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# THE EFFECT OF CHILD PHYSICAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT ON AGGRESSIVE, WITHDRAWN, AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract**—This study investigated aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behavior in physically abused ( $N = 21$ ), nonabused-neglected ( $N = 26$ ), and nonabused-nonneglected ( $N = 21$ ) children aged 5 to 8 years. Multiple assessment techniques were used, specifically the Human Figure and Kinetic Group Drawings, children's verbal stories, and teacher ratings on the Pittsburgh Adjustment Survey Scales. All measurement techniques were able to discriminate among the three groups. Physically abused children displayed significantly more aggressive behavior than the neglected and nonmaltreated; neglected children were significantly more withdrawn than the physically abused and nonmaltreated; nonmaltreated children exhibited significantly more prosocial behavior than the abused and neglected. No single dimension adequately discriminated each of the three groups. Full discrimination was achieved only when aggressive, withdrawn, and prosocial behavior were combined in a multivariate analysis, indicating that effects of maltreatment must be viewed as multidimensional.

*Key Words*—Abuse, Neglect, Withdrawal, Aggression, Prosocial.

## INTRODUCTION

EXPOSURE TO PHYSICAL abuse and/or neglect has serious psychosocial consequences for the child's present and long-term adjustment. Physically abused children have been described as aggressive (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Harper, 1991; Pollock, Briere, Schneider, Knop, Medrick, & Godwin, 1990; Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990), having poor self-esteem, and exhibiting emotionally disturbed behavior (Martin & Beezley, 1977; Morse, Sahler, & Friedman, 1970; Woodarski et al., 1990). Cognitive and neurological deficits have also been noted (Martin, Beezley, Conway, & Kempe, 1974; Morse, Sahler, & Friedman, 1970; Sandground, Gaines, & Green, 1975). Neglected children have been described as passive and apathetic (Green, 1978; Roscoe, Peterson, & Shaner, 1983) and withdrawn (Kent, 1976). They are academically delayed (Fox, Long, & Langois, 1988; Wodarski et al., 1990), have difficulty dealing with frustrating tasks, and appear to be the most unhappy of all the groups of maltreated children (Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983).

Existing research has clearly established the fact that maltreatment has negative effects on childhood development. Less clear, however, is the nature of these effects. Specifically, maltreatment effects—as indicated by differences among abused, neglected, and nonmaltreated

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children—may fit one of several patterns. Briere and Runtz (1989) have identified two patterns: global and specific maladjustment. A global maladjustment pattern would exist if both abused and neglected children exhibit more dysfunctional and less functional behavior than the nonmaltreated (Fagot, Hagan, Youngblade, & Potter, 1989). In the purest form of this pattern, abused and neglected children would be similarly maladjusted (i.e., exhibit similar levels of disorder and distress) with both groups more maladjusted than nonmaltreated children. This view would seem to inform studies that do not explicitly distinguish between types of maltreatment when comparing maltreated and nonmaltreated children (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen, & VanHassel, 1986; Elmer, 1977; Rogeness, Crawford, & McNamara, 1989). One rationale for the global maladjustment pattern is that forms of abuse may overlap; children may suffer more than one form of abuse, e.g., neglect and physical abuse (Ammerman et al., 1986), physical and sexual abuse (Ogata, Silk, Goodrich, Lohr, Weston, & Hill, 1990) or physical and verbal/psychological abuse (Clausen & Critenden, 1991).

A specific maladjustment pattern would imply that each type of maltreatment results in a particular form of maladjustment (Briere & Runtz, 1990; McLaren & Brown, 1989; Ney, Moore, McPhee, & Trought, 1986). For example, physically abused children exhibit more aggression than the neglected, while neglected children are more withdrawn than the abused (Green, 1978; Kent, 1976; Reid, Taplin, & Lorber, 1981; Reidy, 1977; Roscoe, Peterson, & Shaner, 1983; Wodarski et al., 1990). Studies of sexually abused children can be used to illustrate the specific maladjustment pattern; they exhibit more sexual dysfunctions than other abused or nonmaltreated children (Kolko & Moser, 1989; White, Halpin, Strom, & Santilli, 1988). In the purest form of this pattern, the adjustment of maltreated children would be similar to the nonmaltreated for factors other than those involved with the specific type of maltreatment. A successful test of this hypothesized pattern requires that the various forms of abuse are not confounded.

Although Briere and Runtz (1989) distinguished the global and specific patterns of maladjustment, they found support for both patterns. Some forms of maladjustment were common to different categories of maltreatment, while other symptoms were specific to selected categories of maltreatment. These findings suggest a third multidimensional pattern of adjustment; neither of the simple patterns summarized above may be adequate to describe the adaptations of different types of children. There may be a combination of the specific and general patterns, in other words, some maladjustments may be common to all types of maltreated children, while other maladjustments are limited to specific forms of maltreatment. Or, nonmaltreated children may be more maladjusted than some types of maltreated children on certain dimensions. Another aspect of the multidimensional pattern is that positive adjustment (i.e., prosocial behavior) may distinguish among nonmaltreated children and children who have experienced different types of maltreatment (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989). Nonmaltreated children might be distinguished from the maltreated by higher levels of positive adjustment rather than lower levels of maladjustment, or different types of maltreated children might be distinguished by different levels of positive adjustment rather than maladjustment. In the purest form of the multidimensional pattern, abused, neglected, and nonmaltreated children would each be characterized by a unique pattern.

In light of the previous research findings we propose three unidimensional hypotheses based on the specific pattern of maladjustment: (a) physically abused children will exhibit more aggressive behavior than nonmaltreated and neglected children; (b) neglected children will exhibit more withdrawn behavior than nonmaltreated and physically abused children; and (c) nonmaltreated children will exhibit more prosocial behavior than maltreated children. Each of these unidimensional hypotheses makes a single distinction between the groups, reflecting our belief that no single dimension adequately captures the differences among all three groups. This belief is subjected to a formal test through a fourth hypothesis: (d) full discrimination of abused, neglected and nonmaltreated children will require a multidimensional approach;

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