



Intergenerational consequences of violence in the home

By Shanaaz Mathews

Violence during childhood commonly co-occur with other adversities in the home, such as intimate partner violence (IPV) and contributes to an intergenerational cycle of violence. Research shows that male children who experienced violent discipline or other maltreatment during childhood are more likely to be violent towards their own children and partners in adulthood.[1]

Experiencing violence during childhood can thus start an intergenerational cycle of violence. Studies from South Africa and elsewhere also show that witnessing IPV during childhood increases boys' risk of developing violent masculinities and abusing their partners in adulthood. [2,3] For women, experiences of IPV increase the risk of using corporal punishment.

To appreciate this relationship, we have come to understand that where women are subjected to IPV – the home can become an increasingly stressful environment and becomes easier to use corporal punishment. In addition, social norms and attitudes also play a role in women's use of corporal punishment, as mothers who believe that men are justified in beating their female partners are more likely to support and use corporal punishment towards their children.[3]

The work of Fulu and colleagues in the Asia- Pacific region also highlights how experiences of childhood trauma (i.e., physical, sexual or emotional abuse) increase the risk of IPV in adulthood. [1]



Childhood trauma also affected perpetration rates, where 59% of men who had experienced childhood trauma had perpetrated IPV compared to only 36% of men who had not been abused. Research from South African with men also shows that childhood trauma increases the risk of IPV perpetration. [2] This study also found that although there is no direct relationship between child abuse and experience of IPV, child abuse was found to have a profound mental health effect (increased risk for depression and PTSD) which in turn increases the risk for IPV. [2]

What are the effects of experiencing or witnessing violence as a child?

The effects of violence as discussed earlier are wide-ranging and long-lasting. Several studies show that violence is associated with short- and long-term effects on physical and mental health. [5] Children who are abused learn to tolerate violence and are at increased risk of poor mental health (e.g., anxiety and depression), drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviours and HIV, [6] externalising behaviour problems (e.g., aggression, delinquency) and poor social functioning. [7]

Violence commonly results in childhood trauma, with trauma experienced as intense and emotionally distressing – making the child feel not safe and not in control of their life. Children who have experienced violence are also more likely to lack empathy towards others and are more likely to perpetrate violence against other children and grow up to perpetrate violence over their life course.[8]

In the Bt20+ study, violent behaviour was reported by more than 65% of primary school children, rising to 89% of adolescents; and while fewer adults committed acts of violence, the acts became more serious.[9]

The risk for the intergenerational transmission of violence, particularly in the home highlight the need for effective early intervention to ameliorate the effects of violence across the lifespan to break the intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect.



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