Children’s Exposure to Violence: Exploring Developmental Pathways to Diverse Outcomes
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Children’s Exposure to Violence
Exploring Developmental Pathways to Diverse Outcomes

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Identifying mechanisms that explain the children’s differential vulnerability to violence exposure is an important research focus. Developmentally sensitive theories and methods are recommended to better understand children’s risk and resilience to violence exposure. Examples are provided of promising research that links violence exposure to subtle deviations in children’s emotional, cognitive, and physiological functioning, and to disruptions in the family environment.

Keywords: children; exposure to violence; developmental psychopathology; family environment; risk and resilience

Research examining the effects of family and community violence on children currently is at an important crossroads—from documenting links between exposure and childhood problems to identifying mechanisms that influence children’s vulnerability to the stresses of violence exposure. Although the literature clearly identifies violence exposure as a serious risk associated with wide-ranging adjustment problems in children, it also portrays considerable diversity in the functioning of youth who face this stressor (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). For example, in a meta-analysis examining psychosocial outcomes in children exposed to domestic violence, Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, and Kenny (2003) report that 63% of exposed children fare more poorly than nonexposed children; yet, 37% fare as well as or better than nonexposed children. Kaufman and Zigler’s (1987) early review of prospect-
tive studies of long-term effects of child abuse indicates that children’s abuse histories increase the likelihood of being abusive to one’s own children from 5% to approximately 30%; however, 70% of abused children do not become abusive adults. Although not diminishing our concern with violence as a grave risk to children, these data demand that we ask different types of questions: What makes some children fare better or worse than others in response to violence? Do violence-related problems at one developmental stage intensify, maintain, or desist at later developmental stages? And, related, what factors influence the course of violence-related problems over time?

Identifying mechanisms by which violence exposure affects children requires exploring vulnerability as well as resilience, concepts that are related but that offer different perspectives on child outcomes. Vulnerability variables explain the how and why of individual susceptibility. Violence is a general risk for childhood problems, but specific child characteristics (e.g., feeling responsible for parents’ aggression) or family characteristics (e.g., parents’ withdrawal and emotional unavailability) may render some children more susceptible to its effects (Rutter, 1994). Resilience variables help to explain how children overcome specific adversities, such as violence exposure, and still demonstrate good adaptation across multiple spheres of functioning (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; McGloin & Widom, 2001). Although sometimes equated with the absence of vulnerability variables, resilience generally is thought of as resources available to a child that either shield him or her from the stressor itself, that facilitate sustained adaptation despite exposure to the stressor, or that promote recovery from the stressor. Some resilience variables (e.g., IQ) are quite general and typically foster good functioning, regardless of the nature of the stressor, or whether the child even faces a stressor. Other resilience variables may be relevant only in certain situations, buffering the child who faces specific stressors but having a neutral or even negative effect in other situations (Freitas & Downey, 1998; Rutter, 1990; Tiet et al., 1998). For example, children have better outcomes if they use avoidant and withdrawing coping strategies (e.g., tuning out or extricating themselves) in response to interparental aggression, a problem over which they have little or no control (O’Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995). Yet, these same responses are not effective strategies for dealing with problems at school. Thus, understanding vulnerability versus resilience requires identifying which child responses at what developmental stage in response to what type of stressor neutralize or interrupt the trajectory from violence exposure to problem behaviors.
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION
IN THE STUDY OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

Several theoretical perspectives, all taking account of the developmental context, motivate research examining the diversity of outcomes in violence-exposed youth. First, according to developmental psychopathology perspectives, the effect of violence is jointly determined by the interaction between the nature of the violence exposure and the developmental capacities of the child. As with research on other significant childhood stressors, the goal is to understand how violence exposure disrupts the developmental tasks of specific stages and increases the risk of subsequent failure in later developmental tasks (Cicchetti, 1993; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). Disruptions in development are not limited to clinical or diagnosable outcomes but, instead, address subtle and common processes underlying children’s well-being, for example, their abilities to apply themselves in the classroom or to engage in cooperative play. Assessing fundamental behavioral, cognitive, affective, and physiological processes can provide an explanatory framework for the difficulties exhibited by some violence-exposed youth.

Trauma theory, a second important perspective, recognizes that the personal loss and threat associated with violence exposure create a highly stressful environment for youngsters (De Bellis, 2001; Pynoos & Eth, 1985). Such environments may lead to posttraumatic stress symptoms, including altered psychological, biological, neurological, and cognitive functioning. These symptoms not only are important consequences themselves but also can be pathways toward other developmental difficulties, including compromised academic functioning, substance abuse, dating violence, and personality disorders.

A third perspective, family systems theory, considers the inherent paradox that the family, as the primary source of protection for the child, also is the source of violence. In addition to posing threats to the child’s personal safety, family and community violence violates the child’s immediate environment as a safe haven and renders parents potentially less available for physical and emotional caretaking (Margolin, 1998). Family systems perspectives also are concerned with the way that violence erodes family resources, that is, how violence can overwhelm a family system, deplete emotional and physical resources, and lower the threshold for continued aggression as well as the spillover of violence into other family subsystems (Margolin, Oliver, & Medina, 2001; Patterson & Dishion, 1988).
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS
IN THE STUDY OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESSES

Studies that advance our understanding of developmental processes related to violence employ one or more of the following methodological features. First, moving beyond group comparisons of children with and without violence exposure, these studies benefit from a more nuanced assessment of risk and outcome variables. Frequency, severity, and duration of violence exposure all are important dimensions in paradigms that consider dose-response relationships or that attempt to identify a threshold of exposure beyond which most children are adversely affected. Despite progress in the operational definitions of violence exposure, investigators still need to recognize the complexities in these variables and present detailed, clear definitions that allow for comparison with other studies. Second, a more nuanced assessment also involves multiple forms of measurement from multiple informants. These assessment strategies are important to control common method variance resulting in inflated associations between two constructs, to obtain more accurate reports of violence exposure when it is a low-base rate event, and to measure subjective outcomes, which may be unknown to one reporter.

Third, a comprehensive assessment also considers the co-occurrence of multiple types of violence, particularly in light of growing evidence that many children experience more than one type of violence exposure (Appel & Holden, 1998). Studies that examine child abuse, interparental aggression, and community violence as separate, unrelated events in children’s lives may overlook effects due to other types of abuse. Recent meta-analytic reviews show mixed findings when comparing the effect of multiple types versus a single type of violence (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Whereas some studies show cumulative risks, other studies indicate that one form of violence exposure may produce similarly aversive outcomes, perhaps due to the severity of that violence exposure.

Fourth, prospective, longitudinal research designs are needed to test developmental models, for example, whether exposure to violence at an earlier stage is a risk factor for later observed disorders, or whether exposure at a younger, compared with older, age is more detrimental. These studies bring to light different patterns of results for concurrent versus delayed reactions and also show how certain developmentally related characteristics of the child or of the environment might exacerbate or mitigate later risks associ-
ated with violence. Fifth, genetically sensitive designs are needed to address questions about whether the relations between violence exposure and certain child behaviors, such as aggression, are due strictly to environmental influences or also to genetic influences (Hines & Saudino, 2002). For example, the association between children’s exposure to violence and children’s lower IQ might be due to the effect of stress on brain development or to heritability, with IQ also linked to adults’ domestic violence. However, a recent twin study indicated that domestic violence is linked with young children’s IQ independent of confounding genetic effects (Koenen, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Purcell, 2003). Sixth, research needs to take a contextual approach. Not only does violence occur in multiple situations but it also intrudes on multiple contexts of children’s day-to-day lives, certainly family relationships and peer relationships. The interplay between what children bring to these contexts (e.g., their individual thoughts, emotions, behaviors) and what the context offers (e.g., emotional support, investment of adult time and energy) is crucial to understanding children’s reactions to violence.

RESEARCH EXAMINING DEVELOPMENTAL RISKS

Developmentally sensitive research has examined how violence exposure may be related to subtle deviations in children’s emotional, cognitive, and physiological functioning. With respect to emotional development, data suggest that violence is related to hypersensitivity to anger, difficulties recognizing emotions or understanding complex social roles, less ability to empathize, less accurate attention to social cues, and less ability to generate competent solutions to interpersonal problems (e.g., Cummings, Hennessy, Rabideau, & Cicchetti, 1994; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Pollak, Cicchetti, Hornung, & Reed, 2000; Rosenberg, 1986; Trickett, 1993). Some of the cognitive processes associated with violence exposure include lower intellectual ability and difficulties with memory and concentration, which have obvious ramifications for school performance (De Bellis, 2001). Interpretations and appraisals of violence are other cognitive processes related to violence exposure. Children who blame themselves or assume responsibility for stopping the violence tend to have negative outcomes (McGee, Wolfe, & Olson, 2001; O’Brien et al., 1995). Exciting data are coming from studies on the neurobiological consequences of stress, which examine structural and functional changes in the brain as well as the effect on endocrine and immune systems (Cicchetti & Walker, 2001; De Bellis, 2001). Studies on cortisol dysregulation related to child sexual abuse and family disruption appear particularly
promising (De Bellis et al., 1994; Flinn & England, 1997). Overall, the findings on affective, cognitive, and biological processes reflect subtle, generally subclinical effects. Yet, there is evidence that these are important internal processes that affect the way children deal with the external world. Moreover, these processes may be particularly salient when children face stressful environmental conditions or challenging developmental transitions.

Another promising line of developmental research examines early romantic relationships as an important window through which to explore the association between children’s early family exposure to aggression and parallel patterns in adulthood (Wolfe, Wekerle, et al., 2003). Longitudinal data point to early childhood behavior problems as an important link between early family relations and later partner violence, with deviant peer groups and educational underachievement also contributing to these connections (Capaldi & Clark, 1998; Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998). The 20-year prospective study by Ehrensaft et al. (2003) further highlighted the role of children’s behavior problems; although conduct disorders mediated the effect of child abuse on partner violence, they did not mediate the effect of interparental violence on partner violence. Studies such as these, which explore explanatory mechanisms in longitudinal patterns of risk, can help us understand which children may be at risk for adverse outcomes.

RESEARCH EXAMINING FAMILY RISKS

With families as the primary socializing influence on children, we need to understand how family systems are affected by violence and what makes families vulnerable to multiple forms of family violence. Research is beginning to identify both macro- and microsystem explanations for families’ vulnerability to violence. Macrosystem-level analyses identify demographic variables (e.g., maternal age, low education) that increase the likelihood of both domestic violence and child abuse (Cox, Kotch, & Everson, 2003). Margolin and Gordis (2003) found that contextual stress is another explanation for co-occurrence. The cumulative stresses of financial problems as well as parenting stress increased the connection between husband-to-wife aggression and parents’ child abuse potential, but no such connection was found in the absence of stress variables or with only one stress variable.

The exploration of microsystem variables is based on the assumption that stressors associated with violence disrupt day-to-day family processes (Patterson & Dishion, 1988). Studies in our own lab involve direct obser-
vations of marital discussions, parent-child discussions, and triadic family discussions. For families with a history of interparental aggression, parent-to-child hostilities in triadic family discussions related to boys’ anxiety and distracting behavior (Gordis, Margolin, & John, 1997). In addition, for those families reporting interparental aggression, hostilities in the marital discussion were related to lower levels of father-to-child empathy and higher levels of mother-to-child negative affect in parent-child discussions (Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004). These findings illustrate that children living with interparental violence also may have parents who are less emotionally available to them. Moreover, children’s repeated exposure to their parents’ negative affect and low empathy may, over time, influence the children’s own emotional reactions, cognitions, and behaviors, particularly in affect-laden situations. These data provide an example of how violence can erode the support and structure of the children’s day-to-day family environment.

SUMMARY

Research has produced a wealth of data about correlates and sequelae of violence exposure but has provided less information about what factors predispose children to adverse outcomes. Although this field has benefited from descriptive research, theoretical progress needs to be a top priority. We need to expand our paradigms for explaining how violence exposure disrupts domains of individual development and also invades broader spheres of the child’s life, including family, school, and community. Information also is needed to understand the ways in which violence exposure is similar or different from other significant childhood stressors. Although a unique combination of variables determines the effect of violence on any one child, continued research along these lines can help us focus our treatment and prevention efforts.

REFERENCES


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