

Box 6.1 Is Children's Exposure to IPV a Form of Child Psychological Maltreatment?

Historically, the fields of child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (IPV) have developed as separate entities. As Graham-Bermann (2002) notes, "Researchers in the areas of child abuse and domestic violence have occupied different spheres of inquiry, used disparate sources of data, received funding from different agencies, reported results at different conferences, and published their work in different journals" (p. 119). Increasingly, however, researchers have begun to see the two issues as interconnected. For example, as we have noted in previous chapters, IPV frequently co-occurs with the various forms of child maltreatment. In one review of several studies, child maltreatment was shown to co-occur with IPV in as many as 67 percent of some families (Jouriles, McDonald, Smith Slep, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008).

Data from nationally representative samples suggest that 6 to 11 percent of U.S. children have been exposed to IPV in the past year and about 25 percent of children have been exposed to IPV in their lifetime (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2010). Many of these children have been exposed to severe violence, including witnessing a parent being beaten up, threatened with a gun or knife, stabbed, or shot (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). Is exposure to IPV its own specific form of CPM? Many experts suggest the answer is yes, in part because of the negative outcomes for children that result from such exposure.

A number of controlled studies have found that children exposed to IPV experience a variety of negative psychosocial, cognitive, and physiological problems across the lifespan (e.g., Bair-Merritt et al., 2015; Carpenter & Stacks, 2009; Howell, Barnes, Miller, & Graham-Bermann, 2015). Some would argue that the harm that befalls such children is the result of an omission in care, and thus exposure to IPV should be classified as emotional neglect (e.g., failure to protect). Others would argue that the emotional harm that such children experience results from a parental act of commission, and thus exposure to IPV should be viewed as a form of abuse—a form of terrorizing, whereby parental actions or threats cause a child to experience extreme fear and anxiety. Regardless of the classification system used, it is clear that children exposed to IPV experience multiple threats (Campbell & Thompson, 2015).

Children's exposure to IPV has received increasing recognition by legislators, with some states enacting specific laws that criminalize exposure to IPV. To date, approximately 24 U.S. states and territories mention children's exposure to IPV in their state statutes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012a). Some state statutes increase the penalty for domestic violence if it happens in the presence of a child; fewer actually indicate that exposing a child to IPV is a crime. Several states, for example, consider a child's exposure to IPV in their sentencing guidelines for domestic violence as an "aggravating circumstance" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012a, p. 3). Utah laws, on the other hand, are more explicit and state that it is a crime to commit an act of domestic violence in the presence of a child (UAC 76-5-109.1). Whether or not exposure to IPV should be legally criminalized, however, is a matter of some debate because of the special circumstances that sometimes characterize these families as well as the limitations in funding associated with carrying out such legislation (Edleson, Gassman-Pines, & Hill, 2006; Kantor & Little, 2003).

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