

Parental conflict may manifest itself in preschooler behavior

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(Medical Xpress) -- Behavioral problems in preschoolers may mirror the intensity and frequency of their parents' marital conflict and signal possible child maltreatment, suggests a new study co-written by Jun Sung Hong, a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois, and researchers at Ewha Womans University and Duksung Women's University, both in Seoul, South Korea.

The study, which included more than 340 children, their mothers and their teachers at 20 day care sites in Korea, was part of a longitudinal project exploring possible links between family conflict and school violence with the goal of developing intervention programs for at-risk children.

“Considering that many social problems have their roots in family experiences, scholars have become interested in exploring potential family factors – including marital conflict – that are correlated with young children’s aggression,” said the study’s lead author, Hyun-Sim Doh, a professor in the department of child development in the College of Social Science at Ewha Womans University. “Although the study involved children and their families in Korea, the findings could be relevant to children and their families in the U.S. and other countries because child maltreatment and family violence are worldwide social problems.”

Additional co-authors were Nana Shin, Min-Jung Kim and Sangwon Kim, Ewha Womans University; and Mi-Kyung Choi, Duksung

Women's University.

The children in the study, all 3-year-olds, met the criteria for aggressive behaviors – such as fighting with other children, breaking other people's belongings and bullying peers through physical and relational aggression – on the Child Behavioral Checklist, a widely used parent-report questionnaire used to assess children on maladaptive behaviors and emotional problems.

Mothers who reported experiencing the most severe and frequent conflict with their marital partners were more likely to report that they also neglected or physically or psychologically abused their children.

Accordingly, the severity of the children's aggression was significantly associated with the level of maltreatment and with the frequency and severity of marital conflict reported by the mothers.

Several prior studies suggested that children's aggression might be correlated with inter-parental conflict. However, the current study explored the possibility that child maltreatment might be involved as a mediator between child aggression and parental conflict. The findings indicated that the mediating relationship was consistent for girls as well as boys.

Prior research has shown that children who witness inter-parental violence may model that behavior, viewing aggression as an acceptable means of resolving conflict.

“It's important for practitioners to focus on aggressive behavior at an early developmental stage as young children are likely to be more responsive to primary prevention,” Hong said.

Traditionally, patriarchal social values in Korea treated marital conflict

and domestic violence as family matters, and researchers shied away from studying these areas, but a recent surge in school violence has pushed family relationships to the forefront of the research agenda, Doh said.

In a related project, Kim, Doh and Choi collaborated with Hong on a study that tested an intervention program for aggressive children, which comprised social skills training and a parent education component that focused on fostering secure parent-child attachments, promoting communication and problem-solving skills and teaching appropriate disciplinary measures.

Aggressive behavior significantly decreased, and pro-social behavior and emotional regulation significantly increased among the children who participated in the intervention, and their mothers scored higher on measures of warmth and acceptance at the end of the program.

The study about the intervention was published last year in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*. The [marital conflict](#) study became available online in May with the same journal in advance of publication.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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