

Witnessing Domestic Violence and Psychosocial Outcomes

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to examine the associations between a child witnessing domestic violence and negative psychosocial outcomes, specifically the presence of internalizing or externalizing behaviors, psychological symptoms, poor performance in school, and engagement in high-risk behaviors. This secondary data analysis examined data collected in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a longitudinal study conducted by Columbia University's Population Research Center in collaboration with Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.

Introduction

In the United States, thirty to sixty percent of child abuse and neglect calls to Child Protective Services are associated with domestic abuse and intimate partner violence in the home.

Social workers and other helping professionals have recognized that domestic violence is a widespread, growing epidemic that greatly impacts social-emotional outcomes of children, as well as their daily functioning and life course.

Literature Review

Witnessing intimate partner violence as a child has been identified to lead to the development of trauma symptoms (primarily internalizing and externalizing behaviors) and other psychopathies, such as anxiety disorders, depression, dissociation, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, guilt and shame, and other forms of distress. Furthermore, children who witness intimate partner violence suffer academically and are more likely to suffer physical injury. Protective factors such as age, resiliency, and support networks have been identified in previous research.

Research Question

The goal of the present study is to answer the research question "What is the effect of witnessing domestic violence on psychosocial development of children in the United States?"

The hypothesis is that witnessing domestic violence will increase the likelihood of a child experiencing negative psychosocial outcomes.

Methodology

The FFCWS took place in the years 1998-2013 and examined a stratified random sample of approximately 5,000 children and their parents from large urban cities across the United States. 75% of the families studied had parents who were unmarried, and therefore considered "fragile families" due to their high risk of poverty and the high likelihood that the parents would eventually separate.

The families were interviewed at birth, and then again at ages one, three, five, nine, and fifteen. Both qualitative and quantitative data was taken. Through examining demographics, attitudes, relationships, health, and development, the study sought to examine the nature of relationships between unmarried parents and the wellbeing of their children.

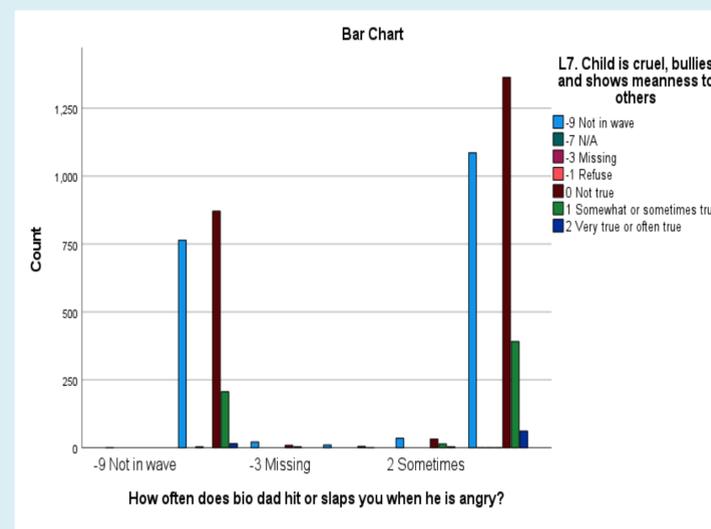
The present study examined five dependent variables; 1) internalizing behavior, 2) externalizing behavior, 3) high-risk behavior, and 4) academic performance. The study examined one independent variable; 1) presence of domestic violence in the home.

Results

Chi-square tests were calculated in order to assess the association between witnessing domestic violence and externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, academic success, and engagement in high-risk behavior.

It was found that children who had witnessed domestic violence in the home were significantly more likely to demonstrate internalizing and high-risk behavior and have poor academic outcomes.

Contrary to previous research, a significant relationship was not found between witnessing domestic violence and the presence of externalizing behaviors, as demonstrated in the bar chart below.



Discussion

Inferential statistical analysis in the form of multiple Chi-Square tests were conducted to specify the relationship between domestic violence and the behaviors of interest. Both significant and insignificant relationships were found.

The present study demonstrated strength in the areas of the randomness of the sample, diversity of study participants, and the modalities of obtaining information about the presence of the behaviors of interest.

A major limitation of the study is the lack of a standardized assessment tool which would allow for easier comparison of results from study to study and would assist with noticing any trends and/or areas of need that children have that are not being currently addressed.

Social Work Application

The findings of the present research study are significant in terms of social work practice because they define areas of specific need that children who witness domestic violence may have. The results tell helping professionals that internalizing and high-risk behavior, as well as poor academic performance, are warning signs that we can look for to identify children who may need intervention. By intervening earlier on when the child begins to display these behaviors, helping professionals can improve psychosocial outcomes of these children and assist them with developing better coping skills to thrive in their development.

This research can potentially be utilized to provide psychoeducation to professionals who work with children, and to develop curricula for working with children exposed to domestic violence.