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Effects of early and later family violence on children's behavior problems and depression: A longitudinal, multi-informant perspective[☆]

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the effects of different forms of family violence at two developmental stages by assessing a sample of 110 Israeli children, drawn from the case files of Israeli family service agencies, studied longitudinally in both middle childhood and adolescence.

Methods: Information about the children's adjustment was obtained from parents, teachers, and the children themselves when the children averaged 10.6 and 15.9 years of age using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), Teacher Report Form (TRF), Youth Self-Report (YSR), and Children's Depression Inventory (CDI). Information about the history of family violence was obtained from the mothers, fathers, children, and social workers.

Results: The results paint a mixed picture of the effects of family violence on children and adolescents. The relationship between concurrent behavior problems and abuse group varied by informant and study phase, although they were strongest when children were the informants. Predictions regarding the relationship between early abuse and later adjustment were only partially confirmed. Different informants did not agree about which groups of children were most adversely affected, there was little stability over time in the pattern of reported effects, and children were more likely than other informants to report levels of maladjustment that varied depending on recent or concurrent exposure to family violence. Many families changed their abuse status over time, and children who were

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new victims at follow-up had the most internalizing problems. Girls were found to be at more risk for internalizing and externalizing behavior problems than boys.

Conclusions: Multiple informants are necessary to evaluate and assess the effects of family violence on children's behavior. Younger children may be more susceptible to the effects of family violence than older children, but problems manifest by some children may not carry over to adolescence. Changes in family and parenting practices, as well as in children's capacity to appraise and cope with family violence may help mitigate the adverse effects of family violence.

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Introduction

Over the past 30 years, increased awareness of the extent and nature of family violence has paralleled increased interest in its effects on children's development. Many researchers have shown that children who are victims of child abuse, exposed to violence between their parents or parent-figures, or exposed to multiple forms of family violence are significantly more likely to have a variety of psychological, psychosocial, and educational difficulties (Bolger & Patterson, 2003; English, Marshall, & Stewart, 2003; Pelcovitz, Kaplan, DeRosa, Mandel, & Salzinger, 2000). However, there have been few longitudinal studies in which abused children have been followed over time, few studies of the effects of family violence on adolescents, few studies that have used multiple informants of abuse status and child adjustment, and few studies in which attempts were made to tease apart the effects of witnessing, as opposed to being directly victimized by, family violence. In this study, we explored the effects of these different forms of family violence at different developmental stages by following a group of children from middle childhood into adolescence.

In the first decade of research on family violence, many researchers documented that victims of physical child abuse were frequently characterized by behavior problems and psychiatric symptoms (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989; National Research Council, 1993; Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1993). More recently, researchers have also emphasized the risks associated with exposure to spousal or partner violence. Children are often exposed to multiple types of family violence (Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Margolin, 1998) because marital violence and child physical abuse frequently co-occur (Appel & Holden, 1998; Jouriles & LeCompte, 1991). Hughes (1988) found that children who were both witnesses (of spouse abuse) and victims (of child abuse) had the most externalizing behavior problems, while children who were neither victims nor witnesses had the fewest such problems, and children who were witnesses but not victims had intermediate scores. Later, Sternberg et al. (1993) found that increased levels of aggression and behavior problems were evident among child witnesses of domestic violence, victims of physical abuse, and children who were both victims and witnesses, with few differences between these groups. Sternberg et al. also reported that children who had been physically abused, had observed spouse abuse, or had been both victims and witnesses did not differ with respect to levels of depression, but that all had higher depression scores than did children in a comparison group. Observing parental violence is associated with externalizing problems even after controlling for parent-child aggression, and for boys such exposure is a better predictor of behavior problems than parent-child aggression (O'Keefe, 1994).

Complementing and extending the results obtained in earlier meta-analytic studies on the effects of marital conflict (Buehler et al., 1998; Reid & Crisafulli, 1990), two recent meta-analyses indicated that

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