



Effects of domestic violence on behavior problems of preschool-aged children: Do maternal mental health and parenting mediate the effects?

Chien-Chung Huang ^{a,*}, Lih-Rong Wang ^{b,1}, Corinne Warrenner ^{a,2}

^a School of Social Work, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, United States

^b Department of Social Work, National Taiwan University, 1, Sec. 4, Roosevelt Road, Taipei, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Using the first four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this article examined the effects of mothers who experienced domestic violence at Year 1 on the externalizing and internalizing behavior problems of children at Year 5 and investigated whether maternal mental health and parenting at Year 3 mediated those effects. Findings from structural equation modeling showed partial support for the hypothesized mediation effects. Consistent with the spillover hypothesis, domestic violence at Year 1 had a direct effect on maternal mental health at Year 3, which had direct effects on children's externalizing behavior problems at Year 5. Likewise, domestic violence at Year 1 had direct effects on parenting behavior and spanking at Year 3, and both parenting behavior and spanking then had direct effects on children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems at Year 5. Domestic violence at Year 1 had direct effects on children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems at Year 5. These results suggest that there are long-term effects of domestic violence on the behavior problems of preschool-aged children and that early interventions are needed to prevent later problems among children in families experiencing domestic violence.

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1. Introduction

The issue of domestic violence has been increasingly recognized as a persistent social and public health problem, particularly because of the tremendous, negative effects it has on victims' health and children's well-being (Carlson, McNutt, & Choi, 2003; Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Lindhorst, Oxford, & Gillmore, 2007; Staggs, Long, Mason, Krishnan, & Riger, 2007; Zlotnick, Johnson, & Kohn, 2006). Although the effects of domestic violence on maternal mental health, parenting, and children's behavior problems have been well established in the literature, most studies have focused on school-age children (Edelson, 1999; Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Sternberg et al., 1993), and only a few studies have examined the associations for children in early childhood (Carpenter & Stacks, 2009; Levendosky et al., 2006; Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English, & Everson, 2003; Zerk, Mertin, & Proeve, 2009).

Empirical evidence has clearly shown the importance of early childhood experiences to an individual's later development (Graces, Thomas, & Currie, 2002; Schweinhart, 2005; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). Additionally, previous studies have found that there is a high prevalence of domestic

violence for low-income women (Catlett & Artis, 2004; Frias & Angel, 2007; Honeycutt, Marshall, & Weston, 2001; Kenney & McLanahan, 2006; Meisel, Chandler, & Rienzi, 2003; Tolman & Rosen, 2001) and that domestic violence tends to be frequent and increase over the early childhood years (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997; Huang, Son, & Wang, 2008; Layzer, Goodson, & Delange, 1985). This means that many preschool-aged children are at a high risk of experiencing domestic violence in their household. Given the large number of children being raised in low-income families and the many financial challenges that these families face (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan et al., 2003), it is imperative to investigate the effects of domestic violence on the internalizing and externalizing behaviors for preschool-aged children because these outcomes have important effects on children's later development. To this end, this article uses the first four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) to examine the effects of domestic violence on maternal mental health, parenting, and preschool-aged children's behavior problems. Increasing our understanding of the effects of domestic violence on these three outcomes will aid policymakers and frontline workers of domestic violence prevention programs in their efforts to design and implement intervention strategies for preschool-aged children who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing abuse.

2. Theoretic framework

The bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) underscores the importance of the dynamic interaction

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 732 932 7520x117.

E-mail address: huangc@rci.rutgers.edu (C.-C. Huang).

¹ Tel.: +886 2 33661242.

² Tel.: +1 732 932 7520x117.

between the child and the environment during a child's development. In bioecological theory, the child is the center of the developmental process, which is influenced both through the child's own biology and a complex system of interconnected environmental layers (micro, meso, exo, and macrosystem). The microsystem is made up of networks in which the child has direct interpersonal relationships, such as the family and school. The mesosystem consists of the relationships between microsystem environments. The exosystem includes settings in which the child does not directly participate but that affect settings in which the child does routinely interact. The macrosystem is made up of larger reaching, less rigidly defined structures such as cultural values and social conditions that have the ability to influence the child through the other environmental layers. In short, bioecological theory posits that the child is an active being who interacts bidirectionally with the societal context and that the child's development is affected by these interactions.

Belsky (1984) took Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework a step further in the area of parenting and identified three domains of determinants of parenting. First, parenting may be influenced by the characteristics of parents (e.g., parental psychological well-being), which are derived, in part, from their own developmental history. The second determinant is comprised of the characteristics of the child (e.g., gender and child temperament). The third domain is the social context within which the parent-child relationship is embedded. Contextual sources of stress (e.g., domestic violence) and support may promote or undermine parenting. In particular, Belsky proposed that, in buffering parent-child interactions from stress, a parent's psychological resources are more important than contextual sources of support, which in turn are more important than the characteristics of the child in predicting parenting behavior.

Within the family microsystem, not only does domestic violence affect children's behavioral outcomes directly, but also it may have an indirect influence through its effects on maternal psychological health and parenting. This paper draws on the spill-over hypothesis, essentially a direct application of the interrelatedness of bioecological theory. In particular, the spill-over hypothesis assumes that hostility and conflict in one family system negatively influence other family systems (Erel & Burman, 1995; Krisknakumar & Buehler, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2006). Similarly, the hypothesis also expects the negative effects of domestic violence on a mother's mental health and parenting to have a negative influence on her children's behavior problems.

3. Empirical evidence

Empirical studies, largely from school-aged children and infants, have supported an ecological model for explaining the effects of domestic violence on the well-being of mothers and their children. That is, domestic violence has negative effects on maternal mental health, reduces their ability to provide high-quality parenting, and results in poor behavioral consequences for children in the household (Anderson & Cramer-Benjamin, 1999; Coker et al., 2002; Edelson, 1999; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2006).

In terms of maternal mental health, victims have significantly higher rates of both depression and anxiety (Coker et al., 2002; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2006). Using population-based data from the National Violence Against Women Survey, Coker and colleagues found that about 29% of women ($N=6790$) had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological domestic violence during their lifetime. Findings from regression analyses revealed that all three types of violence were associated with a high risk of depressive symptoms and chronic mental illness and that higher psychological violence scores were more strongly associated with these health outcomes than were physical violence scores (Coker et al., 2002). Levendosky and Graham-Bermann (2001) studied 120 women and one each of their children who were residing

in shelters or elsewhere in the community and found that domestic violence reduced maternal psychological functioning. Using 203 mother-infant dyads, Levendosky et al. (2006) found that past domestic violence, as well as current violence, significantly affected maternal mental health and that the effects of both past and current violence were similar.

Maternal mental health has been found to have direct and indirect effects on children's behavior via its effects on parenting. In terms of direct effects, studies have shown that poor maternal mental health is related to increased behavior problems for children (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000; Levendosky et al., 2006; Meadows, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007). For example, using the FFCWS ($N=2,120$), Meadows et al. (2007) found that lower maternal mental health was associated with increased odds of anxious or depressed, attention deficit, and oppositional defiant disorders for children aged 3. Especially considering that paternal mental health had no significant association with these problem behaviors, the findings underscored the important influence of maternal mental health on children's behavior problems. With respect to indirect effects, studies have shown that maternal mental health positively affects parenting quality (e.g., parental warmth) and that a high quality of parenting is associated with fewer behavior problems (Jackson et al., 2000; Levendosky et al., 2006). These findings suggest that parenting may partially mediate the relationship between maternal mental health and children's behavior problems.

With respect to parenting, domestic violence appears to reduce the quality of parenting (Anderson & Cramer-Benjamin, 1999; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2006; Miller, Cowan, Cowan, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1993). For example, Miller and her colleagues (1993) used data from 41 families of the Becoming a Family Project and found that certain aspects of parenting quality, such as parental warmth, negatively affected child behavior problems, and the effects tended to be larger for children of preschool age than for adolescents. Likewise, both of the Levendosky studies (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Levendosky et al., 2006) indicated that domestic violence contributed to mothers being less able to respond warmly and sensitively to their children and less likely to bond positively with them. In their review of the literature, Anderson and Cramer-Benjamin (1999) found that interpersonal violence contributed to each parent being less emotionally and physically available to the child, and that reduced availability was likely to result in myriad internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. It is important to note that, in the studies reviewed, only positive dimensions of parenting (e.g., parental warmth towards the children) were measured. The lack of research measuring negative aspects of parenting, such as spanking, in studies analyzing the links between domestic violence and child behavior may be problematic given that these same studies have found that spanking is one of the most influential factors in child behavior problems.

In short, a number of empirical studies have indicated that domestic violence may negatively affect maternal mental health, which can then reduce parenting quality and lead to increased behavior problems for children. However, most of these studies have focused on school-aged children and infants and have used small or local datasets or both from the 1990s. Using data from a recent and large cohort, this paper aims to examine the effects of domestic violence on maternal mental health, parenting, and children's behavior problems during the preschool years, a time that has important effects on later development (Graces et al., 2002; Schweinhart, 2005; Walker et al., 1994; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000). For example, child development outcomes at age 5 are strong predictors of educational achievement in elementary school, which in turn is an important predictor of educational achievement, job earnings, and criminal activity in the adolescent and adult years (Graces et al., 2002; West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000).

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