

Study finds girls, boys affected differently by witnessing parental violence

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Witnessing violence by parents or a parent's intimate partner can trigger a chain of negative behaviors in some children that follows them from preschool to kindergarten and beyond, according to researchers at Case Western Reserve University.

But girls and boys can be affected differently, researchers concluded. While girls tend to internalize their exposure to such [violence](#), boys are more inclined to act out aggressively, said Megan R. Holmes, PhD, MSW, assistant professor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve and the study's lead investigator.

While the reactions may differ, both can result in poor social development, she said.

Findings of the study, produced with researchers from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, were recently reported in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

The researchers linked behavior and exposure to violence in the home at two pivotal points in a child's development: starting preschool, when the focus is on learning [social skills](#); and beginning [kindergarten](#), when [children](#) are expected to adjust to more structured academics.

With information from a sample of 1,125 children referred to Child Protective Services for abuse or neglect in the federal Administration for

Children and Families' database, researchers tracked how often children saw violence between partners and connected that exposure to behavior problems.

The researchers also analyzed responses from the children's mothers, who were interviewed about their child's aggressive behaviors and social skills, in such areas as assertiveness, cooperation, responsibility and self-control.

Mothers reported violence occurring (such as pushing, choking, slapping or threatening with a gun or knife) from 0 to 192 times when the child was between age 3 and 4, or an average of 17 times per child, in the past year. At the second pivotal point, children from 5 to 7 years old witnessed 0 to 191 instances, or 13 times per child.

Most children fell within normal ranges for social development and aggression, Holmes said. Yet 14 percent were of clinical concern for [aggressive behavior](#), and 46 percent displayed fewer social skills than their peers during preschool. During kindergarten years, aggression increased to 18 percent, and 34 percent still showed fewer social skills.

Differences in how boys and girls reacted to seeing violent episodes also emerged.

"The exposure occurring when the child was of school age predicted poor social skills for girls but not for boys," Holmes said. The findings suggest school-age (kindergarten) girls may be more likely to struggle with the social skills needed to interact with others and succeed in school.

Meanwhile, boys were more likely to display aggressive behavior starting in preschool as a result of their exposure to the violence. This set off a chain reaction resulting in both increased aggression and poorer social

skills during kindergarten and beyond. The concern is the same: that aggression hinders developing social skills.

"This aggression tends to isolate and prevent healthy interactions with other children," Holmes said.

Early years are critical to a child's development, yet the negative effects may not surface until children are older, she said.

Holmes hopes the information can lead to new interventions at these two pivotal points to help children develop emotionally.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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