

Introduction

There is compelling evidence that exposure to inter-parental violence (IPV) is associated with a host of negative mental health and social consequences in children and adolescents. A recent comprehensive review and meta-analytic evaluation of 118 studies by Kitzmann and colleagues (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenney, 2003) showed that 63% of children (up to the age of 19) exposed to physical IPV showed significant deficits (e.g. more negative affect, social and academic problems) compared to children not exposed to IPV. This effect was similar in studies of clinical and non-clinical populations, and was comparable to the effects found in children exposed to physical abuse alone, and children exposed to both IPV and physical abuse.

There is a substantial body of evidence that supports the association between IPV and aggression, both concurrently and prospectively (e.g., Baldry, 2003; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). While several studies have examined sex differences in the effects of exposure to IPV (see Kitzmann et al., 2003 and Wolfe et al., 2003 for reviews), few have examined whether there are similar effects when IPV is perpetrated by mothers versus fathers.

The current study extends previous research by examining the specificity of relations between exposure to maternal versus paternal physical IPV and aggression in adolescent girls versus boys. We assessed whether mothers' perpetration of IPV was more strongly related to girls' rather than boys' aggression, and fathers' perpetration of IPV was more strongly related to boys' rather than girls' aggression, or if parental modeling of violence was related to an increased level of aggression in both adolescent girls' and boys' in their own relationships. Further, we examined interpersonal violence across four relationship domains: aggression toward mother, father, friends, and romantic partner.

Finally, since exposure to parental IPV and child physical abuse often co-occurs and both have been linked to aggressive behaviour in adolescence, additional analyses were completed to account for the role of mother or father physical abuse toward youth on the relation between exposure to IPV and youths' aggressive behaviour.

Method

Participants

Participants included 49 girls and 83 boys, 13 to 18 years of age, selected from a provincial centre for severe conduct disorder in the Vancouver area. Data collection is continuing and results will be updated with a larger sample.

Measures

The *Family Background Questionnaire* (McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997), a retrospective measure of childhood victimization comprised of five subscales: psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, exposure to inter-parental violence and neglect. Youth completed each of the items based on their victimization experiences with a maternal and a paternal figure (subscales $\alpha = .73$ to $.86$; scale from 0-3).

The *Conflict Tactics Scale* (Straus, 1979), a broadly used questionnaire that assesses violence and aggression within relationships. In the current study a modified version of the CTS [Pepler, 2004 personal communication; Straus, 1990] was used to assess youth perpetration of violence toward their mother, father, friends and romantic partners within the past six months (subscales $\alpha = .82$ to $.89$; scale from 1-4).

Procedure

The limits of confidentiality were fully explained to those who volunteered to participate, and informed consent was obtained in writing from principal caregivers and youth.

Results

Although boys and girls did not differ in their reported exposure to IPV by fathers ($M = .29$ & $M = 1.75$ respectively), girls reported higher levels of exposure to maternal IPV ($M = 1.76$) than boys ($M = .11$), $t(101) = 2.68$, $p = .008$.

Similarly, although boys and girls did not differ in their reported exposure to physical abuse by their fathers ($M = 1.92$ & $M = 2.61$ respectively), girls reported higher levels of exposure to physical abuse by their mothers ($M = 2.61$) than boys ($M = 1.92$), $t(103) = 2.37$, $p = .02$.

Finally, boys and girls did not differ in their reports of physical aggression toward their mothers ($M = 7.08$ & $M = 8.04$ respectively) or fathers ($M = 7.03$ & $M = 6.77$ respectively); however, boys reported engaging in significantly more physical aggression toward friends ($M = 9.33$) than girls ($M = 8.00$), $t(100) = 2.56$, $p = .012$, and girls reported engaging in significantly more physical aggression toward their romantic partners ($M = 8.13$) than boys ($M = 6.72$), $t(85) = 3.03$, $p = .003$.

The relationships between exposure to IPV and aggression, and exposure to physical abuse and aggression across relationships were tested within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework for girls and boys.

Maternal vs. Paternal IPV and Aggression by Sex

		Maternal IPV	Paternal IPV
Girls	Aggression toward		
	Mother	ns	ns
	Father	ns	$\beta = .35$, $p = .02$
	Friend	$\beta = .29$, $p = .03$	ns
	Romantic Partner	$\beta = .26$, $p = .08$	ns
Boys	Aggression toward		
	Mother	ns	ns
	Father	ns	ns
	Friend	ns	$\beta = .50$, $p = .01$
	Romantic Partner	$\beta = .53$, $p = .01$	ns

Approximately 60% of youth who were exposed to parental IPV also reported exposure to physical abuse by their mother and/or father. Additional analyses were completed to account for the role of mother or father physical abuse toward youth on the relation between exposure to IPV and youths' aggressive behaviour.

Exposure to physical abuse by mothers was not related to any form of aggression in adolescents. However, exposure to physical abuse by fathers was linked to aggression toward fathers by girls ($\beta = .56$, $p = 0.04$) and the relation between exposure to fathers' IPV and daughters' aggression toward their father was no longer significant once exposure to paternal physical abuse was controlled.

Exposure to physical abuse by fathers was also linked to aggression toward fathers by boys ($\beta = .39$, $p = 0.008$).

Discussion

Results show that exposure to parental IPV and parental abuse is complementary in explaining adolescents' aggression across relationships. It is possible that physical abuse is a key risk factor primarily for aggression within families while witnessing parental IPV has more pervasive relations with aggression in multiple interpersonal relationships. Similar findings are presented by Maxwell and Maxwell (2003) who suggest that exposure to IPV is an equally, if not more, important factor in explaining antisocial behavior, including aggression. Further research is warranted to disentangle the distinctive effects of IPV versus child physical abuse. To our knowledge, this is the first study to assess the unique relationships between exposure to mothers' versus fathers' physical IPV and physical aggression by adolescent girls and boys toward mothers, fathers, friends and romantic partners.