

Child abuse: Implications for children's cognitive aptitude and behavioural problems

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Abstract

The present study investigates the relationship among child abuse (i.e., physical punishment, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment), child's cognitive aptitude, and fathers' perception of child's behavioural problems. The Child Abuse and Neglect Scale (CANS), and the Cognitive Aptitude Scale (CAS) were administered to a sample 359 (185 males and 174 females) children enrolled in 6 kindergartens and 4 primary schools in El-Minia, Egypt. In addition, a sample of 358 fathers responded to the Children's Behavioural Problems Checklist (CBPC). A multiple regression analysis revealed that fathers' perception of children's behavioural problems was linked to children's physical abuse, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment respectively. There was a relationship among children's cognitive aptitude, physical abuse, and feeling of rejection. Implications of these findings for children's behavioural problems and cognitive aptitude are discussed.

Keywords. Child abuse, cognitive aptitude, behavioural problems

Introduction

Child abuse has been a worldwide concern. In 1999, there were an estimated 2,822,829 investigated reports of child abuse and neglect in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001). Of these reported cases, 25.4 per cent were substantiated. "Substantiated" means that a report of suspected abuse was made and investigated, and child protection authorities determined that there was a reasonable cause to believe that the abuse or neglect had occurred. In 1999, the overall victimization rate in the United States was 11.8 per 1,000 children, but increased to 12.4 per 1,000 children in 2001. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2004), the rate of child abuse in Australia ranged from 0.9 per 1,000 in Tasmania up to 7.4 per 1,000 in Queensland. There were 198,355 reports of suspected cases of child abuse and neglect made to the Australian state authorities during 2002-2003.

During the year from 1st April 2002 to 31st March, 2003, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in the United Kingdom documented 4109 reported offences of "*cruelty to or neglect of children*", and 1880 of "*gross indecency with a child under the age of 14*" in England and Wales respectively (Home Office, 2004). Trocme and Wolfe (2001) reported that the Social Service Agencies in Canada investigated an estimated 135,573 cases of child abuse in 1998.

Definition and forms of child abuse. Child abuse is generally defined as any act of commission or, in the case of neglect, omission that endangers or impairs a child's

physical, developmental, and emotional well-being (Portwood, 1998). Researchers highlighted that child abuse encompasses physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse includes a multitude of acts that inflict injury on a child. A detailed distinction between physical punishment (e.g. spanking) and child physical abuse may be elusive. Similarly, psychological abuse is intertwined with other forms of maltreatment and needs to be distinguished from associated consequences of other forms of maltreatment (Kolko, 1996).

For example, Hart, Brassard, and Karlson (1996) presented five distinct subcategories of child psychological abuse (e.g., rejecting/degrading, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness) and an additional category of mental health, medical, and educational neglect. In most classifications (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), neglect has been set as a separate category denoting the failure to provide basic necessities for the child. It has been differentiated into (a) physical neglect, such as health care, nutrition, hygiene, and clothing, (b) physical needs neglect, (c) neglect of shelter and safe environment, (d) supervisory neglect, (e) moral and educational neglect, and (f) emotional neglect and abandonment. Erickson and Egeland (1996) suggested the subtypes of physical, emotional, medical, mental health, and educational neglect. According to Berliner and Elliott (1996), sexual abuse incorporates all sexual contact between an adult and a child, such as sexual insinuations, fondling, witnessing sexual acts, forcing to sexual activity, and sexual merchandise.

Adverse Effects of child abuse. An impressive body of research have shown that child abuse may endanger a child's development and increase the risk of negative outcomes later in life (Graham-Berman, Hughes, 1998). For example, physically abused children were found to have greater number of depressive symptoms and lower levels of self-esteem (Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992), higher levels of aggressive behaviour (Azar, Barnes, & Twentyman, 1988), poorer peer relations (Salzinger, Feldman, Hammer, & Rosario, 1993), and poorer academic functioning (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993) than non-abused peers. Teachers have also observed that physically abused children tended to have less social competence and social acceptance, and more externalizing behavioural problems (Rogosch & Cicchetti, 1994).

Neglect and psychological abuse could also have adverse effects on children's well-being (Katz, 1992). Neglected children were found to have the lowest level of academic performance, and they generally suffered more severe problems than children exposed to other forms of maltreatment (Eckenrode et al., 1993). Similarly, Cicchetti and Lynch (1995) found that abused children, who experience severe negative emotions, develop representational models of angry family interactions that are closed and difficult to modify.

Furthermore, insensitive parenting styles were found to produce an insecure attachment in a child, which can encourage a child to develop a negative set of expectations about future social interactions, and an internalized view of themselves as unable to elicit a caregiver's attention (Morton & Browne, 1998). For example, Srinivasan and Raman (1987) demonstrated a significantly increased risk for psychopathology in children (ages 5-15) who experienced prolonged separations from parents (greater than 3 months) or multiple separations during ages 6 months to 5 years. Similarly, Wilkes (1992) demonstrated that a prolonged separation from family has a

destructive influence on the emotional development and maturity of children, leading to difficulties with attachment, behaviour, and self-esteem.

The exposure to violence could also endanger a child's feeling of safety. Children exposed to family violence as witnesses, not direct victims, demonstrated impaired functioning. Exposure to marital violence contributes to behavioural and adjustment problems and risk for psychopathology (Graham-Berman & Hughes, 1998; Holden, 1998; Osofsky, 1998). For example, Warner and Weist (1996) reported that children and adolescents who witnessed family and community violence demonstrated symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, separation anxiety, and depression. They are also evidence disturbances in grieving and bereavement, show externalizing behaviours such as aggressiveness, demonstrate impaired interpersonal relationships, and evidence declines in academic performance. Similarly, Wolfe, Zak, Wilson, and Jaffe (1986) found that children recently exposed to family violence tended to have the lowest levels of competence ratings compared to their less recently exposed and non-exposed peers.

Furthermore, Gil (1993) outlined cases where families have created a sexualized environment which leads to children displaying unusual sexual behaviour. These "sexualized families" (p. 112) encourage children to show interest in sexual matters and do not set appropriate limits for sexual behaviour. Gil also described families which are disorganized in that children are raised without proper health care, nutrition or structure. In these families, which she labelled "sociopathic families" (p. 113), there can be alcohol and substance abuse, and children may witness violence or sexual activity. Children can also be vulnerable to sexual abuse in such environments. Children experiencing different forms of sexual abuse may exhibit different forms of emotional or behavioural disturbance in their play (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). For example, sexually abused children may not suffer observed delay in their play activities. However, the psychological, behavioural, and emotional difficulties are the most frequently reported effects of sexual abuse (Mullen & Fleming, 1998).

Goal of the study

The present study is attempting to build upon the findings of previous research concerning the adverse effects of child abuse on child's overall well-being. One goal of the present study is to investigate whether children's physical abuse, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment would predict children's behavioural problems. A second goal was to investigate the relationship among children's cognitive aptitudes and factors of children abuse (i.e., physical abuse, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment).

Methods

Participants

Subjects of the present study included 359 (185 males and 174 females) children enrolled in six kindergartens and four primary schools in El-Minia, Egypt. The children's age ranged from 4 to 10 years-olds. In addition, a sample of 358 fathers participated in data collection.

Instrument

1- The Child Abuse and Neglect Scale (CANS, Ismaeil & Abd-El-Moniam, 1994)

Using a sample of Egyptian children, Ismaeil and Abd-El-Moniam (1994) developed the CANS to measure children's perception of their parents' abusive and neglecting behaviour. The CANS consisted of 54 items and three subscales. The physical abuse subscale (32 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.83) intends to measure children's perception of their parents' physical abusive behaviour. An example of statements from the physical abuse subscale includes, "*Slam me on the face for trivial reasons.*" The feeling of rejection subscale (18 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.78) intends to measure children's perception of their parents' rejecting behaviour. An example of statements from the feeling of rejection subscale includes, "*Reject and do not help me.*" The psychological punishment subscale (4 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.74) intends to measure children's perception of their parents' psychological abusive behaviour. An example of statements from the psychological punishment subscale includes, "*Get furious when I broke something.*"

The CANS contains two forms; one for fathers (Cronbach alpha = 0.91), and the other for mothers (Cronbach alpha = 0.92). In each form, children indicate their response to each item on a 3 point scale that ranged from 1 (*Absolutely Disagree*) to 3 (*Absolutely Agree*).

2- Cognitive Aptitude Scale (CAS, Al-Abid & Al-Gamal, 1988)

Using a sample of Egyptian children, Al-Abid and Al-Gamal (1988) developed the CAS to measure children's cognitive aptitude. The CAS includes 20 topics, each represents a cognitive task. The split half-reliability of the CAS was 0.83.

3- Children's Behavioural Problems Checklist (CBPC)

The CBPC was developed to use within the present study. The CBPC consisted of 98 items and five subscales, and it intends to measure parents' perception of their children's behavioural problems. The social subscale (62 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.85) intends to measure children's social behaviours. An example of statements from the social subscale includes, "*The child makes fun of his/her peers.*" The personality and emotions subscale (7 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.76) intends to measure children's personality and emotions. An example of statements from the personality and emotions subscale includes, "*When the child is emotionally disturbed, enuresis takes place.*" The health subscale (14 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.80) intends to measure children's health and overall activeness. An example of statements from the health subscale includes, "*The child is always lazy.*"

The psychological well-being subscale (10 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.77) intends to measure children's psychological well-being. An example of statements from the psychological well-being subscale includes, "*The child would like to control his/her peers during play.*" The adjustment subscale (5 items, Cronbach alpha = 0.75) intends to children's adaptive behavioural patterns. An example of statements from the adjustment subscale includes, "*The Child always complains against his/her peers in the school or kindergarten.*" Each item of the CBPC is scored on a 3 point scale that ranged from 1 (*Rarely*) to 3 (*Always*).

Results

1- Correlation analysis

A series of Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients showed that children's behavioural problems had a positive relationship with children's physical abuse ($r = 0.34, p < .05$), and feeling of rejection ($r = 0.32, p < .05$). Children's cognitive aptitude had a negative relationship with physical abuse ($r = -0.38, p < .05$), and feeling of rejection ($r = -0.30, p < .05$). The relationship among children's psychological punishment and children's behavioural problems ($r = 0.05$), and cognitive aptitude ($r = 0.05$) was nonsignificant.

2- Multiple regression analysis

A multiple regression analysis was run with children's behavioural problems as an outcome variable, and children's physical abuse, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment as predictors. The analysis showed that children's behavioural problems was predicted by the factors of children abuse ($F(3, 355) = 36.4, R^2 = 0.33$). Specifically, physical abuse was the strongest predictor of children's behavioural problems ($\beta = 0.28, t = 4.5, p < .05$), followed by feeling of rejection ($\beta = 0.24, t = 3.8, p < .05$), and psychological punishment ($\beta = 0.20, t = 3.1, p < .05$) respectively.

Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship among factors of children abuse (i.e., physical abuse, feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment) and children's cognitive aptitude and behavioural problems.

The results of the study showed that children's behavioural problems were positively linked to children's physical abuse and feeling of rejection. In addition, physical abuse was the strongest predictor of children's behavioural problems, followed by feeling of rejection, and psychological punishment respectively.

It is conceivable that the experience of abuse renders children's vulnerable to a set of unhealthy feelings such as anger, anxiety, frustration, and apprehension. It can also set children to disruptive behavioural patterns, including steal, aggression, enuresis, social withdraw, self-defeating habits, and self-destructive behaviours (see, Katz, 1992). For example, Hoffman-Plotkin and Twentyman (1984) reported that physically abused pre-school children were more aggressive and had received more discipline from teachers than either neglected or non-abused peers. Physically abused children were found to be plagued with disruptive behavioural problems (Eckenrode, et al., 1993), social withdrawal (Azar & Wolfe, 1998), more suicide attempts and self-mutilations (Green, 1978), and high rates of committing juvenile and adult crime (Luntz & Widom, 1994) than non-abused children.

According the acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner, 1999), individuals who perceive themselves to be rejected by attachment figures (e.g., parents) are expected to feel anxious and insecure, and develop distorted mental representations of self, of significant others, and of the world around them (Rohner, 1994). Consistent with our findings, several researchers (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989) have linked feeling of rejection to (a) hostility, aggression, passive aggression, or problems with the management of hostility and aggression, (b) dependence or defensive

independence depending on the form, frequency, duration, and intensity of perceived rejection, (c) impaired self-esteem, (d) impaired self-adequacy, (e) emotional unresponsiveness, (f) emotional instability, and (g) negative worldview.

Another key finding of the present study is that children's cognitive aptitude has a negative relationship with physical abuse and feeling of rejection. It is possible that the abused child is struggling to think through why abuse is occurring, whether it is going to happen in the future, and the best way to avoid or stop it. In addition, abused children may ruminate through the incident of abuse which could trigger feelings of anger, grief, anxiety, confusion, and fear. These adverse feelings and thoughts are likely to relate to lower levels of academic achievement, overwhelmed thinking processes, and poor concentration, memory, and attention. For example, Kuyken and Brewin (1995) reported a significant relationship between abuse and lack of memory specificity. That is, abused children showed a similar deficit in being specific about personal events. Williams (1996) suggested that children might have adopted such a retrieval style as a means of regulating affect. By retrieving less specific memories, abused children reduce the amount of negative affect experienced when recalling the abuse incident (i.e. 'cognitive avoidance').

Consistent with our findings, several studies have marshalled evidence concerning the negative effects of abuse on children's cognitive processes, including display deficits in specific cognitive skills such as receptive language (Vondra, Barnett, & Cicchetti, 1989), reading and expressive language (Burke, Crenshaw, Green, Schlosser, & Strocchia-Rivera, 1989), comprehension and abstraction (Tarter, Hegedus, Winsten, & Alterman, 1984), comprehension of social roles (Barahal, Waterman, & Martin, 1981), and auditory attention and verbal fluency (Tarter, Hegedus, Winsten, & Alterman, 1985). In addition, abused children were found to have significantly lower grades (Eckenrode et al., 1993), and repeated more grades (Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990) than non-abused peers.

In summary, the results of the present study supports further the research findings concerning the adverse impacts of children abuse on children's cognitive aptitude and behavioural problem. Abused children were found to be vulnerable to a set of behavioural problems and impaired cognitive development. Parents, teachers, and educators should work collaboratively to stop children's abuse and create a learning environment where children's cognitive processes and thinking skills can be developed and behavioural problems are kept to a minimum.

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