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THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF WIFE ABUSE AS A RISK FACTOR FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate the relative importance of wife abuse as a risk factor for physical child abuse, physical punishment, and verbal child abuse. The study explored the importance of wife abuse relative to blocks of parent, child, and family characteristics and also relative to specific risk factors.

Method: This study re-analyzed a sub-sample ($N = 2,733$) of data from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey. Hierarchical logistic regressions were conducted, using five different criterion variables measuring physical child abuse, physical punishment, and verbal abuse separately and in combination.

Results: Blocks of parent, child, and family characteristics were more important predictors of violence towards children than was wife abuse, though the presence of wife abuse in the home was a consistently significant specific risk factor for all forms of violence against children. Of specific risk factors, a respondent's history of having been hit as an adolescent was a larger risk factor for physical child abuse than was wife abuse. Wife abuse was an important predictor of physical punishment. Non-violent marital discord was a greater factor in predicting likelihood of verbal child abuse than was wife abuse.

Conclusions: Though this study confirms the association between wife abuse and violence towards children, it cautions us not to overlook the contribution of other factors in our attempts to understand the increased risk attributed to wife abuse.
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Key Words—Child abuse, Physical punishment, Verbal abuse, Wife abuse, Risk factors.

INTRODUCTION

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND the problem of violence against children, it is important to study the contexts in which it occurs. In recent years, attention has focused on child abuse in the context of wife abuse. Studies have revealed that children are at increased risk of physical abuse and/or punishment when wife abuse occurs in the home (Bowker, Arvitell, & McFerron, 1988; Ross, 1996; Schechter & Edleson, 1994; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Straus & Smith, 1990). The co-existence of wife abuse and child abuse is amply documented in the literature and wife abuse is understood to be a clear risk factor for child abuse. What is not found in the literature, however, is much analysis of wife abuse relative to other risk factors for child abuse. In other words, how great a predictor is wife abuse compared to other significant risk factors? The purpose of the present study was therefore to examine the relative importance of wife abuse in understanding violence against children. Because different forms of violence can have distinct etiologies and different correlates,

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three separate types of violence against children were explored: physical abuse; physical punishment; and verbal abuse. The following research questions were investigated: What is the relative importance of parent characteristics, child factors, family characteristics, and wife abuse for understanding violence against children? How important is wife abuse relative to other risk factors? What are the greatest specific risk factors for different forms of violence against children? Knowledge derived from this research may lead to greater understanding of physical child abuse, corporal punishment, and verbal abuse of children.

A Theoretical Model of Child Abuse

Theoretical models of child abuse can be analyzed in terms of their levels of analysis, structure, assumptions about etiology, and their complexity (Azar, 1991). This study used an ecological model of child abuse and considered multiple levels of analysis. As put forth by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the ecological perspective looks at the developing individual, the environment, and their evolving interaction. Bronfenbrenner identified four levels of analysis: microsystems (the immediate setting), mesosystems (relations between settings), exosystems (broader social system settings), and macrosystems (overarching patterns of ideology and/or institutional organization). Belsky (1980) applied this perspective to the problem of child maltreatment, incorporating another level, termed “ontogenic development” to account for what the parent brings to the interaction. The present study analyzed variables related to the following levels of analysis: (1) ontogenic (parent); (2) microsystem, (child characteristics, family factors); and (3) mesosystem (wife abuse) (see Table 1 for list of variables in the analysis).

With regard to structure, the model used in this study considered multiple forms of violence against children and employed multiple predictors, viewing abuse as an interaction between the parent and child in the context of the family setting. As Belsky (1980) observed, “Since the parent-child system (the crucible of child maltreatment) is nested within the spousal relationship, what happens between husbands and wives—from an ecological point of view—has implications for what happens between parents and their children” (p. 326).

The etiology of child abuse is assumed to be related to multiple, interacting factors, including characteristics of the parent, the child, the family, the larger social context, as well as broader cultural norms and beliefs. As Azar (1991) noted, early theories of child maltreatment were single cause theories, followed by more complex theories that considered multiple factors; however, even these later works simply generated “lists of the components of single factor theories with little attempt to specify contingent relationships between components or prioritize their contribution to causality” (p. 35). By utilizing a more complex model of child abuse, the present study sought to address this weakness. Though causality cannot be shown, this research adds to the literature by identifying risk factors and exploring the relative importance (i.e., size and significance of odds ratios) of each risk factor.

Risk Factors for Violence Against Children

Wife abuse. Much research on the link between wife abuse and child abuse focuses solely on rates of violence against children in homes with wife abuse, usually looking only at physical child abuse. Clinical studies indicate that between 40 and 70% of men who batter their partners also abuse their children (40%, O’Keefe, 1995; 63%, Giles-Sims, 1985; 70%, Bowker et al., 1988), while rates of abuse committed by battered women reportedly range from 44% to 56% (O’Keefe, 1995; Stacey & Shupe, 1983; Giles-Sims, 1985). A methodological shortcoming of many studies that rely on non-representative samples is their failure to use comparison groups. Consequently, though the above studies showed that child abuse and wife abuse frequently co-occurred, they failed to demonstrate the increased risk posed by wife abuse.

Certain clinical sample studies did use comparison groups (e.g., Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Stark

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