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Negative affect and parental aggression in child physical abuse[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: Parental negative affect is a risk factor for child physical abuse. As negative affect contributes to aggression, and because physical abuse involves an aggressive act directed at the child, we examined the relationship between negative affect and parent-to-child aggression (PTCA) in parents reported to Child Protective Services for physical abuse.

Method: Baseline assessment data were retrospectively examined on 49 participants in a treatment study for child physical abuse. The negative affects studied were depression, anxiety, and hostility on the Beck Depression Inventory and the Brief Symptom Inventory. PTCA was assessed using the physical aggression subscales (Minor and Severe Physical Violence) of the Conflict Tactics Scale. The contribution of these negative affects to PTCA was examined after controlling individually for the effects of parental attributions and contextual variables widely regarded as etiological factors in child physical abuse.

Results: Contributions of negative affect to PTCA after individually controlling for other predictors were found for Minor Physical Violence but not Severe Physical Violence. Findings were strongest with depression on the Beck Depression Inventory and to a lesser extent with hostility on the Brief Symptom Inventory.

Conclusions: Finding that negative affect contributed to PTCA in this sample suggests that it may be important to study the effects of emotion-focused treatments in physically abusive parents. These findings also suggest that PTCA may have qualities of impulsive aggression, a form of aggression that is conceptualized as driven by negative affect, occurs in response to aversive events, and is not planned. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Parent; Child physical abuse; Aggression; Emotion

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Introduction

Knutson (1978) observed that because child physical abuse (CPA) involves an aggressive act directed at the child by the caregiver, the wealth of research on aggression in other groups may be applicable to CPA. Using this approach, Berkowitz's (1993) formulation on the role of negative affect in aggression has been applied to theoretical models explaining CPA (e.g., Belsky, 1993). However, there has been little research testing this model, with the exception of one report on abusive incidents that resulted in parents being reported to Child Protective Services (Dietrich, Berkowitz, Kadushin, & McGloin, 1990). Here we will examine the role of negative affect in parent-to-child aggression (PTCA) among participants in a treatment study for CPA. To provide a context for this work we first describe studies on negative affect in CPA, to show that there is literature suggesting negative affect contributes to CPA, but that studies have not examined the mechanism by which this may occur. Thus we will examine the hypothesis that negative affect contributes to physical abuse through its effects on PTCA.

Negative affect and child physical abuse

With regard to negative affect in the etiology of CPA, most studies have focused on depression. Using semistructured interviews, Famularo and colleagues (Famularo, Barnum, & Stone, 1986; Famularo, Fenton, Kinscherff, Ayoub, & Barnum, 1994) found that depressive disorders were more common in abusive parents compared to control groups. In an epidemiologic sample, after controlling for substance abuse and social factors, depressive disorder was associated with a self-reported lifetime history of CPA (odds ratio 4.03; Kelleher, Chaffin, Hollenberg, & Fischer, 1994) and new onset CPA in the following year (odds ratio 3.45; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996). Another epidemiologic survey found that CPA was related to major depressive disorder (odds ratio 3.1; Bland & Orn, 1986). However, these studies did not examine the mechanism by which depression may cause CPA. Similarly, studies showing self-reported depression to be higher in abusive parents compared to control parents have not examined the mechanism by which depression may contribute to CPA (e.g., Culp, Culp, Soulis, & Letts, 1989; Evans, 1980; Lahey, Conger, Atkeson, & Treiber, 1984; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). Zuravin (1989) showed that parental depression on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, Ward, Mendelsohn, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) contributed significantly to PTCA after controlling for education and race. However, this study was with a sample of parents reported to Child Protective Services for either CPA or child neglect, and it did not examine the contribution of depression after controlling for parental attributions or contextual variables. Also, studies showing self-reported depression to be significantly related to risk for CPA based on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (Milner, 1994) have not examined the relationship between depression and PTCA (e.g., Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999).

There are surprisingly little data on parental anger in CPA, given that the literature is replete with references to a role for parental anger in CPA (e.g., Ammerman, 1990; Belsky, 1993; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Peterson, Gable, Doyle, & Ewigman, 1997; Reid, 1986; Wolfe, 1987). The following studies suggest a role for anger in CPA: two studies found high anger scores in physically abusive parents (Acton & During, 1992; Nomellini & Katz, 1983),

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