



Children's views on child abuse and neglect: Findings from an exploratory study with Chinese children in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This research study explored children's views on issues about child abuse in Hong Kong and examined their implications on child protection work and research in Chinese societies.

Method: Six primary schools were recruited from different districts of Hong Kong. Five vignettes of child maltreatment in the form of flash movies were presented to 87 children in 12 focus groups for discussion. The process was video-taped and the data were transcribed verbatim for data analysis by NUDIST.

Results: (1) Children do not have a homogeneous view on issues about child abuse and neglect, and their awareness and sensitivity to different kinds of child abuse are also different; (2) some of their views on child abuse and neglect are uniquely their own and are markedly different from those of adults; (3) some of the views expressed by children, however, are very much akin to those of adults, such as the factors they would consider in deciding whether a case is child abuse or not; (4) children's disclosure of abuse in Hong Kong is often affected by the Chinese culture in which they live, like filial piety and loyalty to parents.

Conclusion: Children's views on issues of child abuse and neglect, no matter they are the same or different from those of adults, serve to inform and improve child protection work. Children are not only victims in need of protection. They are also valuable partners with whom adult practitioners should closely work.

Practice implications: Children have, and are able to give, views on child abuse. They should be listened to in any child protection work no matter their views are same with or different from those of adults. As this study suggests, the relatively low sensitivity of the children to child neglect and sexual abuse, and their reluctance to disclose abuse and neglect due to their loyalty to parents are areas to focus on in preventive child protection work in a Chinese society like Hong Kong.

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Introduction

Child abuse has become an international concern and has been discussed extensively in developed countries and regions. However, defining, understanding, and intervening in child abuse are often based on the perspective of adults with the middle class background in developed countries. It is true that the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* declared that every child has the right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child (Article 12), however, children are still often regarded as adults' preparation or as immature adults, being

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incompetent or having incomplete, unformed, or proto-competences that render them not independent subjects of rights, but rather targets to be protected, disciplined, and educated by adults. Often, children's rights to be heard are conditioned by judgments about a child's developmental capacity to understand their situation and to form a meaningful opinion (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). In many situations, adults are still spokesmen for the children's world and consider children to be incompetent or immature. Children's voices on problems that affect them are not commonly audible (Gough, 1993; Robinson & Kellett, 2004).

In recognition of their need to be heard, some studies began to research children's perspectives on different matters affecting them (e.g., Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett, & Robinson, 2004; Lewis, Kellett, Robinson, Fraser, & Ding, 2004; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000). In studying domestic violence, attempts have been made to involve children in research on child protection since the late 1990s (Westcott & Davies, 1996; Williamson & Butler, 1997; Willow & Hyder, 1998). In their book on *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*, Mullender et al. (2002) concluded that listening to children who have lived with domestic violence has offered them the chance to see familiar problems from a new, child-centered perspective, which has very practical implications for working with children who are in need of protection. Increasingly, listening to children has become a fundamental concern of the child protection professionals (Cashmore, 2002; Goodman, Batterman-Faunce, Schaaf, & Kenney, 2002; Jones, 2002).

While children's voices on domestic violence have begun to appear in countries like the US and the UK, little is known about how these children's views are different from their counterparts in other societies, or indeed from children of different ethnic origins within those countries. This is especially the case in the context of Chinese societies where some practices of physical punishment are still widely considered by many adults as a legitimate means of inculcating child discipline. Since the early 1980s, research studies conducted in Hong Kong have consistently found a high tolerance of physical discipline among Chinese parents. Lieh-Mak, Chung, and Liu (1983) found that spanking and scolding were regarded by Chinese as the most effective methods to be used in child rearing. The study by Samuda (1988) showed that physical punishment was used in 95% of the homes of university students in Hong Kong, and in 46% the most severe form of punishment was beating. In a community survey of 1,019 households conducted in November 2005, Tang (1998) found that the base rate of minor violence against children by parents was 526 per 1,000 children and that for severe violence 461 per 1,000 children. Another study of cross-sectional household interviews conducted in 1998 revealed that the rate of physical punishment of children by parents was 57.5% (Tang, 2006). The rate of physical violence against children by parents yielded by studies in the past 2 decades is unequivocally high, especially when compared with other developed societies.

Compared with studies on physical punishment, studies of psychological maltreatment and neglect of children in Hong Kong are rare. Two territory-wide community surveys commissioned by the Government were carried out in 1998 and 2005. The survey on adult parents in Hong Kong by Tang, Pun, and Lai (1999) revealed that 67.7% of parent respondents have engaged in 1 or more psychologically abusive behaviors for at least once in the year preceding the study. The most prevalent forms of psychologically abusive behaviors were insulting or swearing at and sulking or refusing to talk to the children. The overall rate of physically neglecting children aged 10 or below was 34.3%. The most prevalent form of child neglect behaviors among Hong Kong parents was leaving children alone at home (29.4%). Another household survey by Chan (2005) showed that 72% of child respondents had ever encountered psychological aggression by either of or both their parents. Fifty-eight percent said that at least 1 of their parents had been psychologically aggressive to them in the 12 months prior to the study. In the same survey, 36% of child respondents indicated that their parents had ever neglected them, 27% of them said they had been physically neglected by the parents in the 12 months prior to enumeration. It appears from the findings of these 2 community surveys that psychological maltreatment and child neglect by parents are very common among Chinese parents in Hong Kong.

The prevalence of different forms of child maltreatment is related to certain features of the Chinese culture, specifically that of *filial piety* of the Confucius teachings (Chiu, 1987; O'Brian, 1997). Chinese parents traditionally stressed their authority over their children and expect unquestioning obedience from them (Ryan, 1985). They believe that corporal punishment has an educational purpose, not least a necessary devil, but a needed means to train up discipline, integrity, and moral character of their children (Ho, 1986; Kwok & Tam, 2005; O'Brian, 1997). In fact, coupling of "parental authority" and "filial piety" is one of the core elements of the "Five Ethical Principles" advocated by Confucius. Under the spell of Confucianism, Chinese people since birth were molded into group-oriented, relation-oriented and socially interdependent beings through these "Five Ethical Principles." Children's failures to comply with parent's instructions or meeting parents' expectations are often regarded as "impious" and deserving punishments (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Tang, 1998; Wu, 1981). Most Chinese children face more social barriers to exert their individuality, at least when compared with children being socialized in Western culture. Given the adult-centric and patriarchal character of Chinese societies, parents tend to have low awareness of psychological abuse, neglect, and other forms of child maltreatment as well. Chinese parents show little concern about damaging a child's self-esteem (O'Brian & Lau, 1995). They commonly scold, beat, and shame their children in the public (Ho, 1986; O'Brian, 1997). In the Chinese cultural context, parents are heedless of their neglectful behaviors and tyranny over their children in the midst of their parental authority.

Despite low visibility and awareness of child maltreatment, its prevalence has occasionally caught public attention. Since the late 1970s, a number of child protection measures have been instituted in Hong Kong. These include setting up of the Against Child Abuse in 1979 (the first NGO specializing in child protection in Hong Kong) and the Child Protection Services Unit (now the Family and Child Protection Services Unit) under the Social Welfare Department in 1983, establishment of the Working Group on Child Abuse, implementation and regular revisions of the procedures for handling child abuse

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