

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

Genelle K. Sawyer, Corrie A. Davies, David J. Hansen, Mary Fran Flood, and David DiLillo  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

### **Poster Presented at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Association for the Advancement of Behavioral Therapy, New Orleans, Louisiana, November, 2004**

The relationship between childhood exposure to domestic violence and emotional and behavioral problems has been widely documented in the family violence literature (e.g., Edleson, 1999). Family environment factors, such as parenting stress, have been hypothesized to influence how children are impacted by exposure to domestic violence. For example, it is possible that being in a violent relationship disrupts and diminishes one's ability to effectively parent children (Jaffe et al., 1990; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Additionally, mothers who are in abusive relationships may experience a high level of parenting stress due to their lack of emotional, physical, and financial resources. This lack of resources and increase in parenting stress may contribute to the negative outcomes experienced by child witnesses of domestic violence (Holden, Stein, Ritchie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998; Jaffe et al., 1990). Although past studies suggest that parenting practices may play a role in the expression of negative child outcomes, few studies have examined the relationship between domestic violence and parenting stress and parent-child relationships. The few studies investigating parenting practices in battered women have generally found that battered women do experience more parenting stress and use more negative child-rearing practices than women who have not experienced domestic violence (e.g., Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Holden et al., 1998). These studies, however, have some limitations. For example, several studies have used shelter populations, which may overestimate severity and influence the generalizability of the results to community populations. Additionally, 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 parenting stress and parent-child relationship variables. 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 (i.e., abused by past partner, abused by current partner, no partner abuse history) on two parenting measures. Additionally, the interaction of current and past partner violence history was assessed to see how they influence parenting variables. Lastly, the study assessed the influence of various demographic variables (e.g., child age, child gender) 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.

*Parenting Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1986).* The Parenting Stress Index is a parent-report measure that assesses the child-rearing environment. Cronbach's coefficient alpha ranges from .70 to .83 for the subscales of the Child Domain and from .70 to .84 for the subscales of the Parent Domain. The reliability coefficients for the two domains and the Total Stress scale are .90 or greater.

*Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI; Gerard, 1994).* The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory is a self-report inventory designed to assess parental perceptions of parenting and how parents feel about their child. Scores are obtained for seven content scales (i.e., Parental Support, Satisfaction with Parenting, Involvement, Communication, Limit Setting, Autonomy, and Role Orientation) and two validity scales (i.e., Social Desirability and Inconsistency). Alpha coefficients for the PCRI scales range from .70 to .88. Test-retest reliability and construct validity have been demonstrated.

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics for the abuse relational history and outcome variables are presented in Table 1. 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 2). 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 ( $-.270, p < .05$ ), suggesting that a mother who has experienced psychological aggression in her past is probably not experiencing it in her current relationship.

### **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 parenting stress and parent-child relationship scales. Using the PSI and PCRI scales as the criterion variables, the following subsets of variables were entered into the regression in three blocks: first, demographic variables (i.e., child's age, child's gender); second, 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 PCRI Limit Setting [ $F(6, 57) = 3.67, p < .05, R^2 = .28$ ], PSI

Total Scale [ $F(6, 52) = 2.54, p < .05, R^2 = .23$ ], and PSI Child Domain [ $F(6,56) = 2.72, p < .05, R^2 = .23$ ] as the criterion variables.

In the first model (Table 3), a younger child and higher levels of current psychological aggression were predictive of higher scores on the PCRI Limit Setting scale. Likewise, in the second model (Table 4), higher levels of current psychological aggression were predictive of higher PSI Total Scores. As expected, the relational abuse variables were found to contribute above and beyond the demographic variables in both of these models [PCRI Limit Setting scale  $F$ -change (4, 57) = 3.45,  $p < .05$ ; PSI Total Score  $F$ -change (4, 52) = 2.91,  $p < .05$ ]. Similarly, as shown in Table 5, a male child and higher levels of current psychological aggression were also predictive of higher scores on the PSI Child Domain Scale. In this model, however, the relational abuse variables were not found to contribute over and above the demographic ( $F$ -change (4,56) = 1.68,  $p = .17$ ).

### 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 parenting stress and parent-child relationship outcomes (e.g., PSI and PCRI scales).

Overall, mother's relational abuse history variables contributed less to parenting stress and parent-child relationship outcomes than was expected. However, the current experience of higher levels of psychological aggression was predictive of greater parenting stress and parenting dysfunction, having a child who makes it difficult for the parent to fulfill their parenting roles, and increased difficulty in disciplining and setting limits for their child.

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 parenting stress and parent-child relationship characteristics. Assessment of parent-child interactions and domestic violence variables should be obtained from other methods of assessment besides self-report. A multi-method assessment approach would likely provide a more complete picture. It is possible that a history of domestic violence may influence the mother's subjective evaluation of her parenting behaviors and interactions with her child making it necessary to obtain information from multiple sources.

While this study only begins to address some of the gaps in the literature, results convey that it is imperative for researchers to examine the complex context (e.g., current or past relational abuse history) and form (e.g., physical or psychological) of domestic violence in more depth in order to understand how such experiences may contribute to battered women's parenting practices. From a clinical perspective, these results suggest that women who have experienced domestic violence may benefit from parent-training interventions which focus on behavioral management and limit setting as well as building positive parent-child interactions.

### References

- Abidin, R. R. (1986). Parenting Stress Index (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Charlottesville, VA: Pediatric Psychology Press.
- Edleson, J. L. (1999). Children's witnessing of adult domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 14*, 839-870.
- Gerard, A.B. (1994). Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI): Manual. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

- Holden, G. W., & Ritchie, K. L. (1991). Linking extreme marital discord, child rearing, and child behavior problems: Evidence from battered women. *Child Development, 62*, 311-327.
- Holden, G. W., Stein, J. D., Ritchie, K. L., Harris, S. D., & Jouriles, E. N. (1998). Parenting behaviors and beliefs of battered women. In G. W. Holden & R. Geffner & E. N. Jouriles (Eds.), *Children exposed to marital violence: Theory, research, and applied issues* (pp. 289-334). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Jaffe, P. G., Wolfe, D. A., & Wilson, S. K. (1990). *Children of battered women*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Levendosky, A. A., & Graham-Bermann, S. A. (2001). Parenting in battered women: The effects of domestic violence on women and their children. *Journal of Family Violence, 16*, 171-192.

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

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Child's Age	1.00													
2. Child's Gender	-.09	1.00												
3. Past Psychological Aggression	-.29*	.08	1.00											
4. Current Psychological Aggression	.34*	-.10	-.27*	1.00										
5. Past Physical Assault	-.16	-.04	.83**	-.11	1.00									
6. Current Physical Assault	.09	.11	-.09	.65**	.01	1.00								
7. PSI Child Domain	-.02	-.36*	-.02	.24	.09	.01	1.00							
8. PSI Parent Domain	.04	-.00	.01	.37**	.16	.16	.42**	1.00						
9. PSI Total Score	-.03	-.23	.02	.33*	.13	.10	.85**	.84**	1.00					
10. PCRI Parental Support	-.04	.09	.08	.27*	.02	.19	.28*	.69**	.55**	1.00				
11. PCRI Satisfaction with Parenting	.05	-.07	.04	.00	.01	.16	.26	.54**	.38**	.39**	1.00			
12. PCRI Communication	-.06	-.11	.00	.14	.07	.11	.31*	.29*	.34*	.24	.46**	1.00		
13. PCRI Limit Setting	-.05	-.32*	-.18	.26*	-.03	-.05	.63**	.39**	.58**	.41**	.36**	.55**	1.00	
14. PCRI Autonomy	-.05	.02	.17	.10	.17	.03	.15	.44**	.23*	.25*	.14	.12	.23	1.00

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Relational Abuse History and Parenting Variables

	Mean	SD	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
PSI Child Domain	100.24	24.57	63-176
PSI Parent Domain	119.80	25.07	71-194
PSI Total Score	219.63	40.21	140-302
PCRI Parental Support	46.66	10.68	19-67
PCRI Satisfaction with Parenting	21.50	4.98	17-40
PCRI Involvement	18.55	2.88	17-33
PCRI Communication	20.64	5.44	16-43
PCRI Limit Setting	44.09	8.22	33-80
PCRI Autonomy	43.11	6.03	32-67
PCRI Role Orientation	32.67	8.67	17-53

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression with PCRI Limit Setting Scale as the Criterion Variable

Step and Variable	In $\beta$	In $\beta$	Final	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.10*	
Child Age	-.07	-.26*	-.25		
Child Gender	-.32*	-.21	-.22		
Step 2				.28*	.18*
Past Psychological Aggression	---	-.40	-.46		
Current Psychological Aggression	---	-.47*	.40		
Past Physical Assault	---	.31	.32		
Current Physical Assault	---	-.34	-.31		
Step 3				.28*	.01
Past x Current Psych. Aggression	---	---	.12		
Past x Current Physical Assault	---	---	-.07		

$p < .05$

Table 4: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression with PSI Total Score as the Criterion Variable

Step and Variable	In $\beta$	In $\beta$	Final	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.05	
Child Age	-.04	-.16	-.15		
Child Gender	-.23	-.16	-.10		
Step 2				.23*	.17*
Past Psychological Aggression	---	-.11	-.13		
Current Psychological Aggression	---	.53*	.52*		
Past Physical Assault	---	.27	.19		
Current Physical Assault	---	-.23	-.45		
Step 3				.26*	.03
Past x Current Psych. Aggression	---	---	.00		
Past x Current Physical Assault	---	---	.31		

$p < .05$

Table 5: Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression with PSI Child Domain as the Criterion Variable

Step and Variable	In $\beta$	In $\beta$	Final	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.13*	
Child Age	-.04	-.14	-.13		
Child Gender	-.37*	-.30*	-.26		
Step 2				.23*	.09
Past Psychological Aggression	---	-.11	-.10		
Current Psychological Aggression	---	.47*	.42*		
Past Physical Assault	---	.20	.13		
Current Physical Assault	---	-.23	-.42		
Step 3				.25*	.02
Past x Current Psych. Aggression	---	---	-.04		
Past x Current Physical Assault	---	---	.27		

$p < .05$