



## Why aren't we using emotionally focused family therapy to help families impacted by situational couple violence?

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Would you conduct family therapy sessions if the children in the family unit have witnessed intimate partner violence (IPV) between their parents? Responses to this question might produce very strong visceral reactions for therapists, given there is still great debate on how best to address IPV therapeutically. However, this question is important to ask, as violence in the home can significantly impede the development of healthy parent-child attachment relationships. Unfortunately, very little is known about whether family therapy could be appropriate when IPV is the presenting problem.

Researchers Rosalie Paquette and Dr. Dawn McBride set out to overcome this significant gap in the research by exploring the use of emotionally focused family therapy (EFFT) for families impacted by IPV. The researchers propose that EFFT may have the potential to help parents work as a team to repair the ruptured bonds between them and their children. Therapists using EFFT work with families to repair parent-child attachment, thereby allowing children to regain a sense of safety and security as their parents attune to their needs (Furrow et al., 2019). However, the application to EFFT has never been applied to family violence.

To ease any panic on the part of therapists at the thought of a violent partner in the same therapy room as the victim and the child witnesses, the researchers propose that EFFT might be best suited for those couples who report the effects of situational couple violence in the family. Situational couple violence is one type of IPV characterized by patterns of violence resulting from the escalation of arguments, rather than from power and control (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Additionally, the violence may be mutually perpetrated, or it may involve one violent (noncontrolling) partner and one nonviolent partner (Kelly & Johnson, 2008).

The assumption that only situational couple violence would be appropriate for EFFT is one of the research topics the first author will be exploring in her thesis. The researchers are curious how therapists who are already using an emotionally focused approach in therapy will respond to using EFFT with families where situational couple violence is the presenting problem.

This exploratory quantitative study involves asking an estimated 200 therapists about the risks and benefits of using EFFT in cases of situational couple violence. After being presented with a brief case study, participants will also be asked to indicate how important it is that specific situational factors be in place before EFFT can be used when parents report situational couple violence. See the box below for the case study scenario, as well as several examples of situational factors.



**Scenario:**

A coworker has come to you for help as they try to decide whether to use EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED FAMILY THERAPY for a case involving SITUATIONAL COUPLE VIOLENCE between parents. Your coworker is an experienced couple therapist and you have no concerns about their ability to perform their duties ethically and competently.

*(In this survey, situational couple violence is defined as violence used by one or both intimate partners resulting from escalating arguments or interactions.)*

As you decide how to respond to the scenario described above, how important is it to you that <b>THE THERAPIST...</b>	I believe this is not important	I believe this is somewhat important	I believe this is quite important	I believe this is very important	I don't know/no opinion
Has taken training exclusively focused on intimate partner violence					

As you decide how to respond to the scenario described above, how important is it to you that <b>THE PARENTS...</b>	I believe this is not important	I believe this is somewhat important	I believe this is quite important	I believe this is very important	I don't know/no opinion
Have been screened separately for risk/safety (including but not limited to severity and frequency of violence)					

As you decide how to respond to the scenario described above, how important is it to you that <b>THE VIOLENT FAMILY MEMBER(S)...</b>	I believe this is not important	I believe this is somewhat important	I believe this is quite important	I believe this is very important	I don't know/no opinion
Exhibits no psychotic behaviour					

As you decide how to respond to the scenario described above, how important is it to you that <b>THE CHILDREN...</b>	I believe this is not important	I believe this is somewhat important	I believe this is quite important	I believe this is very important	I don't know/no opinion
Indicate feeling safe being in therapy with both parents					

The researchers anticipate that the results of this study will provide critical recommendations for therapists to considering the use of EFFT when parents report situational couple violence. It is hoped that further investigation into innovative intervention strategies for IPV will support the recovery of family members impacted by violence in the home, particularly the youngest and most vulnerable.

### References

- Furrow, J., Palmer, G., Johnson, S., Faller, G., & Olsen, L. P. (2019). *Emotionally focused family therapy: Restoring connection and promoting resilience*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315669649>
- Kelly, J. B., & Johnson, M. P. (2008). Differentiation among types of intimate partner violence: Research update and implication for interventions. *Family Court Review*, 46(3), 476–499. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2008.00215.x>