



## Research article

## Unintended pregnancy as a predictor of child maltreatment



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## ABSTRACT

Whereas child maltreatment research has developed considerable evidence on post-natal risk-factors, pre-natal circumstances have been largely overlooked. The circumstances surrounding a pregnancy may considerably impact the environment in which later parenting behaviors occur. This study examines one of the earliest potentially identifiable risk-factors for child maltreatment: the intentions of a pregnancy. Utilizing both mother and father reports, this study focuses on maltreatment risk, as it relates with both parents' perspectives of the pregnancy's intention. Drawing upon data from the Fragile Families and Child Well Being study, a longitudinal, birth cohort study, survey questions were used that asked parents, at the time of the birth, whether they considered abortion for the child. Unintended pregnancy demonstrates predictive value as one of the earliest identifiable risk-factors for child maltreatment. Regardless of whether the mother or father reported the unintended pregnancy, the relationship with maltreating behavior is largely the same, although for different maltreatment types. Mothers' reports of unintended pregnancy are associated with psychological aggression, and neglect. Fathers' reports of unintended pregnancy are associated with physical aggression. Fathers' perspectives regarding pregnancy intentions matter just as much as mothers', and accounting for their perspectives could be important in understanding the maltreating behaviors of both parents. Identifiable in the earliest stages of caregiving, unintended pregnancy may be an important risk-factor in predicting and understanding child maltreatment.

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## Background

## Introduction

For child maltreatment interventions to be effective, we must understand the antecedents in the chain of events leading toward worse outcomes. Delivering effective services before risks accumulate provides the opportunity for the child and family to switch tracks onto healthier developmental trajectories. The earlier that risks can be identified, the more likely that interventions can effectively interrupt longstanding patterns. This study examines one of the earliest potentially identifiable risk-factors for child maltreatment: the intentions of a pregnancy.

When pregnancies are reported as unwanted or unintended, what are the particular risks to development and well-being when infants are born? To date, the research literature has provided an incomplete understanding of this issue. Whereas considerable evidence has been developed regarding post-natal risk-factors, pre-natal circumstances have been largely overlooked. The circumstances surrounding a pregnancy may considerably impact the environment in which later

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parenting behaviors occur. These early circumstances set the stage, creating a trajectory for subsequent processes, and can shape a situation where children may enter an unwelcoming world.

This study can be understood in the context of an ecological perspective, whereby an organism's health and life chances are determined by its adaptive level of fit to its environment. In the context of child development, the child can be seen as developing within nested domains of influence—within the immediate micro-system of the home and family, meso-system of neighborhood and community, and macro-system of prevailing cultural norms (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Child maltreatment can be understood as the result of a lack of adaptive fit within the parent–child dyad, combined with a breakdown among larger family, community, and cultural levels to adequately support this dyad in pro-developmental ways (Garbarino, 1977). Garbarino explained: “Families involved in abuse seem caught up in a pattern of fundamental *asynchrony*, of chronic and acute mismatch between reality and the parent's ability to effectively manage that reality (Garbarino, 1977, 724).” This mismatch between the child's needs and the parent's capacities begins at a certain chronological point. Garbarino (1977) described this mismatch in terms of role malfunction, or the inability of the parent to adjust to the parental role. He discussed: “Linking such role malfunctions together to account for the maltreatment of children is a major, if largely unexplored, task for developmental research (Garbarino, 1977, 725).” Additionally, Garbarino suggested that maltreatment research should include a focus on family biography, regarding milestones of transitions into key roles. Among others, he mentioned unintended pregnancy, as it relates with the transition to the caregiver role (Garbarino, 1977).

An unintended or unwanted pregnancy, by definition, indicates a lack of adaptive fit within the parent–child dyad (initially, at least), and this mismatch becomes part of the conditions in which the parent–child relationship is formed. Additionally, the parent–child dyad is often embedded within a spousal or partner relationship. From an ecological point of view, Belsky (1980) stated that what occurs within the parental relationship has implications for what occurs between parents and their children. Based on the data available for analysis, this study utilized both mother and father reports of unintended pregnancy (allowing for differing parental perspectives) to predict later child maltreatment outcomes.

### *Unintended Pregnancy*

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) has stated, “The consequences of unintended pregnancy are serious, imposing appreciable burdens on children, women, men, and families (Institute of Medicine, 1995).” IOM found that children of unintended conceptions are at greater risk for numerous developmental and health consequences (IOM, 1995). The United States has one of the highest unintended pregnancy rates in the industrialized world (Singh, Sedgh, & Hussain, 2010), in that approximately half of all pregnancies are unintended (Finer & Henshaw, 2006; Henshaw, 1998). Rates of unintended pregnancy in the U.S. are highest geographically in the South and Southwest, and in states with large urban populations (Kost, 2013). Unintended pregnancies occur throughout all segments of the population, yet they are not evenly distributed. Lower-income women have been found to be four times as likely to experience unintended pregnancy as higher-income women (Finer & Henshaw, 2006). Women at particular risk for unintended pregnancy include those who are aged 18–24, low-income, lacking a high school degree, cohabiting, and African-American (Finer & Zolna, 2014). Additionally, one study found that 38% of unintended teenage pregnancies in England could be attributed to Adverse Childhood Experiences such as child maltreatment, parental separation, or mental illness (Bellis, Hughes, Leckenby, Perkins, & Lowey, 2014).

In the literature, the broader category of unintended pregnancy is typically divided into two subcategories: mistimed and unwanted pregnancies. Mistimed pregnancies include those that occur either too early or too late to achieve family planning goals. Unwanted pregnancies indicate a more extreme level of unintendedness, and occur among women who never wanted to have children at any time, as well as those who wanted no more children than they already had.

It is important to distinguish between an unwanted pregnancy and an unwanted child. A parent's feelings about a pregnancy, or assessment of the intention underlying it, can be especially fluid. Assessments of pregnancy intentions are known to become more supportive of the pregnancy and child over time, and are additionally subject to memory bias, which also increases with time (Rosenzweig & Wolpin, 1993; Santelli et al., 2003). As the fetus develops, parents become more likely to accept the pregnancy and adopt pro-developmental behaviors. As a result, when a parent continues to describe the pregnancy, and later, the child as “unwanted,” this represents an assessment even more extreme than what was initially described as an unwanted pregnancy.

### *Unintended Pregnancy and Developmental Outcomes*

Unintended pregnancy has been associated with lower-quality parental behaviors and outcomes in the pre-natal phase, including late access to prenatal care (Hulse, Laken, Miller, & Ager, 2000; Joyce, Kaestner, & Korenman, 2000; Kost, Landry, & Darroch, 1998), and delays in ceasing tobacco and alcohol use (Green-Raleigh, Lawrence, Chen, Devine, & Prue, 2005; Joyce et al., 2000; Kost et al., 1998). Additionally, unintended pregnancies result in higher rates of underweight and premature infants (IOM, 1995; Kost et al., 1998).

Although less evidence exists, unintended pregnancy has also been associated with poorer post-natal and childhood outcomes. When one or both parents did not intend a pregnancy, attachment security and mental proficiency have been found to be comparatively lower (Bronte-Tinkew, Scott, & Horowitz, 2009). Additionally, feelings and thoughts that parents have about their children, even before birth, have been shown to affect the quality of later parenting (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991; Weiss, 1974). There is also evidence that children from unintended pregnancies are more likely to have difficulties in

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