

Study: When a violent marriage ends, is co-parenting possible?

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When a marriage that has included violence ends, is co-parenting possible? It depends on whether intimate terrorism or situational violence was involved, says a new University of Illinois study published in *Family Relations*.

"There's a tendency to treat all [violence](#) as if it's the same, but different types of violence require different interventions," said Jennifer Hardesty, a U of I assistant professor of human and community development.

"In intimate terrorism, the goal is to control the other person, and the abuser may use not only physical violence but also psychological and financial abuse to dominate his spouse. This calls for rigid, formal post-divorce safety measures, including supervised visitation of children and treatment approaches, such as a batterer's intervention group or alcohol or substance abuse treatment," she said.

"Situational violence is more likely a result of poor [conflict management](#) rather than a desire to control a partner. There may have been a heated argument about finances that ended with a shove. These fathers can probably learn new ways to manage their anger, and they do have the potential to safely co-parent their children," she said.

Hardesty's study used in-depth interviews with 25 women to explore differences in their co-parenting relationships with their abusive ex-husbands.

Role differentiation was a big problem for fathers who had engaged in intimate terrorism, said the researcher. "These men had difficulty separating their role as a father from their desire to hold onto their relationship with the mother. And because they weren't able to differentiate those roles very well, control issues and abuse of the women tended to continue after the separation."

According to Hardesty, renegotiating boundaries after divorce poses unique challenges and risks for abused women. "Separating from an [abusive partner](#) does not necessarily end the violence. Instead, separation may threaten an abuser's sense of control and instigate more violence," she said.

Risk may continue if former partners co-parent after divorce because abusers still have access to their former wives, she said. "Women in the study who had been victims of intimate terrorism all continued to be afraid that their ex-husbands would hurt them or their children," she said.

In contrast, women who had experienced situational violence in their marriages often described safe co-parenting relationships characterized by respect for each other's boundaries.

Currently the legal system assumes it's in a child's best interests to maintain relationships with both parents after a divorce, Hardesty said. "As a result, women's attempts to protect their own and their children's safety are often undermined or overlooked," she noted.

Parent education classes that help participants redefine boundaries around their parental and spousal roles and teach conflict resolution and anger management skills may help persons who have engaged in situational couple violence, she said.

Different approaches for mothers and fathers work best when intimate terrorism has occurred, she said. For mothers, the course should contain information on coercive control, safety planning, risk assessment, and the legal and social benefits available to them and their children. For fathers, the classes should reinforce a rigid and enforced separation between them and their children and their access to mothers.

"In cases of intimate terrorism, parent education would ideally be part of a set of programs aimed at prioritizing safety and assessing risk over time if children's relationships with fathers are to continue," she said.

"Eventually we hope the courts will be able to screen for different types of violence and target interventions, but we're not yet able to put this into practice. More research is needed to tease out these difficulties. Until we can, I think we have to err on the side of safety," she added.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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