral problems for older children become apparent as children enter school and interact with teachers and peers (Jaffe, Wilson, & Wolfe, 1988).

1.5. Child welfare policies related to children's exposure to domestic violence

In many jurisdictions throughout North America, child welfare policies have been revised to include the exposure to domestic violence as a form of child maltreatment (Edelsen, 2004). This has resulted in children being removed from the care of their parent – predominantly their mother – who has been judged by the court as unable to protect them from on-going exposure to violence within the home. A less drastic approach has been to encourage closer cooperation between child protection services and the women's domestic violence service network to better inform child welfare

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