

Threats against children during the separation process for women in abusive relationships

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Mothers who separate from their abusive partners are four times more likely to report threats to take or to harm their children than those who stay in the relationship, a study by Sam Houston State University found.

In "Indirect Abuse Involving Children During the Separation Process," Brittany Hayes, Assistant Professor at the College of Criminal Justice, said that victims of [intimate partner violence](#) continue to suffer from [abuse](#) after separation, but few recognize the indirect abuse of children during the process.

"When we look at the separation process, we know that women are at an increased risk of violence and sexual assault," said Hayes. "But we need to keep an eye out for other forms of abusive behavior that are not as obvious."

The study is based on 339 abused mothers from the Chicago Women Health Risk Study, which surveyed over 700 women who used [health care services](#) at a Chicago area clinic over a 10-month period. According to the study, nearly one-quarter of abusers threatened to take the children away from their mothers, whereas 8 percent threatened to harm the children. Threats against the children are attempts to further control the victim, even after the abusive relationship has ended, the study found.

Although separation may provide additional avenues for abused women in the legal process, it may lead to new avenues of exploitation through child custody issues. Courts rely on "the best interest of the child" standards, which recommends joint custody unless there is evidence of child abuse. The current system makes it hard to balance the safety of the abused victim with the custody and visitation rights of the father.

Therefore, the study suggests it is important for child custody workers to screen for [child abuse](#) beyond physical violence, as controlling behaviors may pre-date the separation and have been found to be a causative factor in victimization. Behaviors that child custody workers should screen for include the abuser encouraging negative beliefs among the children, undermining the mother's authority, or using the children to frighten the mother. The study also recommends the creation of Family Justice Centers that can be used for supervised visits or safe exchanges of [children](#) in cases involving [intimate partner](#) violence. Family Justice Centers also can provide resources for the victims of abuse, including talking to an advocate, filing police reports, meeting with the prosecutor, creating a safety plan, obtaining medical assistance and getting information on housing or public assistance.

"There is still much work that needs to be done on improving services for those involved in a child custody case where there is a history of intimate [partner violence](#)," Dr. Hayes said.

The study was published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* and can be found at jiv.sagepub.com/content/early/.../886260515596533.full

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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