



Does childhood exposure to domestic abuse lead to antisocial behavior in adolescence?

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Abstract

Childhood exposure to domestic abuse, whether through direct victimization or observation, has profound and lasting consequences on adolescent development. In the United States alone, an estimated 15.5 million children are exposed to domestic abuse annually. This paper examines the relationship between childhood maltreatment and later antisocial or criminal behavior, drawing on social learning theory and attachment theory as explanatory frameworks. Findings from longitudinal and cross-national studies consistently show that abused or abuse-exposed youth demonstrate elevated risks of delinquency, aggression, substance use, and criminal justice involvement. Furthermore, these forms of maltreatment often disrupt secure attachments and normalize violence as an interpersonal strategy, perpetuating cycles of abuse across generations. The review highlights the importance of early detection and intervention through school-based programs, trauma-informed counseling, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening family stability.

Does childhood exposure to domestic abuse lead to criminal/antisocial behavior in adolescence?

Domestic abuse, defined as physical, psychological, and emotional violence or neglect, affects millions of children globally. In the United States alone, an estimated 15.5 million children are exposed to domestic abuse each year (Moylan et al., 2010). Domestic abuse exists in various forms: physical violence and neglect such as hitting, choking, or providing insufficient food, shelter, healthcare, and clothing; emotional maltreatment such as manipulation, threats, or humiliation; and sexual abuse which involves unwanted sexual contact. Early exposure, even the simple act of viewing, domestic abuse, has profound implications on adolescents' behavior (Zinzow et al., 2008).

Two psychological theories offer structures for understanding how such exposure can lead to later behavioral issues: social learning theory and attachment theory. Social learning theory posits that children model behaviors observed in their environments; thus, repeated exposure to violent conflict may normalize aggression as an acceptable response to interpersonal challenges (Bandura, 1977). Moreover, attachment theory, developed by psychiatrist John Bowlby and psychologist Mary Ainsworth, suggests that the instability and fear caused by domestic violence can disrupt secure bonds with parents, leading to poor emotional regulation and increased vulnerability to behavioral issues (Sousa et al., 2011). Antisocial and externalizing behavior—including delinquency, aggression, and conduct activities—often emerges during adolescence and carries substantial personal and societal costs, such as increased risk of incarceration, unemployment, and continued cycles of violence (Trentacosta et al., 2009).

This frames the question of whether early exposure to domestic abuse is a significant risk factor for antisocial or criminal behavior in adolescence and early adulthood. Answering this question is critical, as it not only advances our understanding of child development under adversity, providing further means for future research on child development, but also aids the formation of early intervention efforts, such as school mental health programs or public policies which eliminate negative trajectories that cause lifelong behavioral issues.

Physical Abuse

Physical domestic abuse has been identified as one of the most pervasive forms of childhood trauma globally. According to the World Health Organization, one in four children worldwide are subjected to some form of physical abuse prior to adulthood, with rates higher in disadvantaged households (World Health Organization, 2024)

The developmental impacts of physical abuse are profound: children are more likely to develop externalizing behaviors—such as aggression, impulsivity, rule breaking—and internalizing behaviors, including anxiety, post traumatic stress, depression. Increased externalizing behaviors are strongly linked to higher chances of delinquency (Lansford et al., 2007) and internalizing behaviors may lead to coping strategies like substance abuse and running away from home (Bloom et al., 2003).

Multiple existing studies provide support to the connection between adolescent physical domestic abuse and future incarceration or increase of antisocial behaviors. One of the most cited longitudinal studies found—through court cases entailing childhood physical abuse—that individuals with histories of physical abuse were 38% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime compared to their non-abused peers (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Additionally, a cohort study tracking 574 children from age five to 21 across six countries discovered that physically

abused youth were significantly more likely to be arrested for violent, nonviolent, and status offenses (Lansford et al., 2007). These individuals also faced educational and socioeconomic disadvantages such as lower graduation rates, job instability, and teen pregnancy, compounding their risks of incarceration. Moreover, findings from retrospective Adverse Childhood Experiences studies depict that individuals with histories of physical abuse are 59% more likely to be arrested as juveniles, 28% more likely to face adult arrests compared to their non abused peers, and 30% more likely to commit violent crimes (Dube et al., 2001).

Sexual Abuse

Childhood sexual abuse refers to any form of sexual involvement or exposure imposed on a child by an older individual, typically in the context of a power imbalance. It encompasses a wide range of behaviors that violate personal boundaries and developmental norms. This form of abuse differs from other domestic abuse categories as it concerns complex emotional and cognitive consequences, often occurring in relationships where the child is expected to feel safe.

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and later criminal behavior, though the overall volume remains limited compared to studies on physical abuse. Several studies provide important insights on how early sexual trauma may influence developmental trajectories. A large scale cohort study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* found no evidence to support the pre-existing idea that victims of childhood sexual abuse become sexual offenders in the future (Widom & Massey, 2015). In a separate *JAMA Pediatrics* study, researchers found that maltreated children faced significantly higher risks of engaging in violent delinquency later in life, even when controlling for other variables like poverty and family instability (Gilbert et al., 2009). These findings suggest that while childhood

sexual abuse does not directly lead to sexual offending, it may contribute to broader behavioral problems associated with antisocial outcomes. While emotional and psychological effects of sexual abuse such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD are well documented, increasing attention is being paid to the behavioral dimensions of sexual abuse survivors, especially its association with later criminal behavior and delinquency.

A longitudinal analysis from the LONGSCAN project revealed that individuals with childhood sexual abuse histories were approximately 1.7 times more likely to engage in delinquent or violent behavior compared to their non-abused peers, with stronger effects observed in males (Berzenski et al., 2014). Prevalence data further contextualizes the issue: by age 17, approximately 26.6% of girls and 5.1% of boys report having experienced sexual abuse or assault (Finkelhor et al., 2014). Gender remains a consistent moderator, with male victims more likely to externalize trauma through aggression and delinquency, while female victims tend to internalize distress as anxiety, depression, or self harm (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Altogether, these studies suggest that while childhood sexual abuse does not guarantee a trajectory toward criminal behavior, it significantly elevates the risk, highlighting the importance of early intervention efforts.

Emotional Neglect & Abuse

Emotional neglect and abuse, though less visible than physical maltreatment, can be equally damaging to a child's developmental trajectory. Emotional abuse is characterized by constant criticism, rejection, or humiliation, and emotional neglect is defined by the absence of affection and responsiveness. These forms of emotional maltreatment undermine a child's ability to form secure attachments, regulate emotions, and develop healthy coping strategies.

Emotional neglect and abuse's connection to further delinquency remains under researched despite evidence that its impacts on behavior and mental health can be just as severe.

Recent studies have begun to shed light on how these less visible forms of maltreatment can lead to externalizing behaviors such as aggression, defiance, and rule breaking, which increase the risk of delinquency. A study found that emotional abuse significantly predicted both violent and delinquent behaviors in adolescence, emphasizing how emotional maltreatment contributes to behavioral acting out (Kim et al., 2009). Similarly, a study demonstrated that emotional neglect plays a key role in nonviolent crime and status offenses, such as underage drinking, running away from home, and truancy (Aebi et al. 2014). Individuals who experienced emotional abuse or neglect during childhood were more likely to engage in risky and criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood, especially in the absence of an emotionally supportive caregiver (Mullen et al. 1996).

Taken together, these studies underscore the severe and often overlooked role of emotional maltreatment in shaping antisocial outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for early detection of behavioral issues.

Viewing Domestic Violence

A critical perspective of childhood exposure to domestic abuse is the experience of viewing domestic violence, even when the child is not the direct victim of the abuse. According to social learning theory, the simple act of viewing violence will form a premise for negative behavior repertoire; children may begin to internalize such behaviors as appropriate social responses (Bandura, 1977). As a result, violence and manipulation may become normalized

and carelessly utilized as functional means of communication in peer, academic, and romantic contexts.

In homes where intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs, this concern is especially enhanced: children internalize the emotional environment of fear, instability, and power imbalance. Empirical research underscores these risks: individuals exposed to IPV during childhood were found to display significantly more violent behaviors in adolescence and were three times more likely to engage in violent delinquency by the age of 18 (Herrenkohl et al., 2008). Similarly, adolescents who had witnessed IPV exhibited significantly higher levels of externalizing behaviors such as substance abuse, school suspension, and weapon usage or carrying (Moylan et al., 2010). Beyond individual outcomes, the normalization of violence within the home perpetuates intergenerational cycles, as children who grow up observing IPV are at elevated risk of either perpetrating or experiencing violence in their own adult relationships.

Taken together, these findings reveal that observational exposure alone can have powerful behavioral consequences on adolescence, reinforcing the importance of limiting childhood exposure to physical and emotional abuse. Recognizing and mitigating the effects of observational exposure is crucial to breaking cycles of aggression and fostering healthier developmental trajectories.

Despite substantial literature linking childhood exposure to domestic abuse with later antisocial and criminal outcomes, important gaps remain. First, causal pathways are not always clear: many studies are observational and cannot fully rule out confounding factors—like poverty, parental mental illness, etc—that co-occur with maltreatment. Second, the mechanisms that translate different types of maltreatment into specific antisocial outcomes are incompletely specified; for example, how much of the risk is mediated by disrupted attachment, by learned

aggressive models, by neurobiological stress responses, or by school and peer influences.

Third, there is limited long-term comparative evidence about which interventions most effectively prevent antisocial outcomes among abused children across different settings and demographic groups. Many intervention studies are short to medium term, focus on symptom reduction rather than criminal outcomes, or are conducted by treatment developers with limited replication in community settings. Fourth, moderation by gender, culture, and developmental timing needs more precise mapping: while some evidence shows boys externalize more and girls internalize more, how these patterns interact with intervention timing and content is not fully known. Finally, implementation and scalability questions remain limited: which evidence-based programs retain effectiveness when scaled up, adapted for low-resource settings, or delivered via telehealth? Addressing these gaps will require more randomized trials where ethical and feasible, larger multisite longitudinal studies with careful measurement of confounders and mediators, and pragmatic implementation research that tracks both effectiveness and fidelity.

At the policy level, expanding funding for proven programs and workforce training is essential to maintain quality and fidelity. Strengthening cross-sector referral systems between pediatric, school, child welfare, and mental-health services ensures families receive timely support. Additionally, developing linked data systems across child welfare, education, and juvenile justice sectors can improve tracking of outcomes and intervention opportunities. Ultimately, implementation research should continue to test the scalability, cultural adaptability, and cost-effectiveness of these interventions to ensure equitable access and sustainable impact.

Conclusion

Childhood exposure to domestic abuse has been shown to exert profound effects on adolescent development, particularly by increasing the risk of antisocial and criminal behavior. Across physical, sexual, and emotional forms of maltreatment, as well as the experience of witnessing violence, research consistently demonstrates elevated risks of delinquency, aggression, and conduct problems. These findings emphasize how early environments shape later behavior: children internalize the violence they see and suffer, often carrying maladaptive coping strategies into adolescence and adulthood.

This underscores the urgency of prevention and intervention strategies: school-based programs, trauma-informed counseling, and policies aimed at strengthening family stability and mental health resources are all possibilities of conservation methods. Ultimately, addressing childhood exposure to domestic abuse is not only a matter of protecting children in the present but also of safeguarding communities in the future. By breaking the link between early trauma and later antisocial behavior, society can reduce criminal justice involvement, foster healthier relationships, and create opportunities for adolescents to thrive.



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