



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Child Abuse &amp; Neglect

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg)

## Correlates of child abuse potential among African American and latina mothers: A developmental-ecological perspective



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Child abuse potential  
Maternal risk factors  
Child risk factors  
Racial/ethnic minorities

### ABSTRACT

The child victimization rate in the US has rapidly grown over the past five years. Today, nine out of every 1000 children are victims of some type of child maltreatment, and lifetime costs of child victimization exceed \$100 billion per year. Effective policies promoting fairness and child safety must target the most salient indicators of child maltreatment. In this study, we examined three groups of risk factors for child abuse potential with the goal of identifying the most prominent indicators in a sample of 170 African-American and Latina mothers. Specifically, we analyzed the effect of socio-demographic variables (e.g., SES), child-specific behaviors, maternal trauma and corresponding psychological sequelae on child abuse potential. Variables from all three groups were significantly associated with child abuse potential with maternal SES, alexithymia, depression, and child self-control as well as internalizing behaviors having the largest effects. All factors combined captured over 50% of the variation in child abuse potential. The results highlight the need for programs that not only address the financial needs of low SES mothers, but also the mental health outcomes correlated with low SES. Particular emphasis should also be placed on interventions that address children's social needs, specifically their socio-emotional functioning.

### 1. Introduction

In the United States approximately nine out of every 1000 children under 17 years old are victims of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), 2016). Child maltreatment is associated with a host of negative physical, psychological, and social sequelae including injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and lowered economic productivity (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012), exceeding \$100 billion per year in costs to the government and society (Fang et al., 2012). When examining the factors associated with child maltreatment, several limitations have been noted in the literature. From a measurement perspective: 1) parents are often reluctant to admit perpetration of child abuse or neglect and 2) it is challenging to access substantiated case reports from Child Protective Services; thus, adequately identifying the full extent, risk factors, and consequences of child maltreatment has been hampered (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010). Researchers have instead utilized a measure of *child abuse potential (CAP)*, as measured by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI, Milner, 1986), which often serves as a proxy for child maltreatment. Child abuse potential refers to the likelihood that a parent will abuse or

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neglect their child and it is strongly associated with actual commission of child maltreatment and thus is a widely used measure of risk (Chaffin & Valle, 2003; Milner, 1994).

Child abuse potential and child maltreatment are associated with a variety of dynamic and transactional risk factors spanning individual, familial, community, and environmental domains (Belsky, 1993; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). According to the developmental-ecological model of child maltreatment, child and parental factors, parent-child interactions, and social-cultural factors reciprocally contribute to the likelihood of child abuse and neglect perpetration (Belsky, 1993). Researchers have thus called for a focus on multi-level models that examine risk across various spheres (Begle et al., 2010; Belsky, 1993).

### 1.1. Socio-demographic risk factors

Among abused children the most prominent socio-demographic risk indicators include single parent homes, young maternal age, low parental education, low socio-economic status (SES), lack of parental social support, and high parental stress. (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011; Li, Godinet, & Arnsberger, 2011; Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, & Shattuck, 2013).

Studies on racial/ethnic differences in CAP have been limited and findings are mixed (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006). A study of 176 low-income mothers found no racial/ethnic differences in child abuse potential (Medora, Wilson, & Larson, 2001). Relatedly, studies have found that African-Americans and other racial/ethnic minority groups have similar prevalence rates of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) compared to Whites (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006). In contrast, other studies suggest African-Americans have higher prevalence rates of childhood physical abuse compared to Whites (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006). Data from child welfare services point to racial/ethnic disparities in rates of reported child maltreatment. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2016) report, in 2014, African American children had the highest reported child victimization rates compared to Hispanics and Whites (14.6 per 1000 children versus 8.5 and 8.1 per 1000 children, respectively). This disproportionality has been explained in several ways, including racial bias in reporting African-American children and/or African-American's greater exposure to risk factors associated with poverty that influence perpetration of and reporting of child maltreatment (Drake et al., 2011; Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2009). Yet, none of these studies have examined risk factors associated with CAP from a multi-level perspective.

### 1.2. Child risk factors

Consistent with a reciprocal model of child maltreatment, it has been proposed that problem behaviors in children may contribute to stress in the parent-child relationship, and in turn may elicit child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993). Children with externalizing behaviors have difficulty with attention, impulsivity, aggression, and may be defiant towards authority beginning with their parents (Morgan, Robinson, & Aldridge, 2012). Such disruptive behaviors in children can elicit aversive behaviors in parents (Burke, Pardini, & Loeber, 2008; Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000). A study of high-risk African-American and European-American kindergarteners found that child aggression was associated with physical punishment, and oppositionality with low parental warmth and involvement (Stormshak et al., 2000). Research also shows that parents of children with externalizing behaviors report greater stress (Begle et al., 2010), which has been linked to negative parental behaviors or practices increasing CAP (Morgan et al., 2012).

Children with internalizing behaviors, such as social withdrawal and fearfulness, have also been shown to be at risk for CAP or child maltreatment. In particular, empirical evidence suggests that children of parents with high CAP are more likely to report anxious and depressive symptoms (Rodriguez, 2003). Children of high-risk parents are also more likely to exhibit maladaptive attributions, such as an external locus of control, which can contribute to a sense of helplessness, a risk factor for depression. These findings suggest children are at risk for internalizing disorders not only due to abusive parenting, but also because of negative parental belief systems (Bolger & Patterson, 2001).

A meta-analysis of risk factors associated with physical abuse and neglect showed large associations between child physical abuse (CPA) and parent perceptions of child as a problem (Stith et al., 2009). Results also demonstrated moderate associations between CPA and child social competence as well as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Stith et al., 2009).

### 1.3. Maternal risk factors

Maternal history of trauma is one of the most studied risk factors for CAP and child maltreatment, as it has been consistently associated with punitive parenting style and practices (Dilillo, Tremblay, & Peterson, 2000; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Gilchrist, 2009). Studies show that up to 30% of the variance in the perpetration of childhood maltreatment is accounted for by the mother's own childhood abuse history—a process coined the intergenerational transmission (IGT) of violence (Dixon et al., 2009). Empirical research lends strong support to the IGT of violence theory. Dilillo, Tremblay, and Peterson (2000) compared mothers with a history of child sexual abuse (CSA) to non-sexually abused mothers and found that a history of CSA was a significant predictor of physically abusing one's own children. Likewise, Taylor, Guterman, Lee, and Rathouz (2009) found intimate partner violence exposure among mothers was a significant predictor of four indicators of child maltreatment: psychological aggression, physical aggression, spanking, and neglect. Finally, in a sample of 681 teen and adult first-time mothers, Bert, Guner, and Lanzi (2009) found a consistent link between the *propensity* for abusive parenting behaviors and a history of childhood emotional and physical abuse.

From a social learning perspective, abusive parenting may be considered a learned behavior (Gershoff, 2002; McCoy and Raver, 2011). Mothers with abuse histories may also have lower thresholds for reacting to their children's misbehaviors, given difficulties with emotion regulation, which in turn may lead to harsh disciplinary tactics (Dilillo et al., 2000). Unresolved traumatic experiences

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