

Original article

Protection against antisocial behavior in children exposed to physically abusive discipline

Todd I. Herrenkohl, Ph.D.^{a,b,*}, Emiko A. Tajima, Ph.D.^{a,b}, Stephen D. Whitney, M.A.^c, and Bu Huang, Ph.D.^b

^a*Social Development Research Group, School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington*

^b*School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington*

^c*College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington*

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Abstract

Purpose: The study investigated protective factors (school commitment/importance, parent/peer disapproval of antisocial behavior, positive future orientation, and religion) hypothesized to lower risk for antisocial behavior among adolescents who, as children, had been physically abused. Protective factors also were investigated for comparison, nonabused children, and for children at risk on abuse and other factors: low socioeconomic status and early antisocial behavior.

Methods: Analyses used a two-step hierarchical regression approach. In step 1, age, gender, and early antisocial behavior were entered as controls. In step 2, each protective factor was entered separately as a predictor. A final regression model in each case examined the additive (combined) effect of all protective factors on a given outcome. Tests of predictor-by-group interactions were used to examine group differences.

Results: Among abused and nonabused children, having a strong commitment to school, having parents and peers who disapprove of antisocial behavior, and being involved in a religious community lowered rates of lifetime violence, delinquency, and status offenses. Having a positive future orientation appeared less powerful as a protective influence. Exposure to an increasing number of protective factors was for each outcome associated with a diminution in risk for antisocial behavior.

Conclusions: Protective factors represent targets for preventive intervention that are viable for children as they enter adolescence. The fact that protective factors were predictive of lower antisocial behavior in both the abuse and comparison groups suggests that protective effects are more universal than they are unique to a given group of children. © 2005 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Physical discipline; Child abuse; Antisocial behavior; Protection; Resilience

Existing research has documented the deleterious effects of physical child abuse [1]. For example, during adolescence, victims of abuse are at higher risk than are nonabused youth for a variety of mental health and behavior problems, including delinquency and violence [1–8]. However, there is evidence that many victims of abuse avoid later involve-

ment in antisocial behavior, which raises the prospect that these youth encounter protective influences that buffer the influence of this earlier risk exposure [1]. Unfortunately, knowledge is weak on the range of protective influences that work against the onset of antisocial behavior in maltreated children. This study seeks to strengthen research on the topic of resilience by examining several protective factors hypothesized to lessen risk for various forms of antisocial behavior. The study also seeks to examine the degree to which the same protective factors are salient for a sub-

*Address correspondence to: Dr. Todd I. Herrenkohl, School of Social Work, University of Washington, 4101 15th Ave. NE, Seattle, WA 98105.
E-mail address: tih@u.washington.edu

sample of abused children who also meet criteria for risk on other factors (namely low socioeconomic status and early antisocial behavior), as well as children who comprise a “no-abuse” comparison group.

Relation between child maltreatment and antisocial behavior

Evidence on the relation between child maltreatment and youth antisocial behavior has emerged from a number of studies [1]. In one such study, Stouthamer-Loeber et al. [6] investigated the relation between child maltreatment (substantiated cases of abuse and neglect) and risk for overt (e.g., aggression, fighting, and violence) and covert (e.g., property damage and theft) forms of delinquency among boys from a longitudinal, inner city, community sample. They found that many boys who had been maltreated engaged in some later form of delinquency. Compared with controls (i.e., those in the sample without a history of abuse or neglect, matched on race, age, and socioeconomic status), a higher percentage of maltreated boys reported aggression (67% vs. 47%, respectively), fighting (77% vs. 43%, respectively), and serious physical violence (92% vs. 71%, respectively). Differences between maltreated boys and controls on covert forms of delinquency were less pronounced but still evident.

Smith and Thornberry [5] also investigated the relation between child maltreatment (before age 12; defined by official records) and adolescent delinquency. Data for their study were from the Rochester Youth Development Study, a multi-wave panel study of youth and their primary caregivers. After controlling for child gender, race, social class, family structure, and family mobility, they found a significant association between maltreatment and official delinquency; 45% of maltreated children engaged in later delinquency compared with 32% of those without maltreatment histories. A significant relation between maltreatment and youth self-reported delinquency also was revealed.

In earlier analyses of data from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, Herrenkohl et al. [3] examined the relation between physical child abuse (defined by mothers' reports of physically abusive discipline of a child in preschool) and youth-reported violent (assaultive) behavior in adolescence. Analyses showed that after accounting for demographic controls (SES, child gender, and age) and other forms of child maltreatment, mothers' physically abusive discipline significantly predicted later violence.

Widom and colleagues also have investigated the link between physical child abuse (officially recorded) and later violence in their well-known longitudinal cohorts design study [1,8,9]. Findings there are consistent with those from other studies; namely, individuals who were abused were found to be at significantly higher risk than controls for youth violent crime (arrests). Effects of abuse on violence continued into adulthood.

Protection and resilience

Evidence on the relation between physical abuse and youth antisocial behavior (delinquency and violence) is compelling. However, not all children who are maltreated subsequently engage in antisocial behavior; that is, they appear protected from this sequela of abuse [9–11]. The results from the Smith and Thornberry study above illustrate this point. In the study, 45% of maltreated youth engaged in subsequent delinquency; the majority of youth (55%), however, avoided later delinquency.

Individuals who show better than expected outcomes having been exposed to some risk (such as abuse), or those able to avoid negative outcomes (such as antisocial behavior) in the face of adversity, often are described as “resilient” [11]. Resilience in vulnerable children has links to individual characteristics, such as high IQ and positive temperament, and to social influences that modify, and in some cases ameliorate, the damage caused to children's development by earlier risk exposure [10–15]. For example, with regard to antisocial behavior as an outcome, Morrison et al. [16] found that youth who experienced a high degree of social support, parent supervision, and classroom participation fared better than those who did not. The effects of these protective factors on behavior were maintained after accounting for child gender and earlier antisocial behavior, as well as other protective factors such as self-control and assertive problem-solving.

Findings on resilience across a range of adversities do appear in the research literature. However, the quality of the research that has generated these findings is mixed. Many studies on resilience involve small samples or case studies, which limits the accuracy and generalizability of results [11]. Also problematic is that researchers have studied resilience by examining protective influences only within a single, vulnerable group of children, failing to include a comparison group. From analyses, researchers have drawn conclusions about processes of resilience thought to be unique to high risk children when those processes could apply to other children, not just those who experienced a given form of adversity [11].

In the child maltreatment literature, more universal methodological shortcomings exist [7,17–19], which further undermine the strength of existing knowledge on resilience for abused children. Perhaps most troubling is the abundance of studies that use cross-sectional designs and retrospective measures of child maltreatment, absent validation against prospective measures [4,7]. The use of cross-sectional designs leads to ambiguity in causal effects; retrospective measurement is problematic because assessment depends on accurate recall of distant childhood events, which are subject to distortion and/or selectively recalled. Sole reliance on official records to measure abuse, though providing prospective measurement, dramatically underestimates maltreatment cases, which again affects generalizability [20]. The longitudinal design of the Lehigh Longitudinal Study

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