

## Children Exposed to Their Father's Violence Against Their Mother: The Link Between the Children's Perception of the Escalation and Their Experience of Complex Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Abuse

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The present article explores how children exposed to their father's violence toward their mother perceive the interparental conflict escalation process to all-out violence. It attempts to understand how the children's perception affects the complexity of the harm done to them and to explore the relationship between this perception and child psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 children of both genders, aged 7–12. They were sampled from a population of children growing up with family violence, based on social workers' reports in violence prevention and treatment centers throughout Israel. The findings reveal a gap between how the children understand the parents' relationship script and the actual script in which the parents act. Analysis of the children's descriptions revealed two processes, which might explain the source of this gap: 1) Living in a reality ridden with violent conflicts, which directly affect the perception of violence as

taken for granted; 2) The parents' creation of a pseudo-normative reality, with accepted behavioral codes as an integral part of the escalation. The article discusses the way in which these processes, which distort the children's sound reading of reality, may help to legitimize and explain the high percentage of child sexual abuse among this population. Practical implications of the findings are learned in this context.

**Keywords:** Children exposed to violence; interparental violence; child psychological abuse; child physical abuse; child sexual abuse

An overall analysis of the literature review in the field of children exposed to violence shows that the cumulative body of knowledge in the field has extensively covered the outcomes of the children's exposure to interparental violence, but has given very little attention to the way in which these risks are played out (e.g., Goddard & Bedi, 2010). Similarly, from the earliest studies in the field, this

body of knowledge has documented the significant relationship between exposure to violence and direct physical and/or sexual child abuse (e.g., Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). However, it has not addressed the question of what, in this specific context, leads to such high levels of direct abuse in general and of sexual abuse in particular. In other words, the body of knowledge emphasizes the need for social intervention, but provides limited tools for such intervention. This might be because of the fear that developing knowledge in this direction might hold the children themselves responsible or at fault for their involvement in the interparental escalation process. An additional fear might be that this type of knowledge will expose the fact that the child's needs are not always in line with those of the woman. Today, however, since a clear picture has emerged of the negative impacts of the exposure itself and of the issue of responsibility for the violence (which rests with the man, as the initiator and director of the escalation), the time is ripe to deal with this process. The present study focuses on the question of how the children perceive all the stages of interparental violence out of the attempt to understand what it is, in the children's understanding, which creates such complexity of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse.

### **Exposure to Interparental Violence: Children Witnessing Violence**

Since 1980, the amount of research in the field of children exposed to violence dramatically increased, while documenting the relationship between exposure to violence and a wide variety of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive problems

(e.g., Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 2011; Holt et al., 2008). It was found, specifically, that these children suffer from behavioral problems, anxiety, mood swings, depression, and posttraumatic reactions, and demonstrate aggressive and more frequent use of drugs and alcohol than children who are not exposed to family violence (e.g., Evans, Davies, & Dilillo, 2008; Chan & Yeung, 2009). Despite the difficult profile that was found, researchers revealed that the relationship between exposure to the outcomes might be more complex and dependent on numerous variables, which might change, increase, or decrease the phenomenon (e.g., Bogat, Levendosky, & von Eye, 2005; Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, von Eye & Levendosky, 2009). These variables include age, gender, socioeconomic status, frequency and type of violence, direct abuse and exposure to violence, mother-child relationship, and children's coping skills (e.g., Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007; Skopp, McDonald, Jouriles, & Rosenfield, 2007; Sternberg, Baradaran, Abbot, Lamb, & Gutterman, 2006).

A limited number of mainly qualitative and clinical studies focused on how children experience the violent incidents. The overall data that emerged from these studies provide a certain depth of understanding of the complex, multidimensional experience of children who are exposed to violence (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992; Humphreys, 1991; Peled, 1993). Peled (1997) suggested four characteristic types that represent this experience: a) Living with the Secret, in which the child denies the existence of the violence and acts as if it does not exist; b) Living with Conflicts

of Loyalty, in which the child is aware of the violence, but cannot take sides; c) Living in Terror and Fear, in which the child is completely aware of the violence and identifies with the victim, and d) Adopting the Violent Model, in which the child is aware of the violence, but identifies with the aggressor. Based on these types, we examined the cognitive processes that lead to their appearance, providing an understanding of how these processes influence the child's meaning making system (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Enosh, 1998). Later, the conceptualization was expanded into a general theoretical model that included three components: the child's construction of reality; parental expectations, and influences from outside the home. The model emphasizes the place of parental expectations in the children's construction of the reality of their lives (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001).

### **Exposure to Interparental Violence:**

#### **Direct Abuse**

Research in the field of exposure to violence provides clear-cut evidence of a direct relationship between living in a violent reality and direct child abuse; notwithstanding the use of different samples in all the studies as well as of different methodologies, which undermines the possibility of systematic comparison (Hester, Pearson, & Harwin, 2007). Specifically, in many studies that examined the relationship between exposure to violence and child physical abuse, overlap rates of 32% to 53% were reported (Edleson, 1995). In other studies, which examined the relationship between exposure to violence and different types of child abuse, an overlap of 55% was found with physical abuse, and an association of 40% to 70%

with sexual abuse (Saunders, 2003). Despite the exposure of these high percentages of abuse, even when the association was examined using clinical samples and even when it was examined through samples of children who witnessed violence, no attempt was made—based on either theory or on research—to explain the high overlap between exposure to violence and child sexual abuse. The link between exposure to violence and child physical abuse was explained against the background of potential abuse that is ingrained in individuals who are aggressive toward the environment (McCloskey, 2001) and against the background of stress-provoking circumstances (e.g., Slep & O'Leary, 2001).

### **Exposure to Violence as a Context for Child Abuse**

To understand the children's overall experience, it is necessary to examine their perceptions, attributed meanings, and modes of intervention in the process of escalation of the interparental conflicts to all-out violence. The present study focused on the children's perception of the process.

A broad consensus in the literature holds that escalation is an emotional process that involves intense feelings such as anxiety, anger, helplessness, humiliation, shame, guilt, envy, hostility, low self-esteem, and a sense of failure (e.g., Gergen, 1994). The presence of such emotions leads to imbalance, resulting in an experience of a lack of control and loss of the ability to predict, plan, and navigate the course of life. In conditions such as these, the violence becomes a tool that is perceived by those undergoing this process as a means of acquiring

power and control (e.g., Scheff & Retzinger, 1991).

Most theories dealing with escalation examined the components of the escalation more than the dynamics in the process involved. For example, Brockner and Robin (1985) claimed that escalation describes a decision making process in which each side is entrenched in its own viewpoint. Goffman (1967) suggested that at the root of this process is the need to maintain one's self-image and the perception of a change of viewpoint as weakness. Although the different theories differ in the emphasis they place on the variables contributing to the escalation, a broad consensus exists in the literature regarding the centrality of the threat and the reaction to it by counter-threats (e.g., Patterson, 1982).

The model proposed by Retzinger (1991a, 1991b) regarding conflicts and escalation turns to a process in the context of intimate violence. The researcher made a distinction between secure dyadic relationships, which lead to conflict-free interpersonal relationships and dyadic relationships that are threatened when the sides become mutually estranged and feel under attack by the other. Although Retzinger's model is an important step in helping to distinguish between functional and non-functional conflicts in intimate relationships, it focuses on emotions and does not address additional details of the structural components of escalation and of their interactive dynamics.

Later studies, which dealt with escalation in the context of intimate violence (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Gelles, 2002; Winstok, Eisikovits, & Gelles,

2002; Winstok, 2007), attempted to develop a theoretical model that exposes the structure and the dynamics of the violence in intimate relationships from the point of view of the aggressor, the victim, and the dyadic perspective.

In this context, it was found that men perceive their actions during the conflicts as reactivity to their partner's behavior. They tend to focus on the partner's actions, which they perceive as undermining the interpersonal balance and threatening their existential reality. Accordingly, they perceive their own actions as directly tuned toward the need to recreate this balance (Winstok et al., 2002). Specifically, the findings show that men perceive themselves as entitled and obligated to protect their existential dyadic relationship, while recognizing the costs and benefits involved in the use of violence in order to achieve this goal. They create rules and act as judges of when these rules are violated and then take steps to enforce them. These men's assessment of the amount of control they have over their actions and over the advantages and disadvantages of these activities have a great influence on their attempts to reestablish the balance that was lost in their couple relationships.

The men's process of constructing the activity as a reaction to their partner's behavior is composed of two distinct but linked stages: the first relates to identifying the partner's action and constructing it as an action that is worth a reaction, and the second is the construction of an appropriate reaction (Winstok et al., 2002).

In contrast, women see the transition from a non-violent to a violent reality as a process. They

evaluate the change as marked by distinct junctures, which each hold the possibility of either escalation or of an escape from the violence. Control of the situation is a key variable in managing the process, which may or may not lead to violence, and can explain why they stay in the relationship despite the violence (Eisikovits et al., 2002).

The attempt to unify the two viewpoints, while refining the points of similarity and difference between men and women has led to the general view that both the man and the woman involved have the inner potential to see themselves both as aggressors and as victims. Hence, individuals perceive the situation as an ongoing problem, in which they are the victim, and the creator of the problem is the aggressor (Winstok, 2007). When the focus moves from a specific to a wider problem, which threatens the overall couple relationship, the use of violence might be perceived as an action worth taking, even though, at this point, a new problem is created, which might cause the conflict to spiral out of control (Winstok, 2013).

As is apparent from the review, none of the studies dealing with escalation in intimate relationships have placed central focus on the children's perspective. This is despite the fact that these studies are based on the assumption that the children are not only influenced but also have an influence on these events and that their mode of intervention has implications for the nature and severity of the child abuse. In light of this, the question at the core of the present research is: What is the process that leads from a non-violent

reality to a violent reality from the children's perspective?

### Method

This was a qualitative study based on the grounded theory approach. The rationale behind research based on these methodological principles is anchored in the lack of a suitable theory and in the need to expose the meaning of the experience for the individuals involved in the process (Creswell, 1998). Indeed, the aim of the present study was the development of a theoretical model that explains how children exposed to their father's violence against their mother interpret the transition from a non-violent to a violent reality. This study was part of a broad research that examined the phenomenology of the experience of the exposure to violence among children living in families in which the father is violent toward the mother (Carmel, 2010).

### Sample

The participants were recruited for the study according to the accepted ethical principles for studying sensitive populations (Peled, 2001). The final sample of the study was based on 27 children, 13 boys and 14 girls, aged 7 to 12 years, who were sampled from a population of children growing up in families in which the father is violent toward the mother. This information was based on reports by social workers in centers for the prevention and treatment of violence in different areas of Israel.

### The Research Tool

Data for the broad study were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews according to an interview guide based on theoretical and empirical literature. The interview guide included five



content categories: a) the family's everyday life e.g., "Tell me what it is like at home. What do you do there? What do you talk about?" b) the initiation, development, and conclusion of interparental conflicts that do not escalate to violence, e.g., "Tell me about an argument that got worse but did not reach the hitting stage. What do you think influences the ending of the argument at this stage?" c) the initiation, development, and conclusion of interparental conflicts that escalated to violence, e.g., "Tell me about the worst argument that you remember. Did someone get hit?" "How does it happen that an argument turns into a violent quarrel?" d) the children's experiences of the conflicts (both violent and non-violent), and the way they understood and interpreted what they witnessed, e.g., "What do you feel when the argument gets more serious?" "What do you think about in those situations?" e) children's involvement in the interparental conflicts (both violent and non-violent) and their perceptions and attributed meanings to this involvement, e.g., "Where are you when the argument between your parents begins?" "What do you do?" "What effect do you think your behavior has on your parents?" The present study is based on the analysis of data relating specifically to the children's understanding of all the stages of the escalation process.

### **Data Collection**

Like the process of recruiting participants of the study, the data collection also adhered to the accepted ethical principles for studying sensitive populations (Peled, 2001). The children's confidentiality was assured, they were asked to

give their consent to participate in the research, and were given the option of stopping the interview at any time, if they should choose to do so. It was explained to them also that if they would be evaluated as being at risk, the appropriate authorities would become involved.

The interviews took place over one to three sessions and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The child set the pace, so that each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted by a researcher, who had 15 years' experience in clinical consultation work with children exposed to violence in their families. The interview was preceded by a practice stage, in which the children rehearsed answering the type of questions that they would be asked in the interview, to reduce tension and create a balanced interviewer–interviewee relationship. In this article, all the children's names were changed to maintain confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

The grounded theory methodology directs the researcher to a comparative analysis of new data that emerge from the interviews. After content analysis of the data, they were examined, compared, and conceptualized into characteristics and dimensions. The data were then recompiled by creating links between the different classifications that were developed, relating to situations, contexts, interactions, action strategies, and outcomes. The third and final stage of data analysis included choosing core categories and systematically attributing them to the other themes to enable the conceptualization of a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### Findings

The analysis of the findings regarding the children's understanding of the different stages in the development of the escalating interparental conflicts shows that the children see the process in a normative context. They understand the initiation of the conflict as symmetrical, sometimes initiated by the father and sometimes by the mother. They perceive the development of the conflict as an argument around a trivial, everyday subject and the partner violence as an outcome of the argument reaching an impasse, when the sides fail to convince each other to reach a general agreement. This is despite their descriptions of an argument that develops based on the man's interpretation of the woman's words as a violation of the desired balance in the partner relationship and despite describing clearly that the man initiates the escalation as well as deciding when to end the confrontation.

The children's understanding of the process will be addressed in relation to the following themes: the circumstances of the violence; the signs of the conflict escalating to a violent quarrel; the variables that influence the escalation of the conflict to a violent quarrel; the dynamics of the components that create the escalation; the management of the process by the two sides, and the results of using the strategies taken.

#### The Circumstances of the Violence

The children perceive that the conflicts arise as a result of the parents' arguments around different subjects relating to everyday life: work, money, children, and extended family. Even though they describe the internal home reality as essentially

conflictual and the escalation against the background of the man's understanding that the woman's words violate the desirable partner balance, the children's perception shows that they understand the context of the conflict to be trivial, in other words, as a normative argument between the partners, which arises around routine daily issues. In this context, the children's quotes expose two types of understanding: The first sees the responsibility for initiating the conflict, as well as its input, as mutual. The second sees the responsibility for initiating the conflict to be the father's, because he starts the argument, but considers the responsibility for developing the conflict as resting with both the father and the mother, who make a joint contribution to its formation. The following quotes will be presented to learn about the different types of understanding.

#### First understanding pattern.

Interviewer: What makes your parents start arguing?

Let's say, my dad goes shopping and my mom wrote a certain thing on the list and he forgot and didn't buy it, something like that . . . and . . .err ... say . . . my dad said something to my mom and my mom didn't hear him. Then they start arguing about whether he said it or not, and things like that. Or, say . . . my mom asks my dad to do the cleaning, or the other way round. I said my mom but it could also be my dad. I'll give you an example. My dad asked my mom

something in the morning. She was in the bathroom and didn't hear him, and then I said something to her and she did hear me. And then she came out and she didn't answer him, so he asked her what he had asked her before: Who is taking us to school? He wasn't supposed to take us, and then she said to him: OK, you take us," because she didn't have a car, and then he said: You didn't ask and yes you did ask, and the mess continued from there. (Shira)

The girl begins her description by listing the factors that arouse confrontations between her parents, with a brief reference to each. It is conspicuous that she makes a careful comparison between her parents. Her mode of description presents the mother and the father as initiating conflicts in equal measure, in addition to her explicit emphasis that both sides can be the reason for the argument ("I said my mom but it could also be my dad"). This might indicate that the child perceives the parents' mutual criticism as the context in which the conflict arises; in one instance, the mother criticizes the father and in another case, the father criticizes the mother's behavior. Furthermore, the girl does not use a dramatic tone, creating the impression of a normative interparental conflict ("My dad asked my mom something . . . and then he came out and she didn't answer him. . . what he had asked her . . . and then she said to him. . . and then he said . . .").

Nevertheless, bringing an example of the way in which the interparental conflict arose exposes a

different reality. The girl says that, when the mother was in the bathroom and did not hear her father's question, the father interprets the mother's apparent disregard of him as an attempt to belittle his words. In support of his view, he refers to the fact that the mother did answer the girl when she spoke to her. The father initiates the escalation because he assumes that, if he is not answered, he is being ignored. The girl's example was supposed to support the thesis that the interparental conflict was an outcome of trivial everyday matters. However, it exposes a different reality in which the father interprets the mother's remarks as contempt, which creates his sense of a loss of respect and personal insult, to which he reacts through escalation.

The gap between the girl's construction of the context as the development of conflicts as a daily routine and the description of the context as the father's interpretation of the mother's derisive behavior toward him shows that the violence has become a taken-for-granted presence in the home. Hence, the father's remarks are perceived as having equal value to those of the mother, despite the different context in which they are spoken.

### **Second understanding pattern.**

Interviewer: What kinds of things make your parents start arguing?

For instance, when Mom doesn't make the food tasty. When Mom is tired and she can't do the cleaning and when she can, then I think Dad forced her to do the cleaning and to throw out the garbage. They argued about children's crap . . . Mom made



one little mistake, and then Dad would already be yelling. Because, for example, if Mom didn't add salt, he could get up himself and take some without starting. (Gil)

In contrast to the previous quote, in which the girl emphasized both parents' responsibility for starting the argument, in the present quote, the boy describes a reality in which the father initiates the conflict. According to his description, every act by the mother is judged as intact or faulty according to the dimensions determined by the father regarding the accepted way to run a home. The rest of the description completes the picture concerning the circumstances in which the conflicts arise: If the father judges the mother's behavior as faulty, she is punished. The example of the salt, in which the boy perceives the father's reaction as extreme ("if Mom didn't add salt, he could get up himself and take some without starting") just emphasizes: a) the father's constant comparison between the mother's behavior in the present and the standards that he determined as proper; b) the link between the result of the judgment and the punishment, and c) the immediacy of the reaction after deciding to administer the punishment.

Despite the comprehensive description that exposes a violent reality, the boy presents his perception of the circumstances that give rise to the arguments: "They argued about children's crap." The use of the word "crap" to define the topic of the conflicts and through the comparison to the children's world, the boy brings the circumstances down to a trivial level. Thus, the father's remarks become marginal and what remains is the child's

attitude to those conflicts as foolish disputes. Through this "game," which transfers the father's criticism of the mother from the center to the margins, the responsibility for initiating the argument is still placed with him. However the responsibility for its development is placed with both sides, as making an equal contribution to its formation. The use of the plural tense provides additional support for this thesis.

An analysis of all the findings regarding the circumstances that arouse the father's escalation against the mother shows that the same mechanism stands at the basis of the two types of understanding: the perception of the violence at home as taken for granted. This perception, which is an outcome of living in a reality rife with violent conflicts, directly impacts the view of violence as an option within a conflict. It gives a normative dimension to the circumstances in which the conflict arises, which are viewed as part of the trivial routine, namely an argument between the partners on various issues.

### **Signs of Conflict Escalation to a Violent Quarrel**

This theme relates to the signs through which the children can predict the escalation of the conflict to an all-out violent quarrel. In this context, an analysis of the children's descriptions indicates the existence of two components, which they perceive to be involved in the dynamics of the escalation: a communicative component and an emotional component. Although the communicative component relates to the changing character of the argument, which moves from a relevant argument to one that oversteps the boundaries of the subject of the argument to

personal matters or those that touch on the partners' past scripts, the emotional component relates to the intensity of the anger on both sides until it reaches a loss of control and in this context, the children relate to a variety of signs such as the tone of voice, facial expressions, the volume of the shouting, and an increased level of annoyance.

In the context of the signs of the quarrel that are described, the children present two types of understanding of the development of the process. According to the first type, the escalating conflict, namely the developing communicative component and the effect of the cumulative anger on both sides, nourish each other, so that each side's input in the conflict increases the other side's anger. This in turn nourishes the conflict and raises the other side's anger level. According to the second type of understanding, the mother's behavior is what nourishes the father's cumulative anger, and thus the dynamics of the escalation depends on the mother's continuous input to the conflict and the subsequent rise in the level of the father's anger. That is to say, in the second type of understanding, the escalation components were split, in that the mother was seen to be responsible for the communicative component and the father was seen to be responsible for the emotional component. The following quotes will illustrate each type of understanding.

#### **First understanding pattern.**

Interviewer: What are the signs that tell you that an argument that began normally will become more serious?  
Sometimes, they raise their voices.  
They get angry with each other. Dad

starts shouting a bit and then Mom starts shouting a bit and they are yelling. And there are the things they say. For example: Dad says to Mom: "You're not good at anything." And then she answers him: "I'm better than you, fatso. They start insulting each other." For me, the sign that the argument will soon start to get violent is their threats. When he says to Mom: "Be careful!" And when Mom says to him: "Of what?" And he says to her: "You already know. Don't you know?" "No, I don't know." And then it starts . . . like, touching in not a nice way. (Amos)

#### **Second understanding pattern.**

The stage at which I understand that the argument will end up with yelling and cursing is when Mom gets angry. She answers him back and argues with him, and then Dad starts yelling. After that, when he is really yelling, the cursing starts . . . the sign for me that the argument will get violent is when I see that my mom isn't doing anything, and that irritates my dad. He tries to pull her into an argument but she keeps quiet. And after that, I know the hitting will start. (Or'el)

It is interesting to see that the children relate to both the communicative and the emotional components in one of two ways: on the level of visibility and on the level of their essence. Whereas

in the first quote, the child relates to a change in the communicative component on the time axis, on the formative level—a transition from an argument to personal insults and afterwards to threats, in the second quote, the child relates to a change in the same component on the content level—the argument that reaches an impasse and therefore oversteps its relevant boundaries (“He tries to pull her into an argument but she keeps quiet.”) In relation to the emotional component, the illustration of the rising anger is brought on the emotional or the behavioral level. That is to say, the children “paint” the visibility of the aggression as the other side of the anger coin: “Sometimes, they raise their voices. They get angry with each other.” In relation to the two components, it is obvious that the father is the initiator of the escalation.

In the context of the escalation dynamics, the two types of identified understandings reveal an understanding of the violent conflict from a normative viewpoint. According to the first type of understanding, the mutual anger is the outcome of the other’s behavior, and according to the second understanding, the father’s anger is the outcome of the mother’s behavior. In both cases, the anger is understood as part of an emotional script according to which the anger is a natural reaction to the other’s annoying or hurtful words or behavior, which are perceived differently by the other side. Moreover, both descriptions present the perception of the escalation in terms of a normative conflict, in which the reason for the development of the anger, on both sides, is their deep disagreement. (“Sometimes, they raise their voices. They get

angry with each other . . . And there are the things they say;” “The stage at which I understand that the argument will end up with yelling and cursing is when Mom gets angry.”) This understanding places overall responsibility for the intensification of the conflict on both sides, even when the mother, who, in the second understanding pattern, is perceived as leading the escalation. The gap between the way the children’s descriptions and their perception of the reality inside the home might be explained in the context of the taken-for-granted nature of the violence (see Theme 1, The Circumstances of the Violence), which “sends” the children to look for signs of the existence of a normative conflict, and blurs those signs that indicate that the escalation by the man is an outcome of his evaluation of a power imbalance that is not in his favor in the relationship with his partner.

### **Variables that Impact the Escalation of the Conflict to a Violent Quarrel**

In the children’s descriptions, they refer also to variables that they believe to be the cause of intensifying the interparental conflict. An analysis of the findings reveals three types of understanding in this context: a) the parents’ motivation, or lack of it, to continue the quarrel; b) the parents’ ability or inability to control their rising anger, and c) the mother’s behavior as a motive for the father’s escalation. Each of these types of understanding and their implications for the escalation dynamics will be examined.

**First understanding pattern: The parents’ motivation, or lack of it, to continue the quarrel.**

Interviewer: What do you think will influence the quarrel and make it more serious? What will cause the argument to get even worse?

If neither of them want to listen, nothing. If it doesn't bother them, or anything, then it will start to develop and the argument will get a bit bigger and a bit bigger, until it starts . . . if they get fed up, it can stop growing, and if not, it can get to the point at which it explodes. Even if they're about to explode, they can think better of it if they get fed up. If they can't be bothered anymore, they will suddenly think of some idea. (David)

**Second understanding pattern: The parents' ability or inability to control their rising anger.**

Interviewer: What do you think makes arguments get more serious, with shouting and cursing, and even coming to blows?

When they get really angry. Like . . . when an argument starts, they build two walls right away; the wall of anger and the wall of calm. The wall of calm tries to turn off the anger. But sometimes, the anger gets bigger and bigger, and then the calm gets bigger, but it isn't strong enough, so sometimes the anger wins. Sometimes the calm wins and then there won't be violence between them. And sometimes the anger and the calm are equal. (Guy)

**Third understanding pattern: The mother's behavior as a motive for the father's escalation.**

Interviewer: What turns the argument into a violent quarrel?

When Mom annoys Dad. She causes it. She tells Dad what to do and then he gets even more annoyed with her. If she doesn't make him angry, then he can stop. (Inbar)

Interviewer: Explain to me how she makes this happen.

Because at first, they had an argument. And then he said to her, don't make anything, I don't want to eat in the evening. Mom made the cauliflower in her own way and then he got even more annoyed that she didn't make it the way he likes it, and then he came and threw out the cauliflower and then it got really bad. (Inbar)

An analysis of the children's types of understanding in relation to the variables that impact the argument's escalation to a violent quarrel shows that all the children understand that the process is composed of two alternative options: to escalate further or to end the argument. Therefore, the key variable that is perceived as responsible for channeling the process includes an impact in one of these two directions. Moreover, in some cases (again, regarding each of the types of understanding), the children describe the creation of an option for the process to start over again, even after it had apparently come to a close. This was influenced by the variable that they perceived

to trigger the escalation (“And sometimes the anger and the calm are equal;” “And then he said to her, don’t make anything, I don’t want to eat in the evening. Mom made the cauliflower in her own way and then he got even more annoyed . . .”). This shows that an additional option exists in some of the escalation scripts, which is a type of static situation of tension “on standby for explosion,” which can be defined only in retrospect as the point at which the argument ended or as the turning point to escalation.

It can be understood from the above that: a) the children perceive the escalation process as including at least one escape option, which shows it to be controllable by the sides that are involved, at least on a partial level (“ . . . if they get fed up, it can stop growing . . . Even if they’re about to explode, they can think better of it if they get fed up.” – first quote). b) The identification of two options for the development of the conflict shows the possibility of predicting two scripts: one, in the direction of exacerbating the quarrel, and second, in the direction of bringing it to a close. Nevertheless, situations such as multiple junctures throughout the process or renewal of the quarrel after it has stopped because of a reenactment of the key variable might impair the predictive capability. This is because they are required constantly to be on the alert and to reevaluate the script at any given moment. c) The perception of the process as including an option to end it and control it directs the children to perceive the home reality as conflictual in essence, but not as necessarily violent, which assists in constructing a pseudo-normative reality at home, in which the conflicts

are perceived as arguments between the sides, with violence as only one of the options of bringing them to a close. The creation of pseudo-normativity might also explain the fact that only some of the children perceive the motivational variable as influencing the development of the arguments, whereas others identify such a variable but do not see it as a key variable, since it is not inherent to the argument and is not connected to the communication developing between the sides. The following quotes are examples of when the motivational variable is identified, but is not perceived as influencing the escalation of the conflict: “. . . sometimes, the anger gets bigger and bigger, and then the calm gets bigger, but it isn’t strong enough, so sometimes the anger wins” (second quote); “If she doesn’t make him angry, then he can stop” (third quote). In both these examples, the use of language that suggests two options shows the presence of something that is not related to the argument itself and creates the option of escalation or of bringing the conflict to a close.

### **The Escalation Dynamics**

This theme refers to components identified by the children as leading the escalation process and to the interaction that takes place between these components. The children’s descriptions expose three components that construct the intensification of the quarrel to the stage of all-out violence: the escalating conflict; the degree of rising anger, and the extent of control of the abating anger.

Understanding the dynamics being formed as developing thanks to a communicative component that takes part in it indicates understanding of the process in the context of a normative conflict,



when the parents wish to completely exhaust the subject of the argument.

Regarding the process itself, the children's descriptions indicate their understanding of a spiraling process, in which the interplay between the different components creates the dramatic effect. Thus, the level of aggression reached during the process is an inherent part of the escalating conflict (the communicative component). The following quotes illustrate the understanding patterns of the process.

#### **First understanding pattern.**

What happens there is that if they are both as determined as each other not to agree, then it can reach a point where they're hitting each other. The argument can't stop and then they start to get very angry with each other; my dad with my mom and my mom with my dad. Like, one yells why this and why that, and the other doesn't even listen and says the same thing. And afterwards they kind of start threatening, that this one won't give and that one won't give. If my dad gets really angry and my mom less so because she still hasn't reached that level of anger, then he starts, say, threatening her a bit or pushing her a bit and suddenly something happens that, like, it's impossible. They explode and then there is hitting. But my dad hits really hard. (Shahar)

When they are, like, arguing, they annoy each other until a kind of friction is created, when they start to get to the climax of their anger and then they really go up a level. Then they start, and that's it, totally fighting with each other. Sometimes, my dad is really agitated. (Harel)

#### **Second understanding pattern.**

They argue. Mom annoys Dad and then he gets angry at her, and then he starts yelling. And then Mom says to him: "Be quiet, you're waking Shlomit." Then he really yells at her and says: "There'll be no quiet, no quiet!" And then Mom says to him: "Why, what will you do to me?" And then there are screams. He doesn't control himself and starts hitting – Dad. (Shlomit)

As can be seen, whereas the first two quotes expose an understanding, according to which the mutual argument will lead to mutual emotional escalation and to both sides losing control, with the man having a physical advantage, the third quote exposes an understanding, according to which the father's rising anger leads to his loss of control. The first quote exposes also the existence of "internal" motivation for the escalating conflict, namely the wish to totally exhaust the issue under dispute between the sides. In the children's perception, when the sides do not reach an understanding but reach a situation in which each side is entrenched in his/her own stance ("What happens there is that if they are both as determined

as each other not to agree, then it can reach a point where they're hitting each other"), they will aspire to end the conflict by violently imposing their opinion on the other side. In other words, as long as the sides believe that they can convince each other, they will do so by verbal means, but when they reach an impasse, they resort to the physical option. The violent option is legitimized by virtue of its perception in a context of conceptual exhaustion of the argument. This view is valid also when the loss of control is attributed specifically to the man.

### **The Sides' Management of the Escalation Process**

In the children's descriptions, they refer also to their parents' action strategies for regulating the escalation dynamics and bringing the process to a temporary close (which creates an option to end the conflict) or to a final conclusion. Analysis of the findings reveals that the different modes of action are linked to the understanding patterns that were identified in relation to the variables that influence the escalation of the conflict to a violent quarrel.

**First understanding pattern: The parents' motivation, or lack of motivation, to continue to argue.** The children's descriptions show that when the parents lack the motivation to continue to argue, they will adopt one of the following action strategies: a) one side will convince the other that his/her opinions, intentions, or words are right; b) enlisting an option that is external to the dispute to reach a compromise between the sides, and c) one of the sides surrenders. The following quotes

illustrate the separate action strategies and their unique characteristics will be examined:

Interviewer: Can you describe to me how the argument ended?

They started arguing with each other. And then they didn't have the strength to argue anymore, so like when my Dad forgot to buy something at the supermarket, he said to her that he must have missed it out, and then, in the end, they started talking more calmly. (Shira)

I know what makes it [the argument] almost stop, when they're fed up of arguing, and then my sisters are crying. Because then, when they cry, the argument gets a bit worse and then it finishes . . . because then Mom says to Dad: "Look what you've done, now the girls are crying." And then he answers her: "I did that? You're the one who always starts an argument with me!" And then Mom says: "OK, we're both at fault, we both argue." (Amos)

When they've both had enough of arguing, then one of them proves to the other that he is right, or one kind of gives in. Like, the one who gives in doesn't say that the other one is right. He doesn't change his view but stops arguing. (Ran)

The first quote illustrates how the key variable in the escalation (as perceived by the girl)—motivation—elicits an action strategy of mutual

persuasion between the sides for the purpose of ending the conflict. In this context, several points should be noted: first, the girl mentions the existence of a process. The willingness to listen enables the persuasive action strategy to take place leading to contention between the sides. She describes a process in which the sides gradually reach a compromise, which reduces the intensity of the mutual anger. The use of time-related vocabulary throughout the description emphasizes this point. From the perspective of the escalation dynamics, this might show that the de-escalation and escalation scripts are similar in character. They both involve a spiraling process, in which the dynamics between the escalation components creates a weakening or strengthening of the dramatic effect. The second point worthy of attention is that the girl describes both sides' emotional state—the willingness to listen—before describing the variable that she believes has an influence on the escalation dynamics in the direction of ending the conflict: the lack of motivation to argue. This might reveal the existence of two types of understanding regarding the motivation seen by the children as influencing the intensification or conclusion of the conflict: “external” to the dispute itself (that is to say, not related to the subject of the argument) and “internal” (that is to say, motivation to exhaust the subject under dispute between the sides). By linking the conclusion of the argument to its beginnings, the sides return to discuss the subject around which the argument began, which creates the impression of a normative conflict in which the

sides attempt to convince each other that they are right.

The following descriptive quotes by Amos and Ran also illustrate the use of strategies that are essentially communicative and are perceived as related to the argument between the sides. Even though Amos describes enlisting the option to end the argument, which is external to the dispute itself—the effect of the escalating conflict on the children—this is still a topic that is related to the argument in its broad context, and therefore might be perceived as inherent to it. Even though Ran's description refers to a strategy in which one side surrenders to the other, the context is still the subject under dispute.

**Second understanding pattern: The parents' ability or inability to control their anger.** The children's descriptions show that when the parents' anger increases with the intensification of the argument, they will sometimes utilize anger management strategies. At the point of action, they will make use of one or more of the following strategies: a) creation of physical distance between the sides; b) changing the spatial arrangement either inside or outside the house, and c) using self-calming techniques.

When they get angry, then they don't hear anymore. The only thing that interests them is to get away from each other and cool off. To go downstairs to calm themselves down. But sometimes, they don't manage to do that, and then it [the violence] happens. (Roy)

This quote illustrates how the elevated level of anger (“When they get angry”) reduces their level of control (“then they don’t hear anymore”). In such a situation, when both sides implement action strategies channeled toward gaining control over their anger, the process will be aborted and escalation of the conflict will cease. The fact that they make use of three tactics to gain control over their anger, as well as turning to various calming strategies, both internal and external, is indicative of the emotional intensity involved in the process of escalation. Great effort is required to reduce the dramatic effect that is created during the escalation. Hence, it can be assumed that even though the use of one action strategy might bring immediate calm, the anger will be so intense that the tension will remain in the air and any little thing can reignite the conflict.

**Third understanding pattern: The mother’s behavior as a motive for the father’s escalation.**

The children’s descriptions show that at the point at which the father becomes angry in the escalating conflict with the mother, she will sometimes implement a strategy to manage the father’s anger. The following quote demonstrates the nature of this action strategy:

Interviewer: How does it happen that the shouts and curses in the argument will end in a situation of calm and not of violence?

When they will stop the argument and will start afresh. The one who stops it is Mom. There are things that she says that make Dad stop being angry.  
(Dina)

The girl implies the existence of two options: the parents either bringing the conflict to a close, or not. Even though she describes the mother as the one who can stop the argument, in her overall view, she presents both parents as responsible for ending it (“When they will stop the argument and will start afresh”). This reveals an understanding of the conflict on two levels: the internal development level, in which the mother is perceived as leading the process and as responsible for bringing it to a conclusion, and on the general level, in which both sides are perceived as responsible for the argument’s development, positioning the context of the dispute as part of the trivial daily routine.

The girl describes the essence of the strategy as words that will calm the father’s anger. Emphasizing the essence in a general and not a unique manner shows that, in practice, only the mother knows what can calm him down. The calming words cannot be judged in normative terms as soothing or enraging, but are judged from the father’s unique perspective.

An analysis of the findings regarding the action strategies used by the parents to regulate the escalation dynamics shows that all the children understand that a motivational component is involved in the process. The children are divided in their understanding of this component’s place in forming the conflict escalation. Whereas in understanding first understanding pattern, the use of the action strategy depends on the creation of conditions in which the partners lack the motivation to continue to argue, in the second and third understanding, the motivational component is perceived as an action strategy in itself. (In the

second understanding pattern, when the parents become angry, they can choose a strategy of motivation to argue or a strategy to manage or regulate their anger. In the third understanding pattern, when the father becomes angry, the mother can choose a strategy of managing the father's anger or of continuing to argue with him.) Either way, even if the motivation is perceived as a key variable in the process (first understanding pattern) and even if it is perceived as an action strategy (second and third understanding patterns), the understanding that motivation is a component of the process shows that the children identify a motive for the development of the argument and perceive it in two different ways: as "external" to the conflict or as "internal," and linked to the subject around which the argument broke out. The understanding of the concluding script of the argument as involving either communicative or anger management strategies shows the understanding of the process in a normative context and the understanding of the conflict's dynamics as related to the "internal" motive linked to the argument itself. Nevertheless, the existence of another type of understanding indicates the identification of an external motive that is not related to the dispute itself.

### Results

The children's descriptions reveal the existence of three options for developing the process: the first, in the absence of an action strategy, and the second and third as outcomes of enacting such strategies. The possible results of the way in which the parents behave in confrontations that arise between them are as follows: 1) escalation –

intensification of the dispute on a time continuum to all-out violence; 2) de-escalation – making the cumulative effect of the dispute continually less dramatic until the conflict is brought to a close, and 3) a static situation of a possible explosion – maintaining the cumulative effect of the argument at a level of tension that enables temporary calm, even though anything can reignite the "flame of the dispute." Each of the aforementioned options was illustrated and analyzed in the previous sections.

### Discussion

Analysis of the findings regarding the construction of the escalation process from the children's perspective reveals the existence of a predetermined script, according to which the parents act. The following list of observations are evidence of the construction of a conflict escalation process between the parents to all-out violence, as a relationship script in which the individuals are involved: the children's description of the context in which the conflict is formed as a general pattern of occurrence (rather than as an example of specific conflicts); the children's ability to present the conflicts on a developmental curve; reporting the order of events in the conflict as interrelated in a way that gives meaning to what has gone before and prepares the ground for the next stage, and describing the development of the process as a drama in which the tension is built up thanks to the "acting" of the two protagonists, the parents.

These findings are consistent with Gergen's (1994, 1999) proposed conceptual framework of social construction for understanding the development of emotional occurrences. In his opinion, the development of such occurrences is



not intra-psychic or situation-dependent, but is part of a set of social “scripts” that are derived from fixed expectations (Gergen, 1994, 1999). In these terms, we can see emotional expressions as components of specific cultural scripts, which receive meaning only by virtue of their position in a relationship script.

A study of the research findings regarding the circumstances that give rise to the conflict escalation process, as well as the signs of escalation, the influencing variables, the dynamics at the basis of the process, and the action strategies taken to manage the process reveal a gap between the children’s understanding and the parents’ actual behavior in the relationship script in which they act, and which is exposed on the level of the subtext. The children’s perception points to the understanding of the emotional escalation as part of a cultural script, in which each side expresses its dissatisfaction with the other’s words, for the purpose of bringing about a change in how the sides adjust to the relationship (change of perception or attitude).

In contrast, the descriptive level exposes a reality in which the father escalates the conflict by interpreting the mother’s words and behavior as undermining his honor or his authority as decision maker and head of the family. Furthermore, the children describe an escalation process with an asymmetric structure, according to which the father initiates the escalation and the mother either aligns herself with him (in the first and second understanding patterns) or scarcely reacts (in the third understanding pattern). The children describe the escalation dynamics in its advanced stages as

driven by a motivational component, which implies the existence of an external reason for the appearance of the violence, which is not connected to the subject of the argument itself. All of this indicates that the emotional escalation is part of a cultural script, within which the father causes the escalation in order to restore what he perceives to be the balance in the partner relationship: with him as the determining authority whom the mother has to obey.

These findings regarding a gap in understanding the deterministic script of the parents’ actions are consistent with Gergen’s (1999) proposed conceptual framework of social construction, in terms of those emotional expressions being components of specific cultural scripts. Nevertheless, those gaps between the children’s level of understanding and what they are directed toward on the descriptive level also indicate the existence of various hints in reality, which might direct the individuals to construct those same scripts in one way rather than another. In this context, the gap between understanding the conflict escalation script in the context of a normative conflict and the script as it is exposed in the subtext, as derived from a patriarchal culture, calls for an investigation into its roots.

Two processes that were exposed in the analysis of the children’s descriptions might explain the source of the gap: the first relates to living in a reality replete with violent conflicts, which directly influences the perception of the violence as taken for granted, and is therefore understood to be one of the options in the conflict. The second relates to the construction of a pseudo-normative reality in

the framework of which the escalation abounds with the adoption of accepted behaviors. Examples of such behaviors are making use of communicative and anger management strategies to bring the escalating conflict to a close. Even though scrutiny of those behavioral norms exposes external rather than inherent use of them (the communicative strategies that were used were elicited artificially for the purpose of ending the conflict and were not connected to an inherent solution to the conflict), the actual use of them is a concrete hint to the children of the existence of a normative reality. Within this reality, the conflicts reflect an event script in which both sides wish to bring about some kind of change in adjustment to their relationship, when the conflict sometimes deteriorates to violence when the sides do not reach an agreement and one side tries to force his/her opinion on the other.

Besides the fact that the two aforementioned processes shape the context of a distorted construction of reality, in which abuse and danger are perceived as trivial and routine, the children's assimilation of these processes might be manifest in seeking for hints that blur the abuse, disregarding danger symptoms, and adhering to those explanations in the normative reality that might correspond with an abusive lifestyle. Learning and assimilation of these latent processes can explain the gap, which increases through the years, between developing the ability for an intact reading of reality and internalizing accepted social norms and the children's perception of reality, which draws on approaches that justify the use of violence and is expressed in difficulty

understanding social situations. In addition, this learning might explain the inclusion of the learned cognitive strategies in the field of direct abuse, especially sexual abuse. The construction of the normative context by both parents strengthens the perceptual distortion, through instilling the feeling of a consensus that both parents share the perception that all is correct and proper at home.

Sexual abuse inside or outside of the family, in many cases, involves a process in which the relationship becomes sexual over time (Berliner & Conte, 1990). This multi-stage process frequently involves a negation of the sexual nature of the abuse, either by characterizing it as "non-sexual" or by infusing an atmosphere of unique love into the relationship, or by positioning the child as a full partner in the relationship (Conte, Wolfe, & Smith, 1989). The context of violence against women might provide the perfect conditions for child sexual abuse. As mentioned, living in a reality replete with violence has a direct impact on the children's perception of the violence at home as taken for granted, and therefore, might provide the essential conditions for long-term sexual abuse. The parents create a pseudo-normative reality for the children by dropping hints to use accepted behavioral codes within the framework of the escalation. Therefore, in a similar way, the children learn to look for hints of normativity in the context of the sexual abuse. Society provides them with social explanations regarding the need for sex education in preparation for adult couple relationships; indeed, such content is taught in school—in the framework of biology or sex education. They might find support of this also in

concepts such as love or reciprocity in the broad social context (through concern for other people or giving to other people). The parental consensus about the normative home-life routine provides another condition for the existence of sexual abuse. In this context, the fact that the mother herself is a victim of abuse, including sexual abuse, which was found to have very high levels among women victims of violence (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2009), might prevent her from being alert to the signs that her son or daughter is being abused (Lev-Wiesel, 2005). The children themselves might interpret the sexual relationship in the context of love and not in the context of abuse (Lev-Wiesel, 1999).

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

Based on the three understanding patterns of the escalation process, as they emerged from the data analysis: the existence or absence of parents' motivation to continue the argument; the parents' ability or inability to control their anger, and the mother's behavior as motivating the father's escalation,<sup>1</sup> a theoretical model can be proposed for understanding the escalation of interparental conflicts to all-out violence from the children's perspective:

An argument breaks out between the parents on a certain topic. The central question to be asked by both sides is whether they wish to exhaust the lack of agreement in their perceptions of the subject under dispute. If not, the argument will be

exhausted without a conflict. If the answer is yes, an argument will develop in which each side brings his/her claims and it will sometimes slide into verbal aggression until a stage at which they are willing to listen, which in turn will elicit communicative and emotional strategies to end the conflict (de-escalation process).

If the argument is not exhausted, in other words, if it reaches an impasse, the question that will be asked again by one or both of the sides is whether they wish to continue in order to exhaust the argument. This time, however, the question is asked after exhausting the normative options concerning the argument (such as: suggesting and discussing different opinions, backing up the different opinions and even using verbal aggression). If not, the argument will remain open when one side imposes his/her view on the other, which leaves an option for renewing the wish to continue to exhaust the argument later. If the answer is yes, violence will be used to force an end to the conflict.

The study findings contribute an additional layer to the theory that deals with the escalation of interparental conflicts to all-out violence. Whereas the studies by Eisikovits, Winstok, and Gelles (Eisikovits et al., 2002; Winstok et al., 2002) exposed the structure and dynamics of violence in intimate relationships from the perspective of the aggressor and the victim, the present study exposes the children's perspective on the process. The findings show that children, similar to women, see the transition from a non-violent reality to a violent reality as a process marked by junctures, which each hold the possibility for either escalation or

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<sup>1</sup> The third understanding pattern has both a broad and a narrow context of understanding, according to which the responsibility for escalation as well as the motive for its development is placed on both sides. See reference to this point: Theme 1, The circumstances of the violence; Theme 2, Signs of escalation of the conflict, and Theme 4, The escalation dynamics.

escape. However, unlike the woman's view, which sees her ability to control the situation as a key variable in managing the process, the children see the escalation dynamics as dependent on the variable of both parents' motivation to exhaust the subject of the argument. Whereas the mother's viewpoint can be explained against the background of her use of a survival mechanism, (Eisikovits et al., 2002), the children's perspective is derived from the parents presenting a picture of a normative context for the internal home reality.<sup>2</sup>

The study findings make a contribution to the literature on violence against an intimate partner. In this context, exposing the gap between the children's understanding of the relationship script and the latent script as it emerges in the children's descriptions, serves as a basis for the school that sees violence as an expression of power and control that men impose on women (Dekeseredy & MacLeod, 1997) and explains the risk in blurring the context. The need of both parents to shape such a reality serves as a distorted filter for how the children view the reality and gives them to understand that violent conflicts are legitimate within couple and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, these findings constitute a possibility of in-depth understanding of how a violent-free context allows the assembly of a completely different puzzle, still based on reality (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996).

A new, additional theoretical aspect that emerges from the study findings touches on the relationship between the context of exposure to

violence and child physical and sexual abuse. In this context, analysis of the study findings shows that the children's understanding that escalation of the interparental conflicts to violence is normative might serve perceptions and processes that are at the basis of direct child abuse, and hence explain the high percentage of physical and sexual abuse that was found in this population. Specifically, understanding the violence as part of the daily routine, adhering to hints of normativity in the escalation, and perceiving both parents as responsible for the escalation might direct the children to seek these elements in the context of sexual abuse. Understanding the cognitive processes that lead to the children's construction of their experiences, including the drawing of conclusions and the generalization of their learned knowledge to their overall worldview (Eisikovits et al., 1998), might provide support for this thesis.

The immediate implications of this article for the type of treatment required for the population of children exposed to violence is that it must include a cognitive element focused on an intact social view. This focus might be important especially because of the fact that the blurring of the violent reality might explain not only the difficulty of understanding the social situation and legitimizing the violence, but also the high percentages of children who are directly harmed by the father's violence. Trivialization of the harm is made possible by the children's perception of the violent reality at home as normative. Since learning over many years, which includes considering a distorted reality as normal, is deeply ingrained, the position of authorities from outside the home needs to be

<sup>2</sup> Both parents wish to paint a normative picture of reality: the men deny the violence and the women attempt to protect the children despite the violence.

increased significantly in the children's lives. This demands thought and reorganization of the community as well as enlisting the education system to treat these children. In any case, it is important that the children's treatment be separate from that of the mother and should be recognized as treatment for child abuse. This is in light of the findings of the present study, which clearly reveal that the children perceive both parents as responsible for the escalation.

Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration that such work might distance the children from their families (as part of the clearer understanding that they are living in a world of falsehood) and might cause them to relinquish their survival mechanisms that they need for optimal functioning within the escalation scripts of the violent confrontations. The solution might be to work with the children on creating alternative spaces through the various types of art (Carmel, Sigad, Lev-Wiesel, & Eisikovits, 2015), where they will experience components of the normative world, but outside their routine, everyday context. Such an experience might be a bridge to the normative world, not from a place that contradicts their internal home reality, but from a place that might provide them with an alternative option for the future. The next stage of the therapeutic process will be direct confrontational cognitive work. In cases in which there is a reasonable suspicion of physical and/or sexual abuse of the children within the framework of their exposure to violence, the intervention will need to take a different direction, to stop the abuse immediately, understanding that the home environment is not a

safe and protected place. This notwithstanding, acquaintance with components of the normative world through creating alternative spaces might be a key variable in acquiring a new language, which is different from the one imprinted on them in the home space.



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