



## Kindergarten teachers' experience with reporting child abuse in Taiwan<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objectives were to examine factors associated with reporting child abuse among kindergarten teachers in Taiwan based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

**Method:** A stratified quota sampling technique was used to randomly select kindergarten teachers in Taiwan. The Child Abuse Intention Report Scale, which includes demographics, attitudes about child discipline, punishment for perpetrators, and professional responsibility for reporting, subjective norms regarding support for reporting from the general and specific important persons, perceived behavioral control, and vignettes of child abuse, was used to collect data. A total of 598 kindergarten teachers (return rate 47%) provided data.

**Results:** While 97% of teachers reported having no experience with reporting a child abuse case, 11% indicated they had failed to report a suspected case of child abuse. Multiple regression revealed that, except for social norms, attitudes toward child discipline, punishments for perpetrators, and professional responsibility as well as perceived behavioral control explained 22.4% of variance of kindergarten teachers' intention to report child abuse.

**Conclusions:** With the exception of the subjective norms, the findings of this study supported the TPB that kindergarten teachers' intention to report child abuse is associated with attitudes toward child discipline, punishment for perpetrators, professional responsibility, and perceived behavioral controls over reporting. This study revealed the problem of underreporting child abuse among kindergarten teachers in Taiwan, and highlighted the discrepancy between child abuse training and expected reporting outcomes suggesting an insufficiency in the current training programs on child abuse.

**Practice implications:** There is a need to scrutinize the current training in child abuse and develop standardized training and clear reporting guidelines that will increase kindergarten teachers' confidence when confronted with suspected victims and perpetrators of child abuse in Taiwan.

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### Introduction

Studies from Hong Kong showed that in Chinese society children 2–8 years of age were most vulnerable to minor and severe physical abuse (Tang, 1998, 2006). Kindergarten children are particularly vulnerable to child abuse because of their developmental immaturity and associated inability to comprehend and articulate the abuse. For young children who are too young to defend themselves, advocacy for the abused child is an obligation for kindergarten teachers. Educators in the United States (US), the most commonly identified reporters of child maltreatment, file 16.3% of all reports (US Department

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of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2007). Similarly, educators in Taiwan constituted 13.4% of reporters in 2006 and accounted for fewer reports than other mandated professionals (i.e., medical personnel or social workers) (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Interior in Taiwan, 2007).

Mandated reporters report child abuse inconsistently despite legal mandates to report and a legal consequence for a withheld report. Reasons for failing to report include lack of knowledge of child abuse and clear evidence of abuse, misinterpretation of the reporting law, and fear of negative consequences (for a review, see Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Feng & Levine, 2005; Kalichman, 1999). Teachers' ability to identify and report child abuse and to handle disclosures sensitively is limited by their insufficient knowledge about the legal standards in reporting and skills of detection (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Briggs & Potter, 2004; Kenny, 2001, 2002, 2004). Kindergarten teachers in Taiwan reported difficulty in maintaining balance between the benefit of reporting and the risk of harming themselves and their relationships with children, parents, and other colleagues in the process of working with abused children (Feng, Chen, Wilk, Yang, & Fetzer, 2009).

The reporting process is influenced by reporters' characteristics, beliefs, attitudes, cultural factors (i.e., ethnicity and corporal punishment acceptability), self-confidence, as well as social and institutional supports (Alvarez et al., 2004; Goebbels, Nicholson, Walsh, & De Vries, 2008; Ibanez, Borrego, Pemberton, & Terao, 2006; Yanowitz, Monte, & Tribble, 2003). Acceptability of child discipline has been negatively correlated with the likelihood of reporting (Ashton, 2001). Teachers have been known to support physical discipline as a form of corporal punishment (Briggs & Potter, 2004; Kenny, 2004). Taiwanese culture is influenced by Confucianism in which filial piety is the core of family values and prescribes children's absolute loyalty and obedience to parents' authority and demands (Ho & Ho, 2008; Tang, 1998). Wu (1996) argued that filial piety is the key to understand child abuse and neglect in Taiwan.

Most studies examining mandated reporter's behaviors are atheoretical, which limits a systematic examination of factors related to reporting behaviors. Goebbels et al. (2008) investigated the determinants of teachers' reporting behaviors in Australia using the Integrated Change (I-Change) Model that incorporates concepts from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and 4 other models. While trying to capture a holistic picture of teachers' reporting behaviors, the I-Change Model is complicated and difficult to test. Feng and Wu (2005) used Ajzen's (1991) TPB, which provided a clear theoretical framework to investigate the correlates of reporters' attitudes and intention to report child abuse. Based on the TPB, a person's intention to report child abuse will be stronger if one holds more favorable attitudes (disapproving child disciplines, punishing the perpetrators and professional responsibility), receives stronger support from the general and specific important persons (subjective norms), and perceives greater behavioral control over reporting. A test of the TPB found that three variables significantly predict nurses' intention to report child abuse: when nurses believed reporting had a positive outcome for children and families, important persons supported nurses to report suspected cases of child abuse (subjective norms), and nurses had control over reporting (Feng & Wu, 2005).

Teachers are in a unique position to monitor the behavior changes of abused children that other professionals have less opportunity to observe. Given the nature of vulnerability of kindergarten youngsters, factors related to kindergarten teachers' decisions to report child abuse are critical to examine. Therefore, a national survey was conducted to examine factors associated with kindergarten teachers' intention to report child abuse using the standardized Child Abuse Report Intention Scale (CARIS) (Feng & Levine, 2005). Based on the TPB, intention to report child abuse was hypothesized to be determined by attitude toward reporting child abuse, subjective norms regarding reporting suspected child abuse, and perceived behavioral control over reporting suspected child abuse. Child abuse and reporting law knowledge was evaluated to determine any relationship to teachers' intention to report.

## Method

### Participants

A stratified quota sampling technique was used to select Taiwanese kindergarten teachers age 18 years or older. Divided into northern, central, southern, and eastern regions, samples were proportionately recruited from each region of Taiwan. A total of 300 kindergarten principals were randomly selected from the Education database (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Education in Taiwan, 2005) and were approached to inquire about their willingness to participate in the study. A total of 173 principals declined to participate due to unwillingness or inconvenience because of the school schedule. The appropriate numbers of questionnaires were delivered to the 127 principals who agreed to participate. A total of 1286 questionnaires were distributed to the teachers and collected by the principals. A total of 611 questionnaires were returned, representing a return rate of 48%. Thirteen questionnaires were discarded due to a significant number of unanswered questions. A total of 598 questionnaires were used for analyses. The mean age of 598 teachers was 33.5 years ( $SD = 8.22$ ) ranging from 19 to 63. Most teachers were female (98%), married (54%), and held a college degree (65%).

### Measurement

The Child Abuse Report Intention Scale (CARIS), initially developed to examine Taiwanese nurses' intention to report child abuse, was revised to better fit kindergarten teachers' situations. The CARIS consists of six sections: one section with demographic information, past experiences of reporting child abuse, and adequacy of pre-service and in-service professional

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