

# **Examining the Context of Domestic Violence: Relationship of Current and Past Partner Psychological Aggression and Physical Assault to Child Outcomes**

Genelle K. Sawyer, Andrea R. Perry, David J. Hansen, Mary Fran Flood, and David DiLillo  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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## **Introduction**

The impact of domestic violence on children's functioning has been widely documented in child maltreatment and family violence research. For instance, in a review of the empirical literature, Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin (1997) included internalizing effects (e.g., anxiety, depression), school and social difficulties (e.g., social problems, poor problem-solving abilities), and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, substance use) in their summary of the known consequences of children's exposure to marital violence. Although past studies highlight the circumstances in which domestic violence exists, they are not without limitations. First, many of the existent studies have used shelter populations, which may overestimate occurrence and influence the generalizability of the results to community populations. Further, the vast majority of studies have focused on school-aged children and have thus far rarely included young children. Additionally, most studies have utilized the Child Behavior Checklist to measure outcomes, which focuses primarily on internalizing and externalizing problems and neglects to assess adaptive child outcomes. Lastly, most studies to date have defined referent periods of the occurrence of domestic violence as either lifetime prevalence or of a specified time frame (i.e., the last year, the last three months). No studies were found that contrasted these referent periods within a study or used other methods of comparison such as current partner and past partner.

The purpose of the present study was to contribute to the empirical literature on the relationship between domestic violence and the consequences experienced by preschool-aged children. The current study investigated the impact of varying levels of severity of domestic violence (e.g., psychological aggression, physical assault) and the mother's relational abuse history (e.g., past, current, neither) on child outcomes (e.g., externalizing problems, internalizing problems, adaptive skills). Additionally, the interaction of current and past partner violence history was assessed to see how they influence child outcomes. Lastly, the study assessed the influence of various demographic variables (e.g., child age, child gender, parent age) upon this relationship.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants included 64 female primary caregivers of children in Early Head Start or Head Start programs. The mean age of the caregivers was 28.70 (SD = 7.39; range 20 to 47). The vast majority of the respondents were the biological mother of the child (95.3%). Twenty-four (38.1%) identified themselves as married, nineteen (30.2%) as single, ten (15.9%) as divorced, nine (14.1%) as living with someone and one (1.6%) as separated. Of the caregivers, 45 (70.3%) identified themselves as Caucasian, nine (14.1%) as Biracial, seven (10.9%) as African American, two (3.1%) as Hispanic/Latino, and one (1.6%) as Asian American. The sample was predominately low income with 70.3% earning less than \$20,000 per year. Half of

the sample graduated from high school, whereas 15.6% did not complete high school, and 4.7% received their GED. The children had a mean age of 47.08 months ( $SD = 10.02$ ; range 30 to 64) and thirty-five (55%) of the children were male.

### *Measures*

Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2, Straus et al., 1996): The CTS2 is a self-report measure that assesses the amount of physical and psychological aggression experienced in the person's romantic relationship. Subscales included in the study were Psychological Aggression (Past and Current) and Physical Assault (Past and Current). All scales scores were created by adding together the number of positively endorsed items on each scale and dividing by the number of items in the scale; therefore, the possible range for each scale is 0 to 1.

Behavioral Assessment Scale for Children (BASC, Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992): The BASC is a parent-report measure that assesses child behavioral and emotional outcomes. Subscales utilized in the study were Internalizing Problems, Externalizing Problems, and the Adaptive Skills Index.

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics for the abuse relational history and child outcome variables are presented in Table 2. Past Psychological Aggression was endorsed by 65.6% of the caregivers, Current Psychological Aggression by 50%, Past Physical Assault by 64.1%, and Current Physical Assault by 29.7% of the caregivers.

### *Correlational Analyses*

Prior to conducting the regression analyses, a correlation matrix of the selected variables for the entire sample ( $N = 64$ ) was constructed (Table 1). Results revealed multiple correlations among the abuse relational history variables, however, they were not always in the expected direction. For instance, Past Psychological Aggression was negatively correlated with Current Psychological Aggression ( $-0.270, p < .05$ ), suggesting that a mother who has experienced psychological aggression in her past is probably not experiencing it in her current relationship. Additionally, overall, the relational abuse history variables were not related to the child outcome variables. The only significant relationship was between a child's externalizing problems and a mother's experience of current psychological aggression.

### *Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis*

A hierarchical (nested) multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relative contributions of domestic violence and mother's relational abuse history to child outcomes. Using the BASC subscales (i.e., Externalizing, Internalizing, and Adaptive Skills) as the criterion variables, the following subsets of variables were entered into the regression in three blocks: first, all demographic variables (i.e., child's age, child's gender); second, all the relational abuse history variables; and third, the interaction of mother's relational abuse history variables (i.e., past x current psychological aggression and past x current physical assault). Results indicate that the interaction variables did not contribute significantly to any of the full models, therefore, results will be discussed based on the first two steps of the models. The significant models were those using Externalizing Problems [ $F(6,57) = 3.80, p < .01, R^2 = .286$ ] and Internalizing Problems [ $F(6,56) = 2.64, p < .05, R^2 = .220$ ] as the criterion variables. In the first model (Table 3), a male child, a younger child, and higher levels of current psychological aggression were predictive of higher levels of child externalizing problems. As expected, the relational abuse variables contributed significantly to the model over and above the contribution

of demographic variables ( $F$ -change (4,57) = 2.87,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, higher levels of past psychological aggression and lower levels of past physical assault were predictive of higher levels of internalizing problems (Table 4); however, the relational abuse variables contribution over and above the demographic variables was approaching significance ( $F$ -change (4,56) = 2.47,  $p = .055$ ).

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of varying levels of severity of domestic violence (e.g., psychological aggression, physical assault) and the mother's relational abuse history (e.g., past, current, neither) on child outcomes (e.g., externalizing problems, internalizing problems, adaptive skills).

Overall, mother's relational abuse history variables contributed less to child outcomes than was expected. However, the current experience of higher levels of psychological aggression as well as having a male child and a young child were predictive of higher levels of child externalizing problems. Additionally, a history of higher levels of psychological aggression and lower levels of physical assault were associated with higher levels of child internalizing problems.

A limitation of this study is the nature and small size of the sample, which limits generalizability of the present findings to other populations. Therefore, results should be further explored using different and larger samples in order to more fully understand the relationship between relational abuse history and child behavioral and emotional outcomes. Assessment of child outcomes and domestic violence variables should be obtained from other methods of assessment besides self-report, and should consider using a multiple method assessment approach. It is possible that a history of domestic violence may influence the mother's subjective evaluation of their child making it necessary to obtain information from multiple raters.

While this study only begins to address some of the gaps in the literature, results suggest that it is imperative for researchers to examine the context (e.g., relational abuse history) of domestic violence in more depth in order to understand how such experiences may contribute to child outcomes.

### **References**

- Barnett, O. A., Miller-Perrin, C. L., & Perrin, R. D. (1996). Family Violence Across the Lifespan: An Introduction. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Reynolds, C. R. & Kamphaus, R. W. (1992). Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC): Manual. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.
- Straus, M. A., Hamby, S. L., Boney-McCoy, S., & Sugarman, D. B. (1996). The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2). Journal of Family Issues, 17, 283-316.

Table 1: Correlational Matrix of Selected Demographic, Relational Abuse History, and Child Outcome Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Caregiver's Age	1.00									
2. Child's Age	-.064	1.00								
3. Child's Gender	-.107	-.086	1.00							
4. Past Psychological Aggression	.097	-.291*	.081	1.00						
5. Current Psychological Aggression	-.104	.336**	-.095	-.270*	1.00					
6. Past Physical Assault	.083	-.159	-.043	.825***	-.109	1.00				
7. Current Physical Assault	-.185	.091	.114	-.087	.645***	.012	1.00			
8. Externalizing Problems (BASC)	.135	-.045	-.370**	-.161	.341**	-.053	.116	1.00		
9. Internalizing Problems (BASC)	.043	-.260*	-.100	.171	-.051	-.033	-.101	.436***	1.00	
10. Adaptive Skills Index (BASC)	-.192	-.058	.338**	.112	-.068	-.044	.142	-.281*	-.287*	1.00

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .01.

\*\*\* p < .001.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Relational Abuse History and Child Outcome Variables

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Range
Past Psychological Aggression	.25	.30	0 – 1
Current Psychological Aggression	.24	.31	0 – 1
Past Physical Assault	.18	.20	0 - .75
Current Physical Assault	.08	.17	0 - .75
Externalizing Problems (BASC)	53.00	10.94	38 - 86
Internalizing Problems (BASC)	51.11	10.36	26 – 73
Adaptive Skills Index (BASC)	48.22	11.11	24 – 69

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regressions With Externalizing Problems as the Criterion Variable

Step and Variable	In $\beta$	In $\beta$	Final	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.143**	
Child's Age	-.078	-.243 <sup>+</sup>	-.233		
Child's Gender	-.377**	-.320**	-.307*		
Step 2				.286**	.143*
Past Psychological Aggression	—	-.163	-.206		
Current Psychological Aggression	—	.435**	.397 <sup>+</sup>		
Past Physical Assault	—	.077	.058		
Current Physical Assault	—	-.121	-.187		
Step 3				.292**	.007
Past x Current Psych. Aggression	—	—	.071		
Past x Current Physical Assault Major	—	—	.073		

<sup>+</sup> p = .05

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

Table 4: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regressions With Internalizing Problems as the Criterion Variable

Step and Variable	In $\beta$	In $\beta$	Final	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.083	
Child's Age	-.271*	-.227	-.212		
Child's Gender	-.123	-.183	-.160		
Step 2				.220*	.137 <sup>+</sup>
Past Psychological Aggression	—	.697**	.627*		
Current Psychological Aggression	—	.195	.137		
Past Physical Assault	—	-.638**	-.667**		
Current Physical Assault	—	-.124	-.232		
Step 3				.237 <sup>+</sup>	.017
Past x Current Psych. Aggression	—	—	.109		
Past x Current Physical Assault Major	—	—	.121		

<sup>+</sup> p = .05

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01