



Center for the Development of Peace and Well-Being

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Center for the Development of Peace & Well-Being

Undergraduate Fellow – Project Description

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Empathy in the Verbal Responses of Preschool-Age Witnesses and Non-Witnesses to Domestic Violence

Empathy is a construct that plays a pivotal role in children's development of interpersonal relationships and their ability to function socially. It is a quality that fosters insight into different perspectives, promotes genuine open-mindedness, and encourages altruistic behavior. However, while most empirical literature on the construct focuses on the significant role that empathy plays in the developmental continuum, a conspicuous lack of attention is thus given to domestic factors or situations which might inhibit or limit children's capacity for empathy. The present study therefore intends to investigate the relationship between witnessing domestic violence and an important aspect of children's early social-emotional development—their ability to respond empathically to the distress of others.

This project aims to highlight this relationship through a qualitative analysis of the verbal responses of preschool witnesses and non-witnesses to domestic violence during administrations of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Revised (WPPSI-R). Each child's capacity for empathy will be determined based on how well he/she elicits an affective, emotional response that stems from the comprehension of another's emotional state or condition and is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel. Total empathy scores will then be statistically correlated to the intensity of violence witnessed home, as reported by each child's mother during earlier clinical assessments.

The primary question of the current study asks whether children who witness marital violence in the home are adversely affected in their ability to empathize with emotional state of another. More specifically, do these children exhibit less empathy in their verbal responses to a question addressing how they would react to a distressed peer than the comparative normal sample? Furthermore, it is hypothesized that higher levels of exposure to domestic violence will be associated with lower levels of empathy in preschool-age witnesses to marital violence. Results of this research hope to shed light upon the growing number of young children in the United States who live in homes in which domestic violence is perpetrated, in addition to how witnessing episodes of violent marital conflict can lead to the development of maladaptive empathic trajectories.