



# The Effect of Witnessing Domestic Violence on Children's Attributions of Emotion



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## 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, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). These children are at increased risk for emotional disturbances (Adams, 2006), mental illness (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001), and committing and experiencing intimate partner violence (Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 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 & McGraw, 2001; Naqvi, Shiv, & Bechara, 2006) and behavior. Therefore, the study of the emotions that witness children associate with violence is necessary to better understand the increased risks they face and the implications these risks have for the child witnesses' future decisions and behaviors.

This study investigated whether male and female witnesses of interparental 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 Recruited from 1) a domestic violence shelter, 2) transitional housing, and 3) an after-school program in a community with a reported high incidence of domestic violence  
The presence of domestic violence was confirmed by the director of each program

#### Comparison group

Fifty-three children (20 males, 33 females) between the ages of 6 and 11 Recruited from a small educational cooperative organized by parents Teachers and parents, who interacted with one another frequently and in families' homes, reported no evidence of domestic violence among participating families

All children were from the same two-county area  
Ethnicity: 80 percent Caucasian, 20 percent Hispanic, Black, or Asian  
Various religious affiliations  
No other personal information was available due to the participating institutions' policies of confidentiality

### Procedure

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

Responses to the following two questions were analyzed: 1) "Pretend you are the person in the numbered shirt [i.e., the victim]. How do you feel?" 2) "Why do you think the other children [i.e., the perpetrators] acted the way they did?"

Verbal and behavioral responses were coded using the Structure of Violence and Peace Scale (SVAPS; Ballif-Spanvill & Clayton, 2002), with ratings ranging from -6 (intensely violent and destructive) to +6 (altruistic, based on reverence for self and others)

## Results

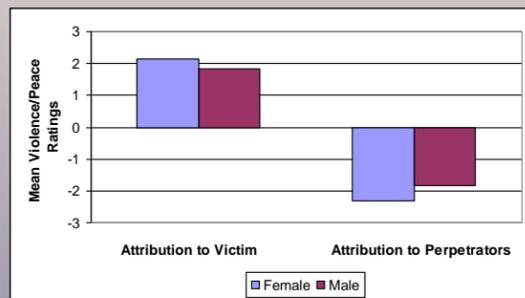


Figure 1: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by gender and question

Males and females responded differently on average to the two questions (Figure 1) as indicated by a significant gender by question interaction ( $F(1, 602) = 14.95, p = 0.0001$ )

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

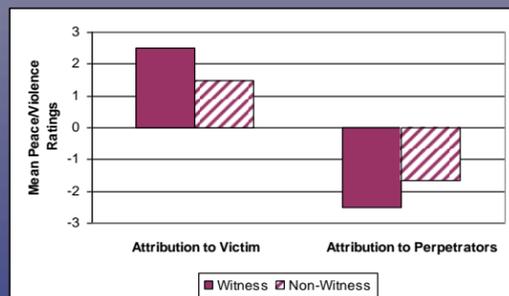


Figure 2: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by exposure and question

Witnesses and non-witnesses responded differently on average to the two questions (Figure 2) as indicated by a significant exposure by question interaction ( $F(1, 602) = 73.68, p < 0.0001$ )

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

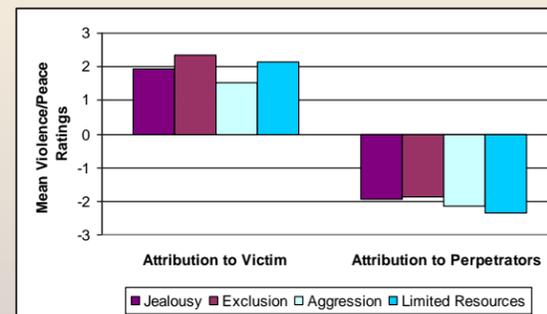


Figure 3: Mean violent and peaceful ratings by video and question

The children responded differently on the violence and peace scale to the two questions depending on the type of conflict in the video shown (Figure 3) as indicated by a significant question by conflict 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 perpetrators question, responses did not differ significantly

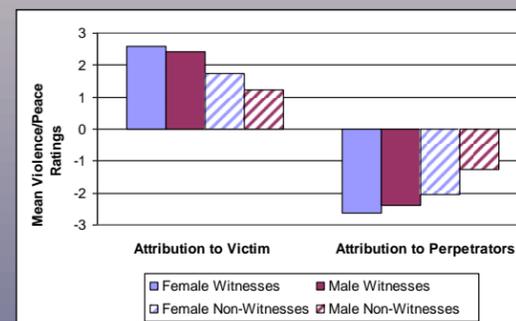


Figure 4: Mean violent and peaceful ratings for conflict questions by gender and exposure

For the attribution to victim question, witness groups were rated significantly higher than the non-witness groups ( $p \leq .0038$ ). 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 ( $p \leq .01$ )

Age was significant ( $F(1, 123) = 18.78, p < 0.0001$ ), 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

## 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 differentially attribute peaceful and violent emotions to victims and perpetrators 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 that 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

## References

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