

Children's Perspectives of Mothering in the Context of Domestic Violence: Recent Research Findings

by D. Kelly Weisberg

In this short but impactful piece, author D. Kelly Weisberg documents what survivors and their advocates already know: that both before and after separation from an abusive partner, a battered women's relationship with her children has great significance for her own well-being and, even more, for that of her children. Ms. Weisberg reiterates the often-stated observation that battered mothers' parenting skills improve after separation, assuming that she becomes finally free to live without the abusive manipulations imposed upon her and her children by the batterer.

Considerable scholarly attention has focused on children's exposure to domestic violence. Exposure to violence occurs in many ways. Children may see their mothers' injuries, perceive their mothers' distress, witness the aftermath of the violence (such as broken furniture, blood on a rug), or observe law enforcement arresting the batterer. Much research has explored the effects of such exposure on children's safety, health, and well-being.¹ Public attention on this social problem reached the national level with the creation of the Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence in 2011.² After holding hearings, that Task Force issued policy

¹ See, e.g., Sherry Hamby et al., Dept. of Justice, Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence and Other Family Violence, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (Oct. 2011). Available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/232272.pdf>; David Wolfe et al., The Effects of Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence: A Meta-Analysis and Critique, *6 Clinical Child & Fam. Psych. Rev.* 171 (2003).

² *Defending Childhood*, Report of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, Executive Summary (Dec. 12, 2012). Available at <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/defendingchildhood/legacy/2012/12/12/cev-executive-sum.pdf>.

recommendations to ensure increased awareness of the problem as well as enact reforms to protect children from the harmful effects of the violence.

Despite such attention to the problem of children's exposure to domestic violence, limited research has focused on children's relationships with their battered mothers. That gap was addressed in a recent study funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council which explored children's perspectives on their relationships with their mothers in the context of domestic violence.³ The study involved 59 children (36 girls, 21 boys) between the ages of 6 and 18, with an average age of 11. The children were recruited through domestic violence organizations (shelters, community organizations, and child protection agencies).

The research yielded four fascinating findings. First, the children affirmed that their relationships with their mothers were highly significant in their lives. Yet, the experience of living in the shadow of domestic violence put a severe strain on mother-child relationships. Children reported that their mothers were less psychologically available to look after them. They noted that their mothers were less patient and quick to anger. Although the children recognized that the perpetrators were the persons responsible for these difficulties in the children's relationships with their mothers, many of the children were critical of their mother's response to the violence. In particular, the children criticized their mothers for remaining so long with the batterer and expressed wishes that their mothers had left the relationships earlier.

Second, the children described positive and negative features of their communications with their mothers. Some children reported how comforting their mothers had been to them during the violence. Other children complained about the restraints on their communications with their mothers that were attributable to the actions of the perpetrators. That is, some children pointed out that the perpetrators imposed barriers to the children's communications with their mothers, such as refusing to allow the children to talk to their mothers or controlling the topics of conversation. This finding is not surprising since we know that children of battering men are exposed to unrelenting demonstrations of coercion and control in their family relationships.

Third, both the children and their mothers adopted strategies to protect each other from the perpetrator. Several children explained the ways in which they had supported their mothers throughout the violence and protected their mothers from the perpetrators. In fact, some children reported that they physically intervened in the violence despite the risk to their own safety. Other children disclosed how they comforted their mothers emotionally. Still other children physically cared for their mothers' injuries caused by the perpetrator. These research findings confirm that both the children and

³ Simon Lapierre et al., *Difficult But Close Relationships: Children's Perspectives on Relationships with their Mothers in the Context of Domestic Violence*, *Violence Against Women* 1 (Oct. 2017) doi: 10.1177/1077801217731541.

the mothers were an important source of strength to each other in the course of their mothers' victimization by intimate partners.

Finally, the researchers found that mother-child relationships significantly improved during the post-separation period. Even in the face of post-separation violence that some mothers experienced, nonetheless the children revealed that their relationships with their mothers improved markedly in the aftermath of the violence. The children noted, for example, that their mothers had a more positive attitude toward life in general, leading to fewer conflicts in the mother-child relationships. Several children noted that their mothers were more patient and psychologically available to them. Children highlighted other improvements in their communication with their mothers; for example, the children felt freer to talk with their mothers about both the occurrence of the domestic violence and its impact.

The researchers conclude that women's victimization and children's exposure are "inextricably linked" (p. 11). Children's sense of well-being depends on their mothers' experiences and well-being. Children view their relationships with their mothers as very meaningful and comforting. As a result, the researchers contend that policymakers should not view these battered mother-child relationships through the lens of the "deficit model" of prior research. Some prior studies reveal that adult victims of battering manifest physical and psychological symptoms that may lead to reduced effectiveness with child management.⁴

Unquestionably, the trauma engendered by domestic violence often leaves the victim with problems of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Those emotional states can have a profound impact on the victim's parenting. Nonetheless, this research from children's perspectives adds to the findings of other studies suggesting that any parenting deficits are time-limited and improve significantly once the batterer is removed. Thus, the cessation of violence and the role of the non-offending parent serve to mitigate the potentially harmful effects for children of their exposure to violence.⁵

These findings have important implications for social and legal professionals in terms of both policy and practice, particularly in the context of child custody. For example, the findings lend support to the belief that courts should prioritize the need for children's safety as well as that of their mothers in custody proceedings. Further, they support the idea that supervised visitation is essential for the protection of women and children despite the prevailing assumption that all children need frequent contact with both parents after separation.

⁴ Peter G. Jaffe & Claire V. Crooks, *Understanding Women's Experiences Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence 4*, Violence Against Women Online Resources. Available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.192.3729&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

⁵ *Id.* at 5.



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