

Children's sense of threat from parental fighting determines trauma symptoms

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(PhysOrg.com) -- If children feel threatened by even very low levels of violence between their parents, they may be at increased risk for developing trauma symptoms, new research suggests.

A study by psychologists at SMU found that [children](#) who witness violence between their mother and her intimate partner report fewer trauma symptoms if they don't perceive the violence as threatening.

The research highlights the importance of assessing how threatened a child feels when his or her parents are violent toward one another, and how that sense of threat may be linked to symptoms of trauma.

Children's perception of threat determines any trauma

"Our results indicated a relation between children's perception of threat and their trauma symptoms in a community sample reporting relatively low levels of violence," said Deborah Corbitt-Shindler, a doctoral candidate in the psychology department at SMU. "The results of the study suggest that even very low levels of violence, if interpreted as threatening by children, can influence the development of trauma symptoms in children."

The researchers presented their findings February 24 at the "National Summit on Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: Forging a Shared Agenda" in Dallas. The scientific conference was sponsored by the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the [Lifespan](#).

Family violence experts estimate that more than half of children exposed to intimate partner violence experience trauma symptoms, such as bad dreams, nightmares and trying to forget about the fights.

SMU study surveyed Dallas area families

The SMU study of 532 children and their mothers looked at the link between intimate partner violence and trauma symptoms in children. The families were recruited from communities in the urban Dallas area.

In the study, mothers were asked to describe any violent arguments they'd had with their intimate partners, and they were asked about trauma symptoms they may have experienced because of the violence.

Similarly, the children in the study, age 7 to 10 years old, were asked to

appraise how threatened they felt by the violence they witnessed, and about trauma symptoms they may have experienced because of the violence. The researchers defined "threat" as the extent to which children are concerned that: a family member might be harmed, the stability of the family is threatened, or a parent won't be able to care for them.

Trauma: Nightmares, bad dreams, trying to forget

To assess trauma, children were asked questions such as if they've had bad dreams or nightmares about their mom's and dad's arguments or fights; if thoughts of the arguments or fights ever just pop into their mind; if they ever try to forget all about the arguments and fights; and if they ever wish they could turn off feelings that remind them of the arguments and fights.

The SMU researchers found that even when mothers reported an episode of intimate [partner violence](#), their children reported fewer trauma symptoms when they didn't view the episode as threatening. Although a mother's emotions sometimes affect their children's emotions, in this study the mothers' trauma symptoms were unrelated to the children's traumatic responses to the violence.

Corbitt-Shindler conducted the study in conjunction with her faculty advisers — Renee McDonald, associate professor, and Ernest Jouriles, professor and chair of the SMU Psychology Department. Additional co-authors of the study were SMU clinical psychology doctoral candidates Erica Rosentraub and Laura Minze; and Rachel Walker, SMU psychology department research assistant.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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