

# Intimate Partner Violence, Parental Divorce, and Child Custody: Directions for Intervention and Future Research\*

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**Abstract:** Joint custody and cooperative coparenting are often unsafe for women who leave violent partners. Although certain legal protections are available, more work is needed to understand and address abused women's needs in this context. This study provides divorce scholars and practitioners with information on the interface between separation/divorce and intimate partner violence. We review existing research, policies, and programs and propose directions for intervention and research that center around the unique needs of these families.

**Key Words:** child custody, children and domestic violence, coparenting, divorce, intimate partner violence.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to a pattern of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse by a current or former intimate partner in the context of coercive control (Campbell & Boyd, 2000). Although violence may be perpetrated by men and women, we focus on male-perpetrated IPV in this study. IPV is a key factor in many women's decisions to end their marriages (Kurz, 1996). Yet, separation does not always stop the violence. Women who share children with abusers are particularly vulnerable to post-separation violence, as they are likely to have ongoing contact with former partners, ongoing contact presents opportunities for further violence. Thus, joint custody and cooperative coparenting, which are strongly encouraged by courts in many states, are often not realistic or safe for abused women and can be harmful for their children (Hardesty, 2002). In this article, we explore the intersection of separation or divorce and IPV and its relevance to divorce scholars and practitioners. First, we review research, policies, and programs related to IPV, parental divorce, and child custody. Unless otherwise specified, we use "child custody" broadly to refer to physical and legal custody, as well as visitation. Based on the limitations of existing work, we

then propose directions for intervention and future research that center around the unique needs of these families.

## Theoretical Framework

According to systems theory, all members of a family are interdependent (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). One part of the family cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the system, and what happens to one part of the system affects the entire family. Families also influence and are influenced by other systems (e.g., cultural norms, legal system), which make up the family's environmental context and may support or interfere with family functioning (Whitchurch & Constantine). Based on these assumptions, systems theory is helpful for understanding how families adjust to separation/divorce and experience violence. Mother-child, father-child, and mother-father dyads experience significant transformations when parents separate, as they develop new rules and ways of interacting (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997). Although separated, parents remain interdependent

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through their connection to the same child (Ahrns, 1994). However, this ongoing connection between former spouses presents risks to women and their children when there is IPV. Drawing from family systems theory, we offer recommendations for intervention and research that consider the needs of the entire family system, while at the same time holding perpetrators of IPV accountable for their behavior and prioritizing the safety of women and children after separation/divorce.

## Postseparation Violence

Data are not available specific to who is more likely to initiate separation when there is IPV. However, we suspect that women are more likely than men to initiate separation in abusive relationships for two reasons. First, leaving is the culturally accepted and dominant solution available to women who are victims of abuse (Brown, 1997). Second, abusive men are often highly dependent on their partners (Johnston & Roseby, 1997) and thus reluctant to relinquish control over them through separation (Hotton, 2001). For these reasons, our discussion focuses on situations in which women initiate separation from abusive partners.

Although women are encouraged to leave abusive partners to protect themselves and their children, separation is a time of heightened risk for abused women. Studies indicate that violence often continues after women leave and sometimes escalates (Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000). Women report ongoing fear after they leave (Kurz, 1996), which appears warranted. Compared to married women, divorced women in one study were 2.5 times more likely to experience violence in the past year, and separated women were 6.5 times more likely to experience violence (Kershner, Long, & Anderson, 1998). Separation is also positively associated with a woman's risk of being killed by an intimate partner (Campbell et al., 2003). When children are involved, women tend to perceive a higher threat of repeat violence, in part because they are not able to sever all ties with the abuser after separation (Belamaric, 2003). Instead, they often have ongoing exposure to the abuser as they negotiate custody and share parenting after divorce (Shalansky, Ericksen, & Henderson, 1999).

During custody negotiations, women have reported ongoing physical violence and threats, including threats to physically harm or kill them, take the children, or fight for custody (Hardesty & Ganong,

in press). Financial abuse also occurs whereby women are coerced and victimized via having to retain attorneys, pay court fees, or cooperate with their abusers out of fear of losing child support (Kurz, 1996). Ongoing abuse and threats create a climate of fear that can lead women to compromise when making decisions about custody, as well as child support (Kurz). Women remain at risk for violence when negotiations result in joint custody, unsupervised visitation, or other parenting arrangements requiring ongoing contact between former spouses. Women who share parenting with abusive former husbands have reported ongoing violence and fears related to their physical safety (Fleury et al., 2000), and some murders have occurred in the context of visitations (Sheeran & Hampton, 1999).

Further, children remain at risk for exposure to violence that occurs after separation. Hotton (2001) found that children were more likely to witness violence against a parent after separation compared to having been exposed to violence prior to the separation. Perhaps, children are prone to witnessing post-separation violence because violence occurs in the context of child-related activities (e.g., exchanging the children), which may be the only time former partners are together. In contrast, prior to separation, violence may occur when children are not present because the parents' contact is not limited to child-related activities. Continual exposure to witnessing or being involved in emotionally and physically traumatic events can have a cumulative detrimental effect on children (Kelly, 1993). Thus, women continue to worry about their children's safety and well-being, as well as their own, after divorce.

Clearly, women who leave violent partners have unique needs related to ongoing violence and worries about their children. However, current policies and programs relevant to parental divorce and child custody focus primarily on system adjustment to separation, with limited attention to the unique needs presented by IPV.

## Parental Divorce and Child Custody

The "best interests of the child" standard is used by most courts to determine a wide range of issues related to the well-being of children after parental separation/divorce, including which parent a child will reside with, the extent of contact or visitation with the child by a nonresident parent, and child

support (Dunford-Jackson, 2004). Despite limited empirical evidence, courts generally assume that children fare better when they are able to maintain relationships with both parents after divorce (Amato & Rivera, 1999). Therefore, joint custody and cooperative coparenting relationships are encouraged for the sake of children. Some states have statutory presumptions in favor of joint legal custody (Bartlett, 1999) and others mandate joint legal custody, except when there is child abuse (Pagelow, 1993). Additionally, physical custody may be awarded to the “friendly parent” or the parent who appears more willing to cooperate in a shared parenting arrangement, and more likely to facilitate a relationship between the children and the other parent. Although an increasing number of parents share legal custody after divorce, the majority of children live primarily with their mothers (Fox & Kelly, 1995). Thus, mothers are generally responsible for facilitating children’s contact with their fathers.

Although joint custody is believed to facilitate cooperative relationships, the specific custody arrangement is not necessarily related to parents’ ability to negotiate successful coparental relationships (Ahrns, 1994). Coparenting involves two parental systems working together cooperatively, rather than independent of each other (Macie & Stolberg, 2003). Those who are successful at coparenting participate in a variety of custody arrangements, with no particular arrangement associated with more cooperation (Ahrns). Even among successful and satisfied coparents, conflict still occurs and is common after divorce as parents negotiate new rules and ways of interacting (King & Heard, 1999).

Ongoing parental conflict, however, can be harmful to children. Indeed, research suggests that exposure to ongoing parental conflict after divorce may outweigh or even reverse the positive benefits of children’s involvement with nonresidential fathers (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Consequently, courts have made efforts to reduce conflicts between divorcing parents and encourage cooperation. For example, many states offer, and sometimes require, divorcing parents with minor children to attend a parent education class before their divorce is finalized (Bartlett, 1999). The classes are usually focused on educating parents about children and divorce. The intended outcome is to reduce the negative effects of divorce on children by improving interactions in the parental subsystem (e.g., reducing parental conflict, increasing coparental cooperation,

and making parents’ aware of how their interactions affect their children; Whitworth, Capshew, & Abell, 2002). Some states also require divorcing parents of minor children to develop parenting plans to be submitted and approved by the courts before divorces are finalized. Parenting plans can range from general to very specific plans for shared parenting after divorce (e.g., specific arrangements for holidays or birthdays, exchanging children, involvement with schools). The intention of such plans is to foster joint decision making and cooperation focused on the best interests of the children (LaFlamme, 2000).

When parents cannot resolve custody and visitation disputes on their own, courts may require mediation. Mediation is a form of dispute resolution designed to help the parental subsystem settle conflict and reach cooperative agreements that focus on the children’s best interests (Emery, 1994). Courts may also appoint a custody evaluator to assess individual and family-related factors that influence children’s well-being and provide recommendations to the court for custody and visitation arrangements (Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Horvath, 2002). When IPV is present, however, these programmatic efforts to work with divorcing parents are limited.

## **IPV, Parental Divorce, and Child Custody**

Although “high conflict” between divorcing parents has received much attention in the literature, researchers rarely differentiate conflict from violence (Walker, Logan, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). This lack of distinction makes it difficult to say whether this literature represents the experiences of abused women and their children and whether existing policies and programs attend to their needs. Evidence suggests that abused women experience many of the same challenges as divorced parents in general, as they negotiate new roles after divorce. However, these challenges are compounded by ongoing violence, threats, and concerns related to their own and their children’s safety (e.g., shielding children from exposure to violence; Hardesty & Ganong, in press).

Only recently have states recognized that joint custody and cooperative coparenting after divorce may not be realistic or safe when there is a history of IPV (Hardesty, 2002). In the past, courts generally assumed that parents who abused their intimate partners were not abusing their children as long as

the children were not direct targets of abuse. More recently, researchers have documented the effects of violence in the parental subsystem on children, which have influenced policy related to children's best interests (Dunford-Jackson, 2004). About 70% of states now mandate consideration of abuse when deciding what is in children's best interests (Family Violence Project of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1995). Approximately 40% of states have adopted a rebuttal presumption against granting sole or joint custody to perpetrators of IPV, and some courts recognize that friendly parent provisions are inappropriate when there is IPV (Dunford-Jackson). Supervised visitation is one option courts use to allow father/child contact while ensuring safety. Supervised visitation involves father/child contact in the presence of a third party (e.g., court-appointed professional), who is responsible for ensuring the safety of children and parents.

Courts have also recognized that mediation, parent education classes, and court-approved parenting plans are often contraindicated when there is a history of IPV. In some states, divorcing couples are exempt from mediation (Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003). The concern is that the imbalance of power between the abused and the abuser makes fair negotiations in mediation unlikely, potentially resulting in unsafe agreements (Emery, 1994). Likewise, parent education classes and court-approved parenting plans are based on the assumption that parents are capable of cooperating, which may be unrealistic and unsafe for abused women. Nevertheless, divorcing parents with IPV are not routinely exempt from these activities, although some efforts to ensure safety have been made (e.g., requiring separate attendance at classes when a protective order is in place). Finally, the National Center for State Courts (1997) developed guidelines for custody evaluations when there is IPV, which include attention to safety issues.

Despite efforts to address IPV, important limitations remain. First, there is no system for routinely identifying abused women during the divorce process. For many reasons (e.g., fear, shame, belief that divorce will stop the violence), women are not likely to volunteer information about IPV (Mathis & Tanner, 1998). Thus, it is not known how many abused women negotiate custody and share parenting after divorce with men who have physically abused them. Options for legal protections and exemption from court programs are accessible only to those who self-identify as abused women, or in

the case of mediation, those who are identified by mediators who screen for IPV and then excluded from mediation (Emery, 1994).

Second, evidence indicates that when women disclose IPV in the context of divorce, they frequently are not supported by their attorneys or the courts and may evoke hostile reactions (Jaffe et al., 2003; O'Sullivan, 2000). O'Sullivan interviewed attorneys who represented abused women, and they acknowledged not asking the court to deny visitation or grant supervised visitation for fear of angering the court or creating hostility toward their clients. Instead, they advised their clients to cooperate and avoid evoking the friendly parent provision. Attorneys warned their clients that they risk losing custody of the children if they were labeled "uncooperative" by the judge. Such responses result from misconceptions that IPV allegations are exaggerated in the context of divorce (Jaffe et al.).

Moreover, despite evidence that women remain at risk after separation and that children are affected by exposure to parental violence, studies suggest that IPV is frequently not considered an important factor by the courts or custody evaluators when making custody and visitation decisions. O'Sullivan (2000) found that IPV did not seem to affect the court's response to visitation petitions. There were no statistical differences in rates of securing visitation orders between fathers with a protective order and fathers without a protective order against them. Further, custody and visitation were rarely denied to parents with protective orders against them. Similarly, Logan et al. (2002) found only minor differences in the custody evaluation process and recommendations for custody dispute cases with IPV compared to cases without IPV. Others have found that custody evaluators do not appear to consider safety issues in their recommendations (Walker et al., 2004). Clearly, courts are not exercising options to restrict custody and visitation when IPV is present, which may reflect in part judicial assumptions about the need to consider spousal and parental conduct as separate domains (Dunford-Jackson, 2004).

Third, although abused women are sometimes excluded from existing programs (e.g., parent education classes, mediation) that emphasize parental cooperation, to our knowledge, they do not receive alternative support programs specific to their needs. Mothers and fathers alike require violence-related interventions that prioritize safety and hold men accountable for their violence. Finally, the responses

and needs of abused women and their children are likely to vary by such factors as race/ethnicity, marital status, disability, and sexual orientation. Yet, these factors have received little attention.

## Directions for Intervention

Family systems theory informs our recommendations for intervention (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). We assume that separation/divorce and IPV intersect in ways that affect the entire family system and that interventions targeted at all family members are necessary to produce system change. We do not, however, suggest that all family members are equally responsible for IPV. Instead, we emphasize the need to prioritize women's and children's safety, provide services to both mothers and fathers, and hold perpetrators of IPV accountable for their violence. Specifically, we offer recommendations for courts to develop and implement procedures for identifying IPV and providing individualized and programmatic support when IPV is present (see Table 1 for a summary).

### *Identification of IPV*

Routine screening to identify IPV among divorcing women with minor children is necessary for effective interventions. There are a number of screening tools available that can be easily used in legal settings. For example, the Abuse Assessment Screen (AAS; Parker & McFarlane, 1991) is widely used in health care settings. The tool asks about the presence and characteristics of IPV, including specific acts of abuse, and versions with two to five questions have been used with success (Sheridan, 2004). The tool has good psychometric properties and has been found to distinguish between abused and nonabused women as defined in longer research instruments (Soeken, McFarlane, Parker, & Lominak, 1998). Another tool is the Abuse Observation Checklist (ABOC; Dutton, 1992), which Jaffe et al. (2003) expanded to include items specific to custody disputes. The adapted ABOC has approximately 80 items and inquires about experienced and inflicted violence, children's exposure to violence, violence before and after separation, and the most recent act of violence. Although not empirically validated, the expanded tool would be useful for initial screening.

Although not all women will disclose IPV, a non-judgmental and nonstigmatizing approach to

screening sends a message that IPV is taken seriously by the courts and that it is acceptable and safe to talk about it. Generally, asking about specific abusive acts is more likely to result in disclosure than simply asking a woman if she has been abused, as women may not define themselves as "abused" (Jaffe et al., 2003). Screening questions can be prefaced with a statement such as "Because violence in families is so common, I routinely ask everyone I see about it." Such an approach normalizes the experience of IPV and will not make women feel singled out or stigmatized if they disclose abuse (Berman, Hardesty, & Humphreys, 2004). Sensitivity to the diversity of abused women is also necessary when screening for IPV.

Cultural background influences what women believe to be abusive, whether they define themselves as abused, and their trust in the legal system (Walker et al., 2004). For example, immigrant women may be reluctant to disclose IPV because they fear deportation. Legal professionals can be sensitive to this possibility and provide immigrant women with accurate information about their rights. Other factors, such as disability, are also important. For example, abuse against women with disabilities may be specific to their health care needs (e.g., damaging assistive devices, withholding medication). Screening tools that are sensitive to diverse experiences and needs (e.g., AAS-Disability; McFarlane et al., 2001) should be used when available as well as tools written in the client's native language. By screening for IPV and being sensitive to diversity, courts can be proactive in identifying abused women and targeting interventions to their individual needs.

### *Individualized Assessment and Safety Planning*

Disclosure of IPV should be taken seriously and procedures should be in place for courts to respond effectively. Such procedures involve an individual assessment of risk when IPV is identified. Two reliable and valid assessment tools include the Danger Assessment (DA; Campbell, 1995) and the Harassment in Abusive Relationships: A Self-Report Scale (HARASS; Sheridan, 2001). The DA includes a calendar assessment and a 17-item yes/no risk-factor list. On the calendar, women indicate the dates of abusive incidents in the past year and the severity of each. The calendar provides a visual of the patterns of violence, particularly increases in frequency and/or severity. Using the risk-factor list, women then

Table 1. *Description of the Levels of Intervention*

Level	Goals	Methods and Delivery
Identification of IPV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify IPV among women with minor children in the separation/divorce process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screen for IPV using standardized tool(s). Abuse Assessment Screen (Parker &amp; McFarlane, 1991). Abuse Observation Checklist (expanded) (Jaffe et al., 2003). Abuse Assessment Screen-Disability (McFarlane et al., 2001).</li> <li>• Use a nonjudgmental and nonstigmatizing approach that is sensitive to diversity (e.g., cultural, disability).</li> </ul>
Individualized Assessment and Safety Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If IPV is identified, assess level of risk.</li> <li>• Develop individualized safety plans based on level of risk.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess level of risk to mothers using standardized tool(s): Danger Assessment (Campbell, 1995). Harassment in Abusive Relationships: A Self-Report Scale (Sheridan, 2001).</li> <li>• Assess level of risk to children using multiple methods. See Bancroft and Silverman's (2004) assessment model.</li> <li>• Use 10-min brochure-driven intervention (McFarlane &amp; Parker, 1994) with mothers to develop a safety plan that includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safety strategies based on level of risk.</li> <li>Age-appropriate safety strategies for children.</li> <li>Community referrals for safety, advocacy, and support.</li> <li>Attention to cultural strengths.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Incorporate safety strategies in court-approved parenting plans.</li> </ul>
Programmatic Efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent postseparation violence.</li> <li>• Foster recovery and healing for women and children.</li> <li>• Promote accountability and change on the part of abusers, with specific attention to the father role.</li> <li>• Support positive father-child relationships following separation, while prioritizing the safety of women and children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incorporate general IPV and safety information into standard curriculum.</li> <li>• Provide alternative education programs with a comprehensive safety-based focus for high-risk parents.</li> <li>• Mandate a combination of treatment programs for batterers, which may include batterers' treatment, substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and general parent education.</li> <li>• Provide treatment and support programs for abused women, which may include substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and general parent education.</li> <li>• Develop coordinated community responses in which community systems work together to effectively deliver all levels of intervention and implement procedures for ongoing assessment of risk and change following divorce.</li> </ul>

*Note:* IPV = Intimate partner violence.

indicate the presence of various factors associated with homicide or severe violence. In previous studies, the presence of eight or more risk factors was found among groups at the highest risk (Campbell et al., 2003). The HARASS is another option that

may be particularly useful in the context of divorce, as harassment often occurs when women try to leave abusive spouses (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998). This instrument lists 23 harassing behaviors and asks women how frequently each occurs.

Assessment of risk to children is also necessary. Legal professionals can ask an abused woman about her children's exposure to IPV, their responses and needs, and her perception of risk to the children. However, because parents are often not aware of the *extent* to which children witness violence and do not always link their children's responses to violence in the home (Ericksen & Henderson, 1998), multiple methods of assessment should be used (e.g., school records, home visits, third-party interviews, protective orders). Bancroft and Silverman (2004) offered a model for thorough assessment of a range of risks posed by perpetrators of IPV (e.g., risk of exposure to violence, risk of abduction, risk of harsh parenting). It is also imperative that custody evaluators and other court personnel (e.g., court-appointed guardians) consider the effects of IPV on children as well as safety issues when assessing children's needs and making recommendations to the court (National Center for State Courts, 1997).

Safety planning should follow the assessment of risk. McFarlane and Parker (1994) developed a 10-min brochure-driven intervention to follow the AAS that can be easily adapted to legal settings. The intervention has been tested with pregnant women in health care settings and was significantly associated with more safety behaviors in the proceeding 6 months and less reported violence (McFarlane & Parker). Some common safety strategies include identifying behaviors of the abuser that indicate increased risk of violence (e.g., homicide threats) or identifying events that trigger violence (the DA calendar can help with this). Safety strategies should be specific to each woman's situation. For example, a woman with higher risk may require more assertive strategies, such as removing weapons from her home, asking police to take possession of weapons belonging to the abuser, or asking neighbors to call the police if they hear or see physical violence (Campbell, Torres, McKenna, Sheridan, & Landenburger, 2004). Community referrals for safety, advocacy, and support (e.g., local shelters, victim advocates) should also be a part of safety planning. Information about local shelters is particularly important for women at high risk for postseparation violence and those lacking housing options following separation.

Safety plans should also incorporate cultural strengths. For example, the value placed on close family ties and hierarchy among Asian Americans can make elders in the community a potential source

of support for abused women (Ho, 1990). Likewise, the value placed on the faith community among African Americans can make clergy an asset for abused women (Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998). With cultural awareness, legal professionals can help abused women identify individuals in their families or resources in their communities that they trust and would be willing to turn to for help. When available, shelters specific to individual needs (e.g., language barriers) should be identified.

If a parenting plan is required by the court, these safety strategies can be incorporated into the document to be approved by the court (Hardesty & Campbell, 2004). Depending on individual needs, parenting plans can range from general to very specific, including how the children will be exchanged (e.g., in a public place, with a third party present, through a third party with no parental contact), how parents will communicate about the children (e.g., via telephone or e-mail, not in person), and expectations for fathers during visitation (e.g., no alcohol/drug use) as well as what will happen if the abuser violates the parenting plan (e.g., visitation revoked until return to court). Parenting plans can also include age-appropriate safety strategies for children (e.g., go to a neighbor's house if father is intoxicated during visit). Some abused women have indicated that developing a court-approved parenting plan helped them establish and maintain boundaries as their family system changed following divorce (Hardesty & Ganong, *in press*).

However, LaFlamme (2000) raised important concerns about discrepancies between mandated parenting plans and protective orders secured by abused women. For example, a protective order may require the abuser to stay away from the family home, whereas a parenting plan states that the father will pick up the children at their home for weekly visits. As a rule, safety concerns should take precedence over custody and visitation issues (LaFlamme; O'Sullivan, 2000). On a case-by-case basis, courts must consider not only the risks to the mother but also the effects on children of ongoing exposure to violence, and they must utilize options for protecting them (e.g., supervised visitation). Custody and visitation should only be awarded when adequate safety provisions for the child and the mother can be made (e.g., supervised visitations with transportation provided by a third party). Otherwise, it should be presumed detrimental to the child (National

Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [NCJFCJ], 1994).

### *Programmatic Efforts*

Courts would benefit from modifying existing programs or developing new ones aimed at serving the needs of divorcing parents with IPV and their children. Parent education classes are one example. To our knowledge, most of these classes do not routinely cover IPV-related issues. It is possible that parents with lower levels of risk could benefit from the standard curriculum—provided content related to IPV and safety strategies were also included. Parent educators should emphasize that when IPV is present, safety should be prioritized over parental cooperation. Abused women need anticipatory guidance about the potential problems that might arise when sharing parenting after divorce and how they can respond to such problems (Henderson, 1990). Parent educators could offer example safety strategies and encourage participants to talk to their attorneys or a domestic violence advocate about including such strategies in their parenting plans. Parents attending these classes should also receive information about the effects of violence exposure on children (in addition to “conflict,” which is routinely covered) and the needs of children who maintain contact with fathers who have abused their mothers. By addressing IPV-related issues, parent educators send a message that courts take IPV seriously and that IPV should be taken into consideration when making custody decisions.

When risk is high, however, alternative programs are needed. Women with high levels of risk require more comprehensive, safety-focused guidance and support. One possibility is the development of parent education classes focused specifically on IPV-related issues as an alternative to the standard curriculum. Likewise, batterer treatment programs with a focus on fathering in combination with other programs (e.g., individual therapy, parenting skills training focused on IPV, substance treatment) would be more appropriate for perpetrators of IPV than the standard parent education classes offered by the courts. Fox, Sayers, and Bruce (2001) found that some batterers took their father role (e.g., commitment, responsibility) seriously and through this role were able to absorb the impact of their violence. Thus, programs that draw upon fathering may offer avenues for some men to change abusive behaviors.

Because separate programs are not always feasible and some women at high risk will remain in standard classes (e.g., reluctant to disclose, limitations of screening), IPV content must be woven into all curricula (Fuhrmann, McGill, & O’Connell, 1999). When safety is prioritized, abused women can benefit from the parenting guidance offered by these programs. Indeed, McKenzie and Bacon (2002) found that parents with IPV did not differ from other parents in experiencing the program content as helpful, although some indicated the need for more IPV-related information and the need to qualify statements about the benefits of cooperative coparenting and joint custody. Although some have reported no association between divorce education programs and subsequent rates of IPV (Kramer, Arbuthnot, Gordon, Rousis, & Hoza, 1998), research is needed that differentiates between high and low levels of risk and that considers ongoing nonphysical types of abuse (e.g., controlling behaviors, harassment). In the meantime, Lutz and Gady (2004) recommended that all education classes familiarize parents with the definition and dynamics of IPV, provide IPV literature and resources, specify when certain course content (e.g., cooperative coparenting) is inappropriate because of IPV, and provide information on a range of parent interaction (e.g., parallel to cooperative). They argue that IPV must be addressed to help parents self-identify and construct effective and appropriate ways to interact with their children and each other.

In addition to education classes, perpetrators of IPV should be mandated to complete a combination of treatment programs before visitation is permitted, particularly in situations of high risk; however, completion of these programs should not be assumed to guarantee safe coparenting. Bancroft and Silverman (2004) offered guidelines for assessing change in perpetrators of IPV that emphasize the need to take responsibility for their violence. Complete cessation of violence and threats is also necessary (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Thus, ongoing monitoring of abusive men and assessment of risk to women and children is needed over time after program completion. Some states specify a time period (e.g., 1 year) after completing treatment in which perpetrators of IPV must comply with existing visitation orders without incident, before changes in visitation will be considered (LaFlamme, 2000). Mothers also may need treatment (e.g., substance abuse, mental health) and support in establishing effective parenting following

separation as they heal from the trauma of violence (Johnston & Roseby, 1997).

Clearly, family systems affected by separation/divorce and IPV have complex needs. For programmatic efforts to be effective, a coordinated community response is needed (Clapp, 2000). Community agencies that work with abused women, abusive men, and their children (e.g., social services, health care system, churches, school system) must share information and coordinate their approaches to more effectively identify IPV and assess risk, as well as intervene to ensure safety and child well-being. Coordination of services would also permit comprehensive monitoring of abusive men over time, as they come into contact with various agencies in the community. Further, by working together, community agencies can identify IPV in families not likely to utilize the legal system when separating (e.g., never married couples, same-sex couples, married couples who separate but do not seek divorce). These families need safety-focused assessment and interventions as well.

Finally, ongoing education and training across the various agencies is necessary for effective identification, assessment, and programmatic interventions. Legal and other professionals need to be educated about the dynamics of IPV, particularly in the context of separation/divorce. For example, by understanding that IPV includes a range of patterns that present varying levels of risk, courts can make more informed decisions about child custody and appropriate intervention programs for parents (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Further, a thorough understanding of the multiple needs of families affected by IPV and the high rate of physical and psychological comorbidity associated with IPV is also required. For example, research documents that IPV is comorbid with substance abuse and mental health problems (e.g., depression) for both perpetrators and victims (Danielson, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998). A proactive and systemic approach to identifying and responding to IPV is necessary to prevent repeat violence, support effective parenting by mothers and fathers, and ensure the safety and health of children.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Research is needed that examines the effectiveness of available screening and assessment tools (e.g., AAS, DA) and interventions (e.g., 10-min intervention) when used with abused women in the context of

divorce. We need longitudinal comparative studies using diverse samples to determine whether intervention early in the divorce process is associated with more safety behaviors and less violence, whether risk assessments effectively differentiate between high and low risk over time, and whether interventions are effective across diverse groups. Findings should drive modifications to existing tools and development of new tools, such as a tool to assess the potential for safe coparenting when there is a history of IPV. In addition, qualitative studies focused on the processes involved in successful coparenting after IPV may provide working models for negotiating custody and coparenting in ways that ensure safety.

Research on children and fathers is needed. Researchers have explored children's experiences with divorce and IPV but not their intersection. Qualitative research is needed to bring children's voices to the literature and identify their needs. Research on the extent to which children are exposed to postseparation violence and in what contexts, as well as what children do to keep themselves safe, would inform risk assessments and safety planning efforts. Also, we know little about the motives of perpetrators of IPV who seek custody or their experiences with postdivorce parenting. Findings could inform interventions with abusive men and ways to engage them as fathers.

How postseparation violence, custody, and coparental relationships vary over time must be explored. According to the divorce literature, parental conflict tends to decrease over time after divorce, and when high conflict persists, fathers often disengage after the first 2 years (King & Heard, 1999). Divorced parents often develop patterns of coparenting over time that work for them but may differ from that which was ordered by the courts (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). Longitudinal studies are needed to identify the trajectories of divorce and postdivorce parenting when there is a history of IPV and how they compare to parents in general. Findings would inform interventions focused on long-term safety, as well as efforts to support families over time.

Further, studies are needed to determine whether standard programs offered by the courts are useful to divorcing parents with IPV or if they exacerbate risk to women by encouraging cooperation. Treatment programs for perpetrators of IPV need to be evaluated with a specific focus on their effectiveness in addressing fathering and postdivorce parenting

issues. In addition, research is needed to explore whether coordinated community efforts result in intended outcomes (e.g., less violence, more safety behaviors). Finally, the effectiveness of procedures for meeting the needs of diverse groups of parents (e.g., never married parents, racial/ethnic minorities, women with disabilities) across the various agencies must be examined.

In conclusion, all family systems undergo significant transformations following separation/divorce, as they develop new rules and patterns of interaction. When there is IPV, the challenges of this process are compounded. Although the states and courts have made significant progress in serving the needs of divorcing parents in general, their efforts are limited when IPV is present. Effective intervention with these families requires routine screening for IPV, individualized assessment and safety planning, and programmatic efforts within the legal system and across community agencies that address the complex needs of the entire family system. With ongoing research to improve these efforts, we can move toward preventing postseparation violence, facilitating women and children's recovery and healing, and supporting safe and positive father-child relationships after divorce.

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