



Type-specific intergenerational transmission of neglectful and physically abusive parenting behaviors among young parents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 October 2008

Accepted 1 February 2009

Available online 11 February 2009

Keywords:

Intergenerational transmission

Parenting behavior

Type specific model

ABSTRACT

Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescents Health (Add Health) data, this study aims to (a) test the hypothesis of intergenerational transmission of child abuse (ITCA) using a nationally representative community sample of young parents and (b) compare transmission patterns between the two most prevalent types of child abuse, physical abuse and neglect. The results show that parents who report having been neglected in their childhood are 2.6 times as likely to report their own neglectful parenting behavior and twice as likely to report physically abusive parenting than those who did not. Likewise, those who recall physical victimization in their childhood are 5 times and 1.4 times as likely to report physically abusive parenting and neglectful parenting, respectively, than those who do not. Findings of this study support the ITCA hypothesis. Contrary to previous studies, results from this study suggest a type-to-type correspondence for transmission of maltreatment to the next generation.

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of child maltreatment in the United States is overwhelming. In 2005, there were an estimated 899,000 children determined to be victims of child abuse or neglect, of which 1460 children died of abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [DHHS], 2007). Neglect is the single most prevalent type of abuse (63%), followed by physical abuse (17%), sexual abuse (9%), and emotional maltreatment (7%) (U.S. DHHS, 2007).

The negative effects of child maltreatment are well documented. They include physical, psychological, and emotional injuries to the victim, and potentially death (Buchanan, 1996). The consequences can persist into adulthood, impairing the ability of victims to function successfully as adults (Buchanan & Oliver, 1977) and harming their children in ways reminiscent of their own childhood (Buchanan, 1996).

Many studies report various types of perpetrator and victim risk factors of child maltreatment (Baumrind, 1994; Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001; Heyman & Slep, 2001; Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001). The general consensus in literature regarding the etiology of child maltreatment suggests that the risk factors of child maltreatment include various distal perpetrator variables such as childhood experience of family violence and lack of social support, and proximal variables such as family structure, stressful life events, and parents' psychological and behavioral problems. Increasingly, research has drawn upon the multilevel

ecological/transactional perspective of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Garbarino, 1977) by addressing both parental-individual level risk factors and child, family, and neighborhood level factors (Baumrind, 1994; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999).

1.1. The intergenerational transmission of child abuse (ITCA) hypothesis

One of the major risk factors associated with the etiology of child maltreatment is the parent's experience of being abused as a child (Belsky, 1993; Haapasalo & Aaltonen, 1999; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Smith & Adler, 1991). Many studies have examined the relationship between being abused as a child and being abusive to one's own children (e.g., Markward, Dozier, Hooks, & Markward, 2000; Putallaz, Costanzo, Grimes, & Sherman, 1998). Researchers have estimated the rate of ITCA as 30(±5)% (Buchanan & Oliver, 1977; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987), which is more than seven times higher than the prevalence of abuse (4%) in a community sample (Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1993).

Newcomb and Locke (2001) also explored ITCA among mothers and fathers by utilizing a retrospective, cross-sectional study of a community sample of parents ($n=383$). Results of their study support the intergenerational cycle of child maltreatment for both mothers and fathers. Sexual abuse also led to an aggressive style of parenting among mothers; however, sexual abuse led to the rejection of parenting practices among fathers. Moreover, among mothers, the experience of neglect resulted in poor parenting practices (Newcomb & Locke, 2001).

Pears and Capaldi (2001) conducted a prospective longitudinal study of abusive parenting behaviors of parents of 109 male children. Their results showed that parents who were abused in childhood were

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2.56 times as likely to exercise abusive behaviors towards their own children as parents who reported no history of having been abused, which was only marginally significant. They also found that the severity of abuse that parents have experienced in childhood was associated with their abusive behavior toward their children.

Although well-regarded and supported by many studies, the ITCA hypothesis has been at the center of controversy regarding methodological weaknesses and inadequacies in the data used in the studies (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000). Kaufman and Zigler (1987) critically review the literature related to the intergenerational transmission hypothesis of child abuse. The authors argue that many studies lack the evidentiary substantiation needed to support the theory due to weaknesses in the representative samples, methodology, formal definitions, and descriptive statistics. Nonetheless, the authors believe that abuse can be cyclical; however, it is not inevitable.

Along this line, Ertem et al. (2000) systematically reviewed studies of ITCA that provided (a) information about physical abuse in two consecutive generations and (b) included a comparison group or nonabused group. They developed a scale of eight methodological standards derived from a hypothetical experimental design to examine the validity of the studies they included. Among the 10 studies they reviewed, only 1 study met all eight standards, 3 met more than four, and 2 met only one standard. They also calculated relative risk of child abuse between the abused and nonabused parents, and found that it varies from 1.05 to 37.80 (Ertem et al., 2000).

Given the evidence base that supports the ITCA hypothesis, it is worth noting that the existing body of literature examining ITCA is rather narrow in scope. Most studies on ITCA are based on findings from high-risk groups, such as those who were at least reported to, if not substantiated by, child protective services for alleged abusive behaviors (Newcomb & Locke, 2001). Using substantiated child abuse case status as a measure of child maltreatment may be considered more reliable and valid than a child abuse measure that relies exclusively on subjective appraisals or recollections of respondents' childhoods. On the other hand, this is methodologically problematic because it hinders generalizing the findings to the general population (Renner & Slack, 2006).

1.2. Type-specific transmission of child abuse

Another methodological problem with ITCA, and the child maltreatment literature in general, is the failure to account for differences between types of child maltreatment. Some studies focus on a specific type of child maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse), whereas others lump different types of maltreatment together to create a single construct without critical attention to the heterogeneity among different types of child maltreatment (Heller, Larrieu, D'Imperio, & Boris, 1999).

Behl, Conyngham, and May (2003) extensively reviewed literature on child maltreatment and reported that between 1977 and 1998 the overall proportion of articles that addressed the distinction between different types of maltreatment increased. More than half of the studies focused on only one type of child maltreatment, reflecting the lack of attention to the type differential perspective between various forms of child maltreatment. In this regard, studies focusing on differences as well as similarities in the etiologies of various types of maltreatments are still needed (National Research Council, 1993).

This notion is particularly salient because most ITCA studies have either examined only one type of maltreatment or used an aggregated measure of child maltreatment (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993; Ertem et al., 2000; Narang & Contreras, 2000; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Pianta, Egeland, & Erikson, 1989). Only a few studies have examined whether parents who experienced physical abuse are more likely to physically abuse, although not more likely, for example, to neglect or sexually abuse their own children than those who did not. Pianta et al. (1989) reported that, among 47 mothers physically

abused as children, 17% were physically abusive and neglectful to their children at 6 years of age. Among a small number of mothers (9; 3.4%) who were neglected as children, 33% were physically abusive and 44% were neglectful to their 2-year-old children. Based on this, there is no "type-to-type correspondence" for transmission of child abuse, physical abuse, or neglect.

Addressing whether there are type-specific patterns of ITCA is especially important for several reasons. Understanding type-specific patterns of ITCA could help child welfare practitioners and administrators to develop practice strategies to decrease the risk of—or preferably, prevent—child abuse. Moreover, understanding type-specific patterns of ITCA has theoretical implications. For example, according to social learning theory, children learn parenting behaviors by modeling the observed parenting behaviors and patterns of others (Bandura, 1977). Based on this theory, children who have been raised by physically abusive parents would likely model the problematic parenting style for their own parenting strategy and, consequently, be more likely to replicate physically abusive parenting behaviors.

The purposes of the present study are twofold: (a) to test the hypothesis of ITCA using a nationally representative community sample of young parents, and (b) to compare type-specific transmission patterns, if any, between physical abuse and neglect, the two most prevalent types of child maltreatment. Thus, the hypotheses tested were:

1. Young parents who experienced neglectful or physically abusive parenting in childhood are more likely to present neglectful or physically abusive parenting behaviors than young parents who did not experienced such abusive parenting in childhood;
2. Young parents who experienced neglectful parenting in childhood are in greater risk of being neglectful to their children than to be physically abusive. Likewise, young parents who experienced physically abusive parenting in childhood are in greater risk of being physically abusive to their children than to be neglectful.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

This study utilized data from Waves 1 and 3, in-home interviews of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of health-related behaviors of adolescents in the United States. In Wave 1, conducted between 1994 and 1995, respondents were in grades 7 through 12. Respondents were 18–26 years old when interviewed again between 2001 and 2002 for Wave 3. The initial sampling was school based with a stratified random sample of adolescents and their parents participating in face-to-face, in-home interviews. The more sensitive questions were asked via an audio-Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI) collection system that allows adolescents to provide information via a computerized, guided system, which increases confidentiality and recall reliability and reduces social desirability bias. The sampling methods, study design, interviewing methods, and measures have been reported elsewhere (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997). Because this study concerns child maltreatment as an outcome variable, only respondents who had at least one child at the time of Wave 3 were included in this study. This group represents 19.5% of the total Add Health in-home sample of adolescents in the Wave 3. The human subjects' protection during primary data collection (conducted by the University of North Carolina) and secondary data analysis (conducted by the author) was reviewed and approved by their respective institutional review boards.

2.2. Measures

Maltreating parenting behavior. Neglectful parenting was measured by two questions, "How often have you left your {child/children}

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