



## Maltreatment type and behaviors: Does listening matter?



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### ABSTRACT

This article presents an exploratory assessment of whether children's perceptions of case-worker support (e.g. feeling listened to) moderates the relationship between the type of maltreatment and problematic behaviors. Relying on data collected for the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW I), this research measures how often children felt listened to by their caseworkers and the effect on the relationship between two types of maltreatment (e.g. physical abuse and neglect) and problematic child behaviors. Results indicate that whereas children reported feeling listened to most of the time, there are significant differences in the probabilities of problematic behavior scores between physically abused and neglected children according to how often they felt listened to. With the exception of those children who felt listened to all of the time, physically abused children have a higher probability of problematic behaviors than neglected children. Comparisons between the two maltreatment types indicate a greater impact of listening on physically abused children across the continuum of feeling listened to (e.g. never to all of the time), than for neglected children, except for at the highest level of listening, as results indicate a small, but significant difference indicating neglected children are more positively impacted by listening than physically abused kids. Implications for practice are that children's perceptions of support from caseworkers may influence behavioral outcomes differently according to maltreatment type. Additionally, these findings encourage the inclusion of children's perspectives regarding the relationships they have with caseworkers.

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### Introduction

An essential tenet of social work is beginning treatment from the client's perspective. Gaining an understanding of children's perceptions regarding the quality of relationships with their caseworkers is important to inform program developers about whether service delivery and treatment planning adequately account for the child's perspective. Acknowledging the opinions and perceptions of children served by the child welfare system enhances the relationship between children and the adults who care for them (Kufeldt, 1984; Merritt, 2008; Merritt and Franke, 2010). Services provided by the child welfare system would be bolstered if evaluation protocol integrated an assessment of children's perceptions of the caseworker/child relationship in relation to positive outcomes. An examination of ways in which children's perceived levels of support are related to behavioral and developmental outcomes can contribute vital information for treatment planning.

Understanding children's perceptions regarding their experiences while interfacing with the child welfare system is essential to evaluating the relational aspect of service delivery, although consistently absent from the empirical literature (Fox, Frasch, & Berrick, 2000). Incorporating an assessment regarding the relationship between children and their

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caseworkers has not been previously utilized in quantitative child welfare program analysis, nor has it typically influenced program or policy development (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004). Given children are the primary clients receiving services, effective treatment delivery should incorporate an evaluation from the perspective of the children. There have been cross-sectional, retrospective assessments regarding the perceptions of previous foster children, now adults (Wilson, 1996), but few inquiring with the client while in care (Berrick, Frasch, & Fox, 2000), such as the research presented herein. Scholars have noted that children want to be queried about their feelings in placement (Festinger, 1983; Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1990; Wilson, 1994, 1996). Moreover, children's relational experiences influence their commitment to continuing with the decided upon treatment plan (Fox et al., 2000). Hence, it is essential to assess the extremely important relationship with the practitioners, as influential regarding desired treatment outcomes. An inquiry such as this can provide a meaningful evaluation component in assessing the efficacy of child welfare intervention. The research presented here focuses on assessing behavioral outcome differences between children who have been physically abused and those neglected based on how often they felt listened to by their caseworkers.

As noted, studies have documented a dearth of research that includes children's perceptions while under the care of the child welfare system (Merritt, 2008; Berrick et al., 2000; Chapman & Christ, 2008; Colton, 1989; Fox et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1990; Needell, Webster, Curraco-Alamin, & Armijo, 1998). The retrospective nature of previous studies should be considered with caution due to memory loss, social desirability biases, and maturation. Other limitations with previous research have been small sample sizes, lack of control groups, indistinguishing between types of fostering (i.e., kinship, long term foster care) and a lack of studies incorporating mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative). Perceptions are subject to many externalized factors, which further necessitate an inquiry inclusive of possible moderating variables. For the most part, research has been designed in ways that seek to capture children's perceptions of love, comfortability, strength of bond, feeling secure and closeness to their caregivers (Merritt, 2008; Merritt and Franke, 2010; Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1990; Johnson et al., 1990; Triseliotis, 1984, 2002; Wilson, 1996; Zimmerman, 1982), as opposed to perceived relatedness to caseworkers as a factor in positive outcomes.

While assessments from the perspective of caregivers, teachers, and caseworkers involved with the child welfare system in their efforts to support children in care have been widely documented, feedback from the children has been scant (George, Wulczyn & Harden, 1996; Whiting & Lee, 2003). Children are the primary consumers of the child welfare system, and as such, must have input in any thorough, client centered evaluation effort (Fox et al., 2000). Researchers have noted the seminal work of Trudy Festinger (1983), which, while focusing on children's reflections of their experiences in foster care, identified the gap in research concerning the perspectives of the children receiving child welfare services (Festinger, 1983). Of those studies that address client feedback from the perspective of the child, the focus has been understanding what children feel about their experiences living away from home, being separated from siblings, school transitions and explanations for removal rather than client satisfaction with caseworker contribution (Fox et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1990; Wilson, 1996).

#### *Why Does It Matter If Children Feel Listened to by Their Caseworkers?*

This study contributes a rarely studied inquiry regarding components of relatedness between the child welfare system population and their caseworkers. In particular, it presents much needed information about the supportive nature of the relationship with their caseworkers from the perspective of children while they are experiencing child welfare services using a large nationally representative sample.

Despite the scant efforts to include children's perceptions in the literature, there is a skeletal framework with which to begin further inquiry (Merritt and Franke, 2010). An examination of factors that characterize the relational quality between children and their caseworkers can contribute rich information to scholars studying perceived relatedness as associated with child well-being outcomes and successful adjustment in transitional environments. Caseworkers should remain cognizant of the value of listening well and querying children about their feelings regarding the provided treatment and services. How well and how often children feel listened to by caseworkers is related to whether they feel understood and supported during traumatic and difficult times while in care. Practitioners charged with implementing treatment plans are remiss in not assessing the child's perceived quality of the service provided. An inquiry such as this provides insight about the level of trust children have with their caseworkers, how they feel about the treatment plan, and ways in which they can be empowered through active listening. Additionally, listening well as a caseworker is equally important to children's successful adjustment and development.

Maltreated children have reported puzzling patterns of relatedness (e.g., expressing high quality relationships while simultaneously displaying a strong desire for increased closeness), while children who have not been maltreated have more consistent patterns (e.g., satisfaction with the quality of the relationship and level of closeness) (Lynch and Cichetti, 1991). Patterns of relatedness or levels of perceived support have not been studied with the intent to distinguish outcome differences according to maltreatment type. Moreover, in addition to contributing an understanding of outcome differences based on perceptions of caseworker support, this study is also poised to contribute to the growing emphasis on highlighting distinct and separate characteristics of physical abuse and neglect. Oftentimes, physical abuse and neglect (of which there are a few categories, e.g. provision and supervisory) are characterized under the overarching term 'child maltreatment', however, the risk factors and accompanying characteristics are distinctly different, thus warranting refined definitions and comparative analyses. Specifically, components of the relatedness concept where it concerns caseworkers, such as the whether children feel listened to, understood, satisfactorily informed, and invested in their treatment plan has not been widely addressed

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