

Parents in High Conflict Divorce in The Netherlands: Prevalence and Types of Intimate Partner Violence

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Background

Social and legal professionals in the Netherlands who work with parents in high conflict divorce (HCD) underestimate the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) in this population, according to a recent websurvey (de Ruiter & van Pol, 2017). IPV screening has, thus far, not been implemented prior to decision making re: mediation or as part of divorce proceedings generally. We conducted an implementation plus evaluation of the Mediator's Assessment of Safety Issues and Concerns (MASIC).

Any item on subscale endorsed by either or both parents?	Ever		Past Year	
	No, <i>n</i> (%)	Yes, <i>n</i> (%)	No, <i>n</i> (%)	Yes, <i>n</i> (%)
Psychological abuse	0 (0)	59 (100)	14 (23.7)	45 (76.3)
Coercive controlling behaviors	2 (3.6)	54 (96.4)	13 (23.2)	43 (76.8)
Threats of severe violence	18 (30.5)	41 (69.5)	31 (56.4)	24 (43.6)
Physical violence	14 (23)	47 (77)	46 (78)	13 (22)
Severe physical violence	26 (45.6)	31 (54.4)	51 (91.1)	5 (8.9)
Sexual violence	44 (73.3)	16 (26.7)	52 (88.1)	7 (11.9)
Stalking	22 (37.9)	36 (62.1)	31 (52.5)	28 (47.5)

Table 1. Reported victimization in High Conflict Divorce cases (*N*=61 individual cases)

Objective

The MASIC (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2010) was translated into Dutch with permission. This interview method provides a behavior-specific screening for different types of IPV. Our goal was to examine the prevalence of different types of IPV among parents who were reported to child protection authorities because of HCD and concerns about the welfare of the children involved.

Results

For all professionals involved, the use of the MASIC was completely new. They noticed the separate interviews with each parent provided much more information than their usual joint sessions with HCD parents. In total, 37 dyads and 8 individual parents (*M*_{age}=35, range=23-53) participated. Parents were asked to rate their interview experience afterwards on a scale from 1-10, and the average rating was around 8. They felt taken seriously and the interview provided some parents with new insights.

The prevalence of IPV in our sample of HCD cases was very high (see Table 1). Psychological abuse and coercive-control were the most common behaviors, and these appear to continue after separation. Physical violence ever in the relationship had a 77% prevalence, but decreased to 22% during the past year. Sexual violence also decreased, but stalking behaviors remained at a prevalence rate of 47.5% during the past year.

Method

Social workers and psychologists (*N*= 10) at three different child protection agencies in the Mid-West Brabant region received a half-day training workshop in IPV screening and the use of the MASIC. They began using the MASIC in their child custody assessments. Every 6-8 weeks, case conferences were held, to provide continued training on MASIC assessments. Parents were asked to provide written informed consent for participation in this study.

Conclusion

The prevalence of different types of IPV in HCD parents who are reported to child protection services in the Netherlands is very high. Compared to findings in a sample of US parents seeking divorce mediation (Pokman et al., 2014), the prevalence of severe physical violence, sexual violence and stalking ever in the relationship was higher in our sample.

We conclude that research-based IPV screening needs to be implemented as a best-practice standard in all evaluations conducted in HCD cases in the Netherlands.

References

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