

Economic abuse affects maternal mental health and parenting, study finds

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(Medical Xpress)— Mothers who experience economic and psychological abuse during the first year of a relationship with their child's father are more likely to become depressed and spank the child in year five, researchers from the Rutgers School of Social Work have found.

The Rutgers team, which studied the impact of [intimate partner violence](#) – known as IPV – and the effects of such violence over time on women, also determined psychological abuse experiences during the first year of the relationship had a significant effect on the level of mothers' engagement with their children in the fifth year.

The findings specifically relate to violence against women since women disproportionately represent survivors and males as perpetrators of physical, sexual and other forms of violence and abuse, including

economic, said Associate Professor Judy L. Postmus, the study's lead author who directs the school's Center on [Violence Against Women](#) and Children.

"When people think about IPV, they might think of physical or psychological abuse, maybe sexual abuse, but they rarely think about economic abuse," Postmus said. "Since the latest recession, however, more attention has been focused on financial matters such as [financial literacy](#) and [personal finances](#). There have also been efforts by the federal government to better prepare individuals to understand [financial matters](#). Still, there have been relatively few studies on economic abuse."

Postmus said economic abuse is considered if a father withholds money, forces his partner to turn over earnings or savings or denies her access to bank accounts or employment opportunities. Psychological abuse includes such behaviors as preventing contact with friends and family and delivering insults and criticism. Slapping, hitting, kicking and unwanted [sexual contact](#) are considered signs of physical or [sexual violence](#). "Our results indicate that mothers who experienced physical, psychological or economic abuse at year one were more likely to experience a depressive episode in year five," Postmus said.

Controlling for such demographic variables as age, ethnicity, education, and childhood and adult living arrangements, mothers who experienced economic abuse were 1.9 times more likely to exhibit signs of depression than mothers who had not suffered abuse. Similarly, mothers who experienced psychological or physical abuse were 1.4 and 1.8 times, respectively, more likely to show signs of depression. When testing for level and changes in abuse over time (between years one and three), only economic abuse predicted maternal depression.

"It is surprising to find economic abuse more predictive of depression over time than other forms of abuse," Postmus said. She said the results

linking economic abuse with depression, including changes in severity of economic abuse over several years, had not been previously identified.

Parenting at year five was measured in two dimensions: engagement in such parent-child activities as singing, reading or telling stories, playing with toys or taking a child to a playground or on an outing, and the use of spanking as a disciplinary behavior. Results indicated that mothers who experienced economic or [psychological abuse](#) in year one all reported less engagement in daily parent-child activities (5.1 compared to 5.3 for women who did not experience abuse) and were 1.5 times more likely to spank the child in year five.

"It's possible that having a partner control access to money or preventing independence through work or school may have a lasting impact on women's mental health, and feelings of disempowerment may force mothers to resort to spanking as a parenting tactic," Postmus said.

She cautioned that further research is needed to better understand the relationship between various types of abuse and parenting behaviors, including how the influence of the perpetrator's actions affects the child and the nature of the perpetrator's own parenting behaviors.

School of Social Work Associate Professor Chien-Chung Huang and doctoral student Amanda Mathisen-Stylianou co-authored the study, "The Impact of Physical and Economic Abuse on Maternal Mental Health and Parenting," that appeared online in *Children and Youth Services Review*. The data came from the first four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study.

Provided by Rutgers University

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