

Co-parenting after the end of a violent marriage: What does the first year look like?

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Intimate partner violence is not uncommon among divorcing couples. Whether a woman experienced intimate partner violence during marriage—and the kind of violence she experienced—has an impact on

how well she and her former partner are able to co-parent after separation.

Researchers at the University of Illinois wanted to find out how co-parenting varies during the first year after separation for mothers who have experienced different types of [violence](#) in their marriages. Would there be continued harassment and conflict for these mothers? Or would there be support for each other as co-parents?

"We know with intimate partner violence, when [women](#) leave those relationships, that initial period and through the first year can be particularly dangerous for women in some abusive relationships," says Jennifer Hardesty, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I. "That is also when custody decisions are being made. So the contact between the former partners and the extent of negative emotions might be highest during that first year. We wanted to see specifically what was going on during that time frame."

Hardesty and her colleagues were interested in the specific type of violence the mothers had experienced in their marriages: coercive controlling violence or situational couple violence. They found that, while both types of violence are serious, women's experiences in the year after separation varied based on the type of violence they had experienced in their marriages.

The two types are distinguished by the context in which the violent acts occur, Hardesty says. "Both include [violent acts](#), but they are based upon the underlying pattern and motivation of the violence. Situational couple violence refers to situations where arguments escalate; maybe there's an affair or an argument over money, or some type of incident in which a couple may not have good conflict or anger management skills. The argument escalates and one or both partners hit each other. But there's no

overall pattern of coercive control in those relationships.

"Coercive controlling violence, though, is when one partner has a constant campaign to control the other partner. Tactics we typically hear of such as isolation—keeping you from your friends and family or not letting you go to the doctor to seek help—or controlling the finances is part of a larger pattern of dominance and coercion," she adds.

In a recent paper, published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, the researchers report that women who had experienced coercive controlling violence in their marriages continued to experience higher levels of harassment, conflict, and volatility from their former partners during the first year than women who experienced situational violence. Those who had experienced coercive controlling violence also saw the least co-parenting support and communication about child rearing.

During the study, 135 women who had a recent divorce filing were interviewed five times throughout the first year of separation. Interviewers asked the women questions pertaining to experiences with conflict, support, communication about child rearing, and harassment, including threatening behaviors, throughout the year.

Women who had experienced situational couple violence in marriage did continue to experience harassment and conflict, but not at the same level as women from controlling violent relationships. For couples with situational violence, there was also a more consistent level of co-parenting support, which may include the former [partner](#) being available to help with the kids, "backing you up" as a parent, and offering emotional support.

"From prior qualitative work on couples who had situational violence, it seemed like they were better able to figure out their issues after divorce. They both wanted to in order to be able to co-parent. Maybe that

consistent level of support they have for each other as co-parents enables them to do that," Hardesty says, also pointing out that it does not discount the fact that divorcing couples who had situational violence still experienced conflict and harassment more than couples who had no violence in their marriage.

Another aspect uncovered during the interviews was the unpredictability women from controlling violent relationships experienced during that first year, explains Brian Ogolsky, an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I and co-author of the study.

"There was much less predictability for women in controlling violent relationships," he says. "These women might experience high levels of conflict and harassment, which may improve and appear better but then worsen once again. There's this up and down that creates a context of fear and unpredictability.

"They never know what's coming. This variability is such an important piece, and we did see that the women with controlling violent relationships had much higher levels of variability."

When Hardesty first began studying [intimate partner violence](#), she observed that divorce education programs were not always giving attention to violence. "Previous work suggested there were some differences based on types of violence, but there wasn't anything on a larger scale that followed people to see how those differences played out. That's what eventually led to this project."

And because these different types of violence play out differently in co-parent relationships, different types of interventions are needed.

"Many people would say those divorcing couples shouldn't co-parent,

that it's not safe for the mom and, in many cases where there is coercive controlling violence, I would agree with that. But the reality is, though, they are co-parenting and in many cases the mom wants to have the dad involved - they just want the violence and [harassment](#) to stop," Hardesty explains. "As long as they are co-parenting when there's been a history of violence, we need to understand how to minimize the risks to women and children and support positive outcomes long term. We have pretty good evidence that moms have ongoing health issues and stress related to co-parenting with partners that were abusive to them, but as far as the exact child outcomes and how they relate to some of these different patterns after separation, we need more research on that."

Educating the court system, including attorneys, judges and custody evaluators, as well as health care providers about the effects that violence and these specific types of violence have on women and a separated couple's ability to co-parent is important for making assessments in divorce situations, she adds.

The paper, "Coparenting relationship trajectories: Marital violence linked to change and variability after separation," is published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

More information: Jennifer L. Hardesty et al, Coparenting relationship trajectories: Marital violence linked to change and variability after separation., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/fam0000323](https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000323)

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