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The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article reviews the literature concerning the impact of exposure to domestic violence on the health and developmental well-being of children and young people. Impact is explored across four separate yet inter-related domains (domestic violence exposure and child abuse; impact on parental capacity; impact on child and adolescent development; and exposure to additional adversities), with potential outcomes and key messages concerning best practice responses to children's needs highlighted.

Method: A comprehensive search of identified databases was conducted within an 11-year framework (1995–2006). This yielded a vast literature which was selectively organized and analyzed according to the four domains identified above.

Results: This review finds that children and adolescents living with domestic violence are at increased risk of experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse, of developing emotional and behavioral problems and of increased exposure to the presence of other adversities in their lives. It also highlights a range of protective factors that can mitigate against this impact, in particular a strong relationship with and attachment to a caring adult, usually the mother.

Conclusion: Children and young people may be significantly affected by living with domestic violence, and impact can endure even after measures have been taken to secure their safety. It also concludes that there is rarely a direct causal pathway leading to a particular outcome and that children are active in constructing their own social world. Implications for interventions suggest that timely, appropriate and individually tailored responses need to build on the resilient blocks in the child's life.

Practice implications: This study illustrates the links between exposure to domestic violence, various forms of child abuse and other related adversities, concluding that such exposure may have a differential yet potentially deleterious impact for children and young people. From a resilient perspective this review also highlights range of protective factors that influence the extent of the impact of exposure and the subsequent outcomes for the child. This review advocates for a holistic and child-centered approach to service delivery, derived from an informed assessment, designed to capture a picture of the individual child's experience, and responsive to their individual needs.

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Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed unprecedented interest in the scope and consequences of children's exposure to domestic violence, resulting in a depth of empirical knowledge about its prevalence and impact on its youngest victims (Hague & Mullender, 2006; Hazen, Connolly, Kelleher, Barth, & Landsverk, 2006). While the focus of this interest and understanding has largely been achieved by eliciting the views of women, shelter workers and other professionals, more recent inquiry has sought to explore directly children and young people's experience of exposure to domestic violence (Buckley, Whelan, & Holt, 2006; Hague & Mullender, 2006; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Influencing this shift has been a changing perception and understanding of children's position within this abusive context. Where previously children were thought of as being tangential and disconnected to the violence between their parents, and commonly labeled "silent witnesses" (McIntosh, 2003), more recent qualitative research has disputed this opinion, finding children dynamic in their efforts to make sense of their experiences, while navigating their way around the complexity and terror intrinsic to domestic violence (McIntosh, 2002; Mullender et al., 2002).

The term "domestic violence" broadly refers to the intimate context within which one partner is abused by another, involving both men and women as victims and same sex partner violence. This term, while worn "smooth with use" (McIntosh, 2002) as the most frequently used and widely accepted term, is nonetheless criticised for, among other things, its gender-neutrality, and the primary emphasis on physical assaults and exclusion of other abuse (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). While some research proposes equivalent prevalence rates of male and female perpetrated violence (Mirrlees-Black, 1999; Morse, 1995), other research rejects the symmetry of men's and women's experience of intimate partner violence, for a number of reasons. First, the numeric extent of violence against women exceeds that of violence against men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walby & Allen, 2004; Watson & Parsons, 2005). Second, the impact of the abuse is likely to be greater for women than men, both emotionally and injuriously (Walby & Allen, 2004; Watson & Parsons, 2005; Women's Aid & the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, London, 2001). Third, women are at far greater risk of serious and lethal abuse at the hands of their male partner than men are at risk from their female partner (Campbell, Sharps, & Glass, 2001; Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Walby & Myhill, 2001; World Health Organization, 2002). Cognisant of these dilemmas regarding definition and terminology, the term "domestic violence" is nonetheless used in this paper, primarily because it is in everyday and professional use and would easily alert people to its content. The terms inter-parental violence and intimate partner violence will also be applied interchangeably in this paper, which is concerned only with the intimate context within which women are abused by men.

Studies on the impact of children's exposure to domestic violence have been beset with methodological concerns and complications. First, exposure to domestic violence is not a "homogeneous uni-dimensional phenomenon" (Jouriles et al., 1998, p. 178), whose impact can be neatly examined in isolation from the potential impact of other stressors or traumas in a child's life. With the co-occurrence of domestic violence and other forms of abuse and adversity clearly established in the literature, failure to differentiate abused children who also witness violence from those who witness domestic violence only, may inaccurately attribute a child's difficulties to the impact of witnessing, without considering the impact that being a direct victim of abuse may have on outcomes for the child (Connolly et al., 2006; Edleson, 1999). Similarly, comparing children exposed to domestic violence with children who are not exposed, without regard for the variability in the level and type of abuses those children are exposed to, both ignores and obscures the potential differential impact on child adjustment from exposure to different types of spousal violence (Jouriles et al., 1998).

Second, while recent studies have been more inclusive of broader populations to reflect the perceptions and experiences of multiple stakeholders in multiple settings (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001), prior research has been criticised for an over-sampling of research participants from shelters (Kashani & Allan, 1998). While representing a unique and highly visible sub-population of those exposed to domestic violence, shelter populations may constitute those most recently and severely affected (Edleson, 1999; McIntosh, 2003) and who may be disproportionately representative of lower socio-economic populations (Kerig, 1998). In addition, shelter life may have a stressful and unique influence on children, which may be independent of their experience of family violence and not necessarily an accurate representation of their mental health in the long term (Edleson, 1999). Kerig (1998) also highlights concerns about research relying on children drawn from clinical populations, as they may be over representative of boys and dominated by externalizing problems.

On a parallel vein, researchers comment on the paucity of reports of domestic violence from multiple family members or professionals, citing evidence that when such reports are sought, agreement is surprisingly low (Holden, 2003), and cautioning that studies which predominantly or solely reflects mothers' reports of their children's problems will by their nature have limited accuracy as they lack the converging information necessary to ensure reliability and validity (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999). Appel and Holden (1998) suggest that as mothers are the sole informants in the majority of cases, the potential for *both* under and over-reporting needs to be considered. In partial agreement McIntosh (2003) warns only of widespread underreporting of domestic abuse by women.

A third methodological issue is raised in Appel and Holden (1998) concerning the inconsistent use of a common criterion for defining child abuse, finding upward of 15 different definitions applied to the 31 studies they reviewed. Holden's later (2003) reflections on terminology considered the range and dramatically different types of exposure mentioned in the literature, with assessment of this exposure inclusive of both mothers' reports about what their child saw or heard and children's own reports as witnesses.

Fourth, criticisms of the measures employed to gather data include what Edleson considers to be an over-reliance on the child behavior checklist, on the grounds that it is a "rough gauge of general functioning," and not developed to tap

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