

The Sounding Board:

News and Reviews in Child Welfare

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Almost the entire January 2009 issue of Child Abuse and Neglect is devoted to articles about emotional abuse and neglect. The most notable contributions to current knowledge and understanding include:

“Parental physical and psychological aggression: Psychological symptoms in young adults,” by Cindy L. Miller – Perrin, Robin D. Perrin and Jodie L. Kocur.

“Emotional abuse in a sample of multiply maltreated, urban young adolescents: Issues of definition and identification,” by Penelope K. Trickett, Ferol E. Mennen, Kihyun Kim and Jina Sang.

“Childhood emotional maltreatment and later psychological distress among college students: The mediating role of maladaptive schemas,” by Margaret O’Dougherty Wright, Emily Crawford and Darren Del Castillo.

In addition, the October 2008 issue of Child Abuse and Neglect contains two important articles on this same subject:

“Psychosocial and cognitive functioning of children with specific profiles of maltreatment,” by Katherine C. Pears, Hyoun K. Kim and Philip A. Fisher.

“Maltreatment risk, self-regulation, and maladjustment in at-risk children,” by Julie N. Schatz, Leann E. Smith, John G. Borkowski, Thomas L. Whitman and Deb A. Keogh.

Several major themes emerge from the studies summarized in these articles:

- Parental psychological aggression (PA), defined as a “repeated pattern of behavior that conveys to children that they are worthless, unloved, unwanted, only of value in meeting another’s needs, or seriously threatened with physical or psychological violence,” has a devastating long term impact on children’s development. In their study of 298 college students ranging in age from 18-27, Miller – Perrin, et al, found that “parental psychological aggression emerged as the only variable uniquely predictive of psychological adjustment” when compared with the effects of corporal punishment and child physical abuse. Frequency of the experience of PA was the key factor in predicting psychological adjustment of young adults in this study.
- There is a fair amount of agreement regarding definitions and types of emotional abuse and neglect among these researchers. Penelope Trickett, et al, utilizes a classification system published by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) which includes spurning, terrorizing, isolating, and exploiting/ corrupting. This is pretty much the classification system developed by James Garbarino almost 30 years ago.
- Trickett and her co-authors found that almost 80% of 303 adolescents who were the subjects of substantiated CPS referrals in Los Angeles had been terrorized. Examples of terrorizing included having a parent threaten suicide, being threatened with bodily harm or abandonment, exposure to domestic violence or being subjected to extreme negativity or hostility. Co-occurring types of emotional abuse and neglect were common in Trickett, et al’s study with Spurning and Terrorizing being the most frequent combination. LA DCFS classified 8.9% of these youth as emotionally abused or neglected in their case records; however “almost half of these youth were labeled emotionally abused when the entire case record was abstracted using the Brassard and Donovan

framework.” Brassard and Donovan published guidelines for classifying emotional maltreatment in Child abuse and neglect: Definitions, classifications, and a framework for research edited by Freerick, Knutson, Trickett and Flanzer, 2006.

- In these studies, different types of child abuse and neglect tend to co- occur; emotional abuse and neglect is combined with child physical abuse, sexual abuse and / or neglect; as a result, developing distinct profiles of developmental outcomes for different types of maltreatment is a difficult task which, nevertheless, some of these researchers pursue in a determined way. Pears, Kim and Fisher found that the 117 pre – school foster children in their study had experienced an average of 3 types of maltreatment. Pears, et al, comment on “the near universality of the experiences of neglect and emotional maltreatment among maltreated foster children.” Some of these neglected children had also been physically abused and / or sexually abused as well. These researchers were surprised to find that sexually abused / emotionally maltreated children had the highest cognitive scores in their sample of young foster youth; and that different combinations of types of child maltreatment did not result in greater or lesser likelihood of externalizing or internalizing behavior problems.
- Pears, et al, found that the co- occurrence of abuse or neglect with other maltreatment types and the severity of those types predicted differential developmental outcomes. In other words, developmental outcomes do not depend on whether children are physically abused, sexually abused or neglected, but on severity of maltreatment and the extent to which children have been both abused (physically or sexually) and emotionally maltreated and neglected as well.
- Schatz, et al, study of 264 young at risk (mostly) African American children found that extent of maltreatment risk impacted children’s emotional self regulation skills “which in turn significantly predicted their pre- academic skills and behavioral functioning at age 5, “suggesting that self – regulation is an important process in the relationship between maltreatment risk and children’s maladjustment.” Children who have experienced severe maltreatment in their pre- school years are likely to have trouble calming down and “show distractibility, over-activity and poor concentration, “according to these researchers. The combination of cognitive delays and affect regulation problems makes it difficult for seriously or chronically maltreated children to succeed in school. Children with learning delays need to be able to tolerate frustration and persist in problem solving efforts; but it is these capacities that are compromised by limited ability to control emotions when obstacles arise. Self regulation appears to depend on children’s experiences with caregivers in the first 3 years of life, according to these authors. Emotional neglect / physical neglect in the first 3 years of life is a common pathway to a childhood of highly volatile out of control emotions and poor cognitive development.
- Wright, et al’s, study of 351 college students found “that the various forms of child maltreatment do occur in the same household, even in a relatively high functioning college sample.” These authors found that emotional abuse and neglect in childhood result in high rates of anxiety and depression and that these mental health problems were mediated by “schemas”, i.e., core beliefs about the self. For example, it is common for young people with histories of maltreatment to believe that “I am unlovable” or “If I put aside my own needs and please others, then I will be loved.” Early histories of abuse and neglect may leave youth and young adults with expectations of rejection, disconnection and isolation, and with highly negative beliefs regarding their competence and worth. It is not surprising that adults with these “schemas” would be vulnerable to mood disorders such as anxiety and depression as these conditions are sustained by negative and fear inducing thoughts.

Taken together, these articles describe common processes by which emotional abuse and neglect, in combination with physical / sexual abuse and neglect, have a devastating impact on child development. Early maltreatment impairs cognitive development and emotional self regulation in pre – school children. Serious academic difficulties follow. A common response to these difficulties in school and at home is social withdrawal (see Shaffer, Yates and Egeland’s, “The relation of emotional maltreatment to early adolescent competence: Developmental processes in a prospective study, “in the January 09 Child Abuse and Neglect) and/ or conduct problems. Parental psychological

aggression, including terrorizing children, has long term impacts on youth's and young adults' core beliefs about their worth, their competence and the likelihood that they will be loved in intimate relationships. These effects are the most profound in children who experience multiple severe types of maltreatment, including emotional abuse and neglect. The children, youth and young adults are highly vulnerable to mood disorders sustained by painful but inescapable thoughts and accompanying self talk.

Little by little, researchers and theorists are piecing together a plausible account of how child maltreatment in its several forms damages children's emotional well being and developmental prospects. The practice implications of this more sophisticated and in- depth understanding of emotional abuse and neglect have yet to be fully developed.

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