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Early Exposure to Violence Leads to Aggression in Children

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Early Exposure to Violence Leads to Aggression in Children

Violence is a major social and health problems that affects large numbers of children and families (Fraser, 1996). Youths have become markedly more involved in violent acts over the past decade (Fraser, 1996). Childhood maltreatment has been empirically implicated in a variety of youth problem behaviors (Braaten-Antrim, 1998). Research has linked childhood maltreatment to delinquency, status offenses, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and suicide (Braaten-Antrim, 1998). This paper will focus attention on the family dynamics of which child maltreatment and domestic violence is the norm and how this environment may breed aggression in children. Thus, the hypothesis is that children who receive heavy degrees of physical punishment learn aggressive behaviors and are more aggressive than peers who did not.

Child maltreatment is an umbrella term that encompasses physical abuse, inadequate care and nourishment, deprivation of medical care, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect (Hull & Kirst-Ashman, 1994). Definitions used by legal and social agencies vary from locality to locality and state to state. For the purpose of this paper, child abuse is defined by Farmer (1989) as any unwanted contact, whether physical or sexual, that causes harm to the child.

This paper seeks to review various studies about child victimization to determine if any trends, issues, or conclusions can be discovered. By examining the research of others, it is expected that a direct connection will be found between child maltreatment and later aggressive behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A child's social development is deeply rooted in opportunities, skills, and recognition that occurs through early interaction with family members, peers, teachers, neighbors, and many others (Fraser, 1996). Throughout early childhood, if a child is not successful in social participation they may be at

a disadvantage in developing skills that will be used in all future life settings (Fraser, 1996).

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Fraser (1996) reports that children in some homes are trained, literally though not intentionally, to respond to authority with hostility. Aggression is instilled into a child by inconsistent parental supervision, use of harsh punishment, failure to set limits, and negative coercive parent-child interaction (Fraser, 1996). Brattan-Antrim & Thompson (1998) suggests that the social learning theory, which states that youth will mimic conflict resolution that they experience in the home, explains how abuse is transferred across generations and becomes a learned behavior.

The cycle of violence, as Fraser (1996) calls it, is continued or perpetuated by parents without any conscious awareness of their own hurt, fear, and sense of helplessness left behind from their parents. Children in abusive and violent homes learn poor problem-solving skills from their parents, and learn that aggression pays off (Fraser, 1996). Conger, Johnson, Simons, and Wu (1995) stated that harsh physical discipline teaches children that it is legitimate, indeed often necessary to hit those you love. Lindquist & Molnar (1995) assert children learn what they live. The role of a violent environment and children's behavior cannot be understood without some consideration of the world into which they have been born (Lindquist & Molnar, 1995).

CHILD MALTREATMENT

Child maltreatment, (Hull & Kirst-Ashman, 1994) as mentioned previously, is a term that encompasses child abuse, sexual abuse, inadequate medical care, neglect, emotional and psychological abuse, and verbal abuse. The effects of child maltreatment are long term and may develop into conduct disorders, anti-

social behavior, post traumatic stress syndrome and possible gang involvement (Alexander & Loos, 1997; www.gettysburg.edu, 1998; Conger, Johnson, Simons, & Wu, 1995; Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts, 1996; www.psych.med, 1998).

Although many adults who were abused do not mistreat their children, statistics show that those who were abused as children run a greater risk of becoming abusing parents (Farmer, 1989). Farmer (1989) estimates that between 80-95% of people have been the victim of some form of parental abuse. Most adults who have been raised in abusive homes or environments, have not learned how to interact with children any other way (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998). When an oppositional child engages in an aggressive behavior, most parents will intervene (Fraser, 1996). But, Fraser (1996) goes on to say, when they do intervene, it is often with excessive force. They yell, threaten, grab, push, yank, and hit to coerce children into compliance (Fraser, 1996). Braatan-Antrim & Thompson (1998) estimate that between 40-60% of children raised in violent homes have experienced at least one violent act from their parents. Lindquist and Molnar (1995) found that for every violent offense committed by a youth, there were three crimes committed by an adult against a child. Thus, children are more likely to be the victim of violence at the hands of their own parents (Lindquist & Molnar, 1995).

Fraser (1996) points out that harsh parental discipline causes increased levels of anger and aggression. This finding is consistent with a study by Alexander & Loos (1997) that demonstrated increased aggressiveness among physically abused children and among adults with histories of parental physical abuse. Alexander & Loos (1997) also found that an abused child will generalize the abusive experience towards others and feel that aggression is an appropriate way in which to interact when distressed or angry. One study suggested a relationship between psychological distress from abuse and

imitative aggression (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998). This study pointed out that in extreme cases of abuse and neglect, a serial killer can emerge (www.gettysbutg.edu, 1998). Most serial killers lived in violent households, were relentlessly, severely physically punished as a child, tortured animals, set fires, and wet the bed. Hence, they imitated the aggression and abuse toward others that was displayed toward them (www.Gettysburg.edu, 1998).

However, research by Gross and Keller (1992) based on the responses to a child abuse questionnaire by 228 college undergraduates found just the opposite. The undergraduates were identified as physically abused, psychologically abused, both physically and psychologically abused, or non abused (Gross & Keller, 1992). The students also completed measures assessing present level of depression and present level of self esteem (Gross & Keller, 1992). Analysis of the data by Gross and Keller (1992) indicated a greater tendency toward depression in students reporting both types of abuse and lower self esteem in students reporting psychological abuse. In this study abused students did not seem to exhibit a more maladaptive style than that of non abused students (Gross & Keller, 1997).

Alexander and Loos (1997) researched the unique long-term effects of parental verbal abuse, emotional neglect, and physical abuse. The sample consisted of 247 female and 154 male undergraduates recruited to complete a retrospective questionnaire of parental maltreatment. The results suggests that emotional neglect and physical abuse perpetrated by ones father is associated with lower self-esteem in males. Maternal maltreatment, by contrast, did not have the same extensive effects as did paternal abuse and neglect on males. Apparently for a boy, negative signals from the male parent, with whom the child is expected to identify, affects the developing sense of

self more strongly than does abuse or inattention by female parental figures (Alexander & Loos, 1997).

Alexander and Loos (1997) found that a history of verbal abuse was uniquely associated with low self-esteem, while, physical abuse is associated with aggression toward others. Sexual abuse was found to cause maladaptive sexual behavior. Psychological abuse was found present in almost all cases of physical abuse and predicted detrimental outcomes for children more so than did severity of injury associated with the abuse (Alexander & Loos, 1997). Further, physical abuse by parents is significantly related to anger and aggression in adulthood.

Briere & Runtz (1993) validated the work of Alexander and Loos (1997) by reporting nearly the same findings. Multivariate analysis revealed that a history of psychological abuse was uniquely associated with low self-esteem, physical abuse was linked to aggression towards others, and sexual abuse was specifically related to a maladjusted sex life (Briere & Runtz, 1993).

However, Conger, Johnson, Simons, & Wu (1995) have called into question the validity of retrospective reporting of child maltreatment. They believe, as does Weeks & Widom (1998), that the information retrieved from child memories may not be accurate. Conger, et al., 1995 listed several problems with retrospective reports they are:

- "(1) studies indicate adults often make mistakes in reporting childhood experiences
- (2) recall of previously repressed memories of childhood abuse may be a product of the therapist
- (3) eye witnesses quickly forget many of the details surrounding an event
- (4) there is no way to check the accuracy of retrospective reports."

(pp. 141-162)

Weeks and Widom (1998) wrote that an adult's account of an event that took place in childhood might be redefined according to present knowledge or that a person could be in denial of events, or how they happened.

CONDUCT DISORDERS

Conduct disorders is a complicated group of behavioral and emotional problems in youngsters (www.psych.med, 1998). Children with conduct disorders have a difficult time in following rules and behaving in socially acceptable ways (www.psych.med, 1998). Expression of anger is a major problem in children manifesting conduct disorders because they are often aggressive, both physically and verbally (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998).

Many factors may lead to a child developing conduct disorders including, brain damage, child abuse, defects in developmental growth, and negative family and social experiences (www.psych.med, 1998). According to the gettysburg.edu website (1998) conduct problems and anti-social behavior can lead to violent behavior in later life because severe physical punishment interferes with the development of a child's conscience. The development of self control results from the appropriate interaction of children with their caretakers. Children's experiences of love and respect promote the development of conscience, whereas, the experience of fear and harsh physical abuse interferes with this development (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998).

Anti-social behavior is a behavior trait that is exhibited across time and is manifest by what society considers risky, inappropriate, and insensitive behaviors (Conger, Johnson, Simons, & Wu, 1995). Research concludes that a child seen by society as out of control, usually comes from a disorganized and unstable family (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998). Withecomb (1997) reports that conduct disorders and anti-social behavior escalates when a child experiences harsh parenting with neglect and lack of social control.

Post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) is included in the list of disorders seen in children who are exposed to chronic violence (Koblinsky, Randolph & Roberts 1996). Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts (1996) stated that PTSD is characterized by nightmares, numbing and avoidance, and an increased sense of arousal. Children exposed to violence on a regular basis has a greater risk of developing PTSD (www.gettysburg.edu, 1998). A recent study (Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts 1996) found conclusive evidence of PTSD in children under the age of four years who lived in a moderate violent atmosphere. An increase has been found in the likelihood of PTSD or other negative reactions to violence include being physically close to the violence as in observing one parent attack the other, having been previously a victim, and being under the age of 11 (Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts, 1996).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Research by Edleson (1997) found a direct relationship between marital discord and child maladjustment in all families studied. According to Edleson (1997) marital conflict is multidimensional, may vary in frequency and intensity, and can be overt or covert. Children who witness frequent domestic violence may develop a wide array of conduct and anti-social behaviors. Internalized problems such as depression, anxiety, and withdrawal has been seen by social agency professionals in children who had witnessed domestic abuse. Conger et al., 1995 pointed out that children and marital partners exposed to recurring physical abuse are more likely to display emotional and psychological problems. Chronic domestic violence is strongly linked to anti-social behavior and other forms of deviance (Conger et al, 1995). Research by Withecomb (1997) found that marital discord and domestic violence has been linked to violent and anti-social behavior in offspring. Furthermore, Conger et al., (1995) indicates the likelihood that children who witness severe

domestic violence will imitate aggressive behavior with siblings and future spouses.

Statistical estimates on the number of children who witnesses domestic violence vary from study to study, however, Edleson (1995) believes approximately 3.3 million households do experience some form of inter parental violence with a possible 10 million children being affected.

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Violence is becoming a natural part of a school-age child's day to day reality (Withecomb, 1997). Withecomb (1997) states that up to 18 percent of school children are bullied at any one time. Molidor's (1996) research indicates that many schools are more like a combat zone than a learning environment with reported knife fights, drug sales, intimidation of classmates and teachers and vandalism.

Growing numbers of families with limited income are living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of crime, violence, and drug use and sales (Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts, 1996). Such families may experience direct or indirect exposure to violent events on a regular basis. Direct exposure includes robbery, assault, and rape, where as, indirect includes witnessing a violent act, or knowing a victim. Many parents are concerned about the effect neighborhood violence will have on their children's safety early development (Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts, 1996).

Exposure to pervasive community violence can jeopardize a child's learning ability. Violence can also undermine young children's developmental security, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. Likewise, children may come to mistrust their parents whom they perceive as being unable to protect them. This in turn may cause children to develop aggressive, impulsive, self-protective behaviors (Koblinsky, Randolph, & Roberts, 1996). Koblinsky et al.,

(1996) brings out that children's preoccupation with violent events may limit their ability to concentrate on school. Koblinsky et al., (1996) further points out that the family, school, and community are important environments that influence a child's development. When these environments are supportive they facilitate positive functioning. However, if the environment is violent and stressful, children fail to thrive developmentally or educationally.

Research (Koblinsky et al., 1996) done on 6-10 year olds in a moderately violent neighborhood in Washington D.C. indicated:

- " (1) 45% of the children had witnessed muggings
- (2) 31% had seen stabbings
- (3) 27% had witnessed shootings
- (4) 37% had viewed dead bodies" (pp.282-294).

Preschoolers are also witnessing or experiencing violent events in greater numbers than previously. Studies done (Koblinsky et al., 1996) on the effects of violence exposure on preschoolers indicate they experience a wide range of emotional and behavioral problems. Problems encountered are regression, depression, exaggerated levels of fear and anxiety, impairments in school performance, aggressive acting out and poor impulse control (Koblinsky et al., 1996).

CHILD AGGRESSION

Violent behavior rarely develops spontaneously, but is more likely to have its' roots in early childhood (Fraser, 1996). Not surprisingly, violent behavior appears to be relatively stable for children who become aggressive at an early age (Fraser, 1996). Moreover, early aggressive behavior has a strong and significant relationship with long-term outcomes, including the development of criminal careers where physical force is used routinely (Fraser, 1996).

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Studies of early offenders done by Linquist & Molnar (1995) indicate that they are likely to come from families in which assaultive and predatory behavior runs across generations. Furthermore, Conger, Johnson, Simons, & Wu (1995) says that children who were subjected to severe physical abuse are at risk for utilizing similar parenting strategies. Likewise, maltreated children are approximately five times more likely to engage in abusive parenting than individuals who were not victims of severe corporal punishment (Conger, Johnson, Simons, & Wu, 1995). Thus the hypothesis that children exposed to harsh treatment learn that severe, coercive measures is a normal part of parenting and, as adults, are more apt to enact these abusive parenting strategies onto their children is accurate (Edleson, 1995).

Weeks & Widom (1998) have reported that abusive parenting increases the probability that an individual will subsequently engage in criminal violence. Furthermore, there are data that indicate that adolescents and adults who engage in domestic assault often have had contact with the police for a variety of criminal behaviors (Weeks & Widom, 1998). Edleson (1997) found in a study of incarcerated adolescent males a high rate of exposure to aggression and family violence. Weeks and Widom (1998) studied 604 incarcerated males in a Canadian institution to assess abuse which occurred before age 18, their findings indicate that 41 percent of their sample group had experienced some form of serious abuse as children.

Hsieh, Rendon, and Schwartz (1994) researched the hypothesis that maltreated children pose a greater risk of juvenile delinquency than non abused children. Their conclusions were that maltreated children pose no greater risk of violent crimes, but, they were more likely to commit status offenses than non abused children. Hsieh et al. (1994) concluded that no relationship was found between maltreatment and delinquency. Hsieh et al.

(1997) suggest a relationship between maltreatment and delinquency are either inconclusive or are weakly connected.

With increasing frequency children are becoming the perpetrators of crime and violence (Koblinsky et al., 1996). According to the Children's Defense Fund in 1996 there were 8,100 juveniles being held in local adult jails, this is an increase of 20 percent over the previous year (www.childrensdefense.org/ 1998). Fraser (1996) reported between the years of 1984 and 1993, the number of juveniles arrested for murder rose 168 percent, and weapons violations rose (Children's Defense Fund, 1995).

Fraser (1996) theorizes that neighborhoods which are characterized by poverty, drug use and easy access to firearms create a high risk of gang involvement for children. Braatan-Antrim and Thompson (1998) suggests that gang involvement affords children the opportunity to act violently which resembles behaviors manifested in their families. Molidor (1996) also indicates a relationship between the abusive family of origin and gang involvement. Molidor's research (1996) indicates that children who become involved in gangs have a previous history of physical and sexual abuse, extensive alcohol and drug use, low economic status and little education.

Psychologists believe they can tell when a child is about to commit violence by the clues they leave (Schrof, 1998). Children who experience violence at home, violence at an early age, children who get into trouble frequently are all factors in determining signs of violent children (Schrof, 1998). Waldron (1998) claims that our violent culture, lack of supervision for children and easy access to firearms has a distinct effect on the violence exhibited by youngsters. Violence permeates our whole society. Television programs, movies, music, video and computer games, depict graphic

representation of people being killed to the point that death has no meaning (Waldron, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that children are increasingly exposed to a number of adverse environmental experiences. The greater the number of experiences and the earlier the age at which they were first exposed, the more likely they will themselves become perpetrators. Children have long been the victims of abuse and violence. Youngsters require love, nurturing and support to break the cycle of violence that affects them.

The research reviewed has established a direct connection between child victimization and child aggression. The research reviewed has demonstrated that a large majority of children who are abused, go on to become perpetrators unless some intervention is provided.

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