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## CHILDREN'S VIOLENCE TO SINGLE MOTHERS

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### ABSTRACT

A survey of 151 mothers to determine characteristics of violence experienced from their children. The survey assessed the length of time they had been single parents, the age and sex of their children, the frequency and types of violence they experienced, and the influence of violent adult modeling upon the children's violence.

Findings indicate that 29% of the mothers had been assaulted by their children. The violent families contained more children than the nonviolent families, and the violent children's ages were more closely-spaced. Battered mothers also reported greater modeling of violence (the children seeing an adult striking their mother) than did mothers reporting no children's violence. Results indicate that children who witnessed modeled violence displayed more frequent and severe violence (more hits and kicks, rather than pushes or slaps) toward their mother. The implications of these findings for clinical practice are discussed.

While issues concerning domestic violence have gained great attention during the past few years, little research has been conducted on children's violence to their parents. This is surprising in light of the fact that this aspect of domestic violence was first identified and studied over 25 years ago (Sears, 1957). While a few researchers (Harbin and Maddin, 1979; Warren, 1978) have published the results of studies gathered from very small samples, and others have gathered massive

quantitative data on very large samples Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980; Cornell and Gelles, 1982), none have adequately addressed characteristics of children's violence in families headed by single mothers.

An estimated 15.4% of U.S. families are now headed by single females (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982). How frequently do children in these families strike their mothers? How severe are these assaults? Are these mothers ever injured or hospitalized? Was violent behavior modeled to these children? What is the age and sex of children most prone to assault their mothers? These questions occurred to me when I was working as a clinician in a residential adolescent treatment facility. Several teens placed in our unit had become violent at home before being placed in our care. This type of placement seemed to happen more frequently following divorces. It occurred to me that if a violent husband left the family, a large teenager might imitate that violence with the mother, in order to secure money and other desired resources. As divorces are commonplace, I began to wonder how frequently single mothers experience violence from their children. A search of the literature provided no answers regarding children's violence to single mothers. This study represents an initial effort to secure data about this growing population.

## METHOD

### Instrument

The instrument employed for this research took the form of a one-page questionnaire, mailed to single mothers. It was composed of nine questions, four of which contained two parts. Questions about actual violence were based upon items from the Conflict Tactics scales (Straus, 1979); greatly simplified to accommodate mail sampling of subjects, rather

than lengthy direct interviewing. While this simplification sacrifices many of the statistical inferences that can be drawn from the Conflict Tactics Scales, the data gained does form an adequate initial base for the study of violence in families headed by single mothers.

### Survey

1. How long have you been a single parent?  
\_\_\_\_\_years      \_\_\_\_\_months

2. How many children (ages 1-19) currently live with you?      \_\_\_\_\_children

3. Please list the sex and age of each child (Example: Male 17, Female 8).

4. Have any of your children ever pushed you?  
\_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

5. How many times during the past year?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Times

6. Have any of your children ever slapped you, or hit you with an open hand?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

How many times during the past year?

\_\_\_\_\_Times

7. Have you ever been injured by these behaviors?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

8. Have you ever been hospitalized, resulting from one of these incidents?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

9. Has another adult ever punched you, struck you, kicked you, etc., in front of your children?

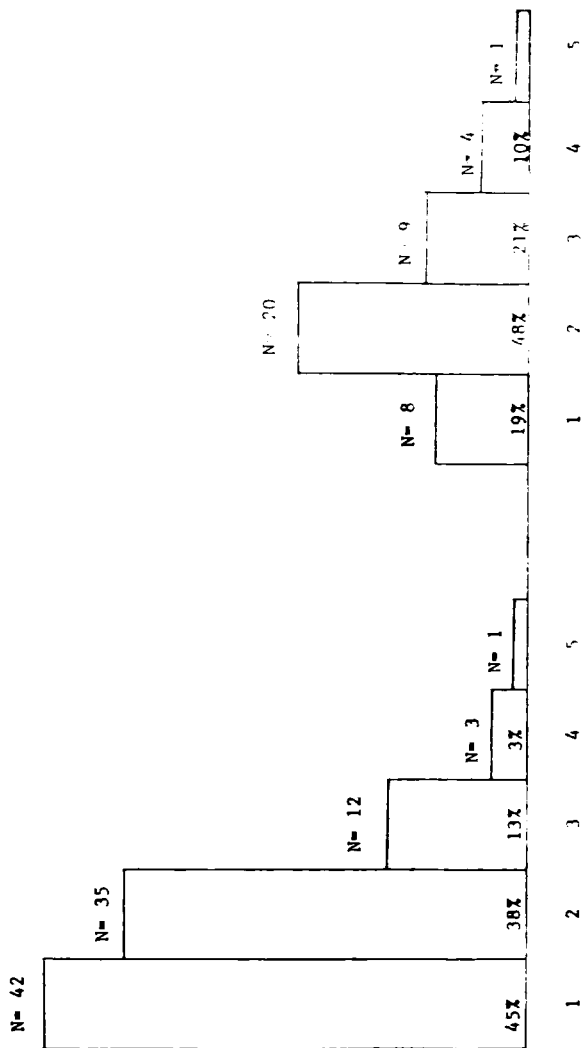
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

If yes, was this adult a male?

\_\_\_\_\_Yes      \_\_\_\_\_No

CHART 1

CHILDREN PER HOUSEHOLD



NONVIOLENT GROUP  $\bar{X}$  = 1.77

VIOLENT GROUP  $\bar{X}$  = 2.20

## Subjects

Surveys were mailed to 669 single mothers of whom 151 (22.6%) responded. The subjects were obtained from the membership list of an organization operating in Central Illinois. This organization, which asked to remain anonymous; is strictly of a fraternal/social nature. It has no connections whatever with domestic violence, nor do members receive any professional therapy or social services. Such an organization was chosen for this research in order to avoid the bias which would be introduced by sampling mental health service recipients. My familiarity with this organization leads me to believe that this sample is representative of the organizations membership. These women are predominantly caucasian, "middle class", and employed outside the home.

## RESULTS

Surveys returned were sorted into two groups to facilitate comparison. The "Violent Child Group" consisted of surveys reporting that the children had committed violent acts against their mothers. The "Nonviolent Child Group" mothers reported no violence from their children. Forty-four of the 151 respondents (29%) reported suffering violence at the hands of their children.

It was important to determine how long the mothers had been a single parent. Survey responses revealed the mean length of time single for the Violent Child Group was 60.5 months; the Nonviolent Child Group's mean was 65.7 months. The difference of 5.2 months was not found to be significant (T-test,  $p < 0.05$ ), nor was the variance between groups significantly

different ( $\chi^2 = 31.64, p < 0.05$ ). Thus, these two groups can be considered samples from the same population (i.e., single mothers) rather than two distinct populations (i.e., mothers recently divorced compared to mothers single for five years or more).

I also wished to know how many children were living with their mother. The Violent Group's mean was 2.29 children per family, while the Nonviolent Group's mean was 1.77 children per family. Chart 1 illustrates the differing frequency distributions of the Violent and Nonviolent Groups.

Thus, the Violent Child families reported a significantly greater number of children per family than did the Nonviolent families (T-test,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests a correlation between larger families and at least one child behaving violently toward the mother, which may reflect the greater stress present in households with more children (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980, 174-181). These stresses could take the form of increased financial pressures, greater crowding, or children's competition for their mother's attention.

The age and sex of each child was next determined. Among the Violent children ( $N = 96$ ), the males (44%) averaged 14.4 years; females (56%) averaged 14.9 years. The family mean for children's age was 14.6 years. Among the Nonviolent Children ( $N = 165$ ), the males (51%) averaged 13.7 years, while the females (49%) averaged 15.4 years. The family mean for children in this group also averaged 14.6 years. While no significant differences between the Violent and Nonviolent groups emerged, the males within the Nonviolent Group were significantly younger than the females at the 0.05 level of significance. This suggests a correlation between closely-spaced children's ages and violent acting-out. Again, children born in relatively rapid succession

are thought to increase stress within the family (Elmer, 1967; 75-78). This is attributed to the relatively brief time family members have to adjust to the new child before another is born.

Questions #4 through #8, which asked mothers about the violence experienced from their children during the past year, are presented in the following table:

In the last year were you	mothers responding yes %	total # (N)	total # of acts past year	average acts per family in past year
(#4) pushed?	79.5	(35)	110	3.14
(#5) slapped or hit with an open hand	59	(26)	77	2.96
(#6) punched, kicked, or object thrown at your	66	(29)	83	2.86
(#7) injured during these attacks	41	(18)	--	--
(#8) hospitalized resulting from these attacks	9	(4)	--	--

Question #9 attempted to assess the role of adult modeling of violence within the household. Fifty-five percent (24) of the Violent Child mothers responded "yes" to this question, compared to 32% (34) of the Nonviolent Child mothers. A contingency table employing the Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 6.83$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) revealed that the factors of adult



modeled violence and children's violence were dependent. This strongly suggests that an adult striking the mother in the children's presence does significantly increase the probability that a child will also strike mother. This conclusion is supported by the work of Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980, p.122). Of the mothers reporting violence from another adult, 96% (23 of 24) indicated this adult was male.

To determine if modeling had any effect upon the severity (punches and kicks were judged to be more severely violent than pushes or slaps) or the frequency of the children's violence, mothers within the Violent Child Group were divided into two groups. Mothers abused by another adult in the presence of their children were assigned to the "Modeled Violence" group, mothers not abused within their children's presence were assigned to the "Violence Not Modeled" group. A chart was then constructed to compare the effect of adult modeling upon the severity and frequency of children's violence to their mothers.

TYPE OF CHILDREN'S VIOLENCE BY MODELED  
VIOLENCE

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		Type of violence		
		pushed	slapped	hit or kicked or object thrown
Modeled Violence (N=24)	N families = 20 (83%)	N=16 (67%)	N=19 (79%)	
	Violent Acts = 78	46	49	
<hr/>				
Violence not Modeled (N=20)	N Families = 15 (75%)	N=10 (50%)	N=10 (50%)	
	Violent Acts = 32	31	34	

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One notes that the Modeled Violence mothers report 78% more total acts of violence (173 versus 97) than do mothers in families where violence was not modeled. This suggests that adult modeling of violence toward the mother tends to increase both the frequency and the severity of violence which children inflict upon their mother.

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey suggest several conclusions about children's violence to sin-

gle mothers. A relatively large minority (29%) of the mothers surveyed reported experiencing violence from their children. This is in contrast to previous findings by Sears (1957) and Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980), both of whom studied only intact families (both mother and father present). The Sears study found 17% of the parents reporting violence from their children. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz found 18% of the parents in their study reporting similar violence from their children.

One explanation for the more frequent violence reported in this study relates to possible effects of family stress. Households headed by single mothers generally face greater economic and social pressures than do households with both parents present. One potential response available to children in highly stressful circumstances is to act out violently.

Another explanation may be the inhibiting force exerted by an adult male in the family. In many instances, a male would not tolerate children repeatedly being violent with their mother, even if the adult male is himself violent with her. With this inhibiting force absent, many children feel freer to be violent with their mother, because of the diminished threat of retaliation.

Another finding was that larger families and families with closely-spaced children appear to have a greater likelihood of experiencing violence from their children. This may also be related to the greater financial, social, and emotional pressures experienced within these families. These findings are supported by previous work pertaining to family size (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980) and closely-spaced children's ages (Elmer, 1967).

Casual observers might downplay the significance of children's violence, contending that little actual damage is done. This survey suggests children's violence is a serious problem; an astounding 41% of the mothers reporting violence also reported being injured during a child's assault. When this figure is compared to the total survey, one finds that 12% of the mothers sampled were injured through their children's violence (18 of 151). Nine percent of the mothers of violent children reported receiving injuries serious enough to merit hospitalization.

Finally, modeling of violence by an adult to the mother appears to strongly influence the children's violent tendencies. Mothers who had been physically abused in their children's presence reported both more frequent and more severe acts of violence from these children. This finding is consistent with earlier studies supporting the transmission of family violence across generations (Carroll, 1980; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980; Steinmetz, 1977).

### CONCLUSION

Single mothers head an increasingly substantial number of families within this country. When a child becomes physically abusive toward his or her mother, each member of that family suffers the effects of that violence. Their plight merits our attention. As many clinicians working in the field of domestic violence believe that violent families beget the next generation of violent families, services directed to these families would appear to be both a logical and necessary intervention. Clinicians should ask single mothers if violence from their children is a problem for them. Since almost one-third of this study did report problems with children's violence, this appears to be a relatively common pheno-

menon.

If a female client bears bruises, cuts, etc., one might gently inquire how these happened. In my practice, I have often received answers such as "My little girl hit me with the car door, after I spanked her". Many mothers already realize these are deliberate acts, not "accidents". Knowing that some children do injure their mothers can help the clinician explore these injuries as therapeutic issues. Realize that many mothers will attempt to minimize the importance of these attacks. This minimizing is to be expected, since mothers often feel responsible for their children's behavior, and feel somehow guilty about these attacks (Finkelhor, et. al., 1983). These women may fear the possibility of having their children taken from them, yet lack alternatives for dealing with the violence. Many mothers will simply endure the violence, hoping "it is just a phase" which will be "outgrown". Current knowledge of family violence suggests that these attacks will occur with increasing frequency and severity over time, in a spiral known as "the cycle of violence" (Walker, 1979).

Clinicians can do much to alleviate problems within these families, utilizing existing services. Individual counseling with the mother and child (Bern, 1982), family therapy (Wells, 1981), an securing support services (Bern, 1982) such as a homemaker, day care, or babysitting services can effectively reduce stress within these families. I feel counseling the violent child offers great promise. My experience in working with violent men leads me to believe that similar groups and educational materials could easily be adapted for use with violent children. As much of my work centers around developing emotional awareness, building a vocabulary for accurately expressing one's feelings, and altering beliefs about sex roles, I would see efforts

directed to children's violence as ultimately preventing many problems which will otherwise be experienced during adolescence or adulthood. Our attention to these violent children today may prove effective in eliminating violent households in future generations.

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