

# Kids witnessing family violence

by Kathleen Moss

This article is adapted from "Witnessing violence — aggression and anxiety in young children," *How Healthy Are Canadians?*, December 2003 (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003-SIE). The article is available free online at [www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-003-SIE/82-003-SIE2003000.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-003-SIE/82-003-SIE2003000.htm).

Exposure to violence in the home is now recognized as a form of child maltreatment. Nonetheless, recent research on how witnessing violence may affect children is often unclear, contradictory and inconclusive.

Some studies have found that children exposed to family violence have more emotional and behavioural problems, such as anxiety and aggression, than do children who are not exposed. Other studies have not always found such relationships. As well, some children can experience effects over the short- and/or longer-term, while others seem unaffected by witnessing violence in the home. Furthermore, the immediate and longer-term associations between seeing violent behaviour and a child's aggression and anxiety appear to depend on a number of factors, such as the child's age and sex, the severity, intensity and frequency of the violence witnessed, the child's perception of his or her role in these episodes, and the parents' responses.<sup>1</sup>

To date, much of the research has been based on data collected at one point in time; for example, accounts

from adult survivors of family violence. In contrast, this article draws on both longitudinal and cross-sectional data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to provide a more complete picture. First, it uses the most recent estimates (1998/99) to profile those children aged 4 to 7 who have witnessed violence at home; then it examines data from three cycles of the NLSCY to assess concurrent and longer-term impacts on the levels of aggression and anxiety observed among children who witnessed family violence in 1994/95.

## What is violence at home?

In this study, violence at home comprises physical aggression between adults or teenagers. Whether a child had witnessed violence was determined by asking the person most knowledgeable (almost invariably the

biological mother) "How often does the child see adults or teenagers in the home physically fighting, hitting or otherwise trying to hurt others?" The four possible responses were "never," "seldom," "sometimes" or "often." Children who saw any violent episodes were classified as having witnessed violence in the home.

Although the longitudinal nature<sup>2</sup> of the NLSCY makes it a valuable tool to assess effects of family violence over time, there are some limitations on the data. Because the analysis is based on information provided by a parent, it refers only to violence that they were aware of and were willing to disclose. Furthermore, the severity of the violence is unknown, and it is not known if the children may themselves have been victims. As well, the questions pertain only to physical aggression and do not include emotional abuse such as verbal insults.

1. Dauvergne, M. and H. Johnson. 2001. "Children witnessing family violence." *Juristat* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-002) 21, 6: 1-13.

2. Longitudinal surveys follow the same respondents over time. This "follow-up" approach allows analysts to learn if an event that occurs in one year is associated with characteristics or behaviours in subsequent years.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) has been conducted by Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada every two years since 1994/95. It has both longitudinal and cross-sectional components. It follows a representative sample of Canadian children aged newborn to 11 in all provinces and territories into adulthood.

In each household, the person considered most knowledgeable about the child answers a set of questions designed to provide socio-economic and general health information about himself or herself, his or her spouse or partner, and about the child, including the child's health and social environment.

### Three time-frames of the study

The principal goal of this study is to learn whether or not exposure to family violence has concurrent or longer-term associations with children's behaviour; specifically, whether these children exhibit higher rates of overt aggression, indirect aggression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> To address this question, children who witnessed violence in 1994/95 were followed over the next two cycles of the NLSCY, and their behaviours were compared with that of children living in non-violent homes.

First, this study used the cross-sectional component of the 1998/99 NLSCY to determine the prevalence of witnessing violence, in relation to selected characteristics of the child, parent and family. These data provide the most up-to-date profile (at time of writing) of children at risk of living in these types of situations.

Second, the study used the 1994/95 cross-sectional component to examine associations between witnessing violence at home and three possible outcomes indicating overt aggression, indirect aggression and anxiety. The strength of relationships

between violence at home and these behaviours were tested in a series of multivariate analytical models that controlled for demographic, socio-economic, family and parenting characteristics believed to play a role in the relationship.

Third, the longitudinal file was used to measure the association between witnessing violence at home in 1994/95 and high levels of overt aggression, indirect aggression and anxiety two years later (1996/97) and four years later (1998/99). Again, the associations were examined in multivariate models. The behaviour of children who had witnessed violence was compared with that of children who did not have the experience.

### Limitations of the data and the results

The NLSCY is a general survey designed to monitor child development; therefore, questions about physical violence in the home are limited. It asks only about violence that children see; no information is provided about the more covert ways in which children may be exposed to violence (heard a confrontation or experienced the aftermath). As well, the questions pertain only to physical violence and do not include emotional abuse such as verbal insults. Nor was it possible to determine who was involved in the violence, although this might influence the relationship between witnessing violence and the outcomes. In addition, parents may falsely assume that their children are not aware of the violence. Furthermore, a parent's wish to provide socially desirable answers may influence descriptions of parenting style and of the child's behaviour.

1. For a full definition of these behaviours, and the method used to determine if a child exhibited them, see the original article at [www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-003-SIE/82-003-SIE2003000.htm](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/82-003-SIE/82-003-SIE2003000.htm).

### One in 12 young children saw violence at home

According to the 1998/99 NLSCY, one in 12 children aged 4 to 7 years old — 8%, or about 120,000 — had witnessed violence at home. More than one-third

of these children (35%) had "sometimes" or "often" seen such behaviour. Boys and girls were equally likely to have been witnesses.

Children with a parent aged 35 or older, as well as those with siblings in

the household, were more likely to have witnessed violence than those whose parents were younger or had no siblings. Four- to 7-year-olds from families with lower socio-economic status — a parent with less than high

	<b>% of children aged 4 to 7 who witnessed violence in the home</b>
<b>Both sexes</b>	<b>8.1</b>
Boy	8.2
Girl	8.0
<b>Child's age</b>	
4 or 5	8.3
6 or 7	7.9
<b>Parent's age</b>	
Under 35	6.8
35 or older	9.3
<b>Family type</b>	
Two biological/adoptive parents	7.5
Two parents (at least one stepparent)	6.9 <sup>E</sup>
Lone parent	11.4
<b>Siblings in household</b>	
None	4.7 <sup>E</sup>
One or more	8.7
<b>Parent's education</b>	
Less than secondary	11.9
Secondary	8.2
At least some postsecondary	7.4
<b>Parent employed</b>	
Yes	8.1
No	8.4 <sup>E</sup>
<b>Household income*</b>	
Lowest/lower-middle	13.1
Middle/upper-middle/high	7.3
<b>Parent has low emotional support</b>	
Yes	9.1
No	8.0
<b>Parenting style</b>	
<i>Low positive interaction</i>	
Yes	10.8
No	7.3
<i>Low consistency</i>	
Yes	11.8
No	7.1
<i>Hostile</i>	
Yes	12.1
No	7.0
<i>Punitive</i>	
Yes	12.3
No	7.3

<sup>E</sup> Use with caution.

\* "Lowest/lower-middle" households report total income under \$20,000 per year if the household numbers 1 to 4 person(s), and under \$30,000 per year if it numbers 5 or more. All other households are classified as "middle/upper-middle/high income."

Source: Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1998/99.

school graduation and a lower or lower-middle family income — were also more likely to witness violence in the home. A high proportion (11%) of children in lone-parent families had been witnesses to family violence, compared with about 7% of children in two-parent families.

Parenting style was also a factor associated with witnessing violence at home. Higher rates of witnessing violence were reported for children whose parents gave little positive feedback, or were quite hostile or punitive in their interactions with the child.<sup>3</sup>

For the majority of children who saw violence in their home, these outbursts were not a recurring event. Close to 60% of those reported to have witnessed violence in 1994/95 did not do so two or four years later. Nevertheless, having witnessed violence had both an immediate and a longer-term association with children's aggression and anxiety.

### Children witnessing violence show concurrent effects

Fighting, making threats, getting angry and bullying are all signs of overt aggression. For both boys and girls in 1994/95, witnessing violence at home was associated with aggressive behaviour: 43% of boys and 27% of girls who had witnessed family violence, compared with 25% and 17%, respectively, of those who had not.

Of course, factors other than witnessing physical aggression between adults and teenagers in the family may contribute to a child's behaviour problems. A multivariate statistical analysis was used to control for a number of socio-economic influences,

3. Four parenting styles were selected for this study: positive interaction, consistent, hostile/ineffective, and punitive. For a description of the methods used to determine each style, refer to the original article.

	Adjusted odds ratio					
	Boys			Girls		
	Concurrent year (1994/95)	Short-term (1996/97)	Longer-term (1998/99)	Concurrent year (1994/95)	Short-term (1996/97)	Longer-term (1998/99)
Overt aggression	1.9*	1.7*	2.1*	1.8*	2.3*	2.1*
Indirect aggression	1.6*	1.1	1.5	1.4	2.0*	1.5
Anxiety	1.4	1.9*	1.0	2.6*	1.4	2.2*

\* Indicates statistically significant difference from the reference group.

Note: Adjusted odds ratio for those children aged 4 to 7 who witnessed violence in the home in 1994/95, compared with those who did not witness violence. Those who did not witness violence at home are the reference group and have an adjusted odds ratio of 1.0.

Source: Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth.

thereby isolating the effect of a child's exposure to violence.<sup>4</sup> The magnitude of the association is expressed in terms of an odds ratio; that is, the estimated likelihood that children witnessing violence at home will exhibit emotional or behavioural problems compared to the likelihood for the reference group, which in this study is the children who did not witness violence. By definition, the odds for the reference group is 1.0, so a ratio over 1.0 for children who witnessed violence indicates a greater likelihood that their behaviour is associated with their experience in the home.

Even when other confounding factors were taken into account, the results of the statistical model show that witnessing violence continued to be associated with certain behaviours in the short-term. For both boys and girls, levels of overt aggression were significantly elevated in 1994/95. Girls who had witnessed violence recorded more than twice the odds of aggression compared to girls who had not.

Aggression is not necessarily physical or overt. It may involve more subtle behaviour, such as trying to get others to dislike or exclude a particular person, gossiping, and disclosing someone's secrets; in other words,

indirect aggression. In 1994/95, about one quarter of boys and girls who were reported to have witnessed violence at home displayed indirect aggression, compared with 13% of boys and 17% of girls who had not.

When other factors in the model were taken into consideration, the concurrent relationship between witnessing violence and indirect aggression differed between the sexes. Boys who witnessed violence at home in 1994/95 had higher odds of exhibiting indirectly aggressive behaviour that same year than boys who were not witnesses; meanwhile, for girls, it was not significantly associated with the likelihood that she would engage in such behaviour.

A child classified as having high anxiety was, in the parent's opinion, unhappy, fearful and tense. Such characteristics were relatively common among children who had witnessed violence in the home, compared with their contemporaries who

had not. In 1994/95, 12% of boys who had witnessed violence had a high level of anxiety, but only 6% of those who had not; the corresponding percentages for girls were 14% and 5%.

However, for boys, the relationship between anxiety and witnessing family violence did not persist when factors such as family type and parenting style were taken into account. By contrast, the odds of high anxiety in 1994/95 were over two times greater for girls who had witnessed violence, compared with those who had not, even allowing for the effects of other variables.

### Seeing violence linked to longer-term behaviour problems

Previous research has found that although children's reactions may be more pronounced immediately after they have been exposed to violence, they can also display longer-term developmental or psychological problems, or both, such as conduct disorder and antisocial or self-injurious behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

4. The variables in the model were: the child's age; reporting parent's age; presence of siblings in the household; family type (lone-parent, two-parent with at least one stepparent, two biological/adoptive parents); reporting parent's education; reporting parent's employment status; household income; reporting parent's level of emotional support; and parenting style.

5. Conduct disorders such as aggression in childhood may be the single best predictor of future conduct disorders. Bennett, K. 2001. "Screening for conduct problems: does the predictive accuracy of conduct disorder symptoms improve with age?" *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 40, 12: 1418-1425.

Analysis of the NLSCY results supports these conclusions from earlier studies. The odds that children who had witnessed violence at home in 1994/95 would continue to exhibit overt aggression behaviour remained significantly higher over the short- and longer-term than those of other children who did not witness violence. The high odds of overt aggression among girls is somewhat unexpected; other studies have found that girls are more likely to internalize the effects of violence with anxiety, rather than externalize them with physical aggression.

In contrast, the association of indirect aggression with violence did not persist over the longer-term. Girls who had witnessed violence in 1994/95 had higher levels of indirect aggression in 1996/97, but by 1998/99, the difference was no longer statistically significant. For boys, the odds were not significantly greater, in either year, than those for boys who had been living in homes that were not violent.

However, witnessing violence in 1994/95 was significantly associated with anxiety in subsequent years: two years later for boys and four years later for girls. The high odds of anxiety among boys is somewhat surprising. Other studies have found that boys are more likely to react with externalizing behaviour such as physical aggression. Furthermore, these findings are particularly notable given that anxiety is less visible than aggression and, therefore, more difficult to identify in younger children.

### Summary

A small but significant proportion of young children aged 4 to 7 — one in 12 in 1998/99 — have witnessed aggression at home. Statistical analysis indicates that witnessing violence in 1994/95 was associated with high levels of overt aggression. For boys, the experience was also linked with indirect aggression and, for girls, with anxiety.

For most of these young children, violence at home is an infrequent occurrence. However, compared with children who had not witnessed violence in 1994/95, boys and girls who had seen violent episodes at home continued to be overtly aggressive two and four years later. In addition, girls were more likely to display indirect aggression in 1996/97 and anxiety in 1998/99, while elevated anxiety was observed for boys in 1996/97. These results add to the emerging evidence that witnessing violence is associated with aggression and anxiety in young children, and that these problems persist in both the short- and longer-term.



**Kathleen Moss** is an analyst with Health Statistics Division, Statistics Canada.

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