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# The relationship between attitudes toward corporal punishment and the perception and reporting of child maltreatment☆, ☆☆, ★

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This study examined the effect of workers' attitudes toward corporal punishment on the workers' perception and reporting of child maltreatment. Three hundred twenty-five (325) potential entry level workers participated in this study.

**Method:** Responding to vignettes in multi-item scales, study participants 1) rated their approval of parental discipline involving corporal punishment; 2) rated the seriousness of incidents of probable maltreatment; and 3) indicated whether or not they would report the incidents of maltreatment to child protective services. Data were analyzed using correlation analyses and multiple regression procedures.

**Results:** 1) Respondents with higher scores for approval of corporal punishment were less likely to perceive maltreatment; 2) respondents with higher scores for approval of corporal punishment were less likely to report maltreatment; 3) the likelihood that a respondent would report maltreatment was a joint function of the respondent's perception of the seriousness of an incident *and* approval of corporal punishment.

**Conclusion:** Attitudes about corporal punishment are important predictors of reporting behavior. Social service agencies face a challenge to provide workers with training which will enable them to detect and report maltreatment despite workers' individual beliefs about discipline and punishment. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Attitudes and corporal punishment; Discipline and maltreatment

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## Introduction

The study reported here concerns the attitudes of entry level social service workers toward corporal punishment, and the relationship of those attitudes to 1) the perception of child maltreatment and 2) the reporting of probable maltreatment to child protective services.

Federal and state laws require health, education and social service professionals (mandated reporters) to report “a reasonable cause to suspect” child abuse or neglect to either a local office or a central registry of child protective services (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 1996). Both Federal and state laws are based on a presumption that workers are knowledgeable about what appropriate parenting is, agree on what constitutes abuse and neglect, and agree on what the consequences for abuse and neglect should be (Davidson, 1995).

Contrary to the presumption, research indicates that mandated reporters do not necessarily agree upon what parental behavior should be considered maltreatment (Craft, Epley, & Clarkson, 1980; Deisz, Doueck, George, & Levine, 1996; Fox & Dingwall, 1985; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Snyder & Newberger, 1986). Moreover, mandated reporters do not agree on what action should be taken in response to maltreatment; a follow up study to the latest National Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (Sedlak & Schultz, 1997) found that nearly one half of the suspected cases of child abuse and neglect that had been identified by professionals were unknown to child protective services.

Child maltreatment continues to be a national epidemic (National Academy Press, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1995; Wang & Daro, 1997). It is important therefore to understand why persons who are mandated to report child maltreatment fail to do so. In order to understand the reporting phenomena it is necessary to identify those factors which affect the decision to report abuse and neglect.

Two sets of factors that are thought to influence worker perception regarding the identification and reporting of child maltreatment are case specific characteristics and worker characteristics.

A number of empirical studies have identified the presence of particular factors in a case as influences to reporting behavior. Mandated reporters are more likely to perceive an incident of problematic parental behavior as maltreatment and to report it if the case has one or more of the following characteristics: involves physical violence (Ards & Harrell, 1993; Ashton, 1999; Craft & Bettin, 1991; Deisz, Doueck, George, & Levine, 1996; Dukes & Kean, 1989; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen, 1985; Van Haeringen, Dadds, & Armstrong, 1998; Zellman, 1992), with risk of imminent harm (Ashton, 1999; Deisz, Doueck, George, & Levine, 1996; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996; Zellman, 1992), to young children (Ards & Harrell, 1993; Ashton, 1999; DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994; Dukes & Kean, 1989; Hutchison, 1989; Kalichman & Craig, 1991; Morris, Johnson, & Clasen, 1985; Van Haeringen, Dadds, & Armstrong, 1998; Zellman, 1992). However, case characteristics do not completely determine reporting behavior, as a considerable number of incidents involving physical violence with risk of imminent harm to young children go unreported each year (Besharov, Lowry, Pelton, & Weber, 1998; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

The decision to report an incident of suspected maltreatment is ultimately an individual

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