



## Variations in emotional abuse experiences among multiply maltreated young adolescents and relations with developmental outcomes<sup>☆</sup>

Penelope K. Trickett<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kihyun Kim<sup>b</sup>, John Prindle<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Southern California, USA

<sup>b</sup> Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, Korea

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Based on the data obtained through Child Protective Services (CPS) case records abstraction, this study aimed to explore patterns of overlapping types of child maltreatment in a sample of urban, ethnically diverse male and female youth ( $n=303$ ) identified as maltreated by a large public child welfare agency.

**Methods:** A cluster analysis was conducted on data for 303 maltreated youth. The overall categorization of four types of abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect) was used to provide a starting point for clustering of the 303 cases and then the subtypes of emotional abuse were broken down in the clusters. The different clusters of child maltreatment were compared on the multiple outcomes such as mental health, behavior problems, self-perception, and cognitive development.

**Results:** In this study, we identified four clusters of child maltreatment experiences. Three patterns involved emotional abuse. One cluster of children experienced all four types. Different clusters were differentially associated with multiple outcome measures. In general, multiply-maltreated youth fared worst, especially when the cluster involved sexual abuse. Also, sex differences were found in these associations. Boys who experienced multiple types of maltreatment showed more difficulties than girls.

**Conclusion and practice implications:** These results reiterate the importance of creating more complex models of child maltreatment. Children who have experienced various types of maltreatment are especially in need of more attention from professionals and resources should be allocated accordingly.

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As a number of recent publications have noted (e.g., Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Egeland, 2009; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009), research on the developmental impact of emotional abuse has lagged behind research on other forms of child maltreatment. Two key reasons for this are, first, that it has been especially difficult to reach consensus about the definition of emotional abuse with resulting difficulties in the operationalization of this construct, a critical factor in scientifically sound research. Second it seems clear from a number of studies (e.g., Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; Trickett et al., 2009) that emotional abuse very often overlaps with other types of child maltreatment and thus it has been especially difficult to ascertain the impact or emotional abuse, per se. For example, in an examination of case record information on a sample of maltreated urban young adolescents, Trickett et al. (2009) found that 76% of emotionally abused youth also experienced neglect and 63% also experienced physical abuse.

Several studies have conducted statistical analyses designed to parse out the impact of emotional abuse from that of other forms of child maltreatment. For example, using regression analyses, Wright, Crawford and Del Castello (2009) found that

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\* Corresponding author address: University of Southern California, School of Social Work, MC 0411, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0411, USA.

emotional abuse, as determined through retrospective self report, predicted current symptoms of psychological distress in adults after controlling other child abuse experiences. In another study, [Wekerle et al. \(2009\)](#) found that emotional abuse was a significant predictor of PTSD symptoms as well as victimization and perpetuation of dating violence when controlling for other types of child maltreatment.

Three studies have used other statistical approaches, cluster analysis or latent class analysis, to examine how or whether different profiles of child maltreatment experiences including emotional abuse can be identified and, if so, whether these profiles are associated with different deleterious developmental outcomes. None of these studies ([Higgins, 2004](#); [Hazen, Connelly, Roesch, Hough, & Landsverk, 2009](#); [Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008](#)) were focused on emotional abuse, per se, but included it as one of 5 types of child maltreatment examined. The [Higgins \(2004\)](#) study focused on adults retrospectively reporting on their child maltreatment experiences while the sample for the study by [Hazen et al. \(2009\)](#) consisted of adolescents ages 12–18 who reported on maltreatment experienced during childhood. In both studies, three clusters or latent classes were identified that were described as identifying different levels of maltreatment (e.g., low, medium, or high) rather than different profiles of types of maltreatment. Although there was not much detail in these articles, it would seem that, like other forms of maltreatment, emotional abuse was distributed across the different latent classes or clusters and thus did not contribute to the identification of a particular cluster or profile. In the third study, the only one to use child protective services (CPS) case record abstraction rather than retrospective self-report, [Pears et al. \(2008\)](#) found that for preschool-aged foster children a latent class analysis revealed four distinctive profiles in which emotional abuse was highly correlated with all four clusters.

Altogether these studies provide little support for the proposition that emotional abuse, per se, can be linked to particular patterns of maladaptive development. However, for the most part the studies that examined self-reported emotional abuse gave little detail on how the construct was operationalized and thus it is difficult to tell if the studies are measuring the same phenomena. All in all the evidence about this issue is scant.

The present study extends prior research by exploring patterns of overlapping types of child maltreatment using extensive and rich data on maltreatment experiences derived from Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) case records of a sample of maltreated urban male and female young adolescents. This sample, and the method of case record abstraction, is described in detail later in this article and in two prior publications ([Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010](#); [Trickett et al., 2009](#)). What is particularly important to note here is that the [Trickett et al. \(2009\)](#) study categorized emotional abuse experiences into four possible types as operationally defined by [Brassard and Donovan \(2006\)](#). Using this classification system it was determined by this case record abstraction that 38% of the sample experienced *spurning*, 82% *terrorizing*, 14% *isolating*, and 31% *exploiting/corrupting*. Most children who experienced emotional abuse had more than one type. The most common co-occurring type of maltreatment was the combination of *spurning* and *terrorizing* (79%). Furthermore this study found that using this classification schema resulted in the identification of almost 50% of the sample as emotionally abused, a number more than 5 times greater than those identified as emotionally abused at the time of referral to DCFS (and thus to the study). That is, a great majority of the emotionally abused children in this sample were referred to DCFS for other types of maltreatment and thus experienced more than one type of maltreatment.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. In this sample of multiply maltreated young adolescents does emotional abuse tend to cluster with certain other types of maltreatment? That is, can distinct patterns of maltreatment – some involving emotional abuse, some not – be discerned? If so, is the nature of the emotional abuse similar or different for the different clusters?
2. Are these different clusters or patterns of child maltreatment differentially associated with mental health and behavior problems, self esteem and other aspects of self-perception, and cognitive ability? Are these associations the same for male and female young adolescents?

## Method

### Participants

Our sample included participants in an ongoing longitudinal study of the effects of maltreatment on adolescent development ([Trickett, 2002](#)). Maltreated adolescents were referred by the Los Angeles county Department of children and Family Services (DCFS). Each month DCFS developed lists of new cases in the system that met the recruitment criteria: the child (1) had a new substantiated referral (i.e., report of maltreatment) to DCFS in the preceding month for any type of maltreatment; (2) was age 9–12 years; (3) was identified as Latino, African-American or Caucasian (non-Latino); (4) resided at the time of the referral to DCFS in one of 10 zip codes in urban Los Angeles County areas. To recruit the comparison sample, school lists of children aged 9–12 years residing in the same 10 zip codes as the maltreated sample were utilized in order to ensure that participating children would have similar neighborhood experiences. Potential caretakers were contacted via postcard and asked to indicate their willingness to participate. Recruitment procedures were approved by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Juvenile Court of Los Angeles County, and the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern California.

A final sample of 303 maltreated children and 151 comparison youths was recruited and utilized for this study. At the initial assessment (Time 1), the participants ranged in age from 8.8 to 13.5 years ( $m = 10.9$ ,  $sd = 1.3$ ), were 53% male and

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