



Risk factors for child physical abuse and neglect among Chinese young mothers[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Although studies have reported a linkage between young pregnancy and child maltreatment risk, it is still unclear about what factors place young mothers at greater risk of maltreating their child in Chinese context. Based on the socio-ecological model, risk factors in 4 domains: family background/structure, maternal stressors, mother-child interaction, and child behavioral issue in relation to physical assault, neglect, both physical assault and neglect, and either physical assault or neglect among Chinese young mothers in Hong Kong were assessed. 392 young mothers were recruited from an integrated supportive program for young mothers. The mean age of mothers at delivery was 21.8 (SD = 3.0) and 52.3% were married. Individual risk factors and cumulative risk domains related to different child maltreatment groups were examined. Our results show both overlapping and unique risk factors across the domains associated with physical assault and neglect. Further, young families exposed to higher number of risk domains show higher rates for physical assault and neglect, co-occurrence of physical assault and neglect, and either form of maltreatment. In addition, various risk domains were found to be particularly important for different forms of maltreatment: family background/structure domain was found to be an important risk domain for neglect; mother-child interaction domain for both physical assault and neglect; family background/structure and maternal stressors domains for either physical assault or neglect. Closer examination of a subgroup of adolescent mothers aged 18 and below shows that family background/structure was an important risk domain for this group.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment, defined as violence acts including physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and psychological abuse against children (Pinheiro, 2006), is a prevalent social and public health problem. Yearly, approximately 4–16% children are physically abused and about 10% children are neglected or psychologically abused (Gilbert et al., 2009). In view of well-documented impacts of child maltreatment on children's health, social and behavioral development, these figures translate into serious economic cost to the society (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012).

Early motherhood, which has been documented to be associated with mental and physical health risks of young mothers, birth complications of the child, and poverty, is also a global health concern (World Health Organization, 2016). In the United States, birth rates for women aged 15–19 and 20–24 were 24.2 and 79 births per 1000 women, respectively (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, Curtin, & Matthews, 2015). The United Kingdom reported 14.5 births per 1000 women aged under 20, and 58 births per 1000 women aged 20–24 (Office for Official Statistics, 2016). In contrast, China had a far lower birth rate for adolescent girls aged 15–19, at 5.9 births per 1000 women, and birth rate for young women aged 20–24 was more comparable to the figures reported in U.S. and U.K., at 69.5 births per 1000 women (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012). Hong Kong showed much lower birth rates among adolescent and young women, at only 3 births per 1000 women aged 15–19 and 20 births per 1000 women aged 20–24 (Census and Statistics Department, 2015a). Lower birth rates among adolescents and young women in Chinese society may be partly explained by the Chinese culture which is strongly influenced by Confucian ideologies that regard pre-marital sex as immoral and ruining the future of young women. Although study shows that Chinese youths nowadays hold more liberal views toward pre-marital sex (Yip et al., 2013), pregnancy at young age is still socially and culturally disapproved (Yu, 2012). To avoid bringing shame to the family and being blamed by parents, some young pregnant girls resort to poor quality illegal abortion services without informing their parents (Hung, 2010).

From the view of child protection, young pregnancy is an issue of concern because of its linkage with child maltreatment (Lee, 2009; Lounds, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). However, previous literature has been conducted mainly in the West, less is known about young mothers and child maltreatment in Chinese context. In Hong Kong, data on prevalence and risks of child maltreatment among children of young mothers were in general lacking. With regard to child maltreatment statistics reported by the Child Protection Registry, statistics stratified by adolescent and young mothers were not available (Social Welfare Department, 2016). Studies on child maltreatment among young mothers therefore rely on self-report and informant-report. However, asking young mothers questions about their child maltreatment acts would be considered very sensitive because of the fear of intervention by child protective services and legal consequences against them, even though child abuse reporting is not mandatory in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is the most westernized city in China, traditional Chinese values still underlie public perception of the issue of child maltreatment. Chinese people tend to keep family matters and violence private because they might bring shame to the family (Chan, 2009). Chinese children also share similar views, as study found that children show hesitation to disclose child maltreatment because of their loyalty to parents (Chan, Lam, & Shae, 2011). In view of these socio-cultural characteristics, coupled with a rapid rising trend of child maltreatment hospitalizations which increased from 31 per 100 000 children in 2001–73.4 per 100 000 children in 2010 in Hong Kong (Ip et al., 2016), research on factors that put Chinese young mothers at risk for maltreating their child is much needed.

The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) has long been the dominated framework for understanding child maltreatment. Building on this foundation, Belsky (1993) asserts that child maltreatment is influenced by interrelated factors at three levels: (1) individual characteristics of parents and children; (2) family characteristics such as parent-child interactions; and (3) the broader socio-cultural context. Along this line of research, numerous child maltreatment risk factors have been identified and summarized in previous meta-analysis (Stith et al., 2009) and reviews (Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001; Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001). In particular, Stith et al. (2009) found that parent's characteristics and parent-child interaction have larger effect sizes for child neglect whereas parent's characteristics and family relationship have larger effects on child physical abuse. Because young mothers and their children are more vulnerable to health, emotional, social, and financial difficulties (Centers for Disease Control Prevention, 2013), various psychosocial aspects of young mothers are of particular relevance in examining the risk factors for child maltreatment. In terms of child characteristics, young pregnancy is associated with poorer outcomes in children such as pre-term delivery, lower birth weight (Chen et al., 2007) and cognitive delay (Morinis, Carson, & Quigley, 2013). Frustration may arise as taking care of children required additional care and perceiving child as problematic may elevate the risk of child maltreatment (Graham, Weiner, Cobb, & Henderson, 2001). In terms of maternal characteristics, young mothers are more likely to have lower education attainment (Laopaiboon et al., 2014), have lack of social support (Cox et al., 2008), use substances (Gillmore, Gilchrist, Lee, & Oxford, 2006) and have rapid repeated pregnancies (Barr, Simons, Simons, Gibbons, & Gerrard, 2013); these conditions may compromise the quality of care they provide for their children and hence increase the risk of maltreatment. Family background such as poverty (Penman-Aguilar, Carter, Snead, & Kourtis, 2013) and single parenthood (Laopaiboon et al., 2014) are related to lower socioeconomic status of young mothers and go hand in hand with child maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010). Although Chinese young mothers may also share some of these risk factors for child maltreatment, the impact of Chinese culture on young mothers may make their experience unique and different from young mothers in the West. Specifically, Chinese culture values protection of face and family honor (Chan, 2009), young pregnant women may have fear of seeking help from the family during their pregnancy and bear greater stress in parenting. Social stigma may also barricade young mothers from seeking health and social services when in need. This will in turn become another stressor for young mothers and increase the risk for child maltreatment.

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