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How Helping Families with Ongoing Problems Can Prevent Child and Partner Abuse

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Unfortunately, victims of child abuse can get used to violence. Studies show that children who are abused by caregivers are more likely to be involved in intimate partner violence in adulthood. As abused children enter romantic partnerships, they are more likely (than their peers who were not abused) to mimic or tolerate the kind of violence that surrounded them when they were young. In turn, research demonstrates a wide variety of negative outcomes that accompany partner violence including anxiety, depression, increased substance use, and poor physical health.

Precursors to the Cycle of Violence

Although the connections between child abuse and adult partner violence have been well researched, few studies have examined how broader family contexts affect both forms of family violence. Because child abuse can lead to later intimate partner violence, preventing child abuse and the problems that lead to it could also reduce rates of partner abuse. To prevent all of these forms of violence and abuse, scholars and policymakers need to understand the difficult family circumstances that can, over time, lead to a cycle of outright violence.

Using data that span over 12 years, I examine the experiences of two different groups. One group includes Black families living in rural, suburban, and urban Georgia and Iowa and the other includes White families living in rural Iowa. This work should inform early intervention efforts aimed at reducing child abuse. My research also highlights the importance of helping victims of childhood abuse address risks that can lead to intimate partner violence later in their lives.

Examining the experiences of my two study groups, I find that, for both groups, three important family processes precede the cycle of abuse and partner violence. Family economic hardship, parental depression, and conflict between caregivers are factors that create direct or indirect risks for children to be abused. In turn, child abuse increased risks for adult abuse of partners involving both verbal aggression and physical violence. My findings mean that interventions aimed at reducing intimate partner violence should address not only child abuse, but also the ongoing family financial struggles, mental health problems, and conflicts that can lead to child abuse.

How to Reduce Child Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

Policymakers, service providers, and child welfare advocates should consider the following options to interrupt the cycle of family violence:

Home Visitation and Parenting Classes – Home visitation programs can help address family financial problems, mental health issues, and unhealthy patterns of conflict. In these programs, nurses visit and provide guidance and support in the early years of a child's life, which can have long-term benefits for family well-being. These programs have been shown to improve family economic outcomes and child and maternal health. They also further positive parenting practices and non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. Parents may also need new skills to deal with adolescents, so parenting classes should be available for families struggling economically or with internal conflicts. These programs teach parents how to monitor and communicate with teens about healthy relationships and dating violence.

Family-Focused Economic Help – Families struggling financially often benefit in several ways when they receive economic support, including nutrition assistance like food stamps and free and reduced school lunches, state tax incentives, public assistance aimed at cutting energy costs, high quality public housing, and subsidized childcare services. Other forms of public support can also make a difference, including access to public transportation, high minimum wages, equal pay for women, and family leave policies. Such programs can reduce mental health problems and unhealthy family conflict.

Mental Health Services – Subsidized insurance programs for children should include access to individual and family counseling. Caregivers would also benefit from community-based support groups for parents at easy-to-access locations such as community centers or places of worship.

Relationship Education for Co-Parents – Conflict between co-parents is a risk factor for child abuse. Relationship education can help co-parents – including biological parents, stepparents, mothers and grandmothers – communicate more effectively with one another to reduce conflict. Such programs can also promote healthy parenting practices.

Relationship Education for Child Abuse Victims – Relationship education during adolescence or young adulthood can help victims of child abuse avoid intimate partner violence later in life. Such programs often include lessons about healthy relationships, how to handle conflict, effective communication, and skills for recognizing and avoiding abuse. Such programs may also address the ways in which past family experiences influence romantic relationships and help participants recognize and change any negative behaviors they have learned. Research shows that these programs reduce partner violence.

Service Integration – Finally, families would benefit if all of these services were offered together or in a systematic and interrelated way. Families are often unaware of the programs available to them, so having a one-stop place to go for information and services can increase access. The Harlem Children's Zone is a great example of programming integration. The Zone includes parenting classes for new parents, education for children from preschool to high school, summer camps, community centers, food services, free legal and financial counseling, and healthy living programs. This type of hub for services has great promise for helping at-risk families address their complex needs.

Read more in Tara E. Sutton "Intimate Partner Violence as a Consequence of Childhood Economic Hardship: The Meditating Role of Family Processes in a Longitudinal Study" Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, 2018.