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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# Empathy and child neglect: A theoretical model<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To present an explanatory theory-based model of child neglect. This model does not address neglectful behaviors of parents with mental retardation, alcohol or drug abuse, or severe mental health problems. In this model parental behavior aimed to satisfy a child's need is considered a helping behavior and, as a consequence, child neglect is considered as a specific type of non-helping behavior.

**Hypothesis:** The central hypothesis of the theoretical model presented here suggests that neglectful parents cannot develop the helping response set to care for their children because the observation of a child's signal of need does not lead to the experience of emotions that motivate helping or because the parents experience these emotions, but specific cognitions modify the motivation to help.

**Implications:** The present theoretical model suggests that different typologies of neglectful parents could be developed based on different reasons that parents might not to experience emotions that motivate helping behaviors. The model can be helpful to promote new empirical studies about the etiology of different groups of neglectful families.

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### Introduction

Studies conducted on the topic of child neglect have focused primarily on its consequences (Cantwell, 1997) or on the risk factors that are associated with neglectful parenting, like poverty (Bousha & Twentyman, 1984; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Kadushin, 1988), social isolation or lack of social support (Coohey, 1995; DePanfilis, 1997; Gaudin, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1996; Polansky & Gaudin, 1983; Polansky, Gaudin, Ammons, & Davis, 1985), depression, anxiety, and emotional disorders (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Famularo, Stone, Barnum, & Wharton, 1986; Gaudin, 1993; Kinard, 1982; Meier, 1985; Vondra, 1990; Zuravin, 1989), alcoholism and substance abuse (Famularo et al., 1986; Meier, 1985) and mental retardation (Martin & Walters, 1982).

Although research on child neglect has contributed useful insights on specific aspects of the problem, few theoretical models can be used to integrate these insights into a cohesive framework of child neglect. There are three theoretical models which focus on the explanation of child neglect: (1) an adaptation of the ecological model of child maltreatment proposed by Howze and Kotch (1985); (2) an adaptation of the social processing information model proposed by Crittenden (1993) and The Parental Environmental Cluster Model proposed by Burke, Chandy, Dannerbeck, and Watt (1998).

First, Howze and Kotch (1984) proposed an adaptation of the ecological model of child maltreatment (Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980) to explain physical and emotional child neglect. From this perspective, risk factors for child neglect were organized into four levels: (1) individual level (parents and children); (2) familial level (structure and functions);

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(3) social level (social support, social network and socio-economic determinants) and (4) cultural level (ideology, values and attitudes).

According to this model, child neglect is determined in large part by the way parents interpret everyday events. These interpretations of child behavior and other events are believed to be affected by different variables pertaining to the four ecological levels described in the model. Thus, everyday events would be perceived as stressful or non-stressful, and, as an outcome of this perception, neglectful behavior would be produced or not.

A second theoretical model, proposed by Crittenden (1993) applies a model of social processing information to the explanation of child neglect. From this point of view, child neglect is understood as an outcome of errors associated with the mental processing of information during situations where a child is in-need. These errors make it more difficult to develop adequate and appropriate parenting skills. According to this theoretical model, neglectful parents have difficulty in one or more of the following domains: (1) perceiving changes in the welfare of the child; (2) correctly interpreting the meaning of these perceived changes; (3) selecting adaptive behavioral responses and (4) executing selected behavioral responses in an adequate way to satisfy the child's needs. This model differentiates various types of neglectful parents based on the way parents perceive, interpret and respond to the child's signal of need: (1) neglectful parents who through "perceptive exclusion" fail to recognize a child's emotional state; (2) neglectful parents who correctly register but inadequately or incorrectly interpret the child's signal of need; (3) neglectful parents who fail in the selection of an adequate behavior to satisfy properly the child's needs; and (4) neglectful parents who correctly perceive and interpret the child's needs and select adequate behaviors but who are unable to execute appropriately this behavior (know what to do, but are unwilling or unable to do it). Thus, from this theoretical model, child neglect represents a breakdown in one or more phases of the processing of social information (Crittenden, 1993).

The third proposed model is referred to as The Parental Environment Cluster Model (Burke et al., 1998), which is composed of three clusters: Parental Skills Cluster, Social Support Cluster and Resource Management Cluster. From the perspective of this model, parental neglect represents a deficit in Parental Skills (knowledge and skills needed to perform the functions of parental care for children), in Social Support (feelings, perceptions, and peer relationships of parents) and in Resource Management (parental relationship with the larger world and functional capacity of people to make use of the environment in which they live).

Since 1993, no new theoretical models for child neglect have been presented, and few research or treatment programs have been developed to test these models. Therefore, to understand child neglect further and to develop effective treatment programs for child neglect, it would be helpful to develop new theoretical models of child neglect, which take into account the perspective of emotions and, more specifically, the perspective of a deficit in empathy.

In the present paper, an explanative theory-based model of child neglect is presented. This model is based on the hypothesis that neglectful parents have a deficit in empathic emotion. It is not an objective of this model to explain neglectful behavior of parents with mental retardation, alcohol or drug abuse, or severe mental health problems. Thus, the core hypothesis of this model is that some cases of child neglect occur when parents fail to experience the empathic emotions that motivate helping behavior or there is an experience of empathy, but cognitive processes inhibit the motivation to help.

### Theoretical bases of the model

In this theoretical model of child neglect, parental behavior aimed to satisfy a child's needs is considered a helping behavior. Moreover, it is assumed that the motivation for the helping behavior is preceded by an emotional experience that occurs in reaction to the observation of a person in need (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983). It has been proposed that the emotion that mediates the relationship between the perception of a child in need and appropriate helping responses is empathy, which implies feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with one's own situation (Hoffman, 1992).

The inability to be empathically aware of their children's needs and to respond to these needs in an appropriate fashion is considered a common trait of maltreating parents (Bavolek, Kline, & McLaughlin, 1979; Steele, 1980). It is relevant to know that one of the six assumptions of the Nurturing Parenting Programs (developed by the National Institute of Mental Health in 1979) was that "empathy is the single most desirable quality in nurturing parenting (Bavolek, 2000, p. 5). From this point of view, the parent's ability to understand the condition or state of mind of the child without actually being able to experience the child's feelings is considered as a main protective factor for effective and nurturing parenting (Bavolek, 2000).

Thus, the central hypothesis of this theoretical model is that neglectful parents cannot develop the helping response needed to care for their children because either they do not experience empathy related to their child or they experience empathy but cognitive processes modify the motivation to help.

A variety of well-designed empirical studies (Batson et al., 1988; Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995) suggest that the motivation (egoistic or altruistic) that produces helping is determined by the type of emotion which is predominant in a person while exposed to another in need. If the resultant emotional response of the parents is "personal distress," helping may occur in an egoistic attempt to reduce the negative affect. If, on the other hand, exposure to another in need leads to empathy, altruistically motivated helping may follow (Batson, 1996; Batson & Coke, 1981; Batson et al., 1981, 1983). "Personal distress" is the vicariously induced aversive emotional reaction such as anxiety, discomfort, or worry that induces self-oriented, egoistic concern (Batson, 1987). In contrast, "empathy" is an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else (Batson, Ahmad, Lishner, & Tsang, 2002). This other-oriented

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