Boys will be boys and girls will be girls: Trauma and aggressive behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the differences in the ways traumatized boys’ and girls’ use aggression in their relationships with their parents.

We evaluated boys and girls relational and physical aggression with their parents in 15 minute assessments, using the observational coding system to code children’s punitive (physically aggressive) and caregiving (relational aggression) controlling behaviors.

Participants were 152 parent-traumatized child dyads; 97 boys and 56 girls who were referred to PCIT because of their children’s disruptive behavior problems.

Results showed that boys used more punitive controlling behaviors and girls used more caregiving controlling behaviors. This confirms findings suggesting boys and girls are equally aggressive, but use different strategies to show it; and that these different styles are observable in early interactions with their parents.

METHODS

Participants

152 parent-child dyads were included in the current study after being referred to the UC Davis CAARE Center for Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) because of their disruptive behavior problems.

Participants entered treatment with children ranging in age from 2-8 with an average age of 4.89 years. 77 children were male and 75 were female. Parents in our sample had an overall average age of 29.76 years. The sample of children was diverse with 30.1% of the sample reporting to be Caucasian, 22.0% African American, 29.3% Latino, and 1.61% Asian.

Available Screener-Triatnalog (BEAS-T; Timmer et al., 2009)

The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Young Children (TSCYC; Kellen et al., 2010) and the Children’s Depression Inventory - Revised (CDI-R; Kovacs, 1992) were used to assess emotional availability and children’s role reversed controlling behaviors as evidence of negative effects of trauma on the child and the parent-child relationship.

These findings suggest that therapists should take note of these behaviors as evidence of negative effects of trauma on the child and the parent-child relationship.

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Statistics for Parent-Child Dyads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregiver educational attainment</td>
<td>11.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse History</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect History</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence History</td>
<td>65.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse History</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age of caregiver in years (SD)</td>
<td>29.8 (1.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of Parent (Female)</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS cont.

- Analyses showed that boys demonstrated more punitive role-reversed controlling behaviors in interactions with their parents.

DISCUSSION

- The purpose of this study was to investigate the differences between traumatized boys’ and girls’ use of aggression in their relationships with their parents.

- Results showing gender differences in the levels of punitive and caregiving controlling behavior shown in the 15 minute observational assessment confirmed our hypothesis that we could observe differences in physical and relational aggression in young children interacting with their parents.

- Boys style of using more punitive and less caregiving controlling behaviors suggest their use of more relational and less physical aggression with their parents.

- Results showed that traumatized boys and girls used similar amounts of bossy controlling behaviors.

- Research into the effects trauma on young children highlight their physically aggressive behavior, but often ignore ways in which they use relational strategies to control others. Because of this omission, assessments may have overlooked important trauma symptoms in girls.

- This study’s findings also demonstrate that these symptoms appear at different ages and in different interactions with their parents. This is important, as these differences have primarily been examined in children no younger than middle childhood.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Our findings suggest that caregiving controlling behavior (i.e., parenting, directing, or overly bright and helpful behaviors) is more evident in traumatized young girls than boys, and may be one way in which they use relational strategies to control their environment. Traditionally these behaviors have been not been counted as clinically significant indicators of a trauma response. These findings suggest that therapists should take note of these behaviors as evidence of negative effects of trauma on the child and the parent-child relationship.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Type of trauma could also modify type of aggression manifested, for example trauma violating boundaries of trust, such as sexual abuse, could result in different forms of aggression than trauma violating physical safety, such as natural disasters.

- Types of aggression used could also depend on parent factors, such as parent emotional availability. Further studies could examine the effects of interacting with mothers vs. fathers, and the differential effects of parent emotional availability on their male and female children.