

# Wounding Words: Maternal Verbal Aggression and Children's Adjustment

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Psychological maltreatment, including verbal aggression, has been implicated as an important contributor to children's behavioral problems. The present study looked specifically at the relationship between different forms of maternal verbal aggression and their association with children's adjustment. Mothers from Violent and Nonviolent families were compared on their use of various verbal aggression tactics, as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). Mothers from both groups used threats and insults with comparable frequency. In both groups, insults were predictive of children's adjustment. The relationship was particularly striking in children from violent homes. We conclude that chronic exposure to inter-parental violence may render children emotionally susceptible to maternal disparagement.

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**KEY WORDS:** maternal verbal aggression; children's adjustment.

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Claussen and Crittenden (1991) have demonstrated that physical maltreatment tends to co-occur with psychological maltreatment, and that developmental dysfunction is more strongly associated with variation in the latter, compared to the former. In their study, psychological abuse was defined by a broad range of behaviors, including isolation, ostracism, and lack of attention. Ney *et al.* (1986) reported that verbal abuse was more likely than other kinds of abuse to affect children's view of themselves. In a later study, Ney *et al.* (1994) found that a combination of physical neglect, physical abuse, and verbal abuse had the greatest impact on children's sense of well-being. Also, an early age of onset for verbal abuse, combined with emotional neglect were significantly associated with greater severity and frequency of mistreatment.

Other researchers have focused specifically on the relationship between verbal aggression and child adjustment.

Vissing *et al.* (1991) found a strong positive correlation between the amount of parental verbal aggression and the number of behavior problems exhibited by their children. Verbal aggression was independent of physical aggression. Regardless of whether or not parents were physically violent, verbal aggression was associated with children's psychosocial problems. The relationship between physical aggression and children's adjustment was negligible unless the parents were simultaneously verbally aggressive. Solomon and Serres (1999) have shown that parental verbal aggression was highly correlated with self-esteem and academic achievement of 10 year-old boys and girls. In a study by Spillane-Grieco (2000), teenaged criminal offenders reported high frequencies of extreme verbal abuse in their families that did not exist for a matched group of nonoffenders.

As Vissing and Baily (1996) have noted, there is no common definition of parental verbal aggression. Consequently, its measurement has varied widely from study to study. They recommended that further research attempt to identify the key aspects of verbal aggression. We took a step in that direction by attempting to identify the specific elements of verbal aggression associated with children's adjustment.

Our previous research on children from violent homes (Moore & Pepler, 1998) revealed that the single

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most potent predictor of children's adjustment in both violent and nonviolent families was the amount of maternal verbal aggression directed at the children. Levels were equivalent in both violent and non-violent families, however the relationship between maternal verbal aggression and adjustment was stronger within the violent families.

What accounts for the link between verbal aggression and child problems? While the finding that maternal verbal abuse has negative consequences for children is not new (Egeland & Erickson, 1987), the mechanism(s) linking specific forms of abuse with adjustment have only recently been articulated. Cummings (1998) has proposed an emotional security hypothesis whereby children react not just to the occurrence of parental conflict, but also to its meaning. The child's appraisal of conflict and their evaluation of its significance for their own well-being is an important determinant of the impact of marital conflict on children's functioning. We hypothesized that in the context of family violence, harsh criticism directed at the child would be especially harmful to children's adjustment. Marital conflict often produces disturbances in parent-child relationships. A hostile mother-child dynamic may threaten children's sense of safety and cultivate feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem, fear and anxiety (Harold *et al.*, 1997; Fincham *et al.*, 1994)

To investigate this hypothesis, we looked at the particular form of verbal aggression used by mothers. Because our measure of verbal aggression was based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979), we were afforded the opportunity to look at the distribution of specific types of verbal aggression. The Verbal Aggression component of the CTS is comprised of six different types of verbal aggression. These are: (1) insulted or swore at; (2) sulked or refused to talk about it; (3) stomped out of the room or house; (4) did or said something to spite the other; (5) threaten to hit or throw something at other; and (6) threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something.

Interparental aggression may lead to an increase in hostile parent-child exchanges. Consequently, we hypothesized that mothers from violent families would use insults with greater frequency than mothers from nonviolent families. Because of their increased vulnerability and anxiety, we also hypothesized that children from violent families would be more negatively affected by maternal insults than their counterparts in nonviolent families.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were children in the age range of 6–12 years, and their mothers. Data were collected on

110 children of mothers residing in several shelters for battered women (Violent group), and 100 children of mothers residing with their partners in nonviolent relationships (Nonviolent group). Other comparison groups that were included in the original study were excluded from these analyses because we were particularly interested in comparing mothers' use of verbal aggression in the context of chronic inter-parental violence. The omitted groups consisted of single mothers and homeless families, some of whom had experienced prior violence, but not to the extent of the shelter mothers. Shelter residents were recruited by means of notice-board announcements posted in the residences and/or through resident staff soliciting their participation. Nonviolent family participants were recruited through ads in local neighborhood newspapers.

Descriptive characteristics of the families are provided in Moore and Pepler (1998). Mothers in the Violent group differed from comparison mothers in terms of general health, education level, and income. None of these factors, however, were strong predictors of children's adjustment. The single strongest predictor of child adjustment in both groups was the amount of mother-to-child verbal aggression. The relationship was stronger for children in Violent families, but overall amounts of maternal verbal aggression were equivalent for the two groups.

### Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted separately and simultaneously for mothers and children. Shelter mothers and children were tested at the shelter within three weeks of their arrival. The research was described to the participants as a survey of family problem-solving tactics and child development. A brief description of the testing instruments was provided to mothers expressing interest in participating. Children and mothers in the nonviolent groups were tested in their homes. Mothers and children were remunerated for their participation. The measures described below were completed by all participating mothers and their children.

### *Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) Straus (1979)*

The CTS provided a measure of the use of verbal aggression and physical violence between family members during the previous year. Conflict tactics were assessed between parents and between each parent and each child in the target age range. Shelter mothers (i.e., those assigned to the Violent group) reported frequent and severe father-to-mother physical aggression, including slapping, kicking, choking, and threatening or using weapons. The

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amount of father-to-mother physical violence in the Non-violent families was negligible.

Verbal aggression was operationally defined by the reported use of any of the following tactics: (1) insulting or swearing at; (2) sulking or refusing to talk about it; (3) stomping out of the room or house; (4) doing or saying something to spite the other; (5) threatening to hit or throw something at the other; and (6) throwing, smashing, hitting, or kicking something. Mothers provided a report of the frequency with which any of the above tactics were used during the previous year (0 = *never*; 1 = *once*; 2 = *2 or 3 times*; 3 = *less than once a month*; 4 = *once a month*; 5 = *more than once a month*; 6 = *more than once a week*).

*Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983)*

Mothers' perceptions of their children's behavior problems during the previous six months were assessed using the CBCL which yields standardized (T-score) scores for Internalizing, Externalizing, Total Behavior problems, and Social Competence. The CBCL has been widely used by investigators in diverse areas of research, and has frequently been used specifically to measure the nature and extent of behavioral problems in children from violent homes.

In the original study, mothers' interviews entailed the administration of the Conflict Tactics Scale, General Health Questionnaire, and the Child Behavior Checklist. Children were administered the reading and math subscales of the WRAT-R, the Digit Span subtest of the WISC, and the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale. The data to be described here focus exclusively on the Maternal Verbal Aggression Subscale of the CTS and the CBCL Total Behavior Problems Subscale.

## RESULTS

Table I shows the relative contribution of each of the six Verbal Aggression tactics to the overall Maternal Verbal Aggression score for mothers from Violent and Non-violent families. The means reflect the proportions of each of the six CTS tactics in the composite verbal aggression scores for each group. In other words, Insults accounted for 22% of the verbal aggression score for the Violent group, and for 27% of the score for the Nonviolent group. Columns do not sum to 100% because of rounding errors.

Group differences were negligible and nonsignificant, multivariate  $F(5,198) < 1$ , thus our hypothesis that insults would be more frequent in the Violent families was

**Table I.** Relative Contribution of Each of the CTS Tactics to the Overall Maternal Verbal Aggression Score, by Group

CTS Tactic	Group			
	Violent ( <i>n</i> = 110)		Nonviolent ( <i>n</i> = 100)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Insult	0.22	0.20	0.27	0.27
Threat	0.29	0.29	0.29	0.30
Sulk	0.14	0.21	0.09	0.15
Stomp	0.12	0.16	0.18	0.23
Threw	0.11	0.17	0.08	0.11
Spite	0.10	0.14	0.09	0.11

not supported. Mothers in both groups used insults with comparable frequencies. Threats and insults, together, accounted for more than half of the total in both groups. Subsequent analyses focused specifically on the between- and within-group associations between children's adjustment and mothers' use of Insults and Threats. Mothers in each group were partitioned into those using Insults and Threats either frequently or never. Frequent use was operationally defined as at least once a month. Figures 1 and 2 show the associations between children's adjustment and mothers' use of Insults and Threats, for Violent and Nonviolent families respectively. Mothers' use of Insults was associated with poorer children's adjustment for both Violent and Nonviolent families,  $F(1,124) = 32.2, p < .0001$ . There was also a main effect of Group, with poorer overall children's adjustment in the Violent families,  $F(1,124) = 22.29, p < .0001$ . The interaction was not significant,  $F < 1$ . A similar pattern of results was observed for mothers' use of Threats. Use of Threats was associated with poorer adjustment,  $F(1,114) = 9.01, p < .003$ . There was a main effect of Group, with children from Violent families showing poorer overall adjustment,  $F(1,114) = 15.45, p < .0001$ . Again, the interaction did not approach significance,  $F < 1$ . Because mothers' use of Threats and/or Insults were not independent, the above ANOVA's were conducted using each of the two tactics (Insults and Threats) as a covariate for the other's ANOVA.

The preceding analyses do not reveal any dramatic differences between threats and insults in terms of their relative impact on adjustment. The main effects mentioned above are expected. Frequent use of either tactic is associated with poorer adjustment, and children from violent homes are more poorly adjusted than those from nonviolent homes. Although neither of the interactions was significant, it is noteworthy that children from Violent families whose mothers never used insults were no more poorly adjusted than children from nonviolent

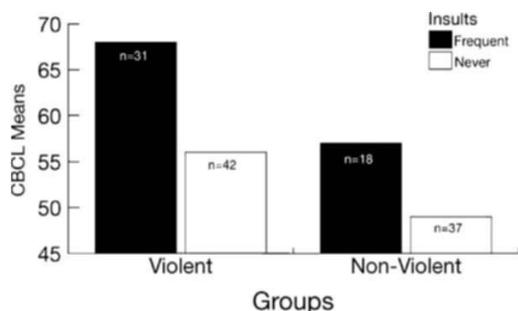


Fig. 1. Children’s mean adjustment scores (CBCL Total Behavior Problems) as a function of mothers’ use of insults.

homes whose mothers frequently used insults. Within the violent families, insult frequency correlated more strongly with behavioral problems (.52 [109],  $p < .001$ ), than did threat frequency (.26 [109],  $p < .001$ ). This difference was significant,  $Z = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . Corresponding  $r$ 's within the nonviolent families (.32 and .25 respectively) did not differ from one another,  $Z < 1$ .

To further explore possible differences between Insults and Threats, we next looked at the proportion of children with CBCL scores in the clinical range. Table II displays these proportions.

These data reveal a dramatic difference with respect to the association between children’s adjustment and mothers’ use of threats vs. insults. In Nonviolent families, tactics did not differ in terms of their association with adjustment, nor did their frequent use predict poorer adjustment. In Violent families, however, the frequent use of insults was strongly associated with poorer adjustment whereas the presence or absence of threats was uncorrelated with adjustment (see Fig. 3). A chi-square analysis using Insults (frequent vs. never) and clinical range status was significant for children from Violent families ( $\chi^2(1) = 8.65$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Comparable chi-squares for Non-

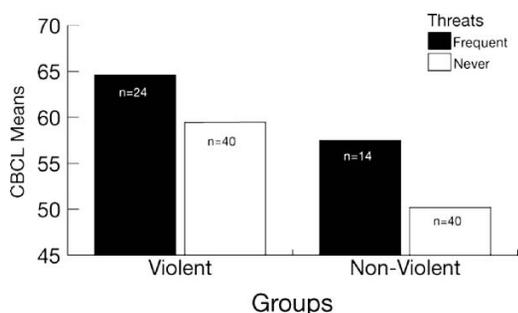


Fig. 2. Children’s mean adjustment scores (CBCL Total Behavior Problems) as a function of mothers’ use of threats.

Table II. Proportion of Children in Clinical Range (CBCL Total Behavior Problems Score >98th percentile) × Maternal Insults vs Threats, × Group

Tactic	Group	
	Violent	Nonviolent
Frequent threats	0.29 (n = 24)	0.07 (n = 14)
No threats	0.25 (n = 40)	0.00 (n = 40)
	} ns	
Frequent insults	0.42 (n = 31)	0.06 (n = 18)
No insults	0.12 (n = 42)	0.00 (n = 37)
	}*	

\* $p < .01$ .

violent families, and for threats within the Violent group were all non-significant.

### DISCUSSION

These results support and extend the findings from other studies that have shown that psychological maltreatment is often associated with maladjustment, independently of physical abuse (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; Moore & Pepler, 1998; Ney *et al.*, 1994; Vissing *et al.*, 1991). The findings suggest that in violent families, insults that originate with the mother are a strong predictor of children’s adjustment. While the inference of a causal link is tempting, these data are essentially correlational in nature. The possibility that more poorly adjusted children elicit more verbal aggression from their caretakers cannot be ruled out. On the other hand, if misbehavior simply attracts more parental criticism, why would the relationship between verbal aggression and adjustment be limited to mothers, and why would the relationship be so much stronger for insults, compared to threats which occur with just as much frequency? When mothers report the use of

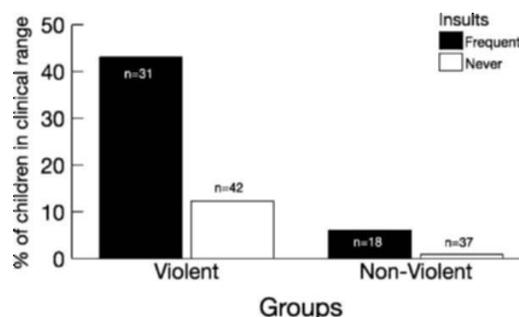


Fig. 3. Proportion of children from violent families in clinical range of CBCL (>98th percentile) as a function of mothers’ use of insults.

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threats, they may be including disciplinary tactics that are context appropriate. We cannot be sure what mothers have in mind when they report the use of threats. "Go to bed and shut up or I'll smack your face," and "Please stop teasing your sister or I'll turn off the television" both illustrate the use of threats, but the latter is arguably more benign than the former. Our instrumentation was simply insensitive to these differences, and this could explain why children's adjustment had a relatively weak association with the use of threats. Similarly, we have no way of knowing what the insults consisted of, however it is quite possible that they subsumed elements of scorn, contempt, and disdain that are psychologically hurtful.

### CONCLUSION

These results constitute a small step towards identifying the key dimensions of verbal aggression and their potential influence on children's adjustment (c.f. Vissing & Baily, 1996). Previous studies have used composite measures of parental verbal aggression without disentangling possible differences between mothers' and fathers' use of these tactics (e.g., Ney *et al.*, 1994, 1986; Vissing *et al.*, 1991). Our earlier data showed that mothers' verbalizations were far more predictive of adjustment than fathers' (Moore & Pepler, 1998). The present study indicates that maternal insults may be especially potent, particularly in the context of family violence. Children from violent families were three times more likely to have serious clinical problems if their mothers reported frequent use of insults, compared to mothers who never used insults. Chronic exposure to inter-parental hostility may render children emotionally susceptible to maternal disparagement (Davies *et al.*, 2002). As the primary caretaker, mothers' remarks to their children may be more influential than fathers', and when the comments are disrespectful and derisive they may have quite adverse consequences, including self-blame and emotional insecurity. Insults can be dispensed quickly and frequently. Increased aware-

ness of their potentially damaging impact might temper their use.

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