



# A conceptual model of the relationship between maltreatment and externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behavior problems, and the intervening role of child welfare service delivery



Melissa Van Wert <sup>a,\*</sup>, Faye Mishna <sup>a</sup>, Tina Malti <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V4, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Toronto Mississauga, 3359 Mississauga Road, Mississauga, Ontario L5L 1C6, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

Despite a substantial body of research examining the relationship between child maltreatment and externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behavior problems, theory is rarely applied in the current empirical research literature. The lack of theoretical application limits opportunities to understand the mechanisms explaining why maltreatment is associated with behavior problems, and the best strategies for intervening to interrupt this association. The purpose of this paper is to analyze relevant theoretical perspectives and develop a conceptual model explaining the relationship between maltreatment and behavior problems, and the intervening role of child welfare services. Six theoretical perspectives were selected for analysis: the ecological model, the transactional model, attachment theory, the life course perspective, the social learning perspective, and social–biological models. After applying these theories to understanding the maltreatment–behavior problem association and the role of child welfare services in intervening, insights from these theories were synthesized into a conceptual model. The policy and practice implications of this model are discussed, with a focus on the implications for child welfare workers, administrators, and policymakers.

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## 1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect is a serious childhood adversity associated with significant social and economic costs and a range of consequences for children and youth, including depression and other internalizing issues and disruptions to cognitive and emotional development

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [melissa.vanwert@utoronto.ca](mailto:melissa.vanwert@utoronto.ca) (M. Van Wert), [fmishna@utoronto.ca](mailto:fmishna@utoronto.ca) (F. Mishna), [tina.malti@utoronto.ca](mailto:tina.malti@utoronto.ca) (T. Malti).

(Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). It is well established that maltreatment is associated with behavior problems, such as externalizing, antisocial, and delinquent or criminal behavior (e.g., Burnette, Oshri, Lax, Richards, & Ragbeer, 2012; Cecil, Viding, Barker, Guiney, & McCrory, 2014; Ryan, Williams, & Courtney, 2013). Almost thirty years ago, Garbarino and Plantz (1986) underscored the difficulty involved in understanding the magnitude, direction, and significance of this association, an observation that remains true. Behavior problems may play a causal role in eliciting maltreatment or may be a consequence of abuse or neglect, a bidirectional relationship may exist, or alternatively, maltreatment and behavior problems may have common causes. Complex contextual mechanisms likely explain why maltreatment and behavior problems are associated for some young people, but not others. The difficulty in understanding these complex issues demands attention to a spectrum of diverse theoretical perspectives that can explain the relationship between child abuse and neglect and externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behaviors. A comprehensive analysis and integration of theories will illuminate the mechanisms linking maltreatment with behavior problems and will provide insight into the question of which maltreated children are at greatest risk.

Child welfare services represent a key service system for children and youth who experience maltreatment, a population at significant risk of behavioral difficulties. Indeed, it is estimated that between 20 and 50% of the populations served by child welfare systems struggle with clinically significant behavior problems such as aggression and criminality (see Campbell, Thomas, Cook, & Keenan, 2013; Ellenbogen, Trocmé, & Wekerle, 2013; Keil & Price, 2006; Postlethwait, Barth, & Guo, 2010). Child welfare services are in a position to play a crucial role in preventing behavior problems among maltreated children, as well as intervening to facilitate service delivery for children who exhibit behavioral difficulties. It is unclear, however, how child welfare systems can best meet the needs of the vulnerable young people who have experienced maltreatment and demonstrate externalizing, antisocial, or criminal behaviors. Analyzing and integrating theoretical knowledge will offer insight into the specific elements of child welfare services that promote positive outcomes, and the factors that constrain effective service delivery.

While the empirical literature offers some understanding of why maltreatment is associated with behavior problems and how child welfare service providers can best support maltreated children with these problems, this paper contributes to the scant body of work that applies theories to these questions. After a comprehensive review of relevant literature, six theoretical perspectives were selected for further analysis: the ecological model, the transactional model, attachment theory, the life course perspective, the social learning perspective, and social-biological models. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and integrate these theoretical perspectives into a conceptual model that further explains (1) why child maltreatment is associated with behavior problems, and (2) how child welfare services can prevent and alleviate behavioral difficulties among children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Informed by theories from across various disciplines, the theoretical analysis and integration presented in this paper is intended to assist researchers, practitioners, and policy makers in developing effective interventions and directing those interventions toward the most vulnerable children and youth.

## 2. Analysis of theoretical perspectives

### 2.1. Ecological model

Ecological models represent an evolving body of theory and research focused on the environmental processes that impact human development across the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Originally developed by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s (1974, 1977, 1979), a central tenet of the ecological model is that physical, social, and emotional development is impacted by the interactions between individual

characteristics and the environment, including the family, peer, school, and community contexts (Jenson & Fraser, 2006; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2005). According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), human development occurs through a process of progressively complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving, bio-psychological human, and the individuals, objects, and symbols in her or his immediate environment. The enduring interactions that occur over extended periods of time are considered proximal processes, and include, for example, parent-child activities, solitary play or play with peers, reading, learning new skills, and performing complex tasks. These processes occur within an ecological environment, which is conceptualized as a set of nested structures, with the innermost level defined as the *microsystem* (e.g., family, school, peer group) and the outermost level defined as the *macrosystem* (e.g., culture, belief systems, opportunity structures, life course options) (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The *chronosystem* adds a temporal dimension to the ecological model, representing change or consistency over time in the characteristics of the individual and her or his environment.

Applying the ecological model to the understanding of child maltreatment, Belsky (1980) proposed that the causes of maltreatment are ecologically nested. While the *microsystem* is viewed as the immediate context in which maltreatment occurs, Belsky emphasized the importance of interactions among various levels of the ecological system. Characteristics of the caregiver, such as lack of experience with parenting, or history of maltreatment in her or his own childhood, can interact with other factors at the outer levels of the ecological system (e.g., parental unemployment, social isolation, community violence) as well as situational factors (e.g., parent-child argument, family crisis, bereavement or loss) to cause maltreatment. Belsky (1993) concluded that there is no single cause of maltreatment, and that there are no necessary or sufficient causes of maltreatment. Rather, there are multiple pathways to abuse and neglect, which tend to lead in the direction of maltreatment when risk factors outweigh protective factors.

In the study of externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behaviors, the ecological model is often utilized as a means to identify predictors or risk factors at various levels of a child's ecology (e.g., Dishion, Capaldi, & Yoerger, 1999; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000; Suldo, Mihalas, Powell, & French, 2008). According to the ecological model, behavioral development and expression are influenced by a person's interactions with the environment, including both the immediate physical and social settings and the relationships among settings (White & Renk, 2012). It is expected that specific environmental elements will heighten or diminish the risk of psychopathology over time, including the risk of problem behaviors in childhood and adolescence (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999), and further, that contextual factors can have direct, mediated, and moderated effects on outcomes (Lochman, 2004). Such contextual factors include family and peer relationships, school characteristics, or a social service intervention, all of which can alter the link between a risk factor and a later behavioral outcome (Lochman, 2004; Osher et al., 2004).

The ecological model offers important insight into why maltreatment is associated with behavior problems. In line with this model, it is expected that the extent to which maltreated children develop behavior problems will vary significantly, depending on their ability to cope with their maltreatment and the availability of support in the environment, from peers, family, community, school, and social services (Tabone et al., 2011). As protective factors diminish and risk factors accumulate at various ecological levels in the life of a maltreated child, behavior problems become more likely to develop and persist (MacKenzie, Kotch, Lee, Augsberger, & Hutto, 2011; Tabone et al., 2011; Verrecchia, Fetzer, Lemmon, & Austin, 2010). Maltreatment can add to an already accumulating number of risks in a child's social ecology, playing a causal role in the development of externalizing, antisocial, and criminal behavior problems. At the same time, difficult child behavior can be understood as an individual characteristic that increases the risk of maltreatment.

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