



Original Article

Comparison of attitudes toward violence and aggression in the children of separated and married parents

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Abstract

Objectives: The aim of this study was to compare the attitudes toward violence and aggression in the children of separated and married parents and to determine any related factors.

Methods: Children from sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and first-year high school students of separated parents (n=100) and those of married parents (n=102) with similar characteristics (e.g., age, socioeconomic class, etc.) were included in this comparative, descriptive study. The data were evaluated using Student's t-test, Mann-Whitney U Test, Kruskal-Wallis test, Chi-squared test, and correlation analysis. The characteristic percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated.

Results: The mean total aggression score was 117.61 ± 21.80 for the children of separated parents and 108.27 ± 21.35 for those of married parents. The difference was significant between the groups ($p < 0.05$). The attitudes toward violence in the children of separated parents was higher than that in those of married parents, but the difference was not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Conclusion: All students had high rates of aggressive behavior and positive attitudes toward violence. In particular, the children of separated parents showed more aggressive behavior, which can be considered a risk for future developmental problems.

Keywords: Aggressiveness; attitudes toward violence; separated and married parents.

The family is the smallest unit within a society and the primary tool by which to develop nations and cultures.^[1] Family is the institution that most strongly affects individuals, and its important qualities and functions cannot be replaced.^[2] Family is a basic social unit that forms the core of human societies, through which children learn attitudes, thoughts and behaviors of their society, and where they gain their most important experiences about life.^[2,3] Thus, it is very important for children to observe healthy parenting models within their families to shape their personality and social skills and to develop a healthy identity.^[2,4] The term "healthy" families reflects a healthy society, which means that the parents live together and have good relationships with each other and with others. When we consider that only healthy families can grow biopsychosocially and produce mentally healthy individuals and that

only these individuals can form a healthy society, we must understand the importance of this institution as it affects the integrity and continuity of social life.^[3] Children with a healthy family become individuals with self-confidence who love both themselves and other individuals, and thus gain the necessary equipment and social skills to develop their identity and personality in a positive way;^[5] however, irresponsible and irrelevant behaviors of the parents toward each other, lack of an adequate living income, disrespect of in-laws,^[6] divorce, death of one or both parents, separation, and disintegration of family unity caused by a complete or partial disconnect with the family as a result of war or occupation negatively affect the social and emotional development of the children depending on their age, development level, and living conditions.^[5,7] A separation or dissolution of the family unit can result in psy-

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What is known on this subject?

- When parents separate, psychological trauma and various social problems can increase in their children. That is, some behavioral disorders and an increase in the risk of aggression and violence can surface.

What is the contribution of this paper?

- There was no statistically significant difference between the children of married parents and those of separated parents in terms of their attitudes toward violence; however, the children of separated parents had significantly higher levels of aggression than those of married parents.

What is its contribution to the practice?

- The results of the present study emphasize the need to take preventive actions by analyzing the social and developmental factors of positive attitudes toward violence and aggression.

chological trauma and various social problems in the children, such as behavioral disorders^[3,8] that can lead to an increased risk of psychological disorders and even an increased rate of suicide.^[9] In addition, the children might frequently exhibit aggression, anxiety, introversion, hostility toward parents, depression, a negative self-perception, and low academic success.^[10]

Not only can dissolution of the family unit have negative effects on children, but parents who continue to coexist in spite of their differences can also harm children. Children who witness various types of parental discord ranging from continuous quarrels between spouses to domestic violence might exhibit more maladaptive behavior than those with divorced parents.^[11] An important factor that affects a child's socialization process within the family arises from parental problems, such as discord, domestic violence, and the process of divorce. Studies have reported that frequent quarrels between parents, divorce, child rearing by only one parent, lack of interest in the child by the father, continuous changes in the child's home environment, and child rearing without love are factors that affect child aggression and violence.^[12] It is an indisputable fact that there are many factors underlying violence within the school environment, such as family problems (domestic violence, economic concerns, divorce, or disinterest of parents), false friendships (e.g., bullying), a wannabe, weak self-control, communication problems, drug abuse, negative effects of mass media (e.g. tv programs that make violent acts seem normal or video games containing violence), and low academic success.^[12,13]

Media information and research have shown that aggressive and violent behaviors have reached alarming levels in the schools. For example, a study of high school students in Turkey has found that 10.3% of students were exposed to violence and more than half of them (51.4%) were exposed to violence by their friends at school.^[14] Ögel et al.^[15] (2006) have conducted a 2004 survey on the prevalence of crime and violence in some schools in Istanbul and found that ~50% of students had been involved in a fight at least once in 2003 and that 15.4% had been injured as a result of a physical fight. In addition, 26.3% of students had injured another person at least once during their academic years. These high rates suggest that violence is a major global problem; therefore, anger

and aggression are the topics most researched by social scientists. There are many factors that affect the development of aggressive behavior in children,^[16] an important one of which is the negative attitude and behavior of the parents.^[17] Our study aimed to compare the attitudes toward violence and aggression in the children of separated parents with those of married parents and determine the related factors.

Materials and Method

The study population consisted of children from sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades (seven secondary schools and two high schools) in Gaziantep, Turkey. The groups were divided into 100 children of separated parents and 102 of married parents who had similar characteristics (e.g., age and socioeconomic class) and who volunteered to participate in the study. To determine the sample students, school counselors at each school were interviewed, and the students of separated parents were identified by the counselors and teachers. No sampling method was used, and an attempt was made to contact all students of separated parents. The researcher evaluated both groups of students for homogeneity in terms of specific variables. Both groups were homogeneous in terms of sex, grade/class, age, and parent education level ($p>0.05$); however, they were not homogeneous in terms of family income levels ($p<0.05$).

Data collection

This was a descriptive, one-stage study conducted between January 1, 2010, and March 1, 2011. Data were collected from all students in the sample in counseling course. The students were first informed about the aim of the study and the methods to be used before obtaining the verbal consent from their families with the support of school counselors. Before beginning the study, written permission was obtained from the Directorate of National Education. Data were collected using the "Personal Information Form", "Aggression Scale", and "Attitudes Towards Violence Scale" as follows:

1. Personal Information Form: prepared by the researchers and comprised questions about the student's sociodemographic characteristics and aggressive or violent behavior.

2. Aggression Scale: developed by Tuzgöl^[18] (1998), who conducted a study on its validity and reliability using the Aggression Inventory of Kocatürk (1982). The scale consists of 45 items to measure the behaviors related to explicit, implicit, physical, verbal, and indirect aggression in young people, comprising 30 items with aggressive and 15 items with nonaggressive content. This five-point Likert-type scale is scored as follows: (5) always, (4) often, (3) occasionally, (2) rarely, and (1) never. There are 13 items with reverse scoring based on negative expressions. High scores refer to high levels of aggression and vice versa. The total scale scores ranged between 45 and 225. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.71 in the original study and 0.80 in this study.

3. Attitudes Towards Violence Scale: developed by Çetin^[19] (2011), who conducted a study on its validity and reliability. It consists of 10 items and one dimension to measure adolescent attitudes toward physical violence. This is a five-point Likert-type scale. Total scale scores ranged between 10 and 50. High scores refer to approval of and a positive attitude toward violence. There was no reverse scoring. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.85 in the original study and 0.81 in this study.

Data analyses

Data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The characteristic percentages, arithmetic means, and standard deviations were used to evaluate a student's descriptive characteristics. The parametric Student's t-test and the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted to compare the mean scale scores based on the student's descriptive characteristics. A correlation analysis was conducted to determine the correlation between the scales, and the Chi-squared test was conducted to evaluate the similarities between the groups in terms of the control variables. $P=0.050$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

The mean age of the students was 13.19 ± 1.23 (min: 10; max: 19), and 51% of the children of separated parents and 38.2% of those of married parents were female. Forty-nine percent of the children of separated parents and 31.4% of those of married parents had income lower than expenses. Forty-six percent of the children of separated parents and 18.6% of those of married parents had witnessed violence, and 10% of those of separated parents and 11.8% of those of married parents considered that violence is necessary (Table 1).

The total mean Aggression Scale scores of the children of separated parents and of those of married parents were 117.61 ± 21.80 and 108.27 ± 21.35 , respectively; the difference between the groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Although the total mean Attitudes Towards Violence Scale score of the children of separated parents was higher than that of those of married parents, the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) (Table 2).

In both groups, males had a higher total mean Aggression Scale score of 124.25 ± 21.70 among those of separated parents and 114.29 ± 20.69 among those of married parents than females, with 110.69 ± 19.85 among those of separated parents and 104.05 ± 20.42 among those of married parents. The difference between the groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). In addition, for both groups, males had a statistically significant higher total mean Attitudes Towards Violence Scale score of 23.94 ± 6.65 among the children of separated parents and 22.90 ± 6.58 among those of married parents than females, with 19.25 ± 5.53 among those of separated parents and 19.25 ± 7.60 among those of married parents ($p < 0.01$)

Table 1. Characteristic distributions of children used in the study

Characteristics	Children of separated parents (n=100)	Children of married parents (n=102)
	n (%)	n (%)
Gender		
Female	49 (49)	63 (61.8)
Male	51 (51)	39 (38.2)
Grade		
6	31 (31)	27 (26.5)
7	31 (31)	32 (31.4)
8	29 (29)	35 (34.3)
9	9 (9)	8 (7.8)
Age (years)		
11-12	32 (32)	28 (28.4)
13	32 (32)	43 (42.2)
14	19 (19)	22 (21.6)
≥15	17 (17)	9 (8.8)
Marital status of parents		
Married	-	102 (102)
Divorced	84 (84)	-
Living separate	16 (16)	-
Income status		
Equal to expenditures	36 (36)	54 (52.9)
Higher than expenditures	15 (15)	16 (15.7)
Lower than expenditures	49 (49)	32 (31.4)
Child witnessed violence		
Yes	46 (46)	19 (18.6)
No	54 (54)	83 (81.4)
Child perceives violence as necessary		
Yes	10 (10)	12 (11.8)
No	90 (90)	90 (88.2)

(Table 3).

The children of married parents who witnessed violence had significantly lower total mean Aggression Scale and Attitudes Towards Violence Scale scores than those who did not witness violence ($p < 0.05$). There was no statistically significant difference in the total mean scores on the Aggression Scale and Attitudes Towards Violence Scale between the children of separated parents who witnessed violence and those who did not witness violence ($p > 0.005$) (Table 3).

In terms of reactions when being provoked/got angry, a statistically significant difference was found in the total mean scores on the Aggression Scale and Attitudes Towards Violence Scale between the children in both groups ($p < 0.05$). In each group, the children who were reported to exhibit negative reactions such as "beating the provoking agent" and "retaliating toward the provoking agent" after being provoked/getting angry

Table 2. Comparison of mean scores on the Aggression Scale and Attitudes Towards Violence Scale of the children of separated and married parents

	Children of separated parents	Children of married parents	p*
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	
Aggression Scale	117.61±21.80	108.27±21.35	0.002
Attitudes Towards Violence Scale	21.64±6.54	20.65±7.49	0.314

*Independent sample Student's t-test. SD: Standard deviation.

Table 3. Comparison of mean scores of the Aggression Scale and Attitudes Towards Violence Scale of the children of separated and married parents based on specific variables

Variables	Children of separated parents		Children of married parents	
	Aggression Scale	Attitudes Towards Violence Scale	Aggression Scale	Attitudes Towards Violence Scale
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Gender				
Female	110.69±19.85	19.25±5.53	104.05±20.42	19.25±7.60
Male	124.25±21.70	23.94±6.65	114.29±20.69	22.90±6.58
p	<0.01	<0.001	<0.01	<0.01
Child witnessed violence				
Yes	116.30±23.07	21.85±6.39	105.74±20.63	19.52±6.91
No	119.15±20.34	21.39±6.77	119.74±20.01	25.58±7.70
p	>0.05	>0.05	<0.05	<0.01
Reaction toward provoking agent when angry				
Beating	126.50±19.09	25.00±7.07	130.83±19.47	24.33±9.95
Shouting and insulting	122.90±27.81	22.50±4.27	115.92±12.49	23.61±5.23
Getting angry	126.35±17.15	25.50± 5.63	111.08±23.98	24.50±6.09
Retaliating	129.60±22.14	28.20±5.15	117.92±24.40	24.38±9.32
Resolving the problem by talking	111.31±20.51	18.91±5.90	101.60±18.82	17.96±6.35
p	<0.05	<0.001	<0.01	<0.01
Feelings after witnessing violence				
Anger	112.76±33.02	21.92±9.82	119.89±16.39	23.53±7.06
Despair	112.65±19.01	20.06±6.05	100.64±19.19	18.64±7.22
Desire to take revenge	123.93±16.82	22.73±4.69	116.54±19.34	22.54±9.05
Fear	119.95±23.53	21.10±6.64	98.28±20.15	19.66±6.98
Hate	120.43±18.38	23.21±5.81	107.76±23.83	18.82±6.64
p	>0.05	>0.05	<0.001	>0.05

Ort.: Ortalama; SS: Standart sapma.

had higher mean scores on both scales. In addition, when the mean scores of the scales were evaluated according to the feelings of children who witnessed violence, a statistically significant difference was found between only the Aggression Scale mean scores of those of married parents ($p<0.05$). Those children with married parents who had feelings of anger and revenge after witnessing violence had higher levels of aggression (Table 3).

There was a positive correlation between all children's mean

scores on the Aggression and Attitudes Towards Violence Scales ($r=0.601, p<0.001$).

Discussion

In this study, 46% of the children of separated parents witnessed violence, which is remarkably high compared to only 18.6% of those of married parents. Some parenting behaviors are associated with the aggressive and violent behaviors of

their children. Bandura^[20] (1989) suggests that it is possible to learn many things indirectly by modeling, observing, listening to, or recognizing the behaviors of other people. Bandura (1986) also emphasizes the roles of indirect reinforcement and punishment in transferring social values to individuals. For example; an observer who witnesses that another person's behavior leads to positive results increases the likelihood that he or she will behave similarly (indirect reinforcement). In addition, the observer who witnesses that another person's behavior leads to negative results reduces the likelihood that he or she will behave similarly (indirect punishment).^[21] Social cognitive theory suggests that the parents' beliefs about aggression might affect their children's attitudes toward aggression. One study has found a relationship between parental attitude toward aggression and their children's Aggression Scale scores.^[22]

The total mean score on the Aggression Scale was 117.61 ± 21.80 for the children of separated parents and 108.27 ± 21.35 for those of married parents. Tuzgöl^[18] (2000) reported similar mean total scores for high school students (males: 117.89; females: 108.07). The results of the present study suggest that all students exhibited high levels of aggression; however, these levels were significantly higher in the children of separated parents than in those of married parents. Parent separation can be a risk factor for the development of aggression in their children. Studies have reported that divorce is associated with the risk of physical aggression among adolescents toward their mothers. A positive family environment with a healthy parent-child relationship is reported to partially reduce this risk.^[23] Dizman^[24] (2003) has found significant differences in terms of aggressive tendencies between children living with both parents and those deprived of their mothers. Similarly, a study of 224 children between 8 and 14 years old from either one-parent or two-parent Spanish families reported physical and verbal aggressive behaviors among the children in one-parent families.^[25] Another study has reported that the children of divorced parents had higher mean scores on the aggression, anger, and violence scales than those of married parents.^[26] Higher levels of aggression in the children of separated parents might be the result of their family structures and sociodemographic characteristics because the groups did not have similar family incomes. The children of separated parents had lower family income, which might affect aggressive behavior among those children. In addition to having separated parents, studies have reported that several other factors, such as poverty, inequality, patriarchal family structure/masculinity roles, frustration, or inhibition, can cause severe violent attitudes and behaviors among the children. Violence, in particular, is a behavior associated with several variables.^[27]

The total mean score on the Attitudes Towards Violence Scale was 21.64 ± 6.54 for the children of separated parents and 20.65 ± 7.49 for those of married parents. Akman^[28] (2013) has conducted a study of 461 high school students and found that their mean score on the Attitudes Towards Violence Scale was 25.15 ± 7.8 . The mean scores of both groups in our study sug-

gest either a positive attitude toward violence or a mid-level approval of violence. Because violence is never acceptable, this increase in the attitudes toward violence could be because of the child's characteristics during his or her period of development. Violence increases dramatically in the second decade of a person's life, affects 12–20% of young people, and declines after 20 years old. There are developmentally significant physical and emotional changes during adolescence that change the child's relationships and the way he or she interacts with others, some of which are as follows: emotional instability, poor impulse control, difficulties regulating moods, need for feeling strong, lack of experience, and difficulties developing a personality and identity. Although these are normal characteristics of adolescence, they play an important role in violent behavior. Poor impulse control and emotional instability make these children the target of those who attempt to control them from the outside because these characteristics can be easily manipulated according to the controller's intended outcome. Difficulties in mood regulation might also make these children more susceptible to being provoked and exhibiting anger.^[29] Our study compared two groups of children in terms of their attitudes toward violence and found that although the children of separated parents had more positive attitudes toward violence than those of married parents, the difference was not statistically significant. Other studies on this subject had different results. For example, one study of 127 adolescents of divorced parents (living with one parent) and 308 of married parents (living with both parents) found that the children living with one parent had more angry feelings and hostile thoughts than those living with two parents.^[30] One study on the behavioral problems in the Chinese children of divorced parents reported that these problems were characterized by aggressive behaviors and social problems such as social withdrawal.^[31] Another study conducted in China using 2,940 children between 6 and 11 years old has reported that separation or divorce are the most important factors among multiple psychosocial and biological factors related to behavioral disorders.^[32] Another study found that the children of divorced parents exhibited significantly more hostility and aggressive behaviors than those of married parents.^[33] Our study results differ from those in the literature in this respect.

Our study found that in both the children of separated and those of married parents, males exhibit significantly more aggressive behavior and positive attitudes toward violence than females, and a higher percentage of males approve violence. A results of a study of the tendency of high school students toward violence showed that males had higher levels of violent tendencies than females; this difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).^[14] A study conducted on 1,635 high school students in Turkey has reported that males have a higher tendency toward violence than females.^[34] Similarly, several studies with analyses conducted to determine whether students' attitudes toward violence differ according to their sex found a statistically significant difference between the mean scale scores of the groups ($p < 0.05$). Several studies have reported that male

students have more positive attitudes toward violence than female students.^[29,35-37] This result might be associated with the differences in socialization processes between the sexes.^[36] Violence occurs during the process of sex-based socialization because sex-based power is higher in males than in females. The cultural belief that men are superior and the male-dominated structure of society influence violent behaviors exhibited by men.^[38] In addition, the fact that male students have a higher tendency to be violent and are more aggressive than female students might be associated with the roles society has imposed on them. The differences in the way by which boys and girls are reared in Turkey indicated that families and Turkish society encourage boys to be aggressive and competitive but suggest that girls be calm, warm, and supportive. In addition, in general, boys favor aggression or violence, while girls do not.^[37] Agnew and Brezina^[39] have proposed three explanations for the differences between the sexes regarding attitudes toward violence. First, specific types of tension (e.g. interpersonal strain) are more common among males, and these can cause them to exhibit abnormal behavior. Second, men and women have different emotional reactions to tension. Anger is observed as a reaction to stress in both men and women; however, in women, anxiety, guilt, and depression might accompany that anger, and these accompanying reactions might reduce their violent behavior. Third, men tend to engage in violent behavior or inappropriate action in response to stress/tension. The present study and other studies suggest that sex is an important risk factor for violence.

When compared to the children of married parents who did not witness domestic violence, those who did witness domestic violence had lower levels of aggression and exhibited negative attitudes toward violence. This difference might be because the children who witnessed violence might have realized its falsity and unacceptability. One of the most important obstacles against children being reared in a healthy family environment is undoubtedly domestic violence. Being exposed to or witnessing domestic violence beginning in early childhood is a traumatic event that has the most serious impact on children.^[40] Social cognitive theory suggests that the parents' attitudes toward violence might also affect their children's attitudes.^[36] Preventing domestic violence is extremely important during childhood development.

A positive correlation was found between the attitudes of the children toward violence and their aggression levels. As their positive attitudes toward violence increase, their aggressive behavior increases. Attitudes affect one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in harmony with each other.^[40] One study has reported that students who develop positive beliefs and attitudes toward violence tend to exhibit more violent behaviors.^[36]

The present study found that children who have negative reactions toward a provoking agent, such as beating and retaliating out of anger, develop more positive attitudes toward violence and have higher levels of aggression. Understanding

the underlying causes of a specific behavior is important to determine ways by which to react to that behavior. Although it is not entirely sufficient, attitude is an important concept that can explain the underlying reasons for a behavior. In addition, when the mean scale scores were evaluated according to the feelings of the children in the face of violence, a statistically significant difference was found among the mean scores on the Aggression Scale of only the children of married parents. The children of married parents who felt anger and revenge after witnessing violence had higher levels of aggression. As such, anger management is important and necessary in preventing violent behavior.

Conclusion

There was no statistically significant difference between the children of separated parents and those of married parents in terms of their attitudes toward violence; however, the children of separated parents had significantly higher levels of aggressive behavior than those of married parents. Witnessing violence reduced the level of aggression and approval of violence. Males in both groups exhibited more aggressive behavior and positive attitudes toward violence than females, and a higher percentage of males approved violence. As positive attitudes toward violence increased, aggressive behavior also increased.

As a result of the gradually increasing rate of divorce throughout the world and the separated parents generating serious social problems such as the absence of authority, disruptions in socialization, parents' failure to fulfill their responsibilities, and adverse effects on the psychological states of the children or adolescents which cause them to blame themselves in this period, the emotional and social problems of the children of separated parents intensify and the psychological support for these children becomes more important.^[2] Marital conflicts and divorce increase the risk of problematic behaviors in children^[41] and can predict an increase in these behaviors both short and long term.^[42] Violence is an aggressive behavior with a debilitating effect on the optimal growth and development of young people. By understanding the social and developmental aspects of violence and the characteristics in children, we can better prepare young people for life's challenges.

The small sample size of the study; the fact that sampling methods, such as stratification, were not used to determine the sample; and the fact that the groups were not homogeneous in terms of economic status constituted the limitations of this study.

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