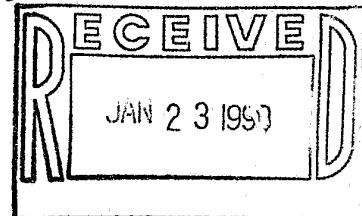


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VERBAL AGGRESSION AGAINST SPOUSES AND CHILDREN  
IN A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF AMERICAN FAMILIES\*

Murray A. Straus, Stephen Sweet, and Yvonne M. Vissing  
Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire  
Durham, NH 03824 (603) 862-2594



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to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

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The frequency and intensity of verbal aggression in families has been depicted in countless novels and plays, such as Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe and Streetcar Named Desire. Verbal aggression may be even more common than physical aggression in families. The available social science evidence also suggests that verbal aggression is very frequent in American families, but there do not seem to be studies of non-clinical samples from which one can estimate the prevalence in the general population.

The present paper is part of a recently inaugurated program of research designed to investigate a number of aspects of verbal aggression. The main purpose of this paper is to describe the prevalence of verbal aggression against spouses and against children in a large and representative sample of American families. Even such a descriptive analysis is more complex than it may at first seem to be. First, there is the difficult issue of how to define and measure "verbal aggression." Second, a single overall measure cannot characterize a family because families are complex systems. Separate measures are needed for different subsystems such as the parent-child subsystem or the spousal subsystem. Verbal aggression is also likely to vary according to the characteristics of the persons involved, such as gender (wives as compared to husbands, and mothers as compared to fathers). Finally, prevalence rates by themselves are not adequate. It is important to measure the "chronicity" of verbal aggression, that is how often such incidents occur within a given family.

As important as these descriptive issues are, the central issues of our research program concern the etiology and consequences of intra-family verbal aggression. That work is still in an early stage. Because of its preliminary nature, and also because of space limitations, this paper gives only a brief summary of our work on some of the consequences of verbal aggression for children and for spouses.

#### THE CONCEPT OF VERBAL/SYMBOLIC AGGRESSION

A wide variety of terms have been used to refer to the behavior which is the focus of this paper. In the literature of social psychology and communication studies "verbal aggression," is the most common term (e.g. Infante, Chandler and Rudd, 1989; Wotring, Bradley and Greenberg, 1973), although "psychological aggression," "symbolic aggression" and "verbal hostility" (Buss and Durkee, 1957) are sometimes used. Some authors use the term, "aggression" without a modifier (Doob and Gross, 1968).

In the literature on child abuse and spouse abuse, terms such as "psychological abuse" (Hoffman, 1984; Hornung et al, 1981, Murphy and O'Leary, 1989), "verbal abuse" (Mulcahy, 1979; Warner et al, 1984), "emotional abuse (Silbert and Pines, 1982)," "emotional maltreatment," and "psychological abuse" tend to predominate. Still others use "coercive response" (Patterson, 1982), "mental abuse," (Garbarino, 1986), and emotional maltreatment (Baily, 1986), and "psychological maltreatment" (McGee and Wolfe, 1989).

### Definition of Verbal Aggression

Each of the concepts listed above overlaps with the others, and while they generally include both verbal and non-verbal acts, there are also differences. The main difference is whether the criterion is the aggressive act carried out by the parent or spouse or the injury suffered by the spouse or child. In social psychological research and in communication studies, acts are the defining criterion; but research on child abuse and many studies of spouse abuse use injury as the defining criterion. McGee and Wolfe's conceptual analysis (1989), which proposes using "...the interaction between maltreating parent behaviors and the special vulnerabilities of the child..." is an important exception to the tendency in child abuse research to use harm as the criterion.

In the face of this lack of consensus, some authors respond by lamenting the absence of clear definitions and measures, but then proceed without providing the definition which guided the work (e.g. Paulson, 1983; Strickland, 1982). Although we cannot expect to provide a definition which will elicit agreement on the part of all, or even most, readers, it is important to present the definition which guided our research:

Verbal/symbolic aggression is a communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent. The communicative act may be active or passive, and verbal or non-verbal. Examples include name calling or nasty remarks (active, verbal), slamming a door or smashing something (active, non-verbal), and stony silence or sulking (passive, non-verbal).

As in the case of the definition and measurement procedures used in our research on physical abuse of children and spouses (Straus, 1989), the above definition, and the operationalization presented below, use the aggressive acts of the spouse or parent as the defining criterion, regardless of whether an injury results. This is partly because a definition based on injury precludes investigating the extent to which, and the circumstances under which, verbal aggression results in some measurable harm to a child or spouse. Or as McGee and Wolfe (1989) put it more generally "...definitions of psychological maltreatment that focus on outcome are inherently tautological."

We use the compound term verbal/symbolic because we believe that non-verbal communication is extremely important for all human interaction, including aggressive communications.\*<sup>1</sup> However, this is a somewhat cumbersome term. Therefore, for convenience of exposition we will often abridge it to "verbal aggression."

Verbal aggression, as just defined may be inflicted as a means to some other end, e.g. a parent who attempts to stop some objectionable behavior by exclaiming "You're a bad boy." This is what Gelles and Straus (1979) identify as "instrumental" aggression. Or the verbal/symbolic aggression may be an end in itself, e.g. a parent is angry with a child or a spouse and expresses the anger by a depreciating remark such as "you're stupid". Gelles and Straus label this "expressive" aggression.

## METHOD

### Sample

A unique aspect of this study is that it describes a large and nationally representative sample of American families. These are the 6,002 families who were studied for the National Family Violence Resurvey (Straus and Gelles, 1986, 1989). The interviews were conducted by telephone in the summer of 1985 (for information regarding the validity of telephone interviews in this survey, see Straus and Gelles, 1986:472; Straus and Gelles, 1989: Appendix). To be eligible for inclusion, the respondent had to be age 18 or older and either (1) presently married, (2) presently living as a male-female couple, or (3) a single parent with a child under 18 living with the parent, including divorced or separated parents. The response rate was 84%. Further information on the sampling design and the characteristics of the sample is given in Straus and Gelles (1986;1989).<sup>\*2</sup>

### Verbal/Symbolic Aggression Measure

The Conflict Tactics Scale or CTS (Straus, 1979; 1989) was used to measure verbal/symbolic aggression. The CTS measures three tactics used in interpersonal conflict within the family: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. The part of the CTS asking about conflict between spouses begins: "No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. I'm going to read a list of things that you and your partner might do when you have an argument. I would like you to tell me how many times in the past 12 months you...":<sup>\*3</sup>

- Insulted or swore at him/her
- Sulked and/or refused to talk about it
- Stomped out of the room or house or yard
- Did or said something to spite him/her
- Threatened to hit him/her or throw something at him/her
- Threw or smashed or hit or kicked something

The response categories were none, one incident, twice, 3-5 times, 6-10 times, 11-20 times, and 20 or more times coded as 0, 1, 2, 4, 8, and 25 respectively. The Verbal Aggression index is the sum of these frequency codes.

## PREVALENCE AND CHRONICITY OF VERBAL AGGRESSION

### Verbal Aggression Between Spouses

(Table 1 about here)

Prevalence. The row labeled Total Sample in Part A of Table 1 shows that husband-to-wife and wife-to-husband verbal/symbolic aggression occur

with about equally great frequency. About three quarters of all husbands and wives engaged in one or more of the verbally aggressive acts included in the CTS. The next two rows provides information on whether this seeming equality might be an artifact of combining data from male and female respondents. However, that does not seem to be the case because there are only small differences in the prevalence rate by gender of respondents.\*<sup>4</sup>

Chronicity. Part B of Table 1 shows that when there is verbal aggression, it is seldom an isolated event. About eighty percent of the couples reported three or more incidents. The mean is over 13 incidents, and this applies to both verbal aggression by the husband and verbal aggression by the wife.

These gender differences suggest that both parties tend to report somewhat more verbal aggression by their spouse than by themselves, i.e. both tend to minimize the incidence of their own aggressive behavior. However, men do so to a somewhat greater extent than women.\*<sup>5</sup> Although these difference are statistically significant, comparing the means for Husband-to-Wife verbal aggression with the means Wife-to-Husband within each row of part B of Table 1, indicates that there is a remarkable similarity between husbands and wives in regard to engaging in acts of verbal aggression, regardless of who was the source of information.

We do not have data on who initiated each incident of verbal aggression. In the absence of such data we can only speculate that the similarity in prevalence and chronicity represents the tendency to respond in kind to aggression. The correlations between verbal aggression by the husband and verbal aggression by the wife are high and therefore consistent with that ( $r=.82$  for the total sample, .83 for male respondents, and .81 for female respondents).\*<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the reason for the similarity in verbal aggression by husbands and wives, the findings are contrary to the folk theory that although wives may be less physically aggressive, they tend to engage in more verbal aggression than husbands. Contrary to this widely held view, these findings indicate that men engaged in verbal aggression against their spouses as often as women.

#### Verbal Aggression By Parents

(Table 2 about here)

The first row of Table 2 shows that verbal/symbolic aggression by parents is also extremely common. Taking all children through age 17, almost two thirds experienced at least one instance in which they were victims of verbally aggressive acts. Mothers were significantly more likely to verbally attack a child than fathers (67.2% versus 59.8%). This difference is very likely a function of the much greater number of hours that mothers spend with children.

Slightly more boys than girls were victims of verbal aggression, and more children age 7 and over as compared to children six and under.

Since the statistics in Table 2 are based on reports by the parents, they are "lower bound" estimates because we can assume that some parents will not reveal instances in which they verbally attacked the child, and because other parents will have forgotten some or all such instances

It may be even more important to keep in mind that these are lower bound estimates when considering the chronicity data in part B of Table 2. It is very difficult for parents to remember the number of times they carried out verbally aggressive acts. With this in mind the first mean in part B of Table 2 indicates that children who were victims of verbal aggression experienced an average of over 12 such attacks during the 12 month referent period of this study. In addition, the percentage distribution shows that more than a third of these children experienced 11 or more such attacks.

Mothers and fathers differed little in the chronicity with which they engaged in verbal aggression (a mean of 12.8 times for mothers, 12.0 for fathers).

The results on gender of child in part B of Table 2 show that the number of verbal assaults was somewhat greater for boys than for girls, and somewhat greater for children under 12.

#### EFFECTS OF VERBAL AGGRESSION

##### Verbal Aggression By Parents

(Figure 1 about here)

This section summarizes the results in two unpublished papers. The first of these (Vissing and Straus, 1989) examines the effect on children of being the victim of verbal aggression by parents. The essential findings are plotted in Figure 1, which shows that The more verbal aggression used by the parent, the greater the probability of the child being physically aggressive, delinquent, or having interpersonal problems.

We also found that even children who are raised in homes where they are never hit experience behavior problems associated with verbal aggression, and that the strong relationship between verbal aggression and psycho-social problems applies for all age groups, and for both boys and girls.

Finally, we found that verbal aggression is more closely linked to psycho-social behavior problems of the child than is physical aggression by parents. It seems as though "sticks and stones" (physical aggression) is not as harmful to children as "names" (verbal aggression).

##### Verbal Aggression By Spouses

(Figure 2 about here)

The second paper is still in preparation. The findings from the analyses completed to date are illustrated by Figure 2. This shows that

the more verbal aggression a wife experiences at the hands of a spouse, the greater the probability she will be in the high quartile of our measure of depression. The probabilities shown in Figure 2 were computed from logistic regression coefficients. The logistic regression analysis controlled for a number of other variables such as socioeconomic status, age, the degree of disagreement between the couple on five issues, and whether there was also a physical attack. Thus, the results shown in Figure 2 show that the relationship between verbal aggression and depression holds regardless of the other characteristics and other problems of the couple.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper reports the incidence of verbal/symbolic aggression by parents against children and by spouses against each other. The data on verbal aggression between spouses were obtained by interviews with a nationally representative sample of over five thousand couples. The data on parent-to-child verbal aggression is based on the more than three thousand of these couples who had children living at home at the time of the interview.

#### Prevalence

We found that use of verbal/symbolic aggression against children and against spouses is extremely common:

1. More than two out of three American children and more than three out of four spouses are victims of verbal/symbolic aggression.
2. Husband and wives are equally likely to engage in verbal aggression against each other, but mothers are more likely to do so, probably as a result of the greater child care responsibilities.
3. Parents who used verbal aggression did so an average of more than 12 times during the year of this study. Spouses who used verbal aggression did so with a slightly higher frequency -- an average of over 13 times per year.
4. Parents used somewhat more verbal aggression against boys than girls.

#### Effects

1. The more verbal aggression experienced by a child, the greater the probability of the child being physically aggressive, delinquent, or having interpersonal problems.
2. The more verbal aggression experienced by a spouse, the higher the probability of psychosomatic symptoms, poor health, and depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Although these relationships are highly significant, one cannot tell from this research whether verbal aggression is the cause or the effect, or both cause and effect. That issue must be investigated by future research using longitudinal and experimental methods. Nevertheless, the findings summarized in this paper indicate that the association between verbal aggression and psycho-social problems is not an artifact of confounding with a number of other variables, including gender and socioeconomic status, and strongly suggests that children. The findings suggest that children and spouses who are the victims of repeated verbal aggression have several times greater chances of developing social and psychological problems.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Strictly speaking, the compound term "verbal/symbolic aggression" would not be necessary because "symbolic aggression" subsumes both the verbal and the non-verbal acts identified in the definition just given. However, that would ignore the well established use of the term "verbal aggression" in communication research and in research on the social psychological of aggression (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1962; Infante, Chandler, and Rudd, 1989). The compound term verbal/symbolic aggression combines the inclusiveness with existing terminology.

2. The sample contains both married and unmarried couples. However, in the balance of this paper, terms such as spouse, husband, and wife, will sometimes be used to refer to both married and unmarried couples in order to minimize use of phrases such as "husbands and male partners."

3. The part of the CTS asking about parent-child conflict begins with: "Parents and children use many different ways of trying to settle differences between them. I'm going to read a list of some things that you (and your spouse) might have done WHEN YOU HAD A PROBLEM WITH THIS CHILD. I would like you to tell me how often you did it with (him/her) in the last year you...."

4. The gender-bias hypothesis could be tested because the data come from interviews with both men and women. Each respondent was asked to respond to each CTS item twice, once for how often the respondent engaged in each behavior and then for how often the spouse did.

5. Men may be deliberately concealing things, or they may simply be less sensitive to the occurrence or verbal aggression. Whatever the reason, these findings are consistent with research which shows that men tend to be less "self-revealing," not only to interviewers, but also to their spouses (Jourard, 1961, Jourard and Lasakow, 1964). This raises the question of whether the relationship of the other independent variables to verbal aggression is affected by the presumed under-reporting of verbal aggression by men. We therefore plotted all relationships separately for male and female respondents. In all cases we found the same relationships, regardless of whether the results are based on data obtained from men or women.

Other interpretations of the data are possible, i.e. that women exaggerate the incidence of verbal aggression or that the "true incidence" is somewhere in between the reports of men and women. The discrepancy may not be the effects of a conscious decision on the part of the respondent to exaggerate or minimize the behavior. Rather, it may be different interpretations of men and women as to what constitutes "yelling" and "stony silence."

6. These correlations were computed using the six category recoded version of the Verbal Aggression Index given in lower part of Table 1. The correlations using the original scores are slightly lower (for example, .76 for the total sample) because the distribution is extremely skewed.

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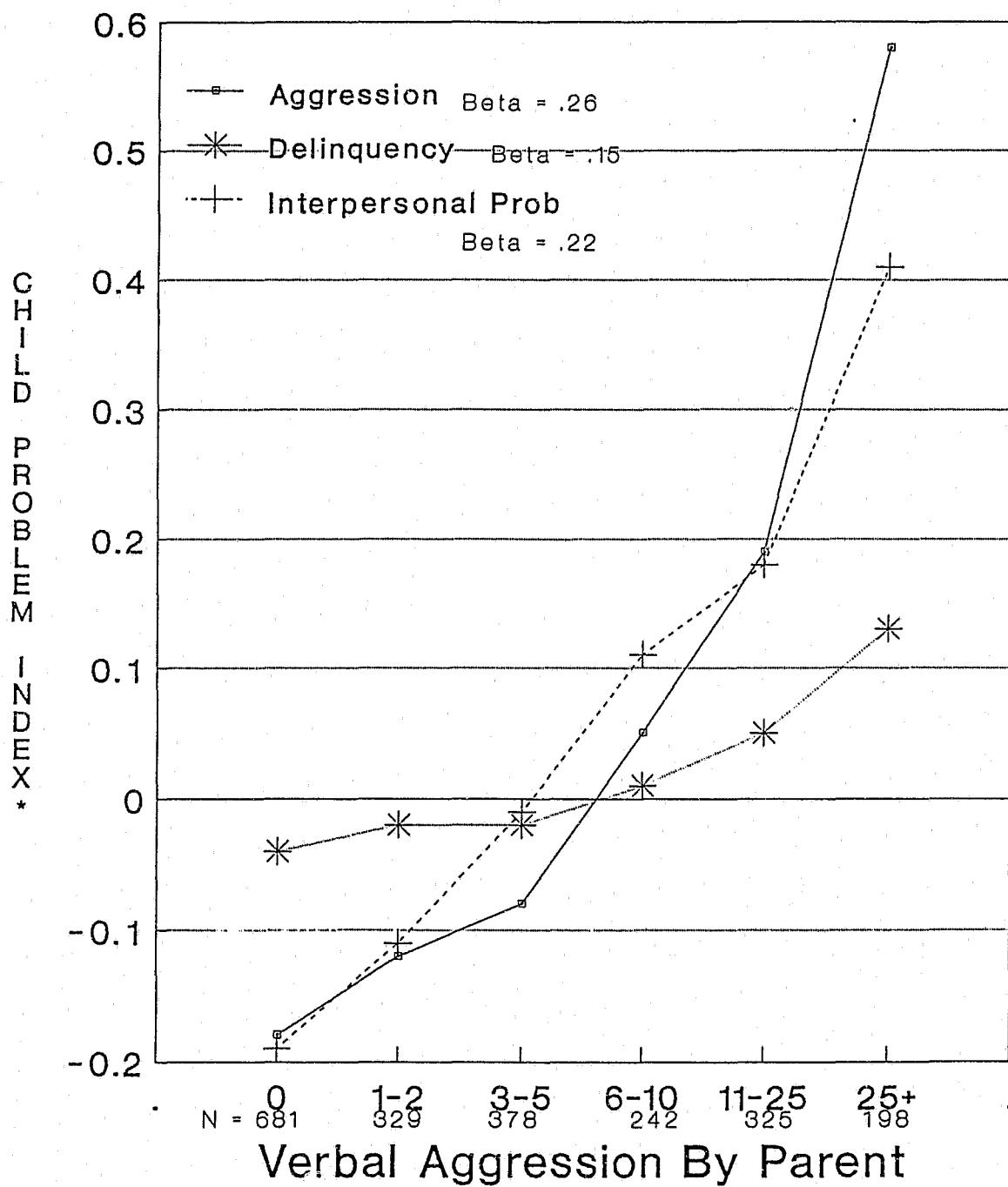
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**Figure 1. Child's Psycho-Social Problems  
By Verbal Aggression of Parents**



\*Deviation scores, adjusted for 3 covars

Figure 2. Probability of Wife Having a High Score on the Depression Index by Frequency of Verbal Aggression By Husband

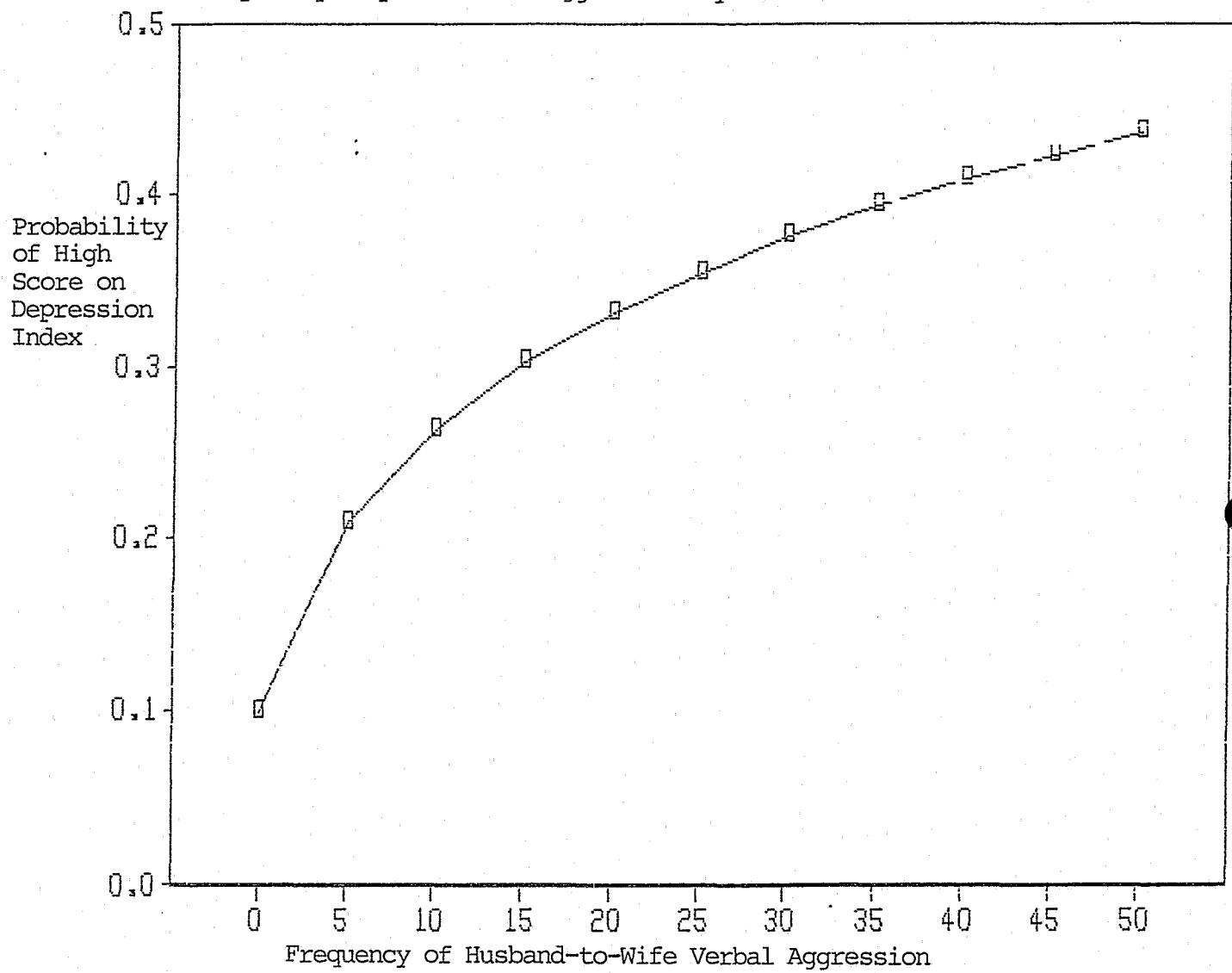


Table 1. Verbal/Symbolic Aggression Between Spouses

<u>Prevalence and Frequency</u>	<u>Type of Verbal Aggression</u>	
	<u>Husband-to-Wife</u>	<u>Wife-to-Husband</u>
<u>A. Prevalence</u>		
Occurred In Last Year <u>As Reported by:</u>		
Total Sample	74.6	74.9
Male Respondents	73.5	69.8
Female Respondents	75.5	78.9
Number Of Couples	5232	5232
<u>B. Chronicity*</u>		
<u>Mean Number of times/yr:</u>		
Total Sample	13.4	13.7
Male Respondents	11.2	12.6
Female Respondentes	15.1	14.4
<u>Percent Distribution</u>		
Once	9.5	9.6
Twice	12.2	11.5
3 - 5 times	19.8	20.9
6 - 10 times	21.9	20.1
11 - 20 times	17.3	18.0
21 or more times	19.2	20.0

\* Among Couples Reporting One Or More Incidents

Table 2. Parent-To-Child Verbal Aggression by Age and Gender of Child

Prevalence and Chronicity	Total Sample	Gender of Child		Age Of Child		
		Male	Female	0-6	7-11	12-17
<u>A. Prevalence</u>						
Percent Reporting Use in past year	63.4%	65.8%	60.9%	57.0	69.9	66.3
Number of Children	3,346	1,680	1,666	1,364	838	1,144
<u>B. Chronicity*</u>						
Mean Number of times/year	12.6	13.3	11.9	13.9	12.6	11.4
<u>Percent Using</u>						
Once	9.9%	8.3	11.7	9.5	8.2	11.7
Twice	12.0	11.2	12.9	11.3	10.8	13.7
3-5	19.5	9.8	9.2	18.9	20.0	19.8
6-10	21.1	21.8	20.4	19.2	24.4	20.6
11-20	16.7	16.2	17.3	15.3	18.6	16.8
20+	20.7	22.7	18.4	25.7	18.1	17.1
Chi-Square		192.5, p<.001		29.65, p<.01		

\* For parents who reported one or more incidents