

Preschoolers understand threats in households with violence

October 27 2011, By Jared Wadley

(PhysOrg.com) -- Preschoolers are aware and understand threats when they see their mother harmed by violent conflicts at home, a new University of Michigan study finds.

The study explored what factors influence children's comprehension and response when violence occurs.

Researchers evaluated [intimate partner violence](#)—conflicts that can be physical or sexual—in the past year for 116 mother-child groups with known violence in the homes. The [children](#) were 4 to 6 years old.

Few studies have looked at children's observations of violence as young as age 5, and the new U-M findings are one of the first to assess outcomes for kids as young as age 4, said Laura Miller, a psychology graduate student and study's lead author.

Mothers and children were interviewed to assess the level of violence at home and their mental health. Children also discussed violent conflict between their mother and another adult.

Results suggest that preschool-aged children are able to meaningfully respond to statements about their parents' conflicts. Girls, more than boys, tend to blame themselves for violence in the home.

"The more children observe intimate partner conflict, the more likely they are to feel threatened themselves," Miller said.

The findings suggest that intervention for children should target how they feel about their own perceived involvement, and ways to make them safe.

Mothers reported annually an average of 50 acts of physical violence, 88 instances of psychological aggression, 24 acts of sexual violence, and had an average of 14 injuries as a result of physical violence.

Young mothers reported higher levels of overall violence. Mothers also indicated they had high levels of depression and injury rates, with 82 percent of the sample reporting at least one violence-related injury in the past year.

The study—which Miller co-authored with Kathryn Howell, a post-doctoral psychiatry student, and Sandra Graham-Bermann, a professor of psychology and psychiatry—appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Interpersonal [Violence](#)*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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