

Test of the spillover hypothesis during the COVID-19 pandemic: Intimate partner violence (IPV) victimisation does not predict emotionally abusive and harsh parenting practices

Agata Debowska, PhD, Grzegorz Inglot, M.D., Rafal Piasek, M.D., Grzegorz Sokol, M.D., Beata Horeczy, M.D., George K. Hales, PhD, Daniel Boduszek, PhD



BACKGROUND

- The burden of IPV is not limited to the primary victim. Children from IPV-stricken households have a higher risk of developmental difficulties [1].
- According to the **spillover hypothesis**, negativity in one family subsystem (e.g., the relationship between partners) can “spill over” into other family subsystems (e.g., the parent-child relationship) [2].
- The spillover effect has been largely studied in relation to IPV perpetration. However, a recent review of research has suggested that **IPV victimisation** can lead to **abusive parenting practices** and a reduction in positive parenting practices [3].
- However, most prior studies in the area were conducted in the United States, focused on lower socioeconomic populations, and used poorly matched controls.

This quasi-experimental study examined the effect of recent IPV victimisation on emotionally abusive and harsh parenting practices among community mothers living in Poland



METHODS

Participants and procedure

Recruitment took place in an outpatient clinic of a large hospital located in a city in south-eastern Poland. Data were collected online among **610 middle-class mothers of children aged between 2-5 years** (M age = 32.54 years, SD = 4.34). Of those participants, 173 (28.4%) were victims of IPV in the last 12 months (IPV positive).

Data analytic plan

The analysis was conducted in **three steps**:

- **Step 1:** Using independent samples **t-tests**, we tested the effect of IPV victimisation on emotionally abusive and harsh parenting in the full sample of participants.
- **Step 2:** To remove observed systematic differences across the treatment group (i.e., IPV positive women) and the control group (i.e., IPV negative women) and hence eliminate treatment selection bias, we performed nearest neighbour **propensity score matching (PSM)** with 11 theoretically selected covariates (age, education, employment status, financial hardship, self-esteem, childhood violence history, alcohol problems, current depression and anxiety, social support, exposure to COVID-19 related stressors, and child sex). The post-matching sample consisted of **160 treatment (IPV positive) and 160 control (IPV negative) participants**.
- **Step 3:** Independent samples **t-tests** were performed to test the effect of IPV victimisation on emotionally abusive and harsh parenting in the post-matching sample.

RESULTS

Step 1

- A pre-matching independent samples t-test indicated that IPV positive mothers used significantly more emotionally abusive ($t[608] = -5.34$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -.48$) and harsh ($t[608] = -4.39$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -.40$) parenting practices than IPV negative mothers.

Step 2

- However, the two samples differed substantially on six background characteristics which are known risk factors for IPV and child maltreatment (self-esteem, social support, childhood violence, mental distress, exposure to COVID-19 pandemic related stressors, financial distress).
- PSM was successful in reducing those imbalances.

Step 3

- Post-matching independent samples t-tests showed that IPV positive and IPV negative mothers did not differ significantly on emotionally abusive ($t[318] = -1.41$, $p = .160$, Cohen's $d = -.16$) and harsh ($t[318] = -1.20$, $p = .233$, Cohen's $d = -.13$) parenting practices.

CONCLUSIONS & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- The **spillover effect** of IPV victimisation on negative parenting was **not supported**.
- The current study shows the importance of isolating a characteristic of interest when making group comparisons between individuals with and without this specific characteristic.
- It appears that interventions for community-based IPV victims do not need to focus on reducing negative parenting practices because this is not a problematic area for the majority of the population.
- Future studies should aim to recruit more geographically diverse samples and study the effect of exposure to different forms of IPV on negative parenting.

References

- [1] Julio, A., et al. (2023). Nuances in the effect of types of intimate partner violence on aspects of child development: evidence from the Philippines. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 138, 106074.
- [2] Engfer, A. (1988). The interrelatedness of marriage and the mother-child relationship. In J. Stevenson-Hinde, & R.A. Hinde (Eds.), *Relationships within families: Mutual influences* (pp. 104–118). Oxford University Press.
- [3] Chiesa, A.E. et al. (2018). Intimate partner violence victimization and parenting: A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80, 285-300.