The Effects of Viewing Violence and Aggression for Children:
Literature Review

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Abstract

Children can be exposed to a myriad of violence throughout their lives through several different mediums including television, movies, music, video games, gangs, or community violence. This paper strives to explore what effects occur when children view violence in their own homes, particularly examining intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence. In order to do this, several articles were explored looking into the different effects viewing in-home violence can have upon children. Specifically, when they view violence occurring between their parental role models. The paper will also touch upon the differences between experiencing this type of violence versus the other violent mediums that children can view and experience.

The Effects of Viewing Violence and Aggression for Children

As a society, so much emphasis is placed upon children viewing and being influenced by video game violence, film and television violence, and listening to violent music, but if these methods are so detrimental then what can be the effects of viewing intimate partner violence within their own homes? This topic focus on looking at violence in the home and how it can mentally effect children across time. It is important to examine so that parents realize that just because they aren't physically abusing their children; it doesn't mean they aren't causing detrimental mental harm that could lead to physical and psychological consequences. It also is necessary to help parents understand that their relationships and actions influence their child's' life just as much as television and the community can.

Literature Review

As I reviewed the literature, several themes were recurring when the researchers looked at the effects of viewing intimate partner violence and those were the mental effects, physical effects, and the effects that occur when there are concurrent variables.

Organized review of research.

Mental Effects.

When the research first began to be composed about children viewing intimate partner violence, researchers mainly focused on the detrimental mental effects viewing the violence would have upon the child and their development. The researchers began to realize that the mental effects of viewing IPV were beginning to take a physical toll on the children. In younger children, Modrowski, Miller, Howell, & Graham-Bermann (2013) found that for preschoolers who had witnessed occurrences of IPV were noted by their mothers and therapists to present symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and often showed physiological arousal symptoms. The physiological arousal symptoms included issues such as trouble focusing and suddenly becoming frightened or startled. Modrowski, Miller, Howell, & Graham-Bermann also found that those preschoolers showed more social, behavioral and cognitive issues than their nonwitnessing peers. The therapists noted the top four issues as reenacting family violence in play or drawings, talking about feelings related to family violence, didn't play as much as others, and they showed negative feelings related to family violence. The mothers had a different perception and noted the top issues as being irritability, fussiness, mood swings, and tantrums; appearing upset when separated from mother; acting aggressively; and the children had nightmares. Also observing preschoolers, Gustafsson, Coffman, Harris, Langley, Ornstein, & Cox (2013) found that preschoolers who witnessed IPV when they were under the age of 30 months were found to prevent a series of memory issues when they got to preschool age. The study revealed that memory was impacted for short term, long term, and deliberate memories. To measure deliberate memory, the children also completed the Object Memory Task. "In this task, children were provided with 15 familiar objects (e.g., plastic toy animals or vehicles or household items such as a mirror or brush) and instructed to do anything during a 2-min study period that they thought would help them to remember the materials (Gustafsson, Coffman, Harris, Langley, Ornstein, & Cox)." Examining kindergarten age children, roughly 5 years-old, who experienced viewing intimate partner violence between birth and age three, were found to show more aggressive tendencies past the age of 8 (Holmes, 2013). These results were magnified when the mothers had suffered a major depressive episode or if the child was of Black/non-Hispanic descent. When looking at effects on older children, a study that focused on children between the ages of 8 and 17 (Miranda, de la Osa, Granero, & Ezpeleta, 2011), researchers found that children who witnessed intimate partner violence in early childhood were more likely to suffer psychological effects than children who suffered solely from child abuse. The children had an increased rate of DSM-IV disruptive disorders, externalizing behavior problems, when the

viewing of IPV occurred concurrently with child abuse there was an increased likelihood of internalizing problems and issues.

Physical Effects.

As the research continued, researchers began to note children experience physical side effects to viewing intimate partner violence in addition to the mental effects. One of the most clearly view signs of the effect was the changes in children's sleep patterns. Insana, Foley, Montgomery-Downs, Kolko, and McNeil (2013) noted that children who were in a volunteer women's shelter differed from children in the community for their sleep patterns with several variables. They examined several sleeping issues that occurred including sleepwalking/talking, nightmares, bedwetting, changes in sleep patterns, and trouble sleeping. Every single issue occurred at a higher rate for the children in the women's shelter with bedwetting, sleepwalking/talking, and nightmares being significantly higher. In a Bangladesh study, researchers found that children whose mothers had experienced intimate partner violence were more likely to be physically stunted, underweight, and received less nutritional value in their diets (Rahman, Poudel, Yasuoka, Otsuka, Yoshikawa, & Jimba, 2012). When studying malnutrition in rats, de Souza, Fernandes, & Tavares do Carmo (2011) found that malnutritioned rats had significantly smaller brain sizes, this occurred even after the treatment group of malnourished rats were rehabilitated to a normal diet. This underdevelopment of the brain lead to a host of issues in the rats including reproductive and hormonal issues, immunity deficiencies, underdevelopment of the central nervous system, and not only can their spatial learning capabilities be stunted, but they were shown to also be stunted in their offspring. In addition to the physical changes of the brain, children who had been in intimate partner violence situations also self-reported physical issues. Lamers-Winkelman, Schipper, & Oosterman (2012) wanted to explore the physical effects of IPV; they found that children who have experienced intimate partner violence had a higher tendency to report physical issues such as eating issues, sleeping, pain, and self harm. They also found that children who had experienced both physical abuse and witnessing IPV reported at the same rate as the children who had only experienced witnessing intimate partner violence. This bides the question, how impacting are concurrent types of violent experiences?

Concurrent Variables.

Of course, intimate partner violence can be accompanied with additional types of violence. Miller, Grabell, Thomas, Bermann, & Graham-Bermann (2012) examined the interactions between intimate partner violence, community violence, television violence, parent-child aggression, and aggression in sibling relationships as it effects preschool aged children. The

researchers focused on the impacts of different types of violence upon aggression in sibling relationships. When looking at the independent types of violence they found that although television violence was the highest to impact the likelihood of violence against siblings, family violence and violence within the community were also shown to highly impact the rate of physical violence and aggression between siblings especially when the variable were compounded. The authors noted that due to this factor it is important for us to try and decrease the overall amount of violence in children's' lives.

Limitations of These Studies

A number of limitations can be found in the materials reviewed. These limitations can arise from the inability to directly test the theories and from other issues such as failure to disclose information about violence occurring within the home. For example, research by Insana, Foley, Montgomery-Downs, Kolko, and McNeil used 40 women from a volunteer shelter and compared them to 60 women in the community, but many of the women chosen from the community could have been victims of intimate partner violence and not disclosed. Especially when the research has shown that "Within the United States, intimate partner violence (IPV) is experienced among approximately 8% of women per year, and by approximately 44% of women across their lifetime" (Thompson et al., 2006 as cited in Insana, Foley, Montgomery-Downs, Kolko, and McNeil). Potentially meaning that of the 60 women used from the community around 26 of them could have been exposed to direct intimate partner violence at some point in their lives and around 5 could have been exposed within the last year. Those numbers could potentially influence the outcome of the study. This is also a difficult topic to test for because ethics would not allow for us to place children or parents in an environment where they would be exposed to intimate partner violence and test for changes or effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although we have known for some time that physical abuse takes a toll on the mental and physical capabilities of children, the toll of witnessing abuse has only recently begun to be examined. However, now that we have been exploring these effects in conjunction with other violence that can touch children's lives and as a stand alone issue, researchers and professionals that work with families and children can begin to look for signs of violence in the home. Doing so can protect both the physical and psychological well being of the abused romantic partner and the well being of the children. This is especially important with the high statistics of domestic violence that are reported and especially with those that go unreported because we can more easily identify these situations that may go unnoticed for long periods of time.

Applications for these research topics include creating programs that will decrease violence in children's lives overall, but placing emphasis on the child's perception of violence within their home. It also gives counselors different avenues when it comes to discussing intimate partner violence and the effects that it not only has on the relationship between partners, but the relationship between parent and child and the child and the rest of the world. Knowing the assorted effects that witnessing abuse can have on a child will help people and professionals identify high risk situations and be able to approach the issue as early on as possible to help avoid further trauma and exposure. Also by identifying the risks that can occur solely by witnessing abuse, researchers and professionals can treat not only the symptoms, but the cause. Also with the wide span of issues that can arise, it is important for people working with these children to not only focus on therapy, but with the detrimental effects to their cognitive functioning focus should also be placed upon improving cognitive skills.

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