



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 28 (2004) 845–861

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Attributions and discipline history as predictors of child abuse potential and future discipline practices

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Received 29 July 2003; received in revised form 31 January 2004; accepted 15 February 2004

Abstract

Objectives: We attempted to identify factors that can be applied in primary and secondary prevention programs and expand the understanding of why those who were not abused may engage in abusive behavior. The purpose of this research was to explore how young adults' attributions of whether they deserved their childhood discipline, as well as their abuse history, relate to physical child abuse potential and their discipline plans for their future children.

Method: A sample of 140 non-parent college students were asked to report on their discipline history, perceptions of that discipline, child abuse potential, and expected discipline practices. An age range of 18–20 was targeted for multiple reasons, including the suitability of these young adults for primary and secondary prevention programs.

Results: Analyses revealed that both physical child abuse potential and future discipline practices were independently predicted by respondents' belief that they deserved their discipline in conjunction with the harshness of their childhood discipline.

Discussion: These results suggest that the attributions of self-blame held by young adults about their discipline experiences are significant for increasing physical abuse potential regardless of whether the individual reports a history of abuse.

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Keywords: Child physical abuse; Abuse history; Physical discipline; Responsibility attributions

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Introduction

Despite continued struggles to contend with the complex issue of child maltreatment, child physical abuse still impacts the lives of countless children across the United States. Reasons for the inadequacy of the current child protection system are complex, although many of its limitations stem from minimal resources (e.g., finances and personnel) available to redesign the child welfare system from a reactive model to a preventative model (Wolfe, 1991). Dependence on a response approach to child abuse can lead to removal of children from their families and potentially further traumatize the family unit (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1993), compared to a preventative approach. Although admittedly complicated, the design of prevention programs offer many advantages, although much of research throughout the field has been hampered by methodological shortcomings.

Issues in prevention

Prevention strategies are categorized as either primary, secondary, or tertiary (Helfer, 1982). Primary prevention combats the antecedents of abuse in the general population, secondary prevention focuses on minimizing factors that augment abuse potential in identified high-risk individuals, and tertiary prevention initiates intervention to prevent further abuse (Helfer, 1982). Although implementation of all three prevention approaches are solid cornerstones in effectively responding to the problem of child abuse, the present welfare system's reliance on tertiary prevention cannot inhibit abuse from occurring in the first place nor does it meet the needs of children who do not encounter the system. A more progressive tactic would tackle both primary and secondary prevention, which is necessary to broaden the scope of current strategies and thereby impact the lives of more children (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1993).

Because of their limited life experience and developmental maturity level (Newberger & Cook, 1983), parents who are adolescents or young adults are at increased risk to perpetrate abuse (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1993), exemplifying a potential secondary prevention group. Not only does this age group represent a set of parents at risk to abuse, individuals in this age range can also serve as a primary prevention group because most have not yet had children. Although scarce, abuse prevention programs structured around educational models targeting adolescents and young adults have proven to be successful (Wolfe et al., 1997). Some programs have demonstrated that young adults' perceptions of positive parenting increase with child development education (Lewko, Carriere, Whissell, & Radford, 1986), but long-term follow-up evaluating the ability of such programs to prevent child abuse is limited (Wolfe et al., 1997). Therefore, further exploration of young adults' perspectives may clarify how best to design effective primary and secondary prevention programs.

Methodological complications

Even though decades have been spent researching the many possible characteristics of a physical abuser, a decisive profile has yet to emerge. The ability to develop an accurate profile has proven exceedingly difficult, in part because research on child physical trauma can be limited by methodological problems.

One such problem involves reliance on retrospective reporting, which is often the only means available to obtain data on abusive experiences. However, such recall poses the risk of memory distortion (Berger, 1980; Widom, 1989). Thus, choosing a target population close in age to the actual occurrence of the experience in question may minimize errors due to retrospective reporting. Another potential pitfall is that

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