



## Analog of parental empathy: Association with physical child abuse risk and punishment intentions

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 May 2012

Received in revised form 8 October 2012

Accepted 9 October 2012

Available online 4 January 2013

#### Keywords:

Child maltreatment

Physical abuse

Child abuse potential

Empathic concern

Empathic perspective-taking

Analog tasks

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Current research has been inconsistent in corroborating that parents' compromised empathy is associated with elevated physical child abuse risk, perhaps in part because of an emphasis on dispositional empathy rather than empathy directed at their own children. Research has also relied on self-reports of empathy that are susceptible to participant misrepresentation. The present study utilized an analog task of parental empathy to investigate the association of parental empathy toward one's own child with physical child abuse potential and with their tendency to punish perceived child misbehavior.

**Methods:** A sample of 135 mothers and their 4–9 year old children were recruited, with mothers estimating their children's emotional reactions using a behavioral simulation of parental empathy. Mothers also provided self-reports on two measures of child abuse potential, a measure of negative attributions and expected punishment of children using vignettes, as well as a traditional measure of dispositional empathic concern and perspective-taking.

**Results:** Findings suggest that parental demonstration of poorer empathic ability on the analog task was significantly related to increased physical abuse potential, likelihood to punish, and negative child attributions. However, self-reported dispositional empathy exhibited the pattern of inconsistent associations previously observed in the literature.

**Conclusions:** Parental empathy appears to be a relevant target for prevention and intervention programs. Future research should also consider similar analog approaches to investigate such constructs to better uncover the factors that elevate abuse risk.

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Predicting whether a parent will engage in physical abuse, often termed child abuse potential, is challenging. One strategy used to estimate a parent's child abuse potential assesses the intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities detected in parents who have been substantiated for abuse (Milner, 1994). Greater child abuse potential has been associated with more frequent use of physical aggression during discipline situations (Rodriguez, 2010a). Moreover, parents with elevated child abuse potential are more likely to demonstrate coercive parenting styles (Haskett, Scott, & Fann, 1995; Margolin, Gordis, Medina, & Oliver, 2003). Compared to non-abusive mothers, physically abusive mothers are more disposed to punish perceived child misbehavior which they are also more likely to consider intentionally annoying (Haskett, Scott, Willoughby, Ahern, & Nears, 2006).

Theoretically, parental cognitive processes may exacerbate child abuse potential by influencing parental decisions to implement physical discipline that escalates to physical abuse. According to Social Information Processing (SIP) theory (Milner, 2000, 2003), maladaptive cognitions can drive a parent to justify harsher physical discipline decisions that over

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time could ultimately become abusive. In SIP theory, parents hold pre-existing cognitive beliefs (e.g., about their child or discipline in general) that can be activated in a series of stages during a discipline encounter. In this model, a parent's inaccurate perceptions of the child or situation and attributional biases can be further compromised by an inability to adequately weigh or integrate the alternative interpretations or options before selecting a discipline response. Research has contributed empirical support for such problematic cognitions (Milner, 2000) even beyond what is attributable to parents' personal vulnerabilities such as stress (e.g., Rodriguez, 2010b).

Among the potential cognitive processes in SIP theory credited with a role in abuse risk is empathy. Empathy has been conceptualized as a combination of interrelated components of emotion recognition (in oneself and others), affective responsiveness (sharing the emotional experience of others), and perspective taking (cognitively assuming the perspective of others), which collectively contribute to empathic ability (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Derntl et al., 2010). These cognitive and emotional elements work synergistically, underscoring the multidimensional nature of empathy (Davis, 1983a, 1983b), wherein one must simultaneously accurately perceive, understand, and share the emotional experience of the other to experience empathy.

Based on SIP theory, in a discipline encounter, a parent needs to accurately perceive their child's emotions and intentions in a situation, which requires drawing on their empathic skills to estimate these in their child accurately to arrive at a discipline decision. Indeed, the capacity to experience empathy for others has typically been considered to inhibit interpersonal aggression (Richardson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994), a parental characteristic that has long been advanced as particularly relevant to the physical maltreatment of children (e.g., Feshbach, 1989; Letourneau, 1981). In the literature pertaining to child maltreatment, the role of empathy has been evaluated using all three related empathy elements, although much of this research has concentrated on parents' dispositional empathy, meaning generalized empathic ability that is not targeted on empathy toward children nor targeted toward their own children (the latter representing parental empathy).

Despite that low empathy is cited as a risk factor in child abuse potential (Feshbach, 1989; Milner, 2000; Milner & Dopke, 1997), findings connecting aspects of empathy to physical child abuse have been mixed. Among the studies supporting empathy as a risk factor, lower dispositional empathic perspective-taking significantly predicted physical child abuse potential in a sample of at-risk mothers raising children with externalizing behavior problems (McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008). Low empathy toward children in general (not specific to one's child) was also reported among abusive parents (Mennen & Trickett, 2011; Rosenstein, 1995); however, both of these studies based their parental empathy findings on a subscale of a measure that was designed to estimate child abuse potential (the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory; Bavolek & Keene, 2001), rendering the observed group differences somewhat tautological. In a rare study examining empathy toward one's own children, a standard measure of dispositional empathy was modified to query a small sample of fathers about empathy toward their children; this study indicated that abusive fathers reported less empathic concern and lower perspective-taking ability than non-maltreating fathers (Francis & Wolfe, 2008). Similarly, higher risk fathers (but not mothers) demonstrated more errors in emotion recognition than low-risk fathers (Asla, De Paul, & Perez-Albeniz, 2011). Others, however, have identified emotion recognition difficulties in high-risk mothers as well (Balge & Milner, 2000).

Other research findings differentially support components of empathy. Parents with high abuse risk showed lower dispositional empathic concern but not lower perspective-taking compared to low risk parents (Perez-Albeniz & De Paul, 2003), whereas another study found high abuse risk mothers report poorer perspective-taking but not lower empathic concern relative to comparison mothers (De Paul, Perez-Albeniz, Guibert, Asla, & Ormaechea, 2008). Dispositional empathic perspective-taking was not predictive of physical child abuse potential or physical assault tactics but was predictive of harsh parenting style (Rodriguez & Richardson, 2007). Poorer dispositional perspective-taking ability was also reported only in high abuse risk fathers compared to low risk fathers, but no differences were observed in empathic concern for mothers or fathers; however, using a measure designed to assess parental empathy toward children, high abuse risk parents demonstrated a weaker tendency to empathize with their children than low risk parents (Perez-Albeniz & De Paul, 2004).

Other studies do not demonstrate the association between empathy and abuse risk. For example, a small sample of high abuse risk mothers did not report lower dispositional empathic concern or perspective-taking, although they did not evince the increased empathy following exposure to a crying infant which was observed in low risk mothers (Milner, Halsey, & Fultz, 1995). In another experimental study to examine whether empathy could be evoked to inhibit aggression in response to pain cues, high abuse risk respondents did not demonstrate lower empathic concern than low risk participants (Perez-Albeniz & De Paul, 2005). Altogether, research on the various related elements of empathy has not reliably confirmed its theorized role in physical abuse potential.

Yet a common refrain echoed in many of these studies' limitations is the heavy reliance on self-report of a characteristic—empathy—that would be particularly vulnerable to respondents' distortion. Parents may ascribe greater empathic ability to themselves than they possess, either intentionally or subconsciously misrepresenting themselves. Dependence on self-report methodology is particularly problematic in sensitive areas of research like child abuse (DeGarmo, Reid, & Knutson, 2006). As an alternative to self-report, which is an explicit assessment of a construct, analog tasks are designed to capture the construct of interest using implicit means, thereby reducing response bias (Fazio & Olson, 2003). Thus, analogs can gauge the construct in a manner where the respondent is not readily able to ascertain the intent of the task and/or how it will be scored. Analog tasks vary in the extent to which they are implicit, wherein more implicit analog tasks will evidence modest correlations with explicit self-reports of the same construct. Some implicit analogs involve behavioral demonstrations of the construct rather than eliciting a participant verbal report that could be subject to bias.

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