



Risk factors for paternal physical child abuse^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study uses the developmental–ecological framework to examine a comprehensive set of paternal factors hypothesized to be linked to risk for paternal child abuse (PCA) among a diverse sample of fathers. Attention was given to fathers' marital status and their race/ethnicity (White, African American, and Hispanic).

Methods: Interviews were conducted with 1257 married or cohabiting biological fathers who participated in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. PCA was assessed when the index children were 3 years old. Analyses included a comprehensive set of self-reported paternal variables as well as controls for maternal variables linked to child maltreatment. PCA was measured using proxy variables: two questions assessing the frequency of spanking in the past month and Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-PC) [Straus, M., Hamby, S., Finkelhor, D., Moore, D., & Runyan, D. (1998). Identification of child maltreatment with the parent–child conflict tactics scales: Development and psychometric data for a national sample of American parents. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 249–270] psychological and physical aggression subscales.

Results: Bivariate results indicated that Hispanic fathers were the least likely to spank or engage in psychological or physical aggression. Multiple regression analyses indicated that paternal employment and earnings were not significantly associated with PCA. Compared to cohabiting African American fathers, married African American fathers were found to be at greater risk for some forms of PCA. This pattern was not found for White or Hispanic families.

Conclusions: In this diverse sample of involved, biological fathers, there appear to be multiple potential risk-heightening pathways that vary across race/ethnic groups. With the proper control variables, paternal employment and earnings may not be as directly linked to fathers' physical abuse risk as has been previously thought.

Practice implications: There is a need for interventions within the child welfare system that better promote family wellbeing by including fathers in services. Patterns linking paternal socio-demographic and psychosocial factors to psychological and physical child abuse varied as a function of paternal race/ethnicity, indicating that race/ethnic differences are among the important factors that intervention efforts should take into account.

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Introduction

Although mothers spend more time caring for children, recent research indicates that fathers are more commonly responsible for severe child abuse, including child homicide (Brewster et al., 1998; Dubowitz, 2006; Krugman, 1996; Margolin, 1992; Nobes & Smith, 2000; Stiffman, Schnitzer, Adam, Kruse, & Ewigman, 2002). Although fathers are disproportionately implicated as perpetrators, little is known about the risk or protective factors that are related to paternal psychological or physical child abuse (Dubowitz, 2006; Dubowitz et al., 2001; Guterman & Lee, 2005). Research to date has primarily focused on maternal characteristics linked to child maltreatment, risk associated with living in a father-absent home (Berger, 2005), or the risk posed when non-related males are present in the home (Daly & Wilson, 1996; Holden & Barker, 2004; Margolin, 1992; Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, & Kotch, 2001; Stiffman et al., 2002). Few studies have used father-reported data assessing both economic and psychosocial variables to investigate risk for paternal child abuse (PCA) among married or cohabiting biological fathers.

To address this gap, the current study uses the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the unique characteristics of involved fathers that are associated with risk for PCA, and includes a comprehensive set of variables measuring demographic factors, contextual factors such as aspects of the father–mother relationship, paternal earnings and employment, and psychosocial variables measuring paternal parenting stress, perceived support from the child's mother, and paternal involvement with the child. We also analyze how these relationships may differ as a function of paternal marital status and race/ethnicity.

The developmental–ecological framework

Both the consequences and the etiology of child maltreatment have been most often understood through the lens of a developmental–ecological model (Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which proposes that parenting behaviors and processes are directly and indirectly influenced by factors across multiple levels, including *parental characteristics* (e.g., age at the time of the child's birth; race/ethnicity of father), the *characteristics of the child* (e.g., gestational age, child sex), and the *broader context* (e.g., marital relationships, employment, community and cultural influences). Prior research with mothers supports the tenets of the developmental–ecological framework. Demographic factors such as age, poverty and single-parent status (Berger & Waldfogel, 2004; Connelly & Straus, 1992; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Daro & Gelles, 1992; Drake & Pandey, 1996), family variables such as large households (Eckenrode, Powers, Doris, Munsch, & Bolger, 1988; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993), and psychosocial characteristics including depression and parenting stress (Berger, 2005; Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Coohy, 2000; Windham et al., 2004) have been associated with maternal child maltreatment. In a companion article we report detailed analyses of mothers at-risk for physical child abuse, as well as models estimating how fathers shape mothers' risk for physical child abuse (Guterman, Lee, Lee, Waldfogel, & Rathouz, submitted for publication). In this paper we focus on the characteristics of fathers that are uniquely related to their risk for child abuse.

One advantage of using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is that it is a prospective, population-based sample using indicators believed to foreshadow risk for future physical child abuse. This provides an opportunity to understand preventively those factors that may contribute to or lessen risk for PCA. Maltreatment proxies are measured using the Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-PC) (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) subscales that indicate psychological and physical aggression directed at the child in the past year, and two additional questions assessing the frequency of spanking the child in the past month. The CTS-PC proxy variables are intercorrelated but distinct indicators of coercive parenting behaviors that have been shown to be reliable indicators of parenting practices placing one at risk for physical abuse of a child (Straus, 2000; Straus et al., 1998; Straus & Mouradian, 1998).

Following is a review of the relevant literature examining factors across the levels of the developmental–ecological model that may be related to increased risk for PCA.

Fathers' employment and earnings. Community indicators of poverty have consistently been associated with higher rates of Child Protective Services (CPS) reported child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 1999; Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; Drake & Pandey, 1996). However, evidence is less conclusive with regard to how socioeconomic indicators such as paternal unemployment and income might influence PCA (Jones, 1990; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993). Building on the family stress model, research has found that economic strain heightens the emotional distress of caregivers, which increases parental irritability and hostility toward children (Conger et al., 1992, 1993; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; McLoyd, 1990). The family stress model, which has been replicated with families from a variety of race/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Conger et al., 2002), suggests that the influence of fathers' employment or low earnings on risk for PCA may be mediated or accounted for by psychosocial factors that are closely associated with fathers' economic role in the family, such as their age, prior educational attainment, and level of parenting stress.

While studies point to the strong link between macro-level indicators of poverty (e.g., welfare receipt, state- and census-tract level indicators of poverty) and involvement with CPS (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999, 2002, 2003), questions remain regarding exactly how low socioeconomic status and poverty contribute to risk for child maltreatment. In one study, parenting behaviors and socioeconomic status independently and significantly contributed to perceived risk for maternal maltreatment (Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). Another study indicates that low socioeconomic status may contribute to child abuse, but only among single-parent families (Berger, 2005). Others have suggested that race/ethnic differences in child abuse rates

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