



Academic achievement despite child maltreatment: A longitudinal study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although researchers have concluded that child maltreatment has a negative effect on children's learning and academic achievement, not all children are negatively affected by maltreatment, and some children seem to succeed academically despite being maltreated. Drawing on risk and resilience theory, we examined a broad range of potential risk, promotive, and protective factors within children and their environments along with characteristics of the maltreatment to account for variability in test scores.

Methods: A national longitudinal probability sample of 702 maltreated school-aged children, ages 6–10, and their caregivers was used to predict reading and math scores among maltreated children over three years.

Results: We found that chronic maltreatment, poorer daily living skills, and lower intelligence explained a substantial proportion of the variance in maltreated children's math scores (39%), whereas type of maltreatment, poorer daily living skills and lower intelligence explained a substantial proportion of the variance in reading scores (54%) over time. Contrary to our prediction, having a behavior problem seemed to protect chronically maltreated children from poorer performance in math over time.

Conclusions: To increase academic achievement among maltreated children, it is imperative that we prevent chronic maltreatment and help children increase their competency on daily living skills.

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Over the last 3 decades, researchers have amassed substantial evidence demonstrating that child maltreatment has a negative effect on children's academic achievement and school success. When researchers compared maltreated children with non-maltreated children, they found maltreated children were less attentive, less engaged in school, had lower grades, had poorer test scores, had more suspensions, had higher absenteeism, and were more likely to drop out of school (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Egeland, 1991; Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003; Johnson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kinard, 1999; Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993; Leiter, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen,

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Table 1
Conceptual framework.

Risk factors	Promotive and protective factors	Outcome
Characteristics of maltreatment	Child ability	Academic achievement
Child:	Child...	Child's...
Type of maltreatment	was more intelligent	Reading scores
Physically abused, physically neglected, inadequate supervised, other	was more competent on daily living skills	Math scores
Exposed to domestic violence	did not have a behavior problem	
Chronically maltreated	was more engaged in school	
Severely maltreated	Child relationships	
Child living in out of home care	Child had...	
Caregiver problems	better peer relationships	
Child was exposed to a caregiver with a... substance abuse problem	more emotional support from caregiver	
mental health problem		

1997; Perez & Widom, 1994; Rowe & Eckenrode, 1999; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). However, not all children are negatively affected by maltreatment: some children seem to succeed academically despite being maltreated. This observation has led some developmental psychopathologists to speculate that certain factors may compensate for the less than optimal conditions in some children's lives (Cicchetti, 1989; Masten, 2006a, 2006b).

Children who are able to maintain normative development despite maltreatment and its associated risks, such as exposure to domestic violence, caregiver psychopathology, and poverty are sometimes referred to as resilient. Table 1 summarizes the framework we used in our study. In Column 1, we list risks factors (main effects) that may adversely affect maltreated children's academic achievement (Masten, 1991). Column 2, lists promotive and protective factors that may function as main effects and/or as protective effects. In the terminology of resilience theory, promotive factors are considered to be assets for development regardless of the extent of risk (cf. adversity), while protective factors are associated with adaptation for children who have experienced higher risk (more adversity) than other children (Masten, 1991). In our study, all of the children were maltreated and, therefore, exposed to adversity; however, children's maltreatment experiences varied by chronicity, severity and by their exposure to domestic violence, to a caregiver substance abuse problem, and to a caregiver's mental health problem. If children were chronically maltreated, severely maltreated, or exposed to these other problems, then we considered them at higher risk than children who did not have these experiences of not achieving average math and reading scores. Therefore, in addition to understanding the main effects of the risk and promotive factors, we were also interested in protection: whether the promotive factors moderated the impact of the five risk factors on math and reading scores.

Column 3 includes our outcome, academic achievement. To measure achievement, we selected two key areas of developed academic knowledge and skill: reading and math scores. We examined reading and math scores separately because maltreatment experiences and other factors may have influenced children's math and reading ability differently. Achievement tests are often contrasted with tests that measure aptitude, a more general and stable cognitive trait. Higher scores on reading and math usually indicate a mastery of grade-level material (Qualls & Ansley, 2005) and a greater likelihood of graduating from high school (Knighton & Bussière, 2006; Miley and Associates, 2005; Simmer & Barnes, 1991; Robinson, 2009). For instance, Simmer and Barnes (1991) found that children who had the most difficulty in mastering reading and math in first-grade were more likely to drop out of high school. Thus, reading and math scores may be a proxy for school success. School success often leads to greater opportunities during adulthood. In the Literature, we summarize the empirical literature on risk and promotive factors related to academic achievement among maltreated children.

Literature

Child maltreatment is not a uniform experience. Maltreatment can vary by type (neglect vs. physical abuse), length of time, and severity. Some researchers have found that children who were neglected had poorer academic achievement than children who were physically abused (Egeland, 1991; Erickson & Egeland, 1996; Johnson-Reid et al., 2004) whereas other researchers have not found a relationship between type of maltreatment and achievement (Barnett, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996; Crozier & Barth, 2005; Eckenrode et al., 1993; Jaffee & Gallop, 2007; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994, 1997; Kurtz, Gaudin, Howing, & Wodarski, 1993). While the weight of the evidence seems to suggest that the type of maltreatment is not directly related to achievement, researchers have not distinguished between major types of neglect or examined the effect of exposure to domestic violence, a type of maltreatment that is increasingly substantiated by Child Protective Services (CPS) in the USA (Coohy, 2007). The presence of domestic violence in the home or neglect may make it more difficult for caregivers to parent and for maltreated children to learn, leading to poorer performance in school.

In addition to the type of maltreatment, developmental theory suggests chronicity, or the length of time the maltreatment persists, and the severity of maltreatment may adversely affect children's learning and academic achievement. Several theorists believe chronic and severe maltreatment create a greater demand on children's coping resources (Cicchetti & Barnett, 1991) and decrease children's ability to learn. Leiter and Johnsen (1997) tested these relationships and found that chronic and severe maltreatment negatively affected academic performance. Kinard (2001) found that chronicity but not

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