



# Child welfare involvement and academic difficulties: Characteristics of children, families, and households involved with child welfare and experiencing academic difficulties

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## ABSTRACT

Children involved in child welfare experience academic difficulties more than any other functioning concern. This study used data from OIS-2013, a large representative sample of child welfare investigations ( $n = 4033$ ), involving children aged 4–15. The following research questions were answered: 1) Do children with maltreatment histories and academic difficulties differ from those with maltreatment histories but no academic difficulties; and 2) Does the presence of academic difficulties influence ongoing child welfare services. Frequencies, cross-tabulations, and Chi-square tests assessed the relationships between academic difficulties and child characteristics, caregiver functioning concerns household characteristics, and maltreatment. Transfer to ongoing child welfare services was the outcome variable in a multiple logistic regression analysis. Being an adolescent, male, Indigenous, and having additional child functioning issues, notably externalizing behaviour, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm were each related to academic difficulties. Academic difficulties were significantly related to households where a caregiver had a cognitive impairment or low social supports, that were overcrowded, unsafe, or of lower income. Children who have academic difficulties are more likely to have recurrent involvement in child welfare, significant risk of future maltreatment, to experience physical harm, and to be placed in out of home care. Unsafe housing was the most significant predictor of a decision to transfer a case to child welfare services, followed by caregiver functioning, maltreatment type, then academic difficulties, when controlling for child gender, age, and ethnicity. Difficulties are likely to compound over time, and ultimately increase cost and frustration across systems.

## 1. Introduction

Academic difficulties are the most frequently identified child functioning concern among children involved with child welfare services in Ontario, identified in 19% of all investigations (Fallon et al., 2015). Academic difficulties are defined as an identified learning disability, receiving special education programming for a learning difficulty, or having a special need related to education or a behaviour problem in school. The World Health Organization (2017) has identified low education levels as a social determinate of health factor linked with poor health, increased stress and poor self-confidence. There is a strong body of knowledge on the long-term effects of child maltreatment, including educational outcomes (Jonson-Reid, Drake, Jiyoung, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2015; Slade & Wissow, 2007; Stone, 2007; Stone & Zibulsky, 2015). Limited resources and fiscal considerations however, often result in service provision to those most evidently in need. Pears and Fisher (2005) hypothesized that

delaying services until students are older and problems have manifested, can result in more significant negative effect on outcomes. To support early intervention efforts, child welfare and education organizations require comprehensive information about the students and families most likely to experience educational difficulties. In specific, the use of large, representative samples and comparison between groups is a noted gap in the literature (Mersky & Topitzes, 2010; Stone, 2007).

### 1.1. Contribution of the current study

The current study involved a secondary analysis of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (OIS-2013). The OIS-2013 is a large representative data set of child welfare investigations in Ontario, Canada. The main objective of the OIS-2013 is to provide reliable estimates of the scope and characteristics of child abuse and neglect investigated by child welfare services in Ontario, with a more specific purpose of examining selected determinates of health that

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may be associated with maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2015). The present study contributes to the literature in important ways. First, the OIS includes several unique variables within a large representative sample. The present analysis included an examination of characteristics of school age children, their households and caregivers, involved in child welfare and who have academic difficulties. The current examination included the influence of maltreatment type on academic difficulties. Students involved with the child welfare system in Ontario and identified with academic difficulties were compared to those involved in this same child welfare system and not identified with academic difficulties. This comparison provided a contrasting picture of child functioning concerns within these two groups. The current analysis provided an overview of the factors that can affect academic functioning of children involved in child welfare. Finally, factors that predict a decision to transfer a case to ongoing child welfare services were examined, considering whether academic difficulties were likely to influence this decision.

## 2. Background

While some students who have experienced maltreatment demonstrate a level of resilience on select outcomes, generally they are less likely to complete high-school, to attend college and to earn comparable salaries than those with no maltreatment history (Mersky & Topitzes, 2010). Educational achievement and feeling connected to school is a strong predictor of future success, mental and physical health (Bond et al., 2007; Goldman & Smith, 2011).

### 2.1. Definitions of adversity and child maltreatment

Adversity has been identified as experiencing psychological, physical or sexual abuse; witnessing violence against ones mother; or living in a household in which someone has experienced problem substance use, mental illness, suicidal behaviour, or imprisonment (Felitti et al., 1998). Child maltreatment is more specific, defined as any act by a parent or other with responsibility, trust or power over a child, that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child's health, survival, development, or dignity, whether through commission or omission and even if harm is not the intended result (Gilbert et al., 2009; World Health Organization, 2016).

In Ontario, everyone, professional or general public, is required to report any situation in which there is a concern that a child may have been maltreated or is at risk of maltreatment (Government of Ontario, 2016). The OIS-2013 classifies child maltreatment within 5 categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional maltreatment, and exposure to intimate partner violence (Fallon et al., 2015). There is an additional "risk-only" category applied to those cases where maltreatment has not occurred but the reporter is concerned that there is a risk of future maltreatment (Fallon et al., 2015).

### 2.2. Maltreatment, academics and child functioning

Knowledge of the impact of early adversity on human development has grown considerably in recent years (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998; McCain, 2007; van der Kolk, 2005). There is a strong body of literature which identifies an association between adversity, maltreatment being one form, and impairments in academic achievement (Haight, Kayama, Kincaid, Evans, & Kim, 2013), mental health outcomes (Romano et al., 2015), delinquent behaviour (Cisler et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2000) and physical health (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). When adversity occurs early in a child's life, is diverse in nature (poly-victimization), or a child experiences multiple exposures to adversity, the risk for trauma symptoms (Cloitre et al., 2009), educational difficulties (Romano et al., 2015; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010), and antisocial behaviour (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Thibodeau, 2012) increases. There is consistent evidence of a link between childhood abuse or neglect and impairments

in both academic achievement and mental health outcomes (Romano et al., 2015).

School success is particularly vulnerable to early adversity (Belsky et al., 2009; Weder & Kaufman, 2011). For example, students who experience maltreatment are at increased risk for poor academic performance in important areas such as math and reading (Haight et al., 2013; Piescher, Colburn, LaLiberte, & Hong, 2014). Students who experience maltreatment enter into special education at higher rates than children with no maltreatment histories (Jonson-Reid et al., 2004), are more likely to be diagnosed with learning concerns such as dyslexia (Fuller-Thomson & Hooper, 2015), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Fuller-Thomson, Mehta, & Valeo, 2014). Cook and colleagues (2005) identify that students who have experienced significant adversity, can develop a focus on self-protection and have difficulty focusing in class, problem-solving effectively, or understanding the perspective of others. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or who have been exposed to violence, are more likely to struggle with emotion regulation and to exhibit externalizing and delinquent behaviour, such as aggression, conflict, and conduct (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Putnam, 2006; van der Kolk, 2005). Students with maltreatment histories and who are receiving educational supports are more frequently identified with emotional and behavioural disabilities (Haight et al., 2013). While, externalizing behaviour among students who have experienced maltreatment is related to higher odds of dropping out of school before graduating, there may be lower odds of dropping out of school among students who experienced maltreatment and had higher levels of internalizing problems (Morrow & Villodas, 2017). Moreover, there is indication that the form of maltreatment experienced may have a differential impact on academic difficulties. For example, interpersonal violence (IPV) has been shown to have a greater impact than maltreatment generally (Kiesel, Piescher, & Edleson, 2016).

### 2.3. Child characteristics

Academic skills develop cumulatively. A gap in academic achievement grows as children age. Children who have been exposed to maltreatment increasingly fall behind their peers as they advance through the grades (Cheung, Lwin, & Jenkins, 2012; Haight et al., 2013). When maltreatment impacts skill acquisition at a critical point in development, subsequent skill progress is affected (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008). Furthermore, academic skills build on one another. Therefore, the early skills a child possesses when entering school are the basis for acquiring further, more sophisticated skills (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Research has disproportionately focused on the short term effects of maltreatment (Mersky & Topitzes, 2010). In younger children, early maltreatment may not yet present with academic problems. However, without intervention, children who have experienced maltreatment are likely to fall further and further back as skill acquisition lags behind their peers.

The effects of maltreatment are particularly concerning for certain populations including males and students from marginalized populations. There is evidence that disadvantage, environmental stress, and negative relationships influence boys more negatively than girls (e.g. Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2007). Maltreatment may compound an already concerning gender gap, in which male students are falling behind (Cook, 2006; Duzer, 2006; Entwisle et al., 2007). Social and systemic issues, including the disproportionate impact of poverty, and historical, cultural and multigenerational trauma increases the risk of adversity among racialized groups (Brave Heart, 2003; Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2009; Shaia & Crowder, 2017; Slopen et al., 2016). Moreover, systemic oppression has a specific impact on student education for example, marginalized communities including Black, Indigenous and students from lower income schools are disproportionately disciplined through school exclusion (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Losen, 2015; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008).

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