

2018

## The Relationship between Childhood Abuse and Aggressive Behavior in Adulthood

Andrew Verrill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Verrill, Andrew (2018) "The Relationship between Childhood Abuse and Aggressive Behavior in Adulthood," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 10 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur/vol10/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer Reviewed Journals at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research* by an authorized editor of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact [jspears@southern.edu](mailto:jspears@southern.edu).

The Relationship between Childhood Abuse and Aggressive Behavior in Adulthood

Andrew Verrill

Southern Adventist University

### Abstract

This literature review examines current knowledge based on the relationship of childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood. A collection of fairly large samples of adults from colleges, prisons, and the general population were assessed with variations in gender and ethnicities. The major methodologies used in the gathered studies were questionnaires and interviews. Groups of psychologists and psychiatrists interviewed inmates at prisons and computerized or mailed surveys were conducted at colleges or in the general population. Many types of childhood maltreatments and forms of aggression in adulthood were tested to conclude that childhood abuse is related to aggression in adulthood, but physical abuse was the type most associated with overall aggression. Emotional abuse in childhood related the most to intimate partner violence in men and physical abuse was the most related to relationship violence in women, but emotional, sexual, and physical abuse were all associated with violence in dating relationships. The research findings on childhood abuse and adult aggression can help individuals establish methods to inhibit aggressive behaviors and protect abused children, however more research on childhood maltreatment and aggression in female inmates and a variety of ethnic groups is required.

*Keywords:* childhood abuse, aggressive behavior, childhood maltreatment, adult aggression, childhood trauma

### Childhood Abuse and Aggressive Behavior in Adulthood

Parental abusive patterns have detrimental psychological effects on children even in adulthood. Abusers in households can have extreme aggressive tendencies. The aggressive behaviors are displayed through different types of abuse. Some major forms of abuse are emotional abuse, physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Allen, 2017; Sansone, Leung, & Wiederman, 2012). Children witness and experience the abusive behaviors of their guardians and their life can be greatly impacted all the way through adulthood (Sansone et al., 2012). There has been considerable research that has studied the relationship between childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood.

Aggression may have major consequences on attitude and behavior because of the influences of parental abuse on children. Discovering relationships to aggression is vital in understanding preventative measures of aggression. Research on how abuse in childhood relates to aggressive behaviors in adulthood is necessary. The purpose of this review of the literature is to examine the relationship between childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood. Through the examination of many correlational studies, there seemed to be a positive correlation between childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood. The majority of the studies collected samples from colleges and prisons. The relationships between many different forms of abuse towards children and aggressive tendencies in intimate partner relationships and overall behavior were explored.

This literature review summarizes the current empirical knowledge base of the general relationship between the different forms of abuse in childhood and adult aggression. The relationship of the variables will be observed by studies conducted at colleges, prisons, and in the general population. Differences between gender and ethnicity in regards to the variables are explored. Studies that produced the findings were collected from EBSCOhost, ResearchGate,

and NCBI databases. The key terms used to find the articles were *childhood abuse*, *aggressive behavior*, *childhood maltreatment*, *adult aggression*, and *childhood trauma*. All sources pertained to the concepts of abuse and aggression.

### **Abuse and Aggression**

Many studies focus on the relationship between the overall spectrum of childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood. Childhood maltreatment encompasses many forms of abuse. Sansone et al. (2012) describes that witnessing violence, physical neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse are the five types of childhood maltreatment. Afifi, Mota, Sareen, and MacMillan (2017) discovered, through studying the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, that maltreatment in childhood was statistically related to intimate partner violence in adulthood, which is a form of aggression. Some limitations to the study could be the fact that the computerized survey used casual language for terms and self-reporting which could result in bias or misleading information (Afifi et al., 2017).

These limitations should be considered in assessing the information, but does not discredit the association between abuse and violence in romantic relationships. Even right before adulthood the results of aggression from abusive situations can be studied. Welfare and Hollin (2015) interviewed adolescent male inmates in which 34.6% of the individuals who were incarcerated for violent crimes and 37.5% serving time for murder were abused as children. The statistics expressed by Welfare and Hollin (2015) demonstrate a direct relationship between those who were abused in childhood and committing aggressive and violent crimes. There can be forms of aggressive tendencies from abusive situations that do not lead to prison. Temcheff et al. (2008) describes a cycle that their questionnaire research concluded in which parents act violently towards their children and then the children report aggressive behaviors in adulthood.

An aggressive gene is also found in human DNA. Gorodetsky et al. (2014) demonstrates that MAOA is the aggressive gene. Even with interview testing for the effects of the gene, childhood maltreatment was still established as associated with aggressive behavior in adulthood (Gorodetsky et al., 2014). Although there are many studies that agree there is a correlation between the different types of abuse and aggression, Sansone et al. (2012) concluded through the use of a 6-page survey that many of the forms of abuse were not related to aggression.

### **Physical Neglect, Emotional Abuse, and Aggression**

Emotional abuse is one of the factors that was related to aggression, according to Sansone et al. (2012). There were others studies that have explored emotional abuse and adult aggression. Cuomo, Sarchiapone, Giannantonio, Mancini, and Roy (2008) observed that adult aggression was associated with substance abuse through an interview processes lead by a group of psychologists and psychiatrists. Emotional abuse and physical neglect was also related to substance abuse of prisoners (Cuomo et al., 2008). Substance abuse is associated with both physical neglect and aggression. According to an interview of inmates conducted by psychologists and psychiatrists, Physical neglect was found to be related to aggression in adulthood (Carli et al., 2014). Certain studies agreed that neglect was related to aggression, but not with all forms of aggression. Allen (2017) revealed through a questionnaire that neglect was associated with aggressive attitude and physical aggression only. Chen, Coccaro, Lee, and Jacobson (2012) examined twins from Pennsylvania using a questionnaire and discovered that childhood emotional and physical neglect trauma were related to aggression in adulthood. The relationship between emotional abuse in childhood and aggression in adulthood should be examined. Berzenski and Yates (2010) demonstrate, from their computerized questionnaire, that emotional abuse was associated with the intimate partner violence form of aggression.

**Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Aggression**

Physical and sexual abuse in childhood were related to intimate partner violence, but were not rated as highly as emotional abuse (Berzenski and Yates, 2010). Even though the relationship was not as high in Berzesnki and Yates' (2010) study, other studies found associations between childhood physical abuse and aggression. Wolf and Shi (2012) assessed the results from a computerized survey that they conducted and found that physical child abuse was related to aggression in adulthood. Children who were physically abused could also often have problems in romantic relationships in adulthood. Taillieu and Brownridge (2015) analyzed the results of an internet survey that participants completed and they observed that physical abuse in childhood was associated with intimate partner violence in adulthood. Overall adult aggression should also be compared with childhood physical abuse. Allen (2017) recognized that physical abuse in childhood was associated with overall aggression, with the exclusion of verbal aggression. Unlike Berzenski and Yates' (2010) findings that there is a minor relationship between sexual abuse and aggression, there was no association between childhood sexual abuse and adult aggression observed by Wolf and Shi (2012). Sexual abuse in childhood was left out of some studies. Chen et al. (2012) did not include childhood sexual abuse in their research, so no relationships could be examined between sexual abuse in childhood and aggression in adulthood.

**Psychological Abuse and Aggression in Adulthood**

Just like sexual abuse being left out of studies, psychological abuse in childhood was not included in many studies as well. Allen (2017) explains that childhood psychological abuse is not commonly tested in research because it is hard to define and is overshadowed by physical abuse and neglect. The concept cannot be easily separated. Even though psychological abuse cannot be easily defined, Allen (2017) examines the relationship between childhood

psychological abuse and adult aggression. The childhood trauma of psychological abuse was related to overall aggression in adulthood, with no exclusion of any tested variables associated with aggression (Allen, 2017). There is a need for more psychological abuse studies because of the lack of testing with the variables.

### **Childhood Abuse and Psychological Aggression**

The subject of psychological abuse is important for research, just like the psychological aspect of aggression in research is needed. Mbilinyi et al. (2012) used questionnaires to determine that physical abuse and sexual violations in childhood were positively and significantly correlated to psychological aggression in intimate partner relationships. Psychological aggression in parent-child relationships have also been studied. Taillieu and Brownridge (2015) explain that psychological aggression, including verbal aggression, of parents is related to many other forms of abuse towards their children. Mbilinyi and his co-researchers (2012) focused on the relationship between physical and sexual abuse with psychological aggression and found them to be associated with each other, but they did not mention any possible connection with emotional abuse. No significant correlation was discovered between emotional abuse and psychological aggression in an online survey lead by Riggs and Kaminski (2010). There tends to be more psychological aggression with those who were physically and sexually abused, than with those who were emotionally abused.

### **Collegiate Participants and Intimate Partner Violence**

Riggs and Kaminski (2010) conducted surveys at the University of North Texas. Five studies using college participants were gathered for this literature review. Intimate partner relationships is a variable that many researchers observe with childhood abuse and aggression. Milletich, Kelley, Doane, and Pearson (2010) tested emotional abuse and physical aggression in

intimate partner relationships of undergraduate students with an online survey. Berzenski and Yates (2010), Riggs and Kaminski (2010), and Taillieu and Brownridge (2015) all observed collegiate participants testing for aggression in dating relationships. These researchers found that childhood maltreatment was related to aggression with dating relationships. Allen's (2017) collegiate research did not focus on intimate partner relationships, but examined overall aggression.

### **Prisoners and Aggressive Behavior**

Another setting important to research is prisons. Five prison studies were collected for this literature review (Carli et al., 2014; Cuomo et al., 2008; Gorodetsky et al., 2014; Welfare & Hollin, 2015; Wolf & Shi, 2012). Through many self-reports and interviews statistical comparisons regarding the relationship of adult aggression and childhood abuse can be acquired. Substance abuse was a major variable in the prison studies. Carli et al. (2014), Cuomo et al. (2008), and Wolf and Shi (2012) studied whether substance abuse was a common variable with associated with childhood abuse. They discovered a relationship between the two variables. Welfare and Hollin (2015) and Gorodetsky et al. (2014) did not account for substance abuse, but focused on adult aggression and childhood abuse exclusively. Gorodetsky et al. (2014) introduced the gene of aggression to support biological factors for the study of aggression. The relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult aggression in prisoners was effectively assessed.

### **Gender Differences in Childhood Abuse and Adult Aggression**

There are gender differences with the types childhood abuse and with the forms of aggression in adulthood. Allen (2017) found that reported physical aggression was higher in men. In the study by Temcheff et al. (2008) women reported higher violent behavior with their

children and in intimate partner relationships. Women in dating relationships reported greater psychological aggression in Riggs and Kaminski's (2010) study. According to the results of the survey that Berzenski and Yates (2010) conducted, emotional abuse impacted women more than men. More instances of sexual abuse were also stated by women than men (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). Specific gender results, such as the ones described, should be noted when testing the variables. Many differences in gender need to be addressed.

### **Ethnicity Differences in Childhood Abuse and Adult Aggression**

Differences in gender is necessary to consider, but so are ethnic differences. According to Wolf and Shin (2012) Caucasian and Hispanic participants reported greater childhood sexual abuse than Black participants, and Caucasians reported higher physical abuse in childhood than Hispanics and Black participants who expressed similar results. They also stated that Hispanics reported lower aggression in adulthood than Black participants (Wolf & Shin, 2012). Their results provide insight in the specific connections of Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic individuals who are associated with childhood abuse and adult aggression. The study showed the levels of physical and sexual abuse, but Berzenski and Yates (2010) also discuss emotional abuse. Hispanic participants reported lower emotional abuse than Asian and other ethnic participants (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). Major abusive relationships of different ethnicities are discussed in these studies.

Studying differing ethnicities and genders resulted in a more broad view of the relationship between childhood abuse and adult aggression. A majority of the research on childhood abuse and adult aggression from colleges and prisons allow for a more precise understanding of the variables' correlation. Through a collection of many studies, childhood maltreatment was found to be significantly positively correlated to adult aggression. Emotional,

sexual, and physical abuse are correlated with intimate partner relationships, and emotional abuse tends to be the main factor with men, while physical abuse the main factor for women. Physical abuse was found to be highly correlated with overall aggression. Understanding the relationship between childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood allows professionals to establish preventative measures and coping mechanisms for adult aggression. Understanding the ramifications of abuse can also be helpful for those working with children.

### **Critique of Literature**

All the studies described in the literature review are quantitative, primary empirical studies, except the article by Afifi et al. (2017) which is a literature review. The overall research and studies used sound methodologies. Interview and survey processes allowed for the research to identify key features of the variables. Many surveys were conducted at colleges. There are many practical reasons why research at colleges is used for determining the relationship between childhood abuse and adult aggression. One reason is that it is easier to get a large sample of participants in the study. Also, some colleges have more diversity than the average population. Another vital reason research is conducted at colleges is because specific variables can be intently tested, and finding willing participants that fit into the category variable is easy. Colleges are essential for many research studies, especially when comparing variables to dating relationships.

The findings of the interviews conducted at prisons are just as vital as the collegiate discoveries. Prisoners were observed because childhood maltreatment and aggression are variables that apply to many of their lives. Prisons are a controlled and convenient environment that has many of willing participants. Their violent offenses are often rooted in aggression, so aggression is able to be readily studied. Even though prisons were able to perceive correlations

efficiently, they were very gender specific. All of the prison studies collected had male participants. Therefore, no implications or applications of their correlations accurately represent female behaviors. Research studies on incarcerated individuals were not the only studies that had only male participants, Mbilinyi et al. (2012) also studied male participants exclusively. Even though the prison research was only conducted on males, the collegiate research had both male and female participants. In fact there were more female participants at the colleges than males. The percentages of female participants at each college ranged from about 58% to 77%, with the exception of the study by Milletich et al. (2010) which did not state the percentage of male or female participants.

The problem of the majority of collegiate participants being female is not really preventable since most co-ed colleges have more female students than male students, and study samples should represent the general population. It was not only collegiate studies that had more female participants, but Chen et al. (2012), Sansone et al. (2012), and Temcheff et al. (2008) also have more female participants in their general population studies. The reason the ratio of male and female participants is so vital to the research is because different variables tend to correlate with specific gender types. The collegiate study conducted by Milletich et al. (2010) assessed the online surveys that the students filled out and discovered that there was a correlation between men being emotionally abused and having higher aggression in dating relationships. The results for women differed from the men's because there was a higher correlation with physical abuse and aggression in dating (Milletich et al., 2010). These differences provide more insight into the relationship of children who were maltreated and adult aggression.

Ethnic differences are also essential in understanding the relationship of the variables. Sometimes no ethnic differences could be tested in the studies because there was only one

ethnicity. Gorodetsky et al. (2014) had all male Caucasian Italian participants for their study. No differences in ethnicity can be tested for studies that do not specify the ethnicities of the participants. Temcheff et al. (2008), Welfare and Hollin (2015), Afifi et al. (2017), and Cuomo et al. (2008) do not specify ethnicities, but they do give the locations of the studies (Canada, England and Wales, United States, and Italy; respectively). Millettich et al. (2010) included no ethnicity or location in their study. Most of the studies with a clear statement of ethnicity in the sample had a majority of Caucasian participants. Berzenski and Yate (2010) and Wolf and Shi (2012) studies were the only two studies found that had a majority of an ethnicity that was not Caucasian. There were 46.2% of the participants that were Asian in Berzenski and Yate's (2010) study, and 50.3% Black participants in Wolf and Shi's (2012) study. Carli et al. (2014) specified that the participants of their study were 87.7% Italian. The majority of participants being studied were Caucasian.

Studies focusing on one specific ethnicity is a weakness to the literature of this topic. Another limitation of the studies was that many did not differentiate between genders. There were also some conflicting discoveries with the variables between the studies. Some studies did not test certain forms of the variables, which could have produced more insight in testing the relationships. Collectively the studies tended to have congruent data outlining a positive correlation between childhood abuse and aggression in adulthood. The sources demonstrated necessary information pertinent to the research topic.

### **Agenda for Future Research**

There is a need for further research of female inmates and greater ethnic diversity with the correlations of childhood abuse and adult aggression. There were no studies in this literature review with female participants in prison. Since most of the studies in this review had a majority

of Caucasian participants, other ethnicities should be studied more in future research. The relationship between psychological abuse and adult aggression should also be explored and expounded upon. Not only should this variable be studied, but also more information should be examined to determine if childhood neglect is associated with intimate partner violence. The types of aggression, except psychological aggression, were not covered in many studies and there is a need to understand their relationship to childhood maltreatment. When these aspects are considered in future research a clearer understanding of the relationship between childhood abuse and adult aggression can be established.

## References

- Afifi, T. O., Mota, N., Sareen, J., & MacMillan, H. L. (2017). The relationships between harsh physical punishment and child maltreatment in childhood and intimate partner violence in adulthood. *BMC Public Health, 17*(1), 1-10. doi:10.1186/s12889-017-4359-8
- Allen, B. (2011). Childhood psychological abuse and adult aggression: The mediating role of self-capacities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 26*(10), 2093-2110. doi:10.1177/0886260510383035
- Berzenski, S. R., & Yates, T. M. (2010). A developmental process analysis of the contribution of childhood emotional abuse to relationship violence. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 19*(2), 180-203. doi:10.1080/10926770903539474
- Carli, V., Mandelli, L., Zaninotto, L., Alberti, S., Roy, A., Serretti, A., & Sarchiapone, M. (2014). Trait-aggressiveness and impulsivity: Role of psychological resilience and childhood trauma in a sample of male prisoners. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry, 68*(1), 8-17. doi:10.3109/08039488.2012.756061
- Chen, P., Coccaro, E. F., Lee, R., & Jacobson, K. C. (2012). Moderating effects of childhood maltreatment on associations between social information processing and adult aggression. *Psychological Medicine, 42*(6), 1293-1304. doi:10.1017/S0033291711002212
- Cuomo, C., Sarchiapone, M., Giannantonio, M. D., Mancini, M., & Roy, A. (2008). Aggression, impulsivity, personality traits, and childhood trauma of prisoners with substance abuse and addiction. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 34*(3), 339-345. doi:10.1080/00952990802010884
- Gorodetsky, E., Bevilacqua, L., Carli, V., Sarchiapone, M., Roy, A., Goldman, D., & Enoch, M. (2014). The interactive effect of MAOA-LPR genotype and childhood physical neglect

- on aggressive behaviors in Italian male prisoners. *Genes, Brain, and Behavior*, *13*(6), 543-549. doi:10.1111/gbb.12140
- Mbilinyi, L. F., Logan-Greene, P. B., Neighbors, C., Walker, D. D., Roffman, R. A., & Zegree, J. (2012). Exposure to domestic violence and childhood emotional abuse: Childhood domestic violence exposure among a community sample of adult perpetrators: What mediates the connection? *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *21*(2), 171-187. doi:10.1080/10926771.2012.639203
- Milletich, R. J., Kelley, M. L., Doane, A. N., & Pearson, M. R. (2010). Exposure to interparental violence and childhood physical and emotional abuse as related to physical aggression in undergraduate dating relationships. *Journal of Family Violence*, *25*(7), 627-637. doi:10.1007/s10896-010-9319-3
- Riggs, S. A., & Kaminski, P. (2010). Childhood emotional abuse, adult attachment, and depression as predictors of relational adjustment and psychological aggression. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *19*(1), 75-104. doi:10.1080/10926770903475976
- Sansone, R. A., Leung, J. S., & Wiederman, M. W. (2012). Five forms of childhood trauma: Relationships with aggressive behavior in adulthood. *The Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders*, *14*(5). doi:10.4088/PCC.12m01353
- Taillieu, T. L., & Brownridge, D. A. (2015). The impact of aggressive parental discipline experienced in childhood on externalizing problem behavior in early adulthood. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *8*(4), 253-264. doi:10.1007/s40653-015-0063-y
- Temcheff, C. E., Serbin, L. A., Martin-Storey, A., Stack, D. M., Hodgins, S., Ledingham, J., & Schwartzman, A. E. (2008). Continuity and pathways from aggression in childhood to

family violence in adulthood: A 30-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Family Violence*, 23(4), 231-242. doi:10.1007/s10896-007-9147-2

Welfare, H. R., & Hollin, C. R. (2015). Childhood and offense-related trauma in young people imprisoned in England and Wales for murder and other acts of serious violence: A descriptive study. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 24(8), 955-969. doi:10.1080/10926771.2015.1070230

Wolff, N., & Shi, J. (2012). Childhood and adult trauma experiences of incarcerated persons and their relationship to adult behavioral health problems and treatment. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 9(5), 1908-1926. doi:10.3390/ijerph9051908