

# Discuss the Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children's Attachment Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

There is a major impact on children who have to experience the terrifying nature of domestic violence. These are only, of course, negative results and alters the affects children's attachment relationships. "Domestic violence can be defined as the systematic pattern of abusive behaviors in a relationship that are used to gain and/or maintain control and power over another person. (Domestic Abuse Project, 2016)" The concept of attachment relationship refers to a caregiver-child relationship that can develop into different styles. John Bowlby (1979) suggests that attachment is a strong and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. The impact of domestic violence and abuse vary among all individuals. This essay will be aiming to investigate how children develop their attachment relationships differently and what the mediated factors are that affect different types of attachment styles being formed. This essay will be divided into four paragraphs. The first part of this essay will be discussing how domestic violence has an impact on children before birth and how interactions between children's temperaments and caregivers' sensitivities can form advantageous attachment relationships. Followed by the second part; discussing the impact of DVA on children's attachment patterns during the infancy period. In addition, discussing how caregivers who were the victim of DVA may not be capable of providing consistent care and creating a safe environment for infants. The next paragraph will introduce three different parenting styles that are proposed by Bancroft et al (2012) and how they change children's attachment behaviours after witnessing a caregiver being abusive to their respective caregiver. The final part of this essay examines how boys and girls tend to act differently when they were exposed to DVA during the adolescent period. In addition, it will also discuss other adversities and risks children may face when living with DVA and how they affect children's attachment behaviours. Lastly, this essay will stress the detrimental effect domestic violence has on children and how it affects a child's holistic development and the long term impact.

**Keywords:** *Domestic violence, attachment relationships, caregivers, temperament, fatherhood parenting style, gender difference*

## 1. POTENTIAL DVA RISKS ON UNBORN CHILDREN

An abundance of research claims that domestic violence increases children's risks of developing a series of maladaptive behaviour problems including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Donna, 2003). The impact of domestic violence on children can even occur before their birth (Pingley, 2017). Fetal morbidity such as preterm delivery and low birth weight occurs more frequently in pregnant women who were abused (Cook.J and Bewley. S, 2008). Women during pregnancy who face intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence (DV)

are at risk of experiencing high levels of cortisol, which becomes a neurotoxin that has a damaging effect to unborn children's brain when exceeding certain level. According to Davis et al (2011), the exposure of cortisol can lead to changes in behavioural development and "a large infant cortisol response", which translates to "a slower rate of recovery after experiencing a stressor." This statement demonstrates that domestic violence during the perinatal period potentially affects the attachment relationships between caregivers and children as their children may not be as resilient as those who have not experienced domestic abuse before birth. As Kaur and Garg (2008) claims that domestic violence is a pattern of coercive control that one person exercises on another, it is unlikely that the act of violence merely

happens a singular time. If it occurs during a woman's pregnancy period, it is highly likely that it will happen again after childbirth. For children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse (DVA) while still developing in the womb, it is more likely that the impact of DVA on their attachment pattern will be more detrimental than children who have not experienced DVA.

## **2. CHILDREN'S TEMPERAMENT**

Fox (1989) suggests that an advantageous attachment requires an interaction between a child's temperament and a caregivers' sensitivity. The concept of temperament refers to a neurobiological element of an individual that differs from person to person based on emotions, sociability, and self control (Hong. Y and Park. J, 2012). A longitudinal study conducted in 1956 (Thomas and Chess) illustrated that a child's temperament can be classified into three main types: approximately 40% of the children were deemed to be "easy children", 10% were "difficult children", and 15% were "fearful children" (Hong. Y and Park. J, 2012). They also mentions that the remaining 35% of the children could not be easily classified into any of the groups listed above as they behave in disorganised ways distinctively. This longitudinal study indicates that attachment styles that originated from Mary Ainsworth's experiment of "Strange Situation (1973)", are not completely determined by a caregiver's parenting style. Linking this result to the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children, suggests that children's temperaments also have an impact on their attachment pattern. For instance, children who are characterised as "difficult children" are more likely to be frustrated and contribute to negative social interactions (Hong. Y and Park. J, 2012). In this case, when "difficult children" are exposed to domestic violence, they are more likely to suffer from psychological distress than children who were classified as "easy children". "Easy children" tend to be more resilient against the exposure of domestic violence and as a result, may experience less of a negative impact than for "difficult children". However, Chess et al (1977) proposes that children's temperaments can be modulated by influencing their environment. This suggests that children's temperaments can be changed based on social and parental values (Hong and Park, 2012). Unfortunately, mothers who were the victims in acts of domestic violence may have difficulty being engaged and complications in their ability to support to their children (Francavilla, 2019).

## **3. DV IMPACT ON CHILDREN BETWEEN 0-1**

According to John Bowlby's (1969) theory, primary caregivers' constant care and warmth are critical to

infant aged from 0-1 as this is the period of time to develop secure attachment relationships. During this essential period, infants who are exposed to domestic violence are at severe risk of being unintentionally injured psychologically by an abusive parent or parents. A lot of research focuses on the consequences of witnessing domestic abuse for older children and the impact in their adulthood, however, Mueller and Tronick (2019) proposes that domestic violence also has a significant impact on children's brain developments as they are susceptible to environmental stimuli during their early childhood. When infants were placed in an environment with violence such as DV and IPV, they were able to sense the intensity of fear and in turn, become frustrated with their own emotions of helplessness and fear. This directly leads to long term self regulation difficulties and numerous psychological and behavioural problems. Infants seek a close bond from their attachment figures and their parents should act as an anchor to that provide care and support. Experiencing domestic abuse even as a witness, not only interferes with an infant's ability to develop a sense of security (Mueller and Tronick, 2019), but also means that parents, especially with the mother frequently as the victim, may not be available to attend to the infant's needs. To this end, children who experience abusive violence during their infancy period, which is a crucial period of time for them in terms of their social, emotional, physical and psychological development, are more likely to develop negative attachment outcomes as they are more sensitive and fearful than children who were raised in non-abusive environments (Waldman-Levi et al., 2013). Children who witnessed domestic abuse during this period may experience problems sleeping, feeding disorders, language delays, and fear of being alone (Edleson, 1999).

## **4. HOW CAREGIVERS' RESPONSE INFLUENCE CHILDREN**

When children start showing these symptoms, it indicates that they require more caregiving and attention from parents as they cannot express themselves as well as children who experience normal motor and language skill development. Unfortunately, parents who are involved in domestic abuse, particularly the victim, usually are not available to prioritise children's needs as their capacity as parents are limited by their stressful conditions (Hong and Park, 2012). This situation will eventually lead to children developing attachment insecurity. Herman-Smith (2013) claims that children with insecure attachment can be avoidant and ambivalent to their caregivers, by being withdrawn; this is because children who are exposed to domestic violence are more likely suffer from chronic stress which leads to stress related symptoms (Herman-Smith, 2013). Flaherty and Sadler (2011) points out that attachment

relationship is reciprocal. This statement suggests that children who showed ambivalent or avoidant behaviour toward their caregivers, bring more challenges for the parents to respond with an advantageous attachment behaviour pattern, especially when parents were also experiencing psychological problems as a result of being abused. For children who are exposed to domestic violence at school age, they are at increasing risk of developing negative behavioural outcomes, such as hyper arousal and increased aggression towards peers (Scheeringa and Zeanah, 1995).

### **5. THREE FATHERHOOD PARENTING STYLES**

There is a common link between childhood abuse and domestic violence (UNICEF). Devaney (2015) states that violent adults do not often discriminate between family members and children might be injured when trying to intervene the violence. A national study in UK carried out by Radford et al (2011) found that children who had lived with domestic abuse were 2.9 to 4.4 times more likely to experience physical abuse from violent adults in the family than children who had lived in non-abusive environment. When children are abused both physically and emotionally by their caregivers, their holistic development and attachment relationships are devastatingly affected. McLeod (2018) argues that the persistent maltreatment of children from the perpetrators will cause severe effects on a child's emotional and cognitive development. Children will be fearful and avoidant to their caregivers, hence develop insecure attachment pattern. Bancroft et al (2012) argues that there are three different types of parenting styles of perpetrators: authoritarian, uninvolved, and self-centred. Authoritarian parenting style refers to inflexibility and control. As children at early school age are not able to protect themselves and can be coercively controlled by their caregivers, perpetrators of domestic violence can shape children's views about themselves and the victim. Perpetrators can also condition children to misinterpret the abuse in order to lead their children to blame their mothers (Francavilla, 2019). This will be harmful to a mother-child attachment relationship, as children will not be receiving sufficient warmth and love from their primary caregivers. In addition, Christine Cooper (1985) proposes that security is one of the most significant needs that children require in order to form a secure attachment pattern, as opposed to how an abuser's coercion and control does not provide a stable and safe family unit. This statement indicates that children who lived with domestic abuse and maternal alienation are unlikely to develop an attachment of security. Instead, perpetrator's control, which can be deemed as another form of abuse, may contribute to a child's insecure attachment and disorganised attachment. Moreover, mother-child

interaction can be harmed when mothers fail to prevent their children from being neglected and abused, as children will lose confidence in their caregivers ability to provide them a secure base. Another parenting style of the perpetrators raised by Bancroft et al (2012) is uninvolved. This means that the role of the father will be mostly absent in the child's life and not able to respond to child's needs. The result of this type of irresponsible parenting style is that father-child interaction will be damaged. Children are more likely to develop insecure attachment with their attachment figure and show avoidant or fearful behaviour in front of the perpetrators, especially after witnessing domestic abuse. Finally, the self-centred parenting style in the context of perpetrators of domestic abuse, refers to the intolerance of an infant's noises and the expectations of children of their parents to give them their absolute attention (Bancroft et al, 2012). Children who were raised by a self-centred parenting style are less likely to develop secure attachment relationships with their caregiver as their needs are not being prioritised.

### **6. DV IMPACT ON DIFFERENT GENDER**

The impact of domestic violence also varies depending on children's gender, especially when they reach adolescence period. As children get older, boys are more likely to express their feelings outwardly, in ways of aggressive behaviours and the use of substances and alcohol. Girls tend to display more internalised behaviours, such as holding in negative emotions and distress inside and becoming withdrawn from other people including their parents (Meltzer et al, 2009). These behaviours will further exacerbate their attachment relationships with their parents, as parents will consider these behaviours disobedient and become frustrated with the child. Evidence shows that children who were exposed to domestic violence are at risk of being abused or become abusive in adulthood. (Sancho-Rossignol, 2018). Domestic violence has a lifelong impact on an individual's attachment relationships and the consequences of developing an insecure attachment style during early childhood can last for life. Children who developed insecure attachment relationships with their caregivers are more likely to experience emotional regulation and intimate relationship issues (Rholes and Simpson, 2017). Developing insecure attachment patterns is not the only negative impact that domestic abuse brings to adolescents. Hornor (2005) proposes that exposure to domestic abuse also affects children's educational abilities. This could mean that children who lived with domestic violence are less likely to achieve high academic performances. The long term impact of their lower academic performances would mean that they are less likely to have a fulfilled life compared to those who were raised in non-violent households.

Another issue with domestic abuse is that it normally brings other adversity risks to children, such as poverty. Fahmy et al (2016) argues that existing analyses consistently found that domestic violence and abuse are strongly associated with lower income and economic strain. Poverty in households means that parents need to worry about their basic needs such as access to food and clean water. To this end, sometimes an infant's needs of security and consistent response might be ignored, which may lead to the development of insecure attachment.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay explains how domestic violence and abuse (DVA) during the perinatal period has an impact on a fetus's behavioural development and how that affects future caregiver-infant attachment relationships in the first part. As for the infancy period, the second section of this essay focuses on the impact of DVA on infants attachment pattern. Infants who witnessed DV or IPV will show a series of symptoms such as aggressiveness, sleeping, and feeding disorder (Edleson, 1999). Due to the stressed condition victims face after being abused, they are typically not capable of responding to their children's needs sensitively, which in turn leads to children developing insecure attachment pattern. The third part of this essay aims to examine how the father, who often acts as the abuser in DVA, have different parenting styles and how they affect children in forming attachment relationships different ways. In addition, this paragraph discusses how perpetrators can manipulate children to distance them from their mothers, causing maternal alienation. The last section of this essay discusses how boys and girls react to exposure of domestic violence in different ways and other adversity risks children may face when living with DVA. This essay also stresses the importance of parents to acknowledge that exposing their children to domestic violence has a devastating effect on a child's development and how that impact can continue into adulthood, as children who experienced domestic abuse are more likely to have negative psychological outcomes.

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