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The Effects of Violence on Academic Progress and Classroom Behavior: From a Parent's Perspective

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Abstract

The present article addresses the effects of violence on academic progress and classroom behavior. Violence is an essential aspect of dysfunctional behavior for youth. Researchers have identified a negative association between violence, academic progress, and appropriate classroom behavior. At the front lines of this issue is the harsh reality of the transferred behaviors from the family and community atmosphere into the classroom environment. Educators play a pertinent role for children who are emotionally sensitive and socially inept by providing a safe haven and learner-centered environment. It is the purpose of this article to highlight the personal, social, and academic factors related to violence and youth involvement, from a parent's perspective.

Key words: violence, children, classroom behavior

Exposure to violent home and community environments, as well as injury due to violence, contribute to both reduced academic progress and increased disruptive or unfocused classroom behavior for children, adolescents, and teenagers. It is estimated that between 10 and 20% of children in the United States are exposed to domestic violence annually (Carlson, 2000) and are physically injured (Fusco & Fantuzzo, 2009). Violence is positively associated with family size. Households who have more children are more likely to experience increased family conflict and child maltreatment (Jungmeen, Talbot, & Cicchetti, 2009), which may lead to intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic limitations. Children affected by family and community violence suffer from lowered social and emotional competence, diminished academic performance (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1999 as cited by Close, 2005; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999), and fear of abuse (Burnham, 2009). With repeated exposure to traumatic events, a proportion of individuals may develop disorders characterized as Posttraumatic Stress and Oppositional Defiant (Aisenberg, Trickett, Mennen, Saltzman, & Zayas, 2007). Given these issues, there is an increased need for school personnel to address the effects of violence on youth achievement in the classroom.

School Functioning

Children from dysfunctional families are less likely to function successfully at school (Iarskaia-Smir nova, Romanov, & Antonova, 2008). Youth exposure to violence may compromise healthy social relationships and academic potential. Bostock, Plumpton, and Pratt (2009) reported that traumatized children often lack in their ability to maintain friendships. Traumatized experiences may also increase functioning impairment (Elbert et al., 2009), influence mother-child aggression (McDonald, Jouriles, Tart, & Minze, 2009), and promote insecurely attached relationships (Schwartz & Davis, 2006). In relation to academic functioning, children who experience higher levels of violence have lower abilities in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge (Silverstein, Augustyn, Cabral, & Zuckerman, 2006).

Imitation plays a fundamental role for children in social and academic settings. Children exposed to violent home and community environments may be more likely to imitate, and transfer learned behaviors to the classroom setting. Children often imitate modeled behavior in social environments, specifically during peer interaction. For example, teachers may observe the power of imitation in the classroom setting as a student demonstrates inappropriate behavior and other students, for a variety of reasons, may imitate the undesired behavior. The process of imitation and socialization become pertinent to the identification process as students socialize more with like-minded peers (Aloise-Young & Chavez, 2002; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997 as cited in McGaha-Garnett, 2008).

The effect of exposure to violence on children is prevalent in the classroom setting. Children utilize healthy coping and problem solving skills training interventions to shield against threatening and harmful situations (Haeseler, 2006). A positive association may exist between imitation and bullying for children who experience violence. Youth who are victims or witnesses of bullying within their household or neighborhood are more likely to associate bullying as a preferred or acceptable style of communication. Students who bully their peers have increased expectations of negative outcomes (Champion, 2009). For example, a student with an increased desire to fight physically is more likely to expect the targeted student to reciprocate aggressive interactions. In addition, a student who faces daily physical negative interactions outside of the learning environment may be more likely to consider physical aggression as normative. Thus, there is an increased need for school personnel to address the process of healthy imitation in young victims of abuse as the higher the likelihood of witnessing violence, the higher the risk of academic decline and problematic relationships.

Age-Related Differences

Reactions to violence in academic and social environments may differ among age groups. Younger children may internalize abuse-related distress as a harsh consequence to poor or inadequate performance. Fusco and Fantuzzo (2009) found that younger children lack the ability to understand the dynamics of interparental violence and thus may blame themselves. Self-blame for most children can result in feelings of guilt, worry, and anxiety that may effect academic output and healthy social interactions. Younger children exposed to violence are at a greater risk of experiencing delayed physiological, emotional, language, and cognitive development (Carpenter & Stacks, 2009).

Children exposed to violence are more likely to report stressful life events than non-exposed children (Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, Eye, & Levendosky, 2009). When faced with adversity, younger children who reside within problematic environments may exhibit fewer prosocial emotions and increased personal problems (Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman, & Abbott, 2006). For example, abused children are more likely to display temper tantrums, frequent fighting, and threatening of other students. Other issues exhibited by these youth in classrooms are eating problems, concentration difficulties, generalized anxiety, and increased physical complaints (Volpe, 1996). When examining the types of abuse most likely witnessed by children, Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, and Ramirez (2001) reported younger children are more likely to witness violent interactions than to experience physical abuse. In addition, younger children tend to witness fewer crime-related traumas such as shooting, shoving, and punching (Wright & Steinbach, 2001). Given the realistic educational consequences of exposure to violence on child and youth behavior, it is likely they will need additional resources within the supportive structures of the school environment to address their needs and improve educational outcomes.

The effects of violence on academic performance and classroom behavior may differ for adolescents. When working with victims of domestic violence, educators in grades K-12 may observe various behaviors in the school environment. Youth reared in abusive environments are more likely to exhibit behaviors of concern (Silverstein et al., 2006). For example, adolescents are more likely to display a lack of interest in social activities, have lowered self-esteem (Dube et al., 2006), avoid peer relations, maintain unhealthy relationships (Levin & Madfis, 2009), and exhibit increased rebellion and defiant behaviors in the school environment. Stress and trauma placed on youth are more likely to affect neurodevelopment and potentially may lead to alcohol usage (Dube et al., 2006).

Adolescents may transfer patterns of abusive behavior into social networks and romantic relationships (Tschann et al., 2008). Children who recognize their presence within a hostile environment and lack healthy outlets of support are more likely experience negative mood provocations with peers (Katz, 2007). Peer victimization and provocation may lead to weapon use, injuries, and multiple abusers (Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2006). Increased violence and its severity can have an impact on school matters as the majority of school violence is reported in middle and high schools (Neiman & DeVoe, 2009). For adolescents who deny the existence of abuse, the process of fitting into a peer group while keeping his or her family life hidden may be overwhelmingly conflicting. Despite the internal and external effects of violence, adolescents are more likely to seek help when violence occurs than are preschool or school-aged children (Fusco & Fantuzzo, 2009). In sum, this study focused on the effects of violence within the school and community environment. Children and adolescents exposed to violence may suffer academically, personally, and socially. Thus, the following research question was addressed: To what extent do neighborhood safety, classroom behavioral problems, peer violence, and family size contribute to violence within the school environment?

Data

Data in this study was selected from the second follow-up of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), conducted by the National Center

of Educational Statistics (NCES). The National Education Longitudinal Study examined 8th grade public and private schools nationwide. Students were randomly selected from 40,000 schools and grouped according to race and ethnicity. The second follow-up longitudinal study examined high school 10th graders who had prior participation in NELS and included 12th graders new to the study. This study examined parents (n=12,144) of adolescent youth. The study explored parent's perspective of violence within the school and community environment. To increase generalizability to the national populations, this study used weighting variables to adjust for unequal probability selection and nonresponse effects.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Frequency	Percent
Relationship		
Mother	8411	69
Father	1633	13
Stepmother	119	1
Stepfather	59	.5
Grandmother	106	.9
Grandfather	10	.1
Other	1806	15.5
Marital Status		
Single	292	2.4
Married	8274	68.1
Divorced/Separated	1540	12.7
Widowed	362	3
Other	1676	13.8
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian/Pac Islander	592	4.9
Hispanic	1135	9.3
Black	1036	8.5
White	7674	63.2
Am Ind/Alskn Nat	107	.9
Unreported	1600	13.2
Highest Educational Level		
Didn't finish HS	1189	9.8
HS Graduate/GED	2260	18.6
HS Some College	4404	36.3
College Grad	1656	13.6
M.A. or Equal	993	8.2
Ph.D., M.D., Other	588	4.8
Unreported	1054	8.7

Sample Demographics:

Demographics for the participants were examined. Respondents described their care giving relationship, current marital status; race/ethnicity and educational level (see Table 1). The care giving relationship revealed 69% mothers, 13% fathers, and eighteen percent reported other. The parent's current marital status identified the following statuses: 2% single, never married, 68% married, 13% divorced, 3% widowed, and 16% reported as other. The respondents identified their race/ethnicity as 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% Hispanic, 9% Black/African American, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 63% Caucasian, and 13% declined to answer. The majority of parents reported college attendance (36%), followed by individuals who completed high school or acquired a GED degree (18%).

Measures:

The attributes examined in the study included the following:

1. Violence on school grounds
2. Classroom behavioral problems
3. Violence among teen friends
4. Neighborhood safety

Results

The data were analyzed with Pearson product-moment correlations and a single one-step regression. The regression examined the association between the dependent variable (violence on the school grounds) and the four independent variables (neighborhood safety, classroom behavioral problems, violence among teen friends, and family size). Collectively, the independent variables accounted for 87% of the variance in violence on the school grounds (R^2 adjusted = .87 p <.001). The four independent variables significantly predicted violence on the school grounds and the standardized beta values indicated that classroom behavioral problems (β = .616, p <.001), violence among teen's friends (β = .181, p <.001), family size (β = .119, p <.001), and neighborhood safety (β= .058, p<.001) were unique predictors.

The correlation matrix indicated that the variables were significantly related. Violence on school grounds was positively associated with classroom behavioral problems (r = .92, p <.01), violence among teen friends (r = .85, p <.01), neighborhood safety (r = .84, p <.01), and family size (r = .85, p <.01). Classroom behavioral problems was positively associated with violence on school grounds (.92, p < .01), violence among teen friends (r = .84, p < .01), school safety (r = .84, p <.01), and family size (r =.84, p <.01).

Discussion

Findings indicated that youth who demonstrate inappropriate behaviors in the classroom received less discipline from teachers and were more likely to demonstrate harmful behaviors within the school. Similarly, adolescents who socialized with violent peers had a higher likelihood of exhibiting similarly violent behaviors. Our findings for neighborhood safety and school violence compliment past researchers' findings

indicating relational significance for community involvement and academic success. Of particular concern, we found that schools in neighborhoods with higher rates of violence are more likely to experience similarly violent incidents. Findings from our study compliment Jipguep and Sanders-Phillips (2003) identification of victimized adolescents exposed to violence within their communities and the effect of violence on the learning environment. Lastly, family size proved pertinent in the association of school violence; individuals who come from larger households are more likely to misbehave. Students who live in larger households may have a higher likelihood of experiencing bullying-related interactions from other siblings or parents and may transfer the home-adjusted pattern into the school environment. With repeated exposure to domestic violence, children and adolescents may experience self-blame for the interparental conflict (Kim, Jackson, Hunter, & Conrad, 2009). In relation to motivation, students who have multiple siblings are less likely to succeed academically, have less social support, and are more likely to maintain a pessimistic attitude towards the learning environment (Kennedy, 2007).

This study identified two limitations. One of the limitations of the study is that it did not include adolescents who dropped out of school due to violence-related factors. It is possible that there are behavioral differences between adolescents who continue in school and students who drop out. Another limitation of the study was that the sample did not examine racial/ethnic differences of students related to the effects of violence in the classroom.

Implications for Practice

There is an increased need for collaborative consultation between caregivers and school administrators to infuse family stability, and the utilization of community resources (e.g., counseling, case management) into the academic environment. Researchers address questions of the utilization of consultation and its effectiveness. To address effectiveness, educators have noted the benefits of collaborating among classroom teachers and mental health professionals for synchronous sharing of resources (Ainscow, Muijs, & West, 2006). Children of abuse or neglect may endure multiple factors involved in relocation stress such as adjustment to a new neighborhood, change in family structure, transfer to a different school, and loss of friends (Haeseler, 2006). Researchers have found an association between community cohesion and physical abuse. Individuals who have limited community involvement have a higher risk of suffering abuse (Obasaju, Palin, Jacobs, Anderson, & Kaslow, 2009). Abused victims who are disengaged from community involvement may lack awareness of community resources (e.g., support groups, parenting classes, prevention programs, safe havens from violence). Effective interventions for healthy behaviors can include:

1. Address student's strengths and performance limitations. Collaborative consultation may be most effective by highlighting the student's strengths and effectively working on challenging problems that exert a negative influence on classroom environment and decline in school performance.

2. Provide coping resources. Teachers and mental health providers may establish an effective partnership in the dialogue of teacher/student/parent communication for traumatized youth. Teachers play an essential role in helping children heal from traumatic experiences and in creating a safe school environment for learning.

Summary

There is an increased need to address the effects of violence on academic progress and prosocial classroom behavior for at-risk students. Educators and counselors can collaborate to maintain a supportive school environment for students and school personnel. Effectively examining academic and non-academic factors in improving classroom performance may eliminate obstacles and barriers to learning motivation and high school completion. Feelings of safety, stability, and predictability are necessary for youths' academic success (Baker, Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Carter, 2002). Thus, high-risk students who increase school involvement are more likely to experience positive emotions of inclusion (McGaha-Garnett & Burley, 2009), ultimately leading to academic progress and healthy behaviors.

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