

**Psychological Abuse of Children:
The State of Public and Professional Concern**

**Bruce B. Burnett, DSW, ACSW
Doctorate: Boston College**

Abstract

Since 1962 when the Kempe article emerged on the "Battered Child Syndrome," there has been concentrated effort to combat physical and sexual abuse of children and youth. While most states included sections in their laws on "psychological abuse," little effort in research, litigation or treatment has been exerted to identify cases or inform the public as to its deleterious effects on children. One stumbling block in this effort has been the conviction that there was little public sanction to examine or prosecute these forms of abuse. This research project aimed at identifying potential areas to be defined as abuse, and to submit to a sample of citizens questionnaires on child psychological abuse, and compare the results with a professional social work cohort.

A questionnaire containing 20 vignettes representing ten types of psychologically abusive behavior was administered to a group of 843 respondents, both professional social workers and a random sample of citizens to further define the phenomenon of psychological abuse. Ratings determined whether an event was abuse; its seriousness (0-5 scale); and whether intervention was recommended (0-3 scale). Demographic data about respondent's age, gender, parenthood and experience or exposure to child abuse was collected.

When a vignette was considered abuse, was rated at least 1.5 on a seriousness scale and 1.00 on an intervention scale it was included in a list of potential definitions of psychological abuse. Respondent characteristics were analyzed to determine their effects on the study results. Characteristics of the vignettes were also analyzed. The results were analyzed using the repeated measures ANOVA (MANOVA), two-tailed T-Test, analysis of variance and Pearson's Correlation Coefficient.

Study results supported definitions on nine types of psychological abuse of children; in order of their seriousness: confining a child to a small space; public humiliation, singling out one child in a family for onerous chores or mistreatment; severe verbal abuse; coercing a child into delinquency; threatening a child with injury or abandonment; refusal of psychological treatment; not allowing social and emotional growth, and not providing a loving atmosphere for the child. Immoral parental behavior, in and of itself, was rejected as a type of psychological abuse. Variables with respondent groups (citizen vs social worker; parent vs non-parent; male vs female; age range; or amount of experience with child abuse) did not substantively influence the ratings. Citizen concern for child psychological abuse was demonstrated, thus supporting public (and in this research, professional) approval to adjudicate cases of psychological abuse.

Summary

Research Problem

Child abuse hit the public scene in the 1960's with the "Battered Child Syndrome" (Kempe et al, 1962) amid national outrage that children should be maltreated. The 1980's and 1990's focused on sexual abuse. Most states included sections outlining sanctions on psychological abuse, but there has been little use of these provisions in ongoing child abuse prevention due to the lack of resources, uncertain definitions and a concern that there was little or no public commitment to prosecute these cases.

Research Background

Early research on psychological abuse (emotional abuse, emotional maltreatment) centered on its definition (Giovanni and Becerra, 1979; American Bar Association, 1981). Other authors devoted their efforts to bringing the full problem of psychological abuse into the open (Baily and Baily 1986), and other authors concentrated on the serious effects of psychological abuse on its victims (Egelund, 1985). One research project (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1991) found more public concern about yelling and swearing at children, but there still was a gap in assessing whether the public felt that psychological abuse was a social problem. This research proposed to survey public opinion about the psychological abuse of latency age children, and then compare it to professional social work's attitude toward the problem.

Methodology

Using the vignette approach (Giovanni and Becerra, 1979), brief family case scenarios of latency age children were constructed for the ten types of abuse found in the literature: 1. Close confinement of a child; 2. encouraging or forcing a child into delinquency; 3. not allowing the social and emotional growth of a child; 4. immoral parental behavior; 5. public humiliation; 6. not providing a loving home; 7. singling out on child for special, unpleasant tasks or unfair treatment; 8. denying psychological treatment of a child when a qualified mental health professional has prescribed it; 9. threatening a child with physical harm or abandonment, and 10. severe verbal abuse.

Along with each vignette on the questionnaire, three questions were posed: 1. did the vignette depict child abuse or not?, 2. how serious was the abuse? (a six point scale from "not serious" to "extremely serious," and 3. what should be done? ("0-no major problem, do nothing," "1-family should receive counseling," "2-family should be referred to court," to "4-child should be removed from the family"). At the end of the questionnaire, additional data was sought by asking respondents their age, (eight point range), sex, parental status, and experience with child abuse (five point scale from "I know no abused child" to "I know many abused children").

The citizen respondent group was selected randomly from the city's voter's list. The professional social workers were from the state professional social worker organization in which the citizens resided. The data was analyzed using the two-tailed t-test, alpha level of $p=.05$, the ANOVA and MANOVA.

Results

Of the 1413 mailed packets, 833 were returned (59%), 381 citizens and 452 social workers. The respondents were typically female (67%) and they were parents (67%). The citizens were middle aged (mean age 46) and had little contact with abused children. The social workers were a bit younger (mean age 37) and had a great deal of contact with abused children.

At least 67% of the respondents judged 18 of 20 vignettes to be child abuse and the results were statistically significant (two-tailed t-test). In 19 of 20 vignettes they rated these vignettes between "serious" and "quite serious" on the seriousness scale (mean of 3.52 out of a possible "6"). On the "what to do scale" the respondents felt that intervention was needed in 19 out of 20 vignettes. This intervention mean (on scale between 0 and 3) was 1.52, with the

respondents wanting intervention somewhere between having the families get counseling and referring them to court.

Combining both vignettes for each type of abuse, the following definitions of abuse were supported, only one (immoral parental behavior) was rejected: 1. Confining a child to a small space; 2. severe public humiliation; 3. singling out one child in a family for abusive behavior; 4. severe verbal abuse; 5. encouraging or coercing a child into delinquency; 6. threatening a child with physical injury or abandonment; 7. denial of psychological treatment; 8. not allowing social or emotional growth, and 9. not providing a loving atmosphere.

Comparing citizens and social workers there were no differences statistically in their judgements about whether the vignettes were abuse or not, on their seriousness ratings, or in their selection of interventions. (T-test; ANOVA, MANOVA). The only variable that may have influenced the respondents' judgement was gender. Female respondents consistently had higher ratings on all the scale and they were statistically significant.

Vignettes depicting a family where there was abuse over time and an effect on the child were rated higher on all three scales than those with a single episode of abuse.

The respondents in this study judged that these vignettes represented child abuse, were serious and needed intervention. These findings lent support to the theory that there are standards of behavior of adults towards children that are unacceptable, even though the child was not physically or sexually abused. The inclusion of a group of lay citizens demonstrating their concern for the victims of psychological abuse may encourage practitioners and research professionals to assume there is more public support for intervention in this type of abuse than originally thought.

The respondents suggested intervention was necessary, yet their ratings were between counseling for the families and refer to court. This implied that the respondents may have favored some mandated counseling. The usual remove or not remove the child may be less relevant in these cases.

Utility For Practice

The findings of this study would indicate that there is already concern for child psychological abuse; moreover, there is public and professional support for using the psychological abuse sections of the child abuse laws to adjudicate reported cases. The usual decision around removing a child or not may not pertain to these cases, trials of counseling should proceed first, then a referral to court if this is not effective. The nine types of abuse supported by these respondents might be seen as definitions of psychological abuse.

There is a need for more research in child psychological abuse. Combining results of research in this field with those of child development, the children of alcoholics and the field of "resilient" children would greatly enhance the field develop strategies for helping the victims and families of child psychological abuse. there is also a need for retrospective studies; there seem to be a paucity of cases (unlike physical and sexual abuse) where the outcome of psychological abuse may be studied.

References

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