

Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence: How Child Welfare Professionals Assess Child Experiences

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Abstract

Child welfare professionals are expected to promptly assess the current safety and future risks for children reported to them. Developing more accurate assessment methods has been a growing concern in child welfare. The presence of domestic violence and children's exposure to it are factors that have been included in many current risk assessment models used by child welfare professionals.

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and the Minnesota Center Against Violence & Abuse jointly conducted an online survey of 152 child welfare professionals from 20 Minnesota counties and gathered their reports on the importance of types of violence in the home, the child's level of involvement in that violence and two hypothetical scenarios of child exposure to and involvement in violence.

The results provide insight into how child welfare professionals assess child exposure and involvement in domestic violence as a perceived risk. These findings are being integrated into an online training system for child welfare professionals.

Introduction

Child welfare agencies have developed a multiple assessment tools to assess the risk of future child maltreatment. Structured assessment tools that have been developed to date raise concerns about the depth of assessment in the area of domestic violence. Recent years have witnessed a focus on gaining better understandings of children's exposure to adult-to-adult domestic violence. Results of state and national studies have increased these concerns, for example:

- Up to 15 million American children are exposed to adult domestic violence annually, with seven million exposed to severe violence (McDonald, et al., 2006).

- The overlap between child maltreatment and domestic violence may be up to 50% (English, Edleson, & Herrick, 2005; Hazen, et al., 2004).

Many risk assessment tools used by child welfare professionals include domestic violence (i.e. Structured Decision Making), however domestic violence is often not the focus. This led to the development of the Child Exposure to Domestic Violence (CEDV) scale here at the University of Minnesota.

One fear expressed by advocates for battered women is that greater identification of child exposure to domestic violence will lead to more battered mothers being substantiated for endangering or failing to protect their children, yet the available studies present contradictory evidence regarding this concern. This study aims to shed light on how child welfare professionals actually do assess child exposure.

This Study

This study surveyed 152 child welfare professionals in 20 counties in Minnesota on their use of assessment information about child exposure to and involvement in domestic violence.

Study questions

- (1) Are varying levels of adult domestic violence in the home and child involvement in such violence weighted differently in child welfare professionals' assessment of risk?
- (2) In what ways would child welfare professionals use the CEDV Scale in their day-to-day decision-making?
- (3) In what ways does information on a child's exposure to and involvement in domestic violence impact how child welfare professionals report they would provide services to this child and his or her family?

Sampling procedure

The current study is an online survey. Twenty county agencies agreed to participate and provide the e-mail addresses for child welfare professionals. A total of 288 electronic invitations were sent asking professionals to complete a 20-minute online survey about children exposed to domestic violence and 152 completed the survey.

Measure

(1) 17 CEDV scale items, (2) two hypothetical scenarios and (3) a set of demographic questions were included in the current study.

Sample description

Demographic characteristics of participating child welfare professionals appear below in Table 1.

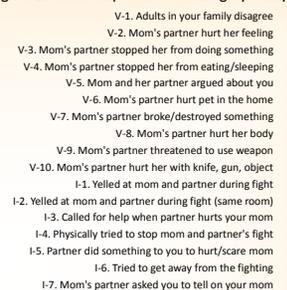
Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants (n=152)

Variable	%	n	Mean	SD
Gender				
Male	26.3%	40		
Female	73.7%	112		
Education				
AA or 2 year degree	.7%	1		
Four year degree	61.8%	94		
Master's degree	36.8%	56		
Doctoral degree	.7%	1		
Job category				
Adult mental health worker	0.0%	0		
Alternative response/family assessment	14.5%	25		
Child mental health worker	4.6%	7		
Foster and kinship worker	2.0%	3		
Generalist worker for child welfare	11.8%	18		
Generalist worker for all social service cases	4.6%	7		
ICWA worker	0.0%	0		
Intake/referrals	5.3%	8		
Investigation/assessment	16.4%	25		
Ongoing family intervention	14.5%	22		
Permanency worker	.7%	1		
Youth worker (adolescent services)	4.6%	7		
Other	7.2%	11		
Missing/no response	13.8%	21		
Job position				
Worker	88.2%	134		
Supervisor	11.2%	17		
Missing/no response	.7%	1		
Length of time employed in child welfare			12.16	8.79
Length of time employed in current position			6.56	5.87

Results

Respondents were asked how important each CEDV violence and involvement item would be in their professional decision-making activities regarding children. Almost all questions were rated as very important, with sample means over 4.00.

Figure 1. Mean importance ranking by study participants (n=152).



As shown in Table 2, respondents reported that they would use the CEDV scale items while working with families in various situations.

Table 2. Usefulness of the CEDV scale (multiple responses)

	%	N
Administer the measure to all children where DV is reported	78.9	120
Administer the measure to all children where DV is suspected in the home	75.7	115
Use the child's responses to assess the risk for future child maltreatment	75.0	114
Use the child's responses when submitting documents to the court	41.4	63
Discuss the child's responses in a family-decision making progress	51.3	78
Other uses	16.4	25
-Share information with therapist or counselor	--	4
-Use for a training with children	--	2
-Assessment	--	5
-Safety planning	--	5
-Service planning	--	1
-Others	--	8
None of these	2.0	3

The survey provided two hypothetical scenarios – one high violence and high involvement and a second low violence and high involvement – based on information gathered through the CEDV scale. Respondents stated they would respond according to the results presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Risk assessment and intervention

	N (%)		M (SD)	
	Scenario One	Scenario Two	Scenario One	Scenario Two
Assessment				
Child's level of risk for future child maltreatment			4.07(.81)	3.08(.96)
Intervention				
Accept for investigation and possible traditional child protection	50 (32.9)	16 (10.5)		
- If so, provide formal out-of-home placement			3.67(1.07)	3.67 (.98)
Accept for family assessment	87 (57.2)	89 (58.6)		
- If so, provide informal out-of-home placement			3.21(1.14)	2.98 (1.1)
Do not accept the case, but provide resource information to the family	5(3.3)	34 (22.4)		
Nothing	0 (0)	4 (2.6)		
Others	10 (6.6)	8 (5.3)		

Discussion

The child welfare field is moving toward using a model of Comprehensive Family Assessment. The presence of domestic violence and the involvement of children in that violence must be seriously examined and considered as part of these assessments. One finding of this study raises concerns regarding child welfare's consideration of assessment information. A full 20% of the survey respondents would not offer any child welfare services to children in scenarios with low level violence but high child involvement. Training is warranted to assist child welfare professionals in recognizing any identified domestic violence including a child needing consideration for services through family assessment or traditional investigations (to be determined by level of violence).

A second area of training that appears necessary based upon the study findings is related to child welfare professionals' sensitivity and understanding of the unique disclosure issues involved in domestic violence, particularly in arenas such as court or family group conferences where the child providing assessment information could be identified by the perpetrator. Alternate methods of safety following up on domestic violence assessment information should be explored.

Next: Online Training

This study is informing the development of an online training series through the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and the Minnesota Center Against Violence & Abuse for child welfare professionals. Other professionals who work with children exposed to domestic violence may also be interested in this training and will be able to access it online as well. The four hour online training will include content on:

- Research and practice with exposed children
- Risk and protective factors
- Comprehensive assessment techniques
- Incorporating assessment into service provision



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