Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse: A Child-Centred Perspective

A substantial body of literature assessing the impact of intimate partner violence on children and associations between intimate partner violence and child abuse now exists. Central to knowledge about these areas of practice and research is a robust, child-centred consideration of some of the more challenging conceptual issues they give rise to. In this paper, we aim to stimulate debate by presenting a critical, child-centred perspective on the intersection between intimate partner violence and child abuse. Initially, we provide the context for the review by presenting a brief overview of the literature. We then consider three central issues from a child-centred perspective. We discuss the language used to describe children forced to live with intimate partner violence, and the importance of hearing children’s perspectives on their experiences of such conflict. Finally, we consider similarities and differences between the intimate partner violence and child abuse fields from a child-centred viewpoint. We conclude that increasing conceptual clarity around these issues will enhance research in the field, and ultimately improve interventions designed to protect children forced to live with intimate partner violence. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Research into the effects of intimate partner violence on children began in the early 1980s (Hershorn and Rosenbaum, 1985; Hinchey and Gavelek, 1982; Jaffe et al., 1985; Rosenbaum and O’Leary, 1981; Wolfe et al., 1985). Since then, the literature focusing on children living with intimate partner violence has grown exponentially (see Bedi and Goddard, 2007). A large amount of research has also examined relationships between intimate partner violence and child abuse (see Appel and Holden, 1998).
For the purposes of this paper, we employ the term ‘intimate partner violence’ in preference to the more commonly used ‘domestic violence’ to refer to physically abusive behaviour between partners in an intimate relationship. ‘Intimate partner violence’ is a more specific term than ‘domestic violence’. It includes the specific relationship in which the violence occurs, whereas ‘domestic violence’ could refer to any violence occurring in a domestic setting.

Central to, and arguably absent from, these fields is a robust, child-centred perspective on the more challenging intersections between intimate partner violence and child abuse. In this paper, we provide a child-centred viewpoint on three conceptual issues relating to links between intimate partner violence and child abuse. We employ as a starting point two issues that we have previously argued to be fundamental to understanding and responding to children who have been abused: the power of language used to describe (and hence define) the experiences of children (Goddard et al., 2005), and the need to hear children’s perspectives about their experiences (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). More broadly, we then consider similarities and points of departure between research and practice in the intimate partner violence and child abuse fields from a child-centred perspective. In these discussions, we include consideration of whether the experience of intimate partner violence in childhood is best defined as a type of child abuse in itself.

To provide the context for these reflections, we initially undertake a brief overview of the literature related to the impact of intimate partner violence on children, and the overlap between these two types of violence. Articles were identified using the keywords ‘child abuse’, ‘children’, ‘domestic violence’ and ‘intimate partner violence’ in the PsycINFO, MEDLINE and CSA Illumina databases. Only English-language articles were included. This overview is not exhaustive; for a more comprehensive presentation of evidence in these fields see Bedi and Goddard (2007).

What is the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Children?

Existing research relates to associations between intimate partner violence and negative outcomes in children, rather than demonstrat- ing causality (Edleson, 1999a), because it would be unethical to produce experimental evidence of a causal relationship. We have previously discussed converging evidence suggesting that this association is a causal one (Bedi and Goddard, 2007). Therefore, in this paper, we use the language of causality to describe...
relationships between intimate partner violence and outcomes in children.

Children forced to live with intimate partner violence experience a range of negative outcomes (see Bedi and Goddard, 2007; Buckley et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2008). Some children experiencing such violence develop post-traumatic stress disorder (McCloskey and Walker, 2000). Depression (Jouriles et al., 1996), anxiety (Kerig, 1998), loneliness (McCloskey and Stuewig, 2001) and lowered self-worth (O’Brien et al., 1997) have all been reported in samples of child victims of intimate partner violence.

Children living with intimate partner violence may also have school difficulties, with reports of lowered verbal intellectual function (Huth-Bocks et al., 2001) and reading ability (Mathias et al., 1995). Unsurprisingly, rates of aggressive behaviour are higher in children living with intimate partner violence than in control groups (Graham-Bermann and Levendosky, 1998). In addition, intimate partner violence may substantially affect the relationship between children and the non-abusive/victimised parent (see Humphreys et al., 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).

Although elevated rates of psychological problems have been reported in groups of child victims of intimate partner violence, there is substantial variability in individual outcomes (Skopp et al., 2005), with some children apparently showing few or no difficulties (Clements et al., 2008; Edleson, 1999a). This variability may relate to the nature of the experience, with the frequency and severity of violence likely to have an impact on outcomes (Kantor and Little, 2003). In addition, recent research has focused on identifying child-related factors that may mediate the association between intimate partner violence and psychological difficulties in children (e.g. Skopp et al., 2005).

As noted, the emerging picture is complex. There is evidence that gender mediates outcomes, with some studies suggesting that boys forced to live with intimate partner violence have more behavioural problems than girls (Jaffe et al., 1986). However, other studies have not found this to be the case (Grych et al., 2000). Younger age at onset appears to carry the potential for greater difficulties (e.g. Hughes, 1988). Children’s interpretations of the violence also appear to mediate outcomes, with greater self-blame and perceived threat associated with higher risk for psychological problems (Grych et al., 2000; Skopp et al., 2005).

Overlaps between Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse

High rates of overlap between intimate partner violence and child abuse have been reported (e.g. Banks et al., 2008; Stanley and
Goddard and Hiller (1993) examined records for over 200 children presenting at the child protection unit of a metropolitan Australian hospital. There were frequent reports of intimate partner violence in the families of these children, with 55 per cent coexistence in physical abuse cases.

Appel and Holden (1998) conducted a review of 31 studies examining overlaps between intimate partner violence and physical child abuse. Coexistence figures ranged from six per cent to 100 per cent, with an average of 40 per cent. Although the majority of previous research has examined overlaps between physical intimate partner violence and physical child abuse (Appel and Holden, 1998), some research has examined other types of child abuse. Goddard and Hiller (1993), for example, found intimate partner violence in the families of 40 per cent of the sexual abuse cases examined. McGuigan and Pratt (2001) reported that, compared to other families, families in which intimate partner violence was present in the first six months of a child’s life were twice as likely to have had a confirmed report of psychological abuse (other than intimate partner violence) or neglect by the time the child reached five years of age.

The frequent coexistence of intimate partner violence and child abuse can be accounted for in a number of ways. The perpetrator of intimate partner violence may also perpetrate against children in the same family (Appel and Holden, 1998). Conversely, mothers who are victims of intimate partner violence may be abusive towards their children (Hartley, 2004; Margolin et al., 2003). Alternatively, children may be injured while attempting to intervene in incidents of intimate partner violence (Edleson et al., 2003), or while being carried by the adult victim at the time of assault.

This brief overview makes clear both that children living with violence between their caregivers are at substantial risk of harm, and that such violence frequently coexists with other types of child abuse. What is less clear is how the experiences of children who live with intimate partner violence are best conceptualised. We now turn to a discussion of conceptual issues, beginning with the language used to describe children in these circumstances.

**Language, Children and Intimate Partner Violence**

We have previously argued that the language used to describe abusive behaviour, and children experiencing abuse, may distance the reader from the emotional realities of abuse (Goddard et al., 2005). Early research focusing on language and child abuse identified a tendency for children in situations of abuse to be described in press reports as ‘it’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’ (Goddard and...
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Saunders, 2000). Described as ‘textual abuse’, this failure to identify the gender of children who have been abused may objectify children and emotionally distance the reader from their distress. Similarly, the language of consensual adult relations may be used to describe sexual abuse, minimising the behaviour of the abuser (Goddard and Saunders, 2000). For example, a man, having raped his ten-year-old step-daughter, was described in the press as having had an ‘affair’ and a ‘relationship’ with the victim (Sheffield, 1997). Careless use of language, by inadequately defining and describing children’s traumatic experiences, may serve to silence child victims (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006).

Historically, increasing understanding about child abuse has been reflected in the use of more accurate language to capture the variety of children’s experiences of abuse. For example, in the first published account of child abuse in the medical literature, Kempe et al. (1962) described ‘the battered-child syndrome’, a clinical condition arising from physical abuse. Over time, however, it was recognised that children may experience a broad range of abusive interactions with adults, only some of which are captured by this ‘syndrome’. Accordingly, language used to describe these phenomena has developed; with child abuse or child abuse and neglect now the most commonly used ‘umbrella’ terms (Goddard, 1996).

Language used to describe children who have experienced intimate partner violence may also be examined in this way. Early work in the field described children as ‘witnesses’ to the violence occurring at home (e.g. Jaffe et al., 1985). As noted by Edleson (1999a), however, children may also hear episodes of intimate partner violence. They may be used as part of violent incidents, and they experience the aftermath of violence (Kantor and Little, 2003). Some children intervene to protect an abused parent (e.g. see Edleson et al., 2003). The term ‘witness’ does not, therefore, adequately represent the pervasive influence that intimate partner violence in the home can have on children.

Other authors have described children forced to live with intimate partner violence as ‘caught in the crossfire’ (Johnson, 1998), the ‘forgotten’ (Johnson, 1998), ‘secondary’ (Joseph et al., 2006), or ‘unintended’ victims (Hershorn and Rosenbaum, 1985). These linguistic approaches render children peripheral to what is occurring in the home. It has been argued that intimate partner violence may function to intimidate children (Goddard and Hiller, 1993), that ‘children, having witnessed the beating of their mothers, need no further reminder of the possible consequences of their resistance to the wishes of their fathers’ (p. 27). In cases where intimate partner violence may be an instrumental approach to controlling family members, children included, it is not accurate to describe children as ‘unintended victims’.

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Holden (2003), noting the absence of adequate terminology, proposed that describing children as ‘exposed’ to intimate partner violence better reflects the various ways in which children experience living with violence in the home. Although this description captures more of the complexity of children’s experiences than does the term ‘witness’, it also implies a passivity on the part of children. This is not supported by evidence of children’s intervention in intimate partner violence (e.g. see Edleson et al., 2003).

An interesting approach to describing experiences of violence in childhood is taken by Saunders (2003). Noting that isolated forms of violence against children such as sexual abuse, physical abuse and living with intimate partner violence frequently co-occur, Saunders makes the important point that ‘the way professional areas of study and practice have developed over time has made it difficult to understand the totality of children’s experience with violence in a comprehensive manner’ (pp. 366–367). He argues for a more inclusive approach, while noting the practical and methodological difficulties inherent in such a task.

Although this attempt at integration of isolated research streams may be laudable, Saunders’ use of language to describe the proposed integrated field is problematic. Initially writing of ‘children exposed to violence’, he later refers to ‘childhood violence’, a term which still later becomes ‘child violence’. In describing the types of violence that could be included under these various umbrella terms, Saunders includes violence perpetrated against children (e.g. sexual and physical abuse), violence children experience indirectly (e.g. ‘witnessing’ domestic violence) and violence perpetrated by children (e.g. juvenile sex offending). This approach is far from specific, and fails to offer an explanation for the inclusion under one broad linguistic banner of violence against children and violence carried out by children.

Given high rates of overlap previously noted between intimate partner violence and child abuse, a consideration of multiple experiences of victimisation in research focusing on children and intimate partner violence is necessary. However, the language used should be aimed at capturing as closely as possible the complexity of children’s experiences of intimate partner violence.

One central aspect of children’s experiences of intimate partner violence that all previous terms have failed to capture is children’s lack of choice in such circumstances. Although the dynamics of intimate partner violence function to remove agency from adult victims (Herman, 1992), child victims of intimate partner violence have still less choice than victimised adults. To ensure that this fundamental factor is not overlooked, we propose the use of the term ‘children forced to live with intimate partner violence’ to describe children in these circumstances. This term incorporates the multiple ways in which children may experience intimate
partner violence, as well as their lack of choice in having these experiences.

Intimate Partner Violence and the Silencing of Children: Hearing Children’s Voices

Edleson has argued that ‘children who witness violence between adults in their home are only the most recent victims to become visible’ (1999a, p. 839). The ‘recent discovery’ of child victims of intimate partner violence is consistent with established patterns in other areas of family violence. Child abuse, for example, is now generally accepted to have been ‘discovered’ after publication of the seminal work by Kempe et al. in 1962 (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). Yet this ‘discovery’ was clearly only a rediscovery; the reader of history with an interest in children will find much to suggest that the problem of child abuse, if not the term, has always existed (see, for example, Corby, 2006).

It has previously been argued that even when visible, children subjected to abuse are frequently rendered inaudible by their experiences (e.g. Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). Unfortunately, experiences that silence children include not just abuse; children may also be silenced by the legal and medical systems that seek to assist them (Goddard, 1996). In research terms, this is reflected in methodologies that privilege expert/clinical perspectives and the perceptions of parents over those of children.

The tendency to assume that children who have had traumatic experiences are not able to adequately describe these experiences extends from the child abuse literature to that focusing on children forced to live with intimate partner violence. Although there are now many articles examining the impact of intimate partner violence on children, there are few focusing on how children perceive these experiences (Mullender, 2006).

There are many complexities surrounding involvement of children in research and practice. The challenges are present at every stage of the research process, from obtaining access at the outset (McLeod, 2008) to interpreting the views of children (Alderson, 2008). According to Alderson, one of the major obstacles to working with children is the ‘prejudices that young children cannot or should not be consulted’ (2008, p. 211). The literature, however, clearly supports the need for ‘a holistic and child-centred approach to service delivery’ (Holt et al., p. 807). The challenges in research can be overcome (Joseph et al., 2006) even though they rest ‘on powerful feelings about risk and anxiety’ (Alderson, 2008, p. 142). Such efforts promise to assist in creating more effective interventions for children (Clements et al., 2008).
Children forced to live with intimate partner violence are in a unique position to inform adults about the experience of living in these circumstances, as well as about the responses of the legal, welfare and medical systems. The opportunity to have one’s perspective heard may also have important therapeutic implications for victims of trauma (McLeod, 2008; Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). A focus on listening to children who have lived with intimate partner violence may therefore have an intrinsic value for the children involved, as well as improving adults’ understanding of how children experience intimate partner violence (Houghton, 2006). Finally, as demonstrated in previous research, children, even young children, are able to provide insightful perspectives on their experiences of abuse (Joseph et al., 2006; Mudaly and Goddard, 2006).

An example of this insight can be found in the words of ‘Scorpion’, a 13-year-old boy interviewed in recent child-centred research (Mudaly and Goddard, 2006). ‘Scorpion’ was forced to live with intimate partner violence, as well as being physically abused by his stepfather. He described his experiences like this:

‘[He] used to bash my mum up, and, you know, like you see your mum get bashed up and you almost got killed once, and . . . you’re not a normal person, you wouldn’t be a normal person if you are going through something like that. I used to think he was an animal, but a bloody animal wouldn’t even do that’ (p. 129).

Scorpion’s perspective demonstrates that children are able to describe and interpret their experiences of intimate partner violence for research purposes. The inclusion of such perspectives is likely to substantially enhance the extent to which the literature addressing children forced to live with intimate partner violence is able to capture, and better elucidate, the experiences of such children (Buckley et al., 2007).

Intimate Partner Violence and Child Abuse: Continuities and Discontinuities

As noted above, the intimate partner violence and child abuse research fields share the need to employ child-centred research practices to better understand children’s experiences. In other ways, however, intimate partner violence and child abuse research and practice diverge substantially (see Stanley and Goddard, 2002); the literature has been described as ‘fragmented’ (Straka and Montminy, 2008, p. 257).

One interesting point of difference relates to the perceived criminality of the abusive behaviour involved. Much of the advocacy work of women’s groups during the 1970s and 1980s focused
on raising public awareness and ensuring that violence against women was addressed as a criminal justice issue (Bohmer et al., 2002). This movement resulted in the adoption of mandatory or pro-arrest policies in many American states in the 1980s and 1990s (Bourg and Stock, 1994). The success or otherwise of these approaches has been the subject of debate and empirical enquiry (e.g. see Berk et al., 1992). Pro-arrest policies may fail to address issues of discrimination (Bourg and Stock, 1994), and mandatory arrest policies have been criticised for their paternalistic approach (see Coker, 2004). Furthermore, prosecution rates may continue to be low in states where arrest is the preferred response to intimate partner violence (Hirschel and Hutchison, 2001).

Notwithstanding these issues, it remains the case that criminal justice responses to intimate partner violence have been widely discussed, an ongoing debate reflected in the extensive literature base (e.g. see Buzawa and Buzawa, 1993; Coker, 2004; Miller, 2003). It is noteworthy, then, that the literature related to criminal prosecution of child abuse is far smaller. Although vocal advocates of criminal intervention in cases of child abuse exist (see, for example, Peters et al., 1989), they are not comparable in number or influence to those who have advocated for criminal prosecution of intimate partner violence. An exception is child sexual abuse, where criminal prosecution is more common (see Levesque, 1995; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1992). However, sexual assault perpetrated by an offender unknown to the child remains more likely to be referred for criminal prosecution than intrafamilial sexual abuse (Stroud et al., 2000). Furthermore, there is a strong opposing voice in those who argue that prosecution of child abuse ‘provides a device to assign blame ... to people who are needy and different. It is a cruel alternative to giving them help’ (Newberger, 1987, p. 115).

This position is reflected at policy level by the family preservation approach to intrafamilial child abuse, which maintains that ‘ideally, children who need child welfare services [should] receive help with their families of origin, and unnecessary out-of-home placement [should] be avoided’ (Blythe et al., 1994, p. 213). The focus on family preservation in preference to criminal intervention, when compared with the emphasis placed on criminal justice responses within the intimate partner violence literature, presents an interesting philosophical divide between the two fields. This divergence is well illustrated by Gelles (2000) in his provocative description of a hypothetical ‘intensive marriage preservation’ service aimed at maintaining a spousal relationship even in cases of serious interspousal assault.

It has been argued that this and other points of difference between intimate partner violence and child abuse research and practice are due primarily to historical factors (Koverola and
Heger, 2003). Social awareness of these two forms of family violence developed separately (Edleson, 1999b) and responses to each type of violence ‘involved different scholars and philosophies, different agencies and auspices’ (Fleck-Henderson, 2000, p. 334). Historical differences between the two fields are, unsurprisingly, reflected in tensions between services focusing on victims of intimate partner violence and child protection services (Beeman et al., 1999).

Although tensions between the two fields may be understandable in light of their separate development, high rates of coexistence of intimate partner violence and child abuse necessitate the development of common understandings and practice strategies (Kantor and Little, 2003). In addition to the need for services to develop collaborative working practices to effectively intervene in families where intimate partner violence and child abuse co-occur, there is a particular need for collaboration in the case of children forced to live with intimate partner violence (Edleson, 1999b).

### Should Intimate Partner Violence be defined as Child Abuse?

One area in which it is necessary for common understandings to be reached between the intimate partner violence and child abuse fields concerns the question of whether being forced to live with intimate partner violence in childhood is best defined as a form of child abuse in itself. Evidence that intimate partner violence is associated with negative outcomes in children has resulted in policies in some countries, including Australia and the US, which include ‘exposure’ to intimate partner violence as a notifiable form of psychological abuse (Bedi and Goddard, 2007). In the UK, the legal definition of ‘significant harm’ to children now includes ‘impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another’ (see Rivett and Kelly, 2006, for a more detailed discussion of the history of legal and policy responses to children living with intimate partner violence in the UK). Some have argued against these policy directions. For instance, Edleson (1999a) has contended that ‘defining witnessing as maltreatment is a mistake’ (p. 866), on the grounds that such policies may prevent women from disclosing their own victimisation for fear of state intervention. He further notes that some children do not sustain negative effects of their experiences of intimate partner violence, a fact that, he suggests, argues against the inclusion of intimate partner violence as a form of child abuse (see also Rivett and Kelly, 2006).
There is, as yet, little evidence on the impact of policies that include intimate partner violence under the banner of child abuse on disclosure behaviour in victimised adults (Bedi and Goddard, 2007). However, similar concerns were expressed about the impact of mandatory reporting policies on disclosure of child abuse (e.g. Boss, 1980). These concerns were not reflected in practice (Goddard, 1996). Further research into the effect of these policies on adult victims’ help-seeking behaviour is needed. Future research should also focus on the development of policies and service models that encourage adult victims to make decisions that support not only their own but also their children’s safety, while recognising the potential for harm associated with being forced to live with intimate partner violence in childhood.

Furthermore, Edleson’s (1999a) contention regarding the absence of adjustment problems in some children forced to live with intimate partner violence is not supported by current practice with regard to other forms of child abuse. For instance, there is increasing evidence that some children subjected to physical abuse also appear to have few psychological difficulties (see Caspi et al., 2002; Haskett et al., 2006). According to Edleson’s suggestion, the existence of isolated children who are able to adjust to experiences of physical assault would argue against the inclusion of physical violence as a form of child abuse.

Although some contend that intimate partner violence should not be defined as a form of child abuse, others argue in support of such policies. For example, Somer and Braunstein (1999) state that ‘offending fathers should be aware that by failing to shield their children from observing their mother being brutalized by them, they are also maltreating their watching offspring’ (p. 453). This position appears to suggest that the problematic aspect of the perpetrator’s behaviour is not the assault, but that they are ‘failing to shield’ their children from observing. This focus on shielding children rather than on the needs of adult and child victims, in combination with a tendency of some child protection systems to position responsibility with victims of intimate partner violence for remaining in violent situations, has understandably resulted in opposition from women’s advocates (e.g. White, 2003).

Current understandings of psychological and emotional abuse, and the relationship between the two, remain limited. Psychological abuse, however, has been defined as ‘sustained, repetitive, inappropriate behaviour that damages or substantially reduces the creative and developmental potential of mental facilities and mental processes’ (O’Hagan, 2006, p. 55). Emotional abuse has been described as ‘sustained, repetitive, inappropriate, emotional responses to the child’s felt emotions and their accompanying expressive behaviour’ (O’Hagan, 2006, p. 46).
Given the evidence, it is difficult to argue that forcing a child to live with sustained violence against a primary caregiver does not constitute both emotional and psychological abuse. The potential for adult victims to be held responsible for their own victimisation, however, necessitates the development of policy responses to this definition that places responsibility for the impact of intimate partner violence clearly with the offending adult.

Future Directions

We have aimed to provide a critical, child-centred perspective on some of the more challenging conceptual issues associated with the intersection between the intimate partner violence and child abuse fields. Greater conceptual clarity in research in these fields will improve the quality of the evidence base, ultimately facilitating better interventions to protect children who have experienced intimate partner violence. In order to arrive at conceptual clarity, it is necessary to use concise and appropriate language to describe children’s experiences, to listen to the voices of children forced to live with intimate partner violence and to recognise that the experience of being forced to live with intimate partner violence is abusive in itself.

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