

When both mothers and fathers maltreat their children

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About one in five cases of child abuse and neglect is committed by both mothers and fathers, but nearly all the research attention has been focused on when just one parent is involved.

A new study that aimed to shine a light on [risk factors](#) for mistreatment coming from both parents found some surprising results.

For example, mothers and fathers who were substance users had lower odds of both being involved in physical or sexual [abuse](#). Couples in which at least one of the parents was a prior abuse perpetrator also had lower odds of [physical abuse](#).

These and other results suggest that the factors that predict when both parents will be involved in specific types of maltreatment are not always obvious, said Joyce Lee, lead author of the study and assistant professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"We need more nuanced ways of understanding and addressing multiple risk factors within the family to prevent [child maltreatment](#) involving both mothers and fathers," Lee said.

The issue is important because previous research suggests that child maltreatment perpetrated by mothers and fathers is more severe than maltreatment committed by one parent alone.

"That's alarming, but also not surprising. Two parents can have more of a harmful impact on a child if they are both involved with maltreatment," Lee said.

The research was published online recently in the journal *Children*.

The study involved data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, which is a federally sponsored project of the Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The final sample included 6,996 families from 11 states in which biological mother-father pairs were identified as co-perpetrating

maltreatment against a child that led to involvement in the foster care system.

Results showed that about 93% of the maltreatment cases involved neglect, followed by 14% physical abuse, 2% sexual abuse and 1% [emotional abuse](#).

The findings related to physical abuse contradict the results of previous research that suggested parental substance use and housing insecurity were risk factors for child physical abuse.

"Parents who are intoxicated from alcohol or drugs, as well as those struggling to find adequate housing, may not have the bandwidth for any type of parenting—even harsh parenting linked to physical abuse," Lee said.

But those same risk factors were linked to higher odds of both parents participating in neglect, she said.

"There seems to be differences in how family characteristics are linked to acts of omission, such as neglect, versus acts of commission, such as physical abuse," Lee said.

The fact that having a parent who was a prior perpetrator was linked to lower odds of both parents being involved in physical abuse suggests that additional services provided to parents and increased monitoring of these families may mitigate the risk of maltreatment recurrence, she said.

Results also showed that intimate partner violence in a couple relationship was linked to higher odds of both parents participating in child neglect.

In cases of sexual abuse, disability and [medical conditions](#) among

parents were linked with higher odds of mothers and fathers being co-involved, while parental substance use was linked with lower odds of sexual abuse.

Intimate partner violence was the only factor in the study linked to the emotional abuse of children.

The study also found, somewhat surprisingly, that economic insecurity and parental mental health problems were not risk factors for any type of maltreatment. That is inconsistent with other research, and Lee said more research is needed to determine if those factors truly aren't linked to both parents being involved in maltreatment.

Lee said the results suggest a critical need for programs and policies to address the presence of a prior perpetrator in the family, parental substance use, disability and medical conditions, inadequate housing, and intimate partner violence in families. But the results suggest a nuanced approach, because efforts to reduce maltreatment may not have an equal impact on all the various types.

"For example, interventions that aim to prevent [intimate partner violence](#) may help prevent emotional abuse and neglect, but not help prevent physical or [sexual abuse](#)," she said. "We really need to have a comprehensive assessment and treatment of risk factors so that we can stop all types of [child maltreatment](#) by both parents."

Co-authors of the study were Susan Yoon and Angelise Radney of Ohio State, Keunhye Park of Michigan State University, Stacey Shipe of Binghamton University, and Garrett Pace of the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

More information: Joyce Y. Lee et al, Father–Mother Co-Involvement in Child Maltreatment: Associations of Prior Perpetration,

Substance Use, Inadequate Housing, and Intimate Partner Violence with Different Maltreatment Types, *Children* (2023). DOI: [10.3390/children10040707](https://doi.org/10.3390/children10040707)

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