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Child Abuse & Neglect



Self-reported disciplinary practices among women in the child welfare system: Association with domestic violence victimization[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the association between physical domestic violence victimization (both recent and more than a year in past measured by self-report) and self-reported disciplinary practices among female parents/caregivers in a national sample of families referred to child welfare.

Methods: Cross-sectional survey of more than 3,000 female caregivers in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) study, a nationally representative sample of children and their families referred to child welfare agencies for investigation of abuse and neglect. Women reported physical domestic violence victimization and their disciplinary practices for their child on different versions of the Conflict Tactics Scales.

Results: Four hundred and forty-three women reported prior year domestic violence, 1,161 reported domestic violence but not in the past 12 months, and 2,025 reported no domestic violence exposure. Any prior domestic violence exposure was associated with higher rates of self-reported psychological aggression, physical aggression and neglectful disciplinary behaviors as compared to those with no domestic violence victimization in bivariate comparisons. After controlling for child behavior, demographic factors, and maternal characteristics, those with remote and recent domestic violence victimization employed more self-reported psychological aggression, while only caregivers with recent DV reported more physical aggression or neglectful behaviors.

Conclusions: In a national child welfare sample, self-reported aggressive and neglectful parenting behaviors were common. In this sample, domestic violence victimization is associated with more self-reported aggressive and neglectful disciplinary behaviors among female caregivers. The mechanism for these associations is not clear.

Practice implications: Rates of aggressive and neglectful disciplinary practices are especially high among female parents/caregivers exposed to domestic violence. Child welfare agencies should plan routine and structured assessments for domestic violence among parents/caregivers and implement parenting interventions to reduce harmful disciplinary practices for those families identified.

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Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is an increasingly recognized epidemic. Prevalence estimates range from 12% to 30% of adult women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). DV is especially common among women with children referred to the child welfare system for investigation of abuse or neglect. Single site studies provide a range of prevalence estimates for domestic violence from 30% to 70% of women with children in the child welfare system (Appel & Holden, 1998). National estimates of families in the child welfare system note a lifetime prevalence of 44% of females affected by domestic violence with 28% experiencing at least one episode in the 12 months preceding the interview (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004).

Domestic violence against women is associated with poor outcomes for children and adolescents. Children exposed to DV are more likely to perform poorly at school, demonstrate cognitive deficits and be identified by teachers with behavior problems than children not exposed to DV (Christopheropoulos et al., 1987; DuRant, Pedergrast, & Cadenhead, 1994). Similarly, children exposed to DV are prone to acts of aggression and depression when compared to their peers (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; McFarlane, Groff, O'Brien, & Watson, 2003; Mejia, Kliewer, & Williams, 2006).

The mechanism for such poor outcomes in children exposed to domestic violence is unclear. While exposure to violence in general is associated with some negative outcomes, DV seems to be a particularly potent detrimental influence. The increased presence of maternal distress, depression, and anxiety disorders found in women affected by DV may make them less successful as parents or less emotionally available to their children (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006). In addition, women affected by DV may be likely to use aggressive or physical forms of discipline (Dubowitz et al., 2001). Because of these concerns, child welfare agencies may consider a history of DV as a risk factor in weighing placement decisions in child welfare investigations.

On the other hand, some studies from domestic violence service organizations suggest that women affected by DV are indeed emotionally available to their children and not more likely to use physical forms of discipline (Stark, 2002). They further argue that prior work did not take into account issues of child behavior and non-physical forms of discipline. Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, and Juras (2000) surveyed 80 women from a domestic violence shelter. The authors found the women to be nurturing parents, comparable to other samples of women in diverse settings.

The continuing controversy around this subject is in part a result of problems with the existing literature. First, very little research has been conducted on these complex families with multiple forms of violence. Secondly, among the available studies, almost all are single site studies from domestic violence service organizations or public records. In addition, the existing studies have had small samples preventing exploration of severe forms of parental discipline and other rare events, or age, gender, and ethnic differences on these issues. Income, age, and ethnic differences are particularly important in research on child maltreatment because of reporting biases and variation in parenting practices. For example, low income and minority parents are much more likely to be referred to child welfare caseloads than higher income or non-minority parents (Freisthler, Bruce, & Needell, 2007). Similarly, an extensive literature on variation in parenting practices and disciplinary practices exist suggesting that studies which do not consider such demographic characteristics may not be generalizable to other populations (Mersky & Reynolds, 2007). For these reasons, large regional or national studies with diverse populations are particularly valuable because they can employ multivariate statistics to control for these other factors.

Relatedly, prior studies have not been able to distinguish among women who are currently experiencing violence from those who experienced it previously. Finally, the limited range of available data and the small sample sizes prevented multivariate analyses in all except one study (McGuigan & Pratt, 2001).

We employed the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) to study a very large sample of women affected by partner violence and their disciplinary behaviors (NSCAW Research Group, 2002). NSCAW is a nationally representative sample of more than 5,000 children referred to child welfare services for abuse or neglect conducted in 92 primary sampling units (mostly counties). NSCAW collected maternal report data on parental disciplinary practices and DV victimization, among many other domains. We employ data from the female caregiver interviews of the children referred for child maltreatment investigations to compare disciplinary practices among women reporting DV in the past year (Recent), women reporting prior DV in the past but not the past year (Remote), and women reporting no history of DV (Never). For the purposes of this study, DV victimization was limited to physical forms of violence only. Given the limited prior literature, we suspected that Recent or Remote history of DV would be associated with greater self-reported use of physical and psychological aggression compared to caregivers reporting never having experienced DV but similar levels of self-reported neglectful or non-physical forms of discipline. In these analyses, we control for sociodemographic factors that may bias studies of DV and parenting.

Method

Participants

Data for this study come from the NSCAW, a nationally representative sample of children and their families referred to child welfare agencies for investigation of abuse and neglect. The target population for the NSCAW consists of children in the US who were the subjects of child abuse and neglect investigations conducted by child welfare agencies during the sampling period.

The NSCAW study used a stratified two-stage sampling procedure, with the first stage involving the selection of 92 primary sampling units (i.e., county child protective services agencies) that were subdivided into nine strata representing a total of 36

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