



## Children's adjustment problems in families characterized by men's severe violence toward women: Does other family violence matter? ☆, ☆☆

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This research examined whether additional forms of family violence (partner-child aggression, mother-child aggression, and women's intimate partner violence [IPV]) contribute to children's adjustment problems in families characterized by men's severe violence toward women.

**Methods:** Participants were 258 children and their mothers recruited from domestic violence shelters. Mothers and children completed measures of men's IPV, women's IPV, partner-child aggression, and mother-child aggression. Mothers provided reports of children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems; children provided reports of their appraisals of threat in relation to interparent conflict.

**Results:** After controlling for sociodemographics and men's IPV: (1) each of the additional forms of family violence (partner-child aggression, mother-child aggression, and women's IPV) was associated with children's externalizing problems; (2) partner-child aggression was associated with internalizing problems; and (3) partner-child aggression was associated with children's threat appraisals. The relation of mother-child aggression to externalizing problems was stronger for boys than for girls; gender differences were not observed for internalizing problems or threat appraisals.

**Conclusions:** Men's severe IPV seldom occurs in the absence of other forms of family violence, and these other forms appear to contribute to children's adjustment problems. Parent-child aggression, and partner-child aggression in particular, are especially important. Systematic efforts to identify shelter children who are victims of parental violence seem warranted.

**Practice implications:** Men's severe IPV seldom occurs in the absence of other forms of family violence (partner-child aggression, mother-child aggression, and women's IPV), and these different forms of family violence all contribute to children's adjustment problems. Treatment programs for children who come to domestic violence shelters should address these different forms of family violence, especially parent-child aggression.

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## Introduction

Children in families characterized by men's severe intimate partner violence (IPV) are more likely to experience externalizing and internalizing problems than children in families with either no IPV (e.g., Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985) or less severe IPV (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Rossman & Rosenberg, 1992). Most studies demonstrating such relations have focused on samples recruited from domestic violence shelters (Jouriles, McDonald, & Skopp, 2005). In these samples, the families and the researchers typically identify men's IPV as the critical form of family violence (e.g., men's violence was what prompted the women to seek shelter). Descriptions of the men's IPV in such samples often indicate multiple beatings and the threat or use of knives and guns (Jouriles et al., 1998). Such extreme violence naturally commands attention and is often assumed to be a major reason for the high prevalence of adjustment problems among children in families recruited from domestic violence shelters (Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, & Peters, 2001).

Unfortunately, the family context in which these children live often includes exposure to other forms of family violence as well. For example, parental physical aggression toward children is a robust correlate of men's IPV, with rates of severe parental physical aggression toward children often exceeding 40% in domestic violence shelter samples (Appel & Holden, 1998; Jouriles, McDonald, Smith Slep, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008). Similarly, in families in which the men engage in severe IPV, up to 50% of the women also engage in IPV (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2005; Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996). The extent to which these other forms of family violence (parental physical aggression toward children and women's IPV) adversely affect children who have been exposed to men's severe IPV is important to consider from a scientific as well as a practical perspective (see Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003 for review).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that children develop beliefs and behavior patterns from observing and interacting with others, particularly salient others such as their parents. Having two parents who engage in IPV, rather than one, can be conceptualized as providing children with more opportunities to observe aggression. Similarly, families in which the parents engage in both IPV and aggression toward children, rather than only IPV, might be regarded as families in which the children have additional opportunities for learning aggressive behavior patterns. Social learning theorists have also suggested that children are more likely to incorporate the values and behaviors of the parent with whom they more closely identify, most typically the same-sex parent (Bandura, 1977; Crick & Dodge, 1994), suggesting that women's IPV and mother-child aggression might disproportionately affect girls. Consistent with this view, in a pediatric clinic sample, mothers' IPV predicted girls' externalizing problems, whereas fathers' IPV predicted boys' externalizing problems (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001).

The cognitive contextual model points to the importance of the children's interpretations of marital conflict as determinants of their adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000). The model holds that children appraise interparental conflict according to its threat to family stability and to their own well-being, and children who appraise their parents' marital conflict as threatening are more likely to experience internalizing problems. Families characterized by multiple forms of family violence (e.g., men's severe IPV and parental aggression toward children) tend to be unpredictable and extremely chaotic (Patterson, 1982).

Thus, children might be expected to feel more threatened and experience more internalizing problems when both IPV and parent-child aggression occur within the family as opposed to only IPV, or when both, rather than one, of the caregivers engages in IPV.

There is empirical evidence, albeit sparse and sometimes equivocal, that parent-child aggression is related to children's adjustment problems in families characterized by men's severe IPV (e.g., Hughes, Parkinson, & Vargo, 1989; Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987; Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman, & Abbott, 2006; Wolfe et al., 2003). However, these studies rarely differentiate between mother-child and father-child (or partner-child) aggression, which as discussed above is a potentially important distinction from a social learning theory perspective. In addition, these studies rarely include data on parent-child aggression collected from multiple sources, which is an important methodological limitation (Appel & Holden, 1998; Jouriles, Mehta, McDonald, & Francis, 1997). Moreover, no studies to date have considered the contributions of women's IPV in examining children's adjustment problems within families characterized by severe men's IPV.

Historically, it has been contended by many that women's IPV primarily reflects self-defense (Swan & Snow, 2002), particularly when it occurs in the context of severe men's IPV. It has also been suggested that questioning or acknowledging otherwise does women an injustice, risking the possible loss of legitimate support for women who are victims of serious violence (e.g., White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredo, 2000). On the other hand, it has also been argued that there are sufficient data to suggest that women do engage in violence against their partners, and whether or not the violence is in self-defense, lack of knowledge about the nature and dynamics of IPV in general – not just men's IPV – limits our ability to understand its effects (e.g., Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004; Wolfe et al., 2003). Setting aside questions of resource allocation and social justice, examining whether children are adversely affected by the violence of women in families characterized by men's severe IPV holds implications for policy, theory, and practice, and for those reasons it warrants consideration.

The present research is designed to examine the associations of children's adjustment problems with men's and women's parent-child aggression and women's IPV within families characterized by men's severe IPV. On the basis of theory and research reviewed above, it is hypothesized that men's and women's parent-child aggression and women's IPV will each contribute independently of the others in the prediction of children's adjustment problems and threat appraisals. Mother-child aggression and women's IPV are also expected to be more strongly associated with the adjustment problems and threat appraisals of girls rather than boys.

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