

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF PARENTING BEHAVIOURS: The role of intimate partner violence and mental health



What we know

Parenting includes a range of behaviours such as providing guidance and emotional support, creating structure and consistency, and setting and enforcing boundaries in ways which support positive child development, help children learn expectations and consequences for behaviours, reward good behaviour, and engage with the world¹⁻³. While there is a tendency to label a person as a good or bad parent, in reality parents engage in a range of behaviours which may both be healthy and unhealthy, such as use of non-violent and violent discipline strategies with children. Negative life experiences such as childhood exposure to violence from caregivers, intimate partner violence exposure in adolescence and adulthood, and socioeconomic factors such as poverty, are known risk factors for negative parenting behaviours⁴⁻⁷. These positive and negative parenting behaviours may have short-and long-term effects on children's health and behaviours⁸.



What we need to learn

To date, there is limited understanding on intergenerational transmission of positive and negative parenting behaviours in South Africa, as most evidence on parenting comes from North America, Europe, and Australia. While intimate partner violence exposure and mental distress are associated with negative parenting behaviours, there is a gap in longitudinal research on how these risk factors relate to childhood parenting experiences. Understanding pathways and related mechanisms for intergenerational transmission of both positive and negative parenting behaviours may illuminate strategies to intervene to promote positive parenting and mitigate impacts of negative parenting.



How we did the research

In 2010-2011, 1664 adolescents aged 10 – 17 were randomly sampled from households in Ehlenzani district, Mpumalanga province, and invited to participate in interviews about their health and wellbeing, including experiences of parenting behaviours and mental distress. In 2022-2024, those same adolescents, now young adults aged 20-33, were re-interviewed about their health and wellbeing, including their own use of parenting strategies with a child in their care. This study focused on the childhood experiences of female adolescents (n=549) who were caring for their own biological child, or caring for a child as if they were the child's parent, in adulthood. Confirmatory factor analysis established that eight domains of parenting were relevant to young women in Mpumalanga, and structural equation modelling was used to identify pathways between childhood experiences of several parenting behaviours, and adult use of parenting strategies with children.



What did we find

Receiving more praise from parents in childhood is protective for child mental health. Female children who received more positive verbal feedback from their caregivers such as compliments and praise for good behaviour and for helping with household chores had fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation and/or attempt. Children who received more praise were also less likely to enforce punishments and to reduce the strength of stated punishments with their own children in adulthood.

Experiencing psychological abuse from caregivers exacerbates childhood mental distress. Overall, 66% of female children experienced abusive behaviour from caregivers, with 44% experiencing psychological abuse. Psychological abuse exposure was significantly associated with children's depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidality symptoms among female children. Physical abuse exposure was marginally associated with greater depression symptoms but not with anxiety, PTSD, or suicidal ideation or attempt.

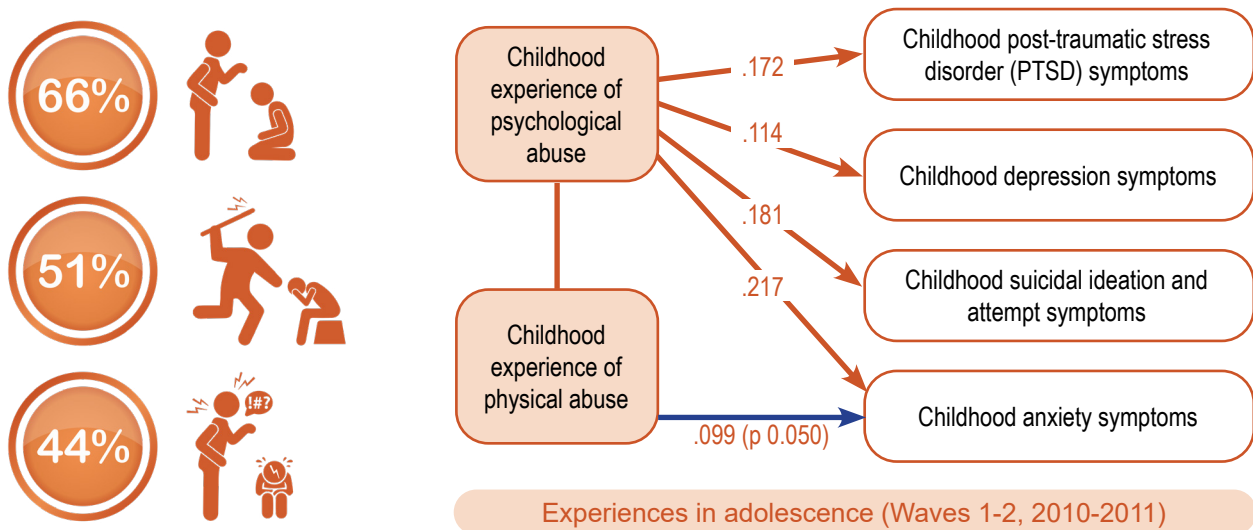


Figure 1. Prevalence and impact of violent experiences of parenting on adolescent mental health, Waves 1-2 (2010-2011). Black arrows show significant ($p < 0.05$) associations, and blue arrows show marginal ($p < 0.10$) associations.

Female adolescents who experience psychological abuse are more likely to experience a cascade of risk factors which lead to violent parenting. Overall, 53% of females who were caregiving for a child in adulthood had used physical or psychological abuse, or deprivational neglect,

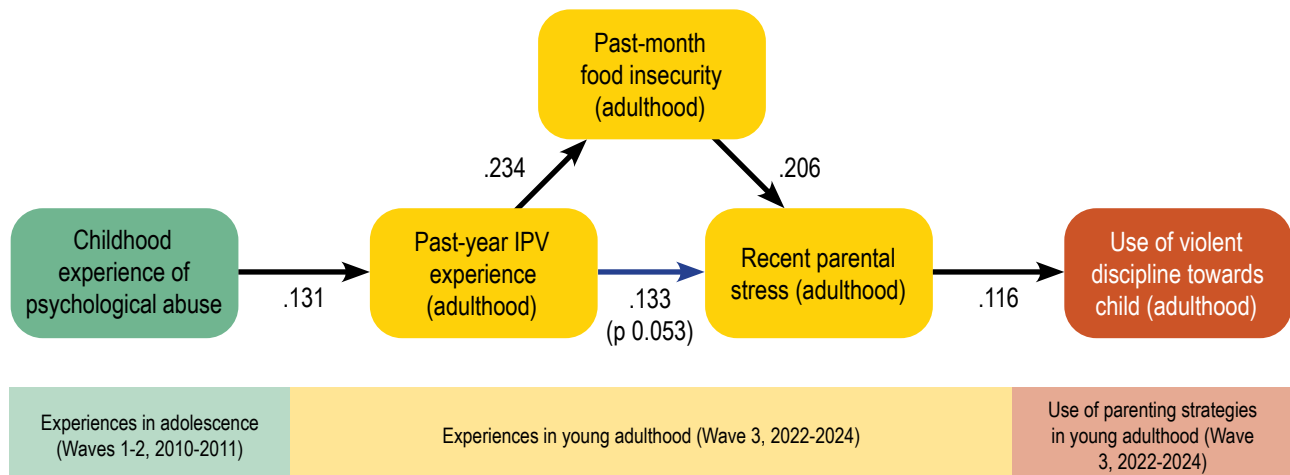


Figure 2. Mechanisms for intergenerational transmission of violent parenting among female young adults in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Black arrows show significant ($p < 0.05$) associations, and blue arrows show marginal ($p < 0.10$) associations.

against their children. While psychological abuse exposure in childhood was not directly associated with use of violent discipline strategies with children, our findings revealed an indirect pathway which helps explain the role of intimate partner violence exposure in negative parenting. Specifically, female children who experienced psychological abuse were more likely to experience lifetime and past-year IPV, and female adults who experienced past-year IPV were more likely to experience food insecurity. Greater food insecurity, in turn, exacerbated parenting stress, and greater parenting stress was directly associated with use of violent discipline with children.



Programme implications

- Child and family-focused interventions may promote positive parenting and mitigate negative parenting strategies through a combination of:
 - Parent skills training focused positive verbal feedback, and relationship-building through play and activities with children, and appropriate discipline strategies;
 - Social support network building and stress relief activities to reduce parental stress; and
 - Economic empowerment and/or cash transfer provision to families to address food insecurity.
- Greater investment in mental health services and in group-based community mental health programming for children may mitigate negative impacts of violent parenting experiences and create avenues for building social support.
- Addressing IPV through prevention efforts and greater provision of psychological and financial support to survivors may help promote positive parenting and prevent use of violent parenting with children.

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Source

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