



Who are these parents involved in child neglect? A differential analysis by parent gender and family structure

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Abstract

Studies about fathers and child neglect are scarce. Current research, which tends to focus on mothers, does not allow to fully understand the influence of all parental figures on child protection. This research aims to compare socio-demographic characteristics and personal problems of mothers to those of fathers in 1266 neglecting families. The data, from the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect — 2003*, was collected by workers in a representative sample of 63 child welfare service areas. The findings suggest that parental situations vary greatly according to gender and family structures. Mothers (biological and surrogates) face more issues than fathers (biological and surrogates). For example, they face more mental health issues. Biological mothers are in worse position than surrogate mothers but, inversely, surrogate fathers are in worse position than biological fathers. Parental characteristics and problems also differ according to family structures but the way those issues affect mothers could explain most of those differences. Overall, single female-headed families seem particularly vulnerable and fathers present better socio-demographic characteristics and struggle with less personal problems than mothers. Implications for research and action with mothers and fathers will be discussed.

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1. Introduction

Neglect is a form of child maltreatment that does not involve an assault but instead stems from a failure to provide the care required. It can be defined as persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical, intellectual or emotional needs (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993) by not assuming parenting tasks and responsibilities (Minty & Pattinson, 1994).

Child neglect comes with significant social costs (Blanchard, Bouchard, H elie, & Mayer, 2002). Paradoxically, although neglect is the most common form of maltreatment and continues to increase in Canada (Trocm e et al., 2005), it is one of the least studied (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003) and one for which the effectiveness of intervention is the least firmly established (Dufour & Chamberland, 2004). Differential research based on the sex of the parents involved in situations of neglect would facilitate the development of more effective intervention strategies, but research of this kind is virtually nonexistent. The *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* (Trocm e et al., 2005) provides original data that can be used to explore this aspect of neglect.

2. Problem Definition

Research into the differences between fathers and mothers has essentially been limited to Caucasian, middle-class, two-parent families with no particular problems, to the detriment of adults playing the role of parents in families grappling with major issues (Dufour & Bouchard, 2003; Lane, 2002; Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). Aside from research into sexual abuse, child maltreatment is no exception in this respect (Dubowitz, Black, Kerr, Starr, & Harrington, 2000; Lamb, 2001; Lane, 2002; Marshall et al., 2001; Muller & Diamond, 1999; National Research Council, 1993; Pittman & Buckley, 2005; Ryan & Little, 2000). Fathers in maltreating families are often identified as perpetrators, but in reality, very little is known about them (Sternberg, 1997). Despite the fact that some progress has been made over the last decade, "a significant gap persists concerning knowledge of fathers' roles in child maltreatment" (Dubowitz, 2006, p. 461).

The scientific literature tells us that men are more likely to abuse children sexually, that women are more likely to be deemed responsible for the protection of children and that physical violence within the family is just as likely to be perpetrated by men as by women (May-Chahal, 2006). Neglect appears primarily to affect single-parent families headed by women who are socially isolated and struggling with a variety of social and health problems (Crittenden, 1999; Garbarino & Collins, 1999; Gaudin, 1993; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Swift, 1995). Lacharit e (2001) and Radhakrishna, Bou-Saada, Hunter, Catellier, and Kotch (2001) have argued, however, that men are in fact much more present in neglectful families than past research suggests. In support of this view, Mayer, Dufour, Lavergne, Girard, and Trocm e (2006) have recently established that fathers, whether biological or surrogate, are present in the vast majority of situations of neglect. In Canada, in 2003, biological mothers were identified as the perpetrators in 83% of situations of neglect, yet men contributed in a significant fashion: 36% of the identified perpetrators were biological fathers, while 9% were male common-law spouses or step-fathers (Trocm e et al., 2005).

Studies suggest that the presence of a man in the family increases the risks of neglect and other forms of maltreatment. The presence of *biological* fathers, for instance, in the company of "at-risk" teenage mothers appears to increase the risks rather than reduce them (Bolton & Belsky, 1986). Similarly, the presence of *surrogate* fathers in the company of children also appears to

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