

Exposure to family violence especially harmful to previously abused children

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Millions of American children are exposed to violence in their homes each year, putting them at risk for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems. According to a new study in the September/October 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*, children who are maltreated tend to have a lot of re-exposure to family violence, and this re-exposure often leads to increased psychological problems.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, University of California, Irvine, and West Chester University found that the types of violence that abused children were subsequently re-exposed to led to specific types of psychological problems. Specifically, previously abused children who witnessed family violence had more symptoms of depression and anxiety, while previously abused children who were subjected to harsh physical discipline were more aggressive and broke rules more frequently.

"Our study has implications for mental health treatment and policy: Clinicians and service providers should be especially concerned about the substantial number of maltreatment victims who are re-exposed to family violence, because these children are highly vulnerable to ongoing emotional and behavioral problems," according to Andrea Kohn Maikovich, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania and the study's lead author.

"Understanding more about how violence affects youth can help us develop more cost-effective and targeted interventions for our nation's

young victims of violence," she added. "Because victims of abuse and neglect are at increased risk of witnessing and experiencing other forms of family violence, intervention efforts must focus not only on protecting children from re-victimization as it is defined legally, but work to decrease even non-abusive forms of physical discipline such as corporal punishment and the amount of adult domestic violence children witness in their homes."

In the study, family violence was defined as partner-on-partner abuse, including yelling, throwing an object, hitting, beating up, pointing or using a knife or gun, and dealing drugs, as well as adult-on-child abuse, including the above examples and spanking. Harsh physical discipline was defined as anything from an adult spanking a child to an adult choking a child.

The researchers studied a racially diverse group of 2,925 children ages 5 to 16 years. All of the children had been reported to Child Protective Services as suspected victims of abuse (for neglect as well as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse). Three times over a three-year period, the children's caregivers reported how much physical discipline they used with the children, and the children reported how much violence they saw in their homes. Caregivers also reported on the children's emotional and behavioral problems.

It can be difficult to determine whether a child's emotional and behavioral problems are the result of experiencing violence in the home or are caused by the other stressful events that many victims of family violence experience. The researchers used a type of statistical testing that allowed them to examine whether witnessing home violence and experiencing harsh physical discipline were associated with children's emotional and behavioral problems above and beyond the effects of other factors that predict childhood mental illness and are strongly tied to violence, including poverty and caregivers' mental health problems.

They also took into consideration each child's age and gender, as well as normal expected changes in childhood mental health over time.

Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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