



## Maltreatment of children with developmental disabilities: An ecological systems analysis

Carl L. Algood<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jun Sung Hong<sup>b,1</sup>, Ruby M. Gourdine<sup>a,2</sup>, Abigail B. Williams<sup>b,3</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, Howard University, 601 Howard Place, Northwest, Washington, DC 20059-1019, USA

<sup>b</sup> University of Illinois, School of Social Work, Children and Family Research Center, 1010, W. Nevada Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review is to understand the risk factors for maltreatment of children with developmental disabilities. Using the Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1977) ecological systems framework, the authors examine how socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, and special education), *micro-* (parent–child relationship and domestic violence), *exo-* (parenting stress, parents' social support, and area of residence), and *macrosystems* level (culturally defined parenting practices) factors influence or inhibit maltreatment of children with disabilities. The authors highlight major implications for practice and policy for maltreated children with disabilities.

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### 1. Introduction

Maltreatment of children with disabilities has been a major social concern (Hibbard & Desch, 2007). Some researchers concur that children with disabilities are significantly more likely to be at risk of maltreatment than children in the general population (Brown & Schormans, 2003; Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1993; Goldson, 2001; Gore & Janssen, 2007; Mandell, Walrath, Mateuffel, & Pinto-Martin, 2005; Mansell, Sobsey, & Moskal, 1998; Sullivan & Knutson, 1998). Skarbek, Hahn, and Parrish (2009) also posit that children with disabilities are over three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than do children without disabilities. The Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008) estimates that 750,000 children were abused or neglected in 2008, of which more than 70% experienced neglect, 16% were physically abused, and 9% were sexually abused. Children with disabilities accounted for 6% of all maltreatment cases.

However, several researchers (Bonner, Crow, & Hensley, 1997; Hibbard & Desch, 2007; Westat, Inc, 1993) have argued that little is known about the prevalence rate of abuse and neglect among children

with disabilities, which is attributed in part to the failure of child welfare workers to recognize and document disabilities status in child abuse cases. Hibbard and Desch (2007) argue that data on the prevalence rate of maltreated children with disabilities are limited which is attributed to 1) variations in the definitions employed by researchers; 2) the lack of a consistent means to classify maltreatment; 3) the failure of child protective workers to document and recognize disabilities; and 4) the lack of social services training to properly assess children (Hibbard & Desch, 2007; p. 1018). Sullivan (2009) concurs that there is a lack of data on the incidences of exposure to violence on children with disabilities due to the various definitions of disabilities. The researcher argues that it is necessary to recognize the fact that 'developmental disability' is not a term that is interchangeable with all types of disabilities. Children can have a disability but not necessarily have a developmental disability (Sullivan, 2009). The legal definition of developmental disability was established with the passage of the Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights Act (P.L. 91–517) by the Congress in 1970.

*Developmental disability* is defined by the Federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act as severe, chronic conditions that 1) are attributable to mental and physical impairments or both; 2) are manifested before age twenty two; 3) are likely to continue indefinitely, 4) results in substantive limitations in three or more major life activity areas, such as self care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self direction, capacity for independent living, and economic self sufficiency; and 5) require a combination and sequence of special interdisciplinary or generic care treatment or other services that are of extended or lifelong duration

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 202 806 7306.

E-mail addresses: [clalgood@yahoo.com](mailto:clalgood@yahoo.com) (C.L. Algood), [jhong23@illinois.edu](mailto:jhong23@illinois.edu) (J.S. Hong), [rgourdine@howard.edu](mailto:rgourdine@howard.edu) (R.M. Gourdine), [willia49@illinois.edu](mailto:willia49@illinois.edu) (A.B. Williams).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 217 244 4662.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 202 806 4733.

<sup>3</sup> Tel.: +1 217 265 7867.

and are individually planned and coordinated (Public Law 106-402, 2000; pp. 7–8) Under the Act, *severe chronic* conditions include autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Down's Syndrome and intellectual disability, spinal bifida, and fetal alcohol syndrome. Amendments to the Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-517) and the Developmental Disabilities Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-602) (Dodd, 2007), now referred to as the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-402), significantly broadened the definition of *severe, chronic* conditions and provisions under the bill. Title II of the Act mandates provisions of family support services for families of children with severe disabilities, which would ensure a variety of devices to assist the child, counseling and training services for parents, and funding to defray any costs related to services for children with developmental disabilities (P.L. 106-402). Moreover, Title II stipulates that services must be culturally relevant and parents must be able to gain access to the needed services (Turnbull et al., 2007).

Disability status is frequently overlooked in the assessment of maltreatment despite the fact that disability status is found to be a contributing factor for maltreatment (Gore & Janssen, 2007; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Kendall-Tackett, Lyon, Taliaferro, & Little, 2005; Mandell et al., 2005; Romney, Litrownik, Newton, & Lau, 2006; Sobsey, 2002; Sullivan, 2009; Westat, Inc, 1993). Recognizing the importance of understanding the risk factors associated with abuse and neglect for children with disabilities (Kapitanoff, Lutzker, & Bigelow, 2001; Sullivan, 2009; Sullivan & Knutson, 1998), a number of empirical studies have emerged in recent years, which found that risk factors for child maltreatment are multifaceted. However, little has been known about the multiple level ecological factors associated with maltreatment for this population. To understand maltreatment of children with disabilities, the authors argue that multiple level factors must be examined within an ecological framework.

The authors begin by identifying socio-demographic characteristics of children with disabilities who are abused by their parents, which is followed by a discussion of the risk factors within the *micro-, exo-, and macrosystem* from which we draw assessment, prevention, and intervention strategies.

## 2. Selection criteria

Empirical research and literature review studies were selected via electronic bibliographic databases and manual searches. Studies published from 1980 to 2010 were reviewed for this study. Databases utilized for this review include scholar.google, Medline, PsycINFO, and Social Science Abstracts. Manual search included published books, theses and dissertations, and government reports. Keywords for the search included *abuse, neglect, maltreatment, children with disabilities, developmental disabilities, and learning disabilities*. Because 'child abuse' is defined as physical, emotional, and sexual mistreatment of children, according to the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (n.d.), studies that examined these types of abuse were considered in this review. Our search was limited to empirical research that quantitatively or qualitatively assessed the risk and protective factors for maltreatment of children with disabilities, as well as evidenced-based intervention studies that specifically focused on children with disabilities, or included these children in the sample.

## 3. Ecological systems analysis

An ecological approach can facilitate our understanding of the complexity surrounding child maltreatment in several ways. The ecological theory conceives the environment as an interactive set of systems, which are "nested" within one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The theory also perceives the interdependent interaction of systems as the major dynamic shaping the context in which the

individual directly experiences social reality (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The individual child is an inseparable part of a social network, which is composed of the *micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem*. The theory emphasizes the importance of considering cultural, political, economic, and demographic factors in shaping the family dynamics (Garbarino, 1977).

### 3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

#### 3.1.1. Age

Howe (2006) found in his study that children in preschool are at a greater risk for abuse. Sullivan and Knutson (1998) found that while the abuse starts at an early age usually at the hands of a family member, it continues throughout childhood. Jaudes and Mackey-Bilaver (2008) found similar results in their study on maltreated children with behavioral health problems who were abused prior to three years of age. The researchers found that these children were ten times more likely to suffer from repeat episodes of maltreatment. Others (Cicchetti & Toth, 2000; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006) also identified child age as a risk factor. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2006) reported that in 2004, children under four years of age comprised 80% of maltreatment cases.

#### 3.1.2. Gender

Among children without disabilities, girls and boys are equally likely to experience child abuse, with girls more frequently the victims of child sexual abuse and boys more frequently the victims of physical abuse. However, these findings are inconsistent when abuse is examined within the context of gender and disability (Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007; Sobsey, Randall, & Parrila, 1997). Both Hershkowitz et al. (2007) and Sobsey et al. (1997) found in children with disabilities that boys are more often abused than girls. For sexual abuse, both studies also report that boys were also significantly more likely to be sexually abused than were girls. The overrepresentation of boys reflects the larger proportion of boys with disabilities in the general population (Sobsey et al., 1997). Goldson (1997) hypothesized that parents in the U.S. have the tendency to respond more negatively to their sons with disabilities than to their daughters. The researcher also noted that boys with disabilities, such as learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity (ADHD) may be difficult to manage as compared to girls with the same problems but without much of the disruptive characteristics of ADHD, making them less prone to abuse. Further research on gender difference in maltreatment among children with disabilities is needed.

#### 3.1.3. Special education

A limited number of studies (e.g., Jonson-Reid et al., 2004) report that children who are enrolled in a special education program in school are likely to be abused or neglected by their parents. A study by Jonson-Reid et al. (2004) examined the association between enrollment in special education program and maltreatment among low-income children. The study included 7940 cases, which consisted of participants between 7.5 years to 16 years of age in St. Louis metropolitan area. Findings from the research indicate a bi-directional relationship between special education and maltreatment. Abused children are more likely to be enrolled in a special education program in school. In terms of the types of abuse, children who were sexually abused had the lowest rates of entry while those who were physically abused had a highest rate of entry into a special education program. The researchers also report that children receiving special education services for learning disabilities, mental retardation, and serious emotional disturbances were most likely to be abused by their parents.

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