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School readiness of maltreated children: Associations of timing, type, and chronicity of maltreatment

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ABSTRACT

Children who have been maltreated during early childhood may experience a difficult transition into fulltime schooling, due to maladaptive development of the skills and abilities that are important for positive school adaptation. An understanding of how different dimensions of maltreatment relate to children's school readiness is important for informing appropriate supports for maltreated children. In this study, the Australian Early Development Census scores of 19,203 children were linked to information on child maltreatment allegations (substantiated and unsubstantiated), including the type of alleged maltreatment, the timing of the allegation (infancy-toddlerhood or preschool), and the total number of allegations (chronicity). Children with a maltreatment allegation had increased odds of poor school readiness in cognitive and non-cognitive domains. Substantiated maltreatment was associated with poor social and emotional development in children, regardless of maltreatment type, timing, or chronicity. For children with unsubstantiated maltreatment allegations, developmental outcomes according to the type of alleged maltreatment were more heterogeneous; however, these children were also at risk of poor school readiness irrespective of the timing and/or chronicity of the alleged maltreatment. The findings suggest that all children with maltreatment allegations are at risk for poor school readiness; hence, these children may need additional support to increase the chance of a successful school transition. Interventions should commence prior to the start of school to mitigate early developmental difficulties that children with a history of maltreatment allegations may be experiencing, with the aim of reducing the incidence of continuing difficulties in the first year of school and beyond.

School can provide a stabilizing environment and opportunities for building self-esteem for children experiencing adversity in their home lives (Gilligan, 2000; Veltman & Browne, 2001), but this requires that children have a level of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive competence that enables them to meet the demands of school. There is substantial evidence that children who have been subject to maltreatment are at increased risk of social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive difficulties (e.g., Kovan, Mishra, Susman-Stillman, Piescher, & LaLiberte, 2014; Veltman & Browne, 2001). The effects of trauma may mean that these children are ill-equipped to handle the transition to school, heightening the difficulty of adapting to this new developmental challenge (Veltman & Browne, 2001). If early difficulties are not addressed, the ongoing challenges of the school environment may exacerbate problems. It is therefore crucial to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which maltreatment in the early childhood period may influence children's school readiness.

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A number of researchers have argued for the importance of “unpacking” maltreatment to better understand how different dimensions of maltreatment may influence child outcomes (e.g., English, Upadhyaya, et al., 2005). Dimensions of maltreatment include the type of maltreatment, the age of the child when maltreatment is first reported, and the chronicity of maltreatment. As yet, there has not been a comprehensive investigation of the association between different dimensions of maltreatment and school readiness. The various dimensions of maltreatment are significantly associated with academic achievement in later schooling (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Frechette, 2015), so it is possible that these factors are also important for determining how ready a child is to start school.

1. Type, timing, and chronicity of maltreatment

All types of maltreatment (physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect) are associated with maladjustment for children and adolescents. In particular, all forms of abuse or neglect are significantly related to an increased risk of social and emotional difficulties in children (Dodge, Petit, & Bates, 2008; Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Dobbins, 2011; Hébert, Tremblay, Parent, Daignault, & Piché, 2006; Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman, 1984; Lemire, Hébert, Cossette, & Langevin, 2017; Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009). However, there is also some evidence of variability in outcomes depending on the type of maltreatment. For example, neglect and sexual abuse are both associated with poor academic outcomes and cognitive and language deficits (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Fantuzzo et al., 2011; Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman, 1984; Hanson et al., 2013; Holmes, Yoon, Berg, Cage, & Perzynski, 2017; Spratt et al., 2012), and physical and emotional abuse are associated with behavioral difficulties (Eckenrode et al., 1993; Hoffman-Plotkin & Twentyman, 1984; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Shaffer et al., 2009). There may therefore be variability in the domains of school readiness, dependent on the type of maltreatment children have experienced.

The developmental period in which children first experience maltreatment may also have a bearing on the developmental difficulties they experience, but the available evidence on this potential relationship is unclear. Given the importance of the first few years of life for physical and neurobiological development (Shonkoff, 2003) and formation of attachment relationships (Ainsworth, 1979), it is reasonable to assume that maltreatment that begins early in a child’s life would be associated with more deleterious outcomes than maltreatment that first occurs later in childhood. Consistent with this assumption, a number of studies have found evidence that maltreatment occurring during the first years of life is associated with poorer outcomes than maltreatment occurring at later ages (Dunn, McLaughlin, Slopen, Rosand, & Smoller, 2013; Cowell, Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2015; Fantuzzo et al., 2011; Holmes et al., 2017). However, one study found no effect of early maltreatment on social and cognitive outcomes (Ayoub et al., 2006), another found the poorest outcomes associated with maltreatment with onset during preschool (ages 3–5; Kaplow & Widom, 2007), and another found an equal effect on children’s emotional and behavioral outcomes, regardless of the timing of maltreatment (Manly et al., 2001). Of note, the authors of this latter study found that maltreatment that begins during the preschool period and persists through subsequent developmental stages is associated with significant maladjustment (Manly et al., 2001). Therefore, the chronicity of maltreatment is also posited to predict the level of maladjustment maltreated children may experience.

Maltreatment chronicity has been variably defined in the literature, with some researchers classifying chronic maltreatment according to the total duration of maltreatment, and others using frequency of maltreatment events (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangiwala, 2005). However chronicity is defined, research shows that children who have been subject to repeated or persistent maltreatment exhibit more emotional, behavioral, and social problems (Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong, 2011; Manly et al., 2001) and lower cognitive ability (Cowell et al., 2015; Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong, 2011) than children who have been maltreated at one time point only. How chronicity of maltreatment relates to school readiness is unclear; however, based on the available evidence, it is possible that children who have had limited exposure to maltreatment are more likely to be ready for school than children who have experienced repeated episodes of maltreatment.

2. Substantiated and unsubstantiated maltreatment allegations

There may also be implications for children’s developmental outcomes depending on whether a maltreatment allegation is substantiated or not (e.g., Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009). A substantiation of maltreatment requires sufficient evidence of the occurrence of real harm, or of a significant risk of harm to the child. If there is insufficient evidence of harm, maltreatment is defined as unsubstantiated. However, a determination of ‘unsubstantiated’ may not actually indicate that maltreatment did not occur, especially for young children, who may not be able to provide the required evidence for substantiation (Hussey et al., 2005; Kohl et al., 2009). Although children with substantiated and unsubstantiated allegations are quite different in legal terms, there is growing evidence that their developmental outcomes are similar (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 2011; Hussey et al., 2005). As such, an investigation of the school readiness of children with unsubstantiated maltreatment, separate to substantiated maltreatment, would be beneficial for informing our understanding of whether children with unsubstantiated allegations are also in need of support services at the transition to formal schooling.

3. Current study

This study aims to examine the association between the different dimensions of child maltreatment (i.e., type, timing, chronicity) and children’s school readiness, using a population sample of children in their first year of formal school. These associations will be examined for children with both substantiated and unsubstantiated allegations of maltreatment. School readiness scores are linked to administrative records of child maltreatment notifications (from birth until school entry). We expect that children with a maltreatment allegation will

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