



ARE CHILDREN EXPOSED TO INTERPARENTAL VIOLENCE BEING PSYCHOLOGICALLY MALTREATED?

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ABSTRACT. *Research on childhood witnessing of interparental violence is reviewed. Evidence is presented as to the severe developmental damages the witnessing covictims often sustain. These include: depression, anxiety, cognitive problems, delinquency, and proneness to violence and victimization. Parental failure to shield children from such traumatizing experiences constitutes child maltreatment in that it exposes the victims to (a) terrorizing, and (b) missocializing by corrupting models. Psychological maltreatment is even more potentially damaging than direct physical abuse or neglect alone. In light of the ambiguity in defining caregiver acts of psychological maltreatment, cases in which children have regularly watched wife battering are easier to identify than other forms of psychological maltreatment. Child protection agencies must give priority to responding to cases of psychological maltreatment of children. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.*

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LAST YEAR I (ES) was consulted by Israel's National Council for the Child (INCC) in a criminal case handled by the Tel Aviv District Attorney's office. The defendant was a 28-year-old male who lived separately from his estranged wife and their 4-year-old son. He was tried for aggravated assault, rape, and sodomy. The brutal attack occurred as the petrified child looked on. I was asked by INCC to opine on the following question: "Does battering and raping a mother in the presence of her observing son constitute psychological child maltreatment?" This review article presents the outcome of the literature search I performed prior to my submission of the position article (Somer, 1997).

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Psychological maltreatment, though not a new phenomenon, is emerging as the most recent subject of inquiry in the field of child maltreatment. The term *psychological maltreatment* is used throughout this article because it subsumes psychologically abusive and psychological caregiving behavior that is either neglectful or in contradiction to the special developmental needs and vulnerabilities of the child.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT

Consensus is growing among professionals that psychological maltreatment is more prevalent than other forms of maltreatment, and is more destructive (Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986). The International Conference on Psychological Abuse of Children and Youth held in 1983 defined psychological maltreatment as any act committed or omitted that is judged to be psychologically damaging to the child (Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1987). Some authors posit that psychological maltreatment lies at the core of all major forms of abuse and neglect (Brassard & Gelardo, 1987; Hart & Brassard, 1987). Other definitions label psychological maltreatment as something that threatens development of a positive and intact self-concept (Garbarino et al., 1986); impedes satisfaction of basic individual psychological needs (Hart et al., 1987); or jeopardizes the well-being, normal functioning, and developmental potential of the child (Navare, 1987). The broad definitions of psychological maltreatment emphasize the consequences for the child rather than inadequate parental behaviors.

To operationally define what constitutes psychologically abusive parent behavior, Hart et al. (1987) developed categorization schemes that identify seven subtypes of caregiver psychologically maltreating acts:

1. *Rejecting*: active expressions of rejection such as refusing to help or scapegoating.
2. *Degrading*: devaluation and verbal derogation of the child.
3. *Terrorizing*: actions or threats that can cause a child extreme fear and anxiety.
4. *Isolating*: refusing to allow interactions with others, or confining a child in room alone.
5. *Missocializing or corrupting*: acts that teach or otherwise encourage the child to develop orientations that are destructive to others or himself or herself.
6. *Exploiting*: using the child for personal advantage or profit.
7. *Denying emotional responsiveness*: acts of omission in which the caregiver fails "to provide the sensitive, responsive caregiving necessary to facilitate healthy social/emotional development" (Hart et al., 1987, p. 7).

A difficulty with this classification scheme pointed out by McGee and Wolfe (1991) is that certain psychologically harmful parent-child dynamics cannot be easily classified into one of the seven types. A case in point is inconsistent parent behavior that includes intermittent explosive aggressiveness. This parenting style has been strongly associated with the development of child behavior problems (Patterson, 1982; Wahler & Dumas, 1987).

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

According to the organizational model normal development is seen as a progression from a diffuse and undifferentiated state to a state of greater, more organized complexity. As the child negotiates the challenges of successive developmental stages, emotional, social,

cognitive and social-cognitive competencies become better articulated and integrated (Cicchetti & Schneider-Rosen, 1984, 1986). According to this perspective, successful resolution of critical early stage-salient issues, such as attachment to the parent, encourages appropriate adaptation of future stage-salient challenges, such as the development of an autonomous self (Sroufe & Rutter, 1984); caretaker behavior toward a developing child is considered an extremely important factor in the prediction of the child's adaptation during important developmental stages (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Research by Egeland and Erickson (1987) has prospectively demonstrated that psychologically unavailable caregiving and verbally hostile caregiving is related to the development of child deviance and delay.

VIOLENT ENVIRONMENTS

In this review article I claim that child witnesses to family violence are traumatized by the experience, and are psychologically maltreated by the offending parent, who failed to shield the observing child from the traumatizing sight. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is described by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) as being a characteristic set of symptoms following exposure to "a traumatic event in which the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened deaths or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (p. 424). Several studies have documented PTSD symptomatology among children who have been traumatized. In a study of 26 children whose school bus was hijacked and who were buried by kidnappers, all were found to be suffering from PTSD (Terr, 1979), and all still had PTSD symptoms and preoccupation with death in a follow-up 4 years later (Terr, 1983). Pynoos et al. (1987) tested 159 children who had been under sniper attack in their Los Angeles school. More than half of the children showed PTSD symptomatology one month after the attack. In a follow-up 14 months later all the children who were directly exposed to the attack or its aftermath continued to show severe symptoms. In a sample of 165 children aged 6–10 from a moderately violent neighborhood in Washington DC, Martinez and Richters (1993) found a relationship between witnessing violence and children's self-reports of PTSD symptoms. Other studies reported clear evidence of PTSD in children exposed to the chronic stress of living in actual war zones and in "inner-city war zones" (Nader, Pynoos, Fairbanks, Al-Ajeel, & Al-Asfour, 1993; Osofsky & Fenichel, 1994).

Many people assume that very young children are not affected by witnessing violence in their environments because they are too young to understand or to remember what has happened. Contrary to those beliefs, clear associations have been found between watching violence and posttraumatic symptomatology even in the earliest phases of infant and toddler development (Drell, Siegel, & Gaensbauer, 1993; Zeanah, 1994). Typical reactions include increased anxiety and sleep disturbances (Pynoos, 1993). Developmental factors influence the young child's perception and experience of the trauma associated with violence. Infants show increased irritability and separation anxieties (Osofsky, 1995). Exposure to violence can interfere with their normal development of trust and with the later emergence of autonomy through exploration (Osofsky & Fenichel, 1994). Drell et al. (1993) reported regression in developmental achievements, such as toileting and language. In somewhat older children exposed to violence, sleep disturbances can also cause deficits in memory and concentration (Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Kink, 1993). Findings by Dyson (1990) and Shakoor and Chalmers (1991) also point to the general negative

effects on school performance in children who have witnessed violence. In response to violence exposure, latency-aged children tend to show internalizing behaviors (e.g., somatization) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., impulsive aggressiveness; Pynoos & Eth, 1986). Among traumatized adolescents, conflicts develop around dependency issues, with some teenagers showing marked swings toward excessive dependence and others showing rebellious or defiant independence from parents (Warner & Weist, 1996).

WITNESSING INTERPARENTAL VIOLENCE

This article explores the potential harming effects of interparental violence on children. Before I present the empirical data on this question it is important to state that mere viewing of television violence had been documented to have detrimental effects on young viewers. For example, a follow-up after 10 years of over 200 children showed that the amount of violent television watched at age 9 was the best single predictor of juvenile delinquency offenses related to aggression at age 19 (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, & Huesmann, 1972). Exposure of children to television violence has been found to increase levels of aggression in the viewer, to have long-term effects, and to lead to emotional desensitization (Slaby & Quarforth, 1980). Extensive research has highlighted family violence as a major social problem, and has revealed high prevalence of abuse between family members (Strauss & Gelles, 1990; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Reactions of children to intrafamilial violence are expected to be at least as serious as those observed in children exposed to television or neighborhood violence. Studies of child development in normal families lead to the belief that a child's very sense of self and his or her development of emotional expression stem from the nature of early experiences with significant caretakers.

In the past decade spousal violence has come to occupy center stage as a possible predeterminant of developmental psychopathology, but if the children are not directly victimized they are often overlooked. In fact they may suffer from trauma and psychological symptoms similar to those in cases of child abuse (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986). Children of battered women were rated significantly higher in behavior problems and were rated lower in social competence than children in a comparison group (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). Children who observed their mothers being assaulted had a higher likelihood of being involved in serious personal (as opposed to property) crimes such as assault, rape, attempted rape, attempted murder, kidnapping, and murder (McCord, 1983; Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science, 1980). Children who observed their mothers being assaulted were seen to be living in dangerous, chaotic, and highly dysfunctional families (Strauss et al., 1980). Several studies have demonstrated that children growing up in violent families are at risk of reaching clinical levels in behavior problems (Jaffe, Suderman, & Reitzel, 1992; McDonald & Jouriles, 1991). Research in social learning suggests that children's observation of interparental aggression increases the likelihood of problematic child behavior, and that the frequency and intensity of marital conflict are important parameters of this relationship (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Jouriles, Farris, & McDonald, 1991). The social learning hypothesis seems to be supported by Bach-y-Rita and Veno (1974), who reported that 53% of their 62 cases of habitually violent offenders had observed their parents engaged in physical combat. Lewis, Shanok, Pincus, and Glasser (1979) noted that 79% of the violent children they studied reported witnessing extreme violence between their parents, compared with only 20% among nonviolent offenders. Hartstone and Hansen (1984) found that 23% of the fathers of violent youths had engaged in wife battering. Kalmuss (1984) reported that observing

hitting between one's parents was more strongly related to involvement in severe marital aggression than was being hit as teenagers. Cappel and Heiner (1990) analyzed coexistence of aggressive relations reported by 888 intact child-rearing families and found that the existence of spousal violence in the family of origin increased the likelihood that the respondent was the target of aggression by his or her spouse.

An alternative to the social learning hypothesis is that children's observation of interparental violence sensitizes them to marital conflict, causing them to be vigilant and overreactive to all forms of marital aggression (E. M. Cummings & Davies, 1994; J. S. Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius, & Cummings, 1989). Retrospective studies of childhood exposure to parental marital aggression demonstrated that men who abused their wives were significantly more likely than are other men to have witnessed violence between their parents (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Silvern et al., 1995; Ulbrich & Huber, 1981). A study by Strauss et al. (1980) revealed that the rate of wife beating was 1,000% higher for men who observed familial violence in childhood than for men who had not witnessed it. This circumstance also appeared validated by the retrospective accounts of battered women, who were found to be trapped by emotional, social and financial hardships, and also imprisoned by their own childhood observations of their mother's victimization (Roy, 1977). With some exceptions, girls growing up in such families are typically described as displaying more internalizing difficulties than boys, and were more likely than boys to become passive, withdrawn, and clinging (Carlson, 1984). Boys were seen to exhibit higher levels of externalizing behaviors (e.g., fighting, destruction of property; Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, & Jaffe, 1986) and were significantly more likely to have run away and to report suicidal thoughts, and were somewhat more likely to hit their mothers, than nonobservers (Carlson, 1990).

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

I have demonstrated that childhood witnessing of interparental violence is associated with lasting damages reflected in diminished self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidability, juvenile delinquency, increased proneness to future abuse, and problems related to anger and control of aggressive behavior. Child witnesses to wife abuse suffer from emotional and cognitive adjustment leading to diminished school performance. Exposing children to such experiences constitutes a failure by the offending parent to shield the child from at least two caregiver psychologically maltreating acts: (a) terrorizing, or exposing the child to extreme fear and anxiety, and (b) missocializing or corrupting the child by modeling aggressive and degrading interpersonal orientations that can shape future offending or victim-prone behavior patterns.

Despite some definitional ambiguity, the concept of psychological maltreatment may be found in the definition of child abuse and neglect in child abuse and neglect laws of many countries (Garrison, 1987). However, only in rare instances are legal proceedings initiated on the basis of psychological maltreatment. Currently, limited data exist to help determine whether a clearly operationalized definition of psychological maltreatment could help identify this distinct population of unserved at-risk children. The literature review presented here can help child protection services identify the accidental victims of spousal abuse: the witnessing children.

Offending fathers should be aware that by failing to shield their children from observing their mother being brutalized by them, they are also maltreating their watching offspring, and so are liable to criminal prosecution. Garbarino et al. (1986) have suggested that psychological maltreatment should be considered the core issue of child abuse, even more

potentially damaging than physical abuse or neglect alone. Child protection workers must give high priority to responding to cases of psychological maltreatment of children, particularly cases of children witnessing their mothers being battered. In these cases, "hard" corroborating evidence is available, thus allowing legal and social-psychological interventions.

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