Abstract

A sample of 115 children was shown video vignettes portraying a violent conflict between children. The participants were asked to describe the feelings of the victim and perpetrator(s). Gender and the witnessing of intimate partner violence proved significant factors in the kinds and the intensity of emotions attributed.

Introduction

An estimated 15 million children have witnessed domestic violence in the US alone (McDonald, Jouriles, & Mikler, 2006). These children are at increased risk for emotional disturbances (Adams, 2006), mental illness (Buca, Steich, Bishodile, & Ears, 2001), and committing and experiencing intimate partner violence (Koenig, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Tenke, 2003). However, many individuals who have been exposed to violence in the home do not become victims or perpetrators of partner violence.

Emotions play an important role in decision making (Mellers, B. A., & McGraw, A. P. 2001). Attribution to victims and perpetrators is an essential part of this decision making process. In families where interparental violence is observed by children, the emotional responses of the children to the violence may be a significant factor in the children's future decisions and behaviors.

This study investigated whether male and female witnesses of interpersonal violence differ from male and female nonwitnesses in the emotions they associate with victimization and the perpetration of violence or other aggression.

Methods

Participants

Witness sample

Sixty-two children (27 males, 35 females) between the ages of 6 and 11 were recruited from a small educational cooperative organized by parents and in a community with a reported high incidence of domestic violence.

The presence of domestic violence was confirmed by the director of each of the institutions' policies of confidentiality. No other personal information was available due to the participating organizations' policies of confidentiality.

Non-Witnesses

In families where interparental violence is observed by children, the emotional components of these experiences become associated with both the contexts of the violence and the victims and perpetrators of the violence. Thus, it is not surprising that witness and nonwitness children differ in their perceptions of and responses to the violence of the perpetrators and victims in conflict situations presented in videos. Some possible reasons for the differences include:

- Witness children may perceive victims as more innocent that do nonwitness children.
- Witness children may have learned to deny their anger toward perpetrators. Witness children may be less likely to express violent feelings when they take the part of the victim because they have observed a victim's violence response provokes further abuse by the perpetrator.
- Witness children may interpret the aggression of the perpetrator as being out of proportion to any provocation on the part of the victim.

Procedure

Children watched videos of victims and perpetrators engaging in the following four types of conflict: jealousy, exclusion, aggression, and limited resources.

Results

The children responded differently on the violence and peace scale to the two questions depending on the type of conflict in the videos shown (Figure 1) as indicated by a significant gender by question interaction (F(3, 602) = 3.57, p = 0.014).

For the attribution to victim question, responses to the aggression conflict were significantly less peaceful than responses to exclusion or limited resources conflicts.

For the attribution to perpetrator question, responses did not differ significantly.

Discussion

In families where interparental violence is observed by children, the emotional components of these experiences become associated with both the contexts of the violence and the victims and perpetrators of the violence. Thus, it is not surprising that witness and nonwitness children differ in their perceptions of and responses to the violence of the perpetrators and victims in conflict situations presented in videos. Some possible reasons for the differences include:

- Witness children may perceive victims as more innocent than do nonwitness children.
- Witness children may have learned to deny their anger toward perpetrators. Witness children may be less likely to express violent feelings when they take the part of the victim because they have observed a victim's violence response provokes further abuse by the perpetrator.
- Witness children may interpret the aggression of the perpetrator as being out of proportion to any provocation on the part of the victim.

Figure 1: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by gender and question

Males and females responded differently on average to the two questions (Figure 1) as indicated by a significant gender by question interaction (F(1, 602) = 13.95, p = 0.001).

Females attributed a greater degree of peaceful emotion to victims than did males. Also, females attributed a significantly greater degree of violent emotion to perpetrators than did males.

Figure 2: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by gender and question

Witnesses attributed a significantly greater degree of peaceful emotion to victims and a significantly greater degree of violent emotion to perpetrators than did non-witnesses.

Age was significant (F(1, 1231) = 16.78, p < 0.0001), indicating that there is a relationship between age (measured in months) and the degree of violent or peaceful responses to the questions.

For every one month increase in age, rating decreased on average by .015 points.

There were no significant interactions between age and other variables.

Figure 3: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by gender and question

Witnesses and non-witnesses responded differently on average to the two questions (Figure 2) as indicated by a significant difference by question interaction (F(1, 602) = 7.56, p < 0.01).

Witnesses attributed a significantly greater degree of peaceful emotion to victims and a significantly greater degree of violent emotion to perpetrators than did non-witnesses.

Figure 4: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by video and question

For the attribution to victim question, witnesses groups were rated significantly higher than the non-witness groups (p = .0018). Male and female groups were not significantly different, and the female and male non-witness groups were not significantly different.

For the attribution to perpetrator question, female and male witness groups were not significantly different, and the female non-witnesses and male witnesses were not significantly different. All other groups' ratings were significantly different from one another (p < .01).

Figure 5: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by conflict and question

Age was significant (F(3, 1231) = 14.95, p = 0.0001). A significant gender by conflict interaction (F(3, 602) = 3.37, p = 0.014) was found. Female non-witnesses attributed to perpetrators than did males.

No other personal information was available due to the participating organizations' policies of confidentiality.

References


The Effect of Witnessing Domestic Violence on Children’s Attributions of Emotion

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