

# Adolescent males' coping responses to domestic violence: A qualitative study

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## Abstract

This article explores the coping strategies of 10 adolescent males, ages 14 through 17, who were exposed to domestic violence perpetrated by a male parent. In-depth interviews provide the foundation for understanding their experiences, suggesting that environmental stressors, which produce psychosocial difficulties, warrant clinical intervention, and in turn influence coping. It is noteworthy that such behavioral problems, which are sometimes seen as pathological, can also be adaptive.  
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## 1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, study after study (Carlson, 1994; Davis, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1990; Rivett, Howarth, & Harold, 2006; Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1985) show that latency age children exhibit psychological problems due to their exposure to domestic violence. These researchers and others (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Osofsky, 1997) observe that boys externalize their response by exhibiting aggression while girls internalize theirs, turning their anger toward themselves. Inquiry about young children continues to receive attention while investigation into the effects of domestic violence on adolescents is still evolving. More specifically, its impact on poor adolescent boys of color living in an urban context needs more exposure and needs to be better understood (O'Keefe, 1996). My study seeks to fill that gap (Aymer, 2005).

Adolescence involves transitions, choices, connections, alienation, and risks. These processes potentially bolster self-development and support autonomous functioning. The occurrences of domestic violence create additional complications for poor male adolescents of color living in an urban environment, making their psychosocial functioning difficult, and sometimes treacherous. This study was informed by social learning theory, which emphasizes how environmental variables affect behavior. Bandura's (1973) view is that "behavior partly creates the environment, and the resultant environment, in turn, influences the behavior" (p. 43). For the boys in this study, seemingly dysfunctional behaviors—such as using violence to solve interpersonal problems, running away from home, and using

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drugs and alcohol as coping reactions—underscore their connection with the violent familial and environmental contexts which permeate and inform their social and emotional development (Fraser & Kirby, 1997), reminding us once again that environment provides “the context for child development” (p. 20).

The present study not only investigates coping mechanisms, but also examines how these young men are affected by poverty, poor parenting, social injustice, maltreatment, and parental pathology (Fraser & Kirby, 1997). The construct of *resilience* underlies the research, a quality that enables children to deal with internal and external distress. Greene, Galambos, and Lee (2003) note that resiliency theory should be considered when working with populations where risk and vulnerability exist. They believe that both environmental and socio-cultural variables must be evaluated in order to understand functioning.

In this study, I ask the following questions: What behavioral difficulties are evident in males exposed to domestic violence? What risk do environmental and familial factors play in developing coping capacities? What environment and familial circumstances impact coping behaviors? What conditions promote resilience? Given the paucity of research on adolescent males—but also the importance of understanding all reactions to the exposure of violence—the experiences of both boys and girls are discussed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Effects of exposure

Jaffe et al. (1986) observe the prevalence of emotional problems among children who witness domestic violence and child abuse. One of their findings is that females run away from home, while males condone the use of alcohol and violence. They argue that the boys may have *identified with the aggressor*, i.e., their fathers. Graham-Berman (1998) underscores this observation, postulating that boys observe, then internalize, the aggression that their fathers exact toward their mothers, a learned message, which legitimizes aggression. A similar study conducted by O’Keefe (1996) highlights the resulting effects of different forms of family violence. The data reveal that adolescents living in low-income households are more susceptible to child abuse than those living in higher income households, and that boys and girls manifest emotional/behavioral problems. All of the children were affected both as witness and recipient.

Wolfe and Korsch (1994) also explore how domestic violence affects boys and girls. Similar to O’Keefe (1996), they suggest that children evidence a range of emotional distress due to witnessing parental abuse. Highlighted is that boys in particular have a proclivity to use violence to deal with problems, imitating their father’s relational style as a means of exerting control. Other researchers (Ehrensaft, Cohen, & Brown, 2003) concur: children exposed to physical discipline and violence in the home can perceive aggression as a way to solve problems.

Bell and Jenkins (1991) stress that males surrounded by community violence engage in dysfunctional behaviors, thus truncating their maturation. This corresponds with data that implies that adolescent boys who witness domestic violence have a tendency to abuse alcohol and to engage in delinquent behaviors (Carlson, 1994). Underlying this is that community and domestic violence occur in a context that has multiple meanings for boys, and their consequences induce confusion and fear.

### 2.2. Coping

The use of internal and external resources can facilitate healthy coping. Ego strengths help develop autonomy and a strong sense of self-efficacy (Smith & Carlson, 1997). Defenses such as modeling, denial, intellectualization, and repression enable children to manage their parent’s conflicts.

Bandura (1973) remarks, “it is evident from informal observation that human behavior is to a large extent externally socially transmitted, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the behavior examples by influential models” (p. 68). Adolescent males may interpret the use of domestic violence as a legitimate method of coping with conflict, fostering a distorted view of resolution, and predisposing them to its use. Observational learning, as Bandura describes it, offers a theoretical base for understanding how adolescent acting out may specifically connect children to their parent’s aggression.

Goldstein (1995) contends: “[T]he situational context is a key variable in evaluating ego functioning, because some aspects of the social environment may evoke better or worse functioning” (p. 70). Therefore, internal coping for adolescent males is highly influenced by the external stimuli and the circumstances they are exposed to. As a result,

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