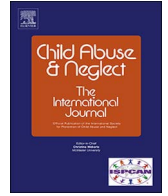


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Research article

The influence of maltreatment history and out-of-home-care on children's language and social skills



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which maltreatment history and the characteristics of out-of-home care correlated with the language and social skills of maltreated children. Participants in this study were 82 maltreated children aged between 5 and 12 years of age. All children were residing with state-designated carers in out-of-home-care. The children were presented with standardised tests assessing language and social skills. Results showed that the sample performed significantly below the normative mean on both tests. Correlation analyses showed social skills, but not language skills were correlated with aspects of maltreatment history. The education level of the state-designated carer/s was correlated with the children's language skills; higher education level was associated with higher language skills. The study provides evidence that at the group level, language and social skills are poor in maltreated children. However, gains in language skills might be made via the out-of-home-care environment. Improvements in the social skills of maltreated children may require additional support.

1. Introduction

The negative consequences of child maltreatment have been well documented (for reviews see Gilbert et al., 2009; Norman et al., 2012). Children who have been maltreated are likely to experience social and behavioural problems (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002), have an increased risk of academic failure (Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Fréchette, 2014) and chronic health problems (Kerker et al., 2015; Kolko, Moser, & Weldy, 1990). Language and social skills (Bolger & Patterson, 2001a; Darwish, Esquivel, Houtz, & Alfonso, 2001; Lum, Powell, Timms, & Snow, 2015) are also vulnerable to the effects of maltreatment. This is a concern as both are important predictors of social and academic outcomes (Conti-Ramsden, Durkin, Simkin, & Knox, 2009; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000; Malecki & Elliot, 2002; Snowling, Bishop, Stothard, Chipchase, & Kaplan, 2006). The current study investigated the extent to which maltreatment history and out-of-home care characteristics relate to individual differences in the language and social skills of maltreated children.

Children exposed to maltreatment have repeatedly been found to have poorer language skills compared to non-maltreated children (for reviews see Law & Conway, 1992; Stacks, Beeghly, Partridge, & Dexter, 2011; Veltman & Browne, 2001). There is a reliable association between maltreatment and language skills even after controlling for socio-economic factors that might otherwise contribute to group differences. Lum, Powell, Timms and Snow (2015) used meta-analysis to summarise the data from 26 studies that compared the language skills of maltreated children to a control group matched on socioeconomic background. The analyses revealed

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that, on average, maltreated children had significantly poorer expressive and receptive language skills compared to controls.

Another common finding in the field is that maltreated children have poorer social skills compared to non-maltreated children. Social skills are a collection of abilities and behaviours that promote positive social interactions (Gresham & Elliott, 1984) and are closely related to pragmatic language abilities (Snow & Douglas, 2017). There is evidence suggesting that social skill deficits are common in maltreated children (for a recent review see Holosko, 2015). For instance, maltreated children have been found to show lower levels of empathy and perspective taking (Burack et al., 2006; Kay & Green, 2016), are poorer at initiating social interactions (Darwish et al., 2001), less cooperative and assertive (Kinard, 1999) and more withdrawn (Bolger & Patterson, 2001b). In instances where maltreated children do interact with others, higher levels of aggression (Aber & Allen, 1987) and bullying have been observed (Hong, Espelage, Grogan-Kaylor, & Allen-Meares, 2012).

However, close inspection of the language and social skills research in maltreated children reveals variability in findings. Some studies report no differences between maltreated and non-maltreated children on measures of language functioning (e.g., Beers & De Bellis, 2002; Gregory & Beveridge, 1984; McFadyen & Kitson, 1996). Also, some subgroups of maltreated children do not differ from controls on tasks assessing emotion recognition (Pollak, Cicchetti, Hornung, & Reed, 2000) and, aggression (Straker & Jacobson, 1981). Along similar lines, within a sample of maltreated children, it is not the case that language and social skills are universally poorer. Stacks, Beeghly, Partridge, and Dexter (2011) examined the language skills of 963 infants with substantiated cases of maltreatment longitudinally over a five-year period. Replicating past research, at the group level, language skills were consistently below age appropriate levels. However, within the maltreated sample, there were children who had normal to well above average language skills (e.g., +3 *SD* above the normative mean). The social skills of the same sample of children were examined by Schultz, Tharp-Taylor, Haviland, and Jaycox (2009). Again, analysis at the group level revealed poorer social skills. But within the sample, inspection of the standard deviation and range of scores indicates there were maltreated children with social skills that were age-appropriate and in some cases in the superior range.

There has been considerable interest in identifying variables that might explain individual differences in the language and social skill outcomes of maltreated children. Research undertaken to date has examined the extent to which maltreatment history (Culp et al., 1991; Kaplow & Widom, 2007; Manly et al., 2001), home environment and, broader demographic factors (Bradley, Caldwell, Fitzgerald, Morgan, & Rock, 1986; Chamberland, Lacharité, Clément, & Lessard, 2014; Howell, Miller, Lilly, & Graham-Bermann, 2013) explains individual differences in the social, cognitive and language functioning of maltreated children. In part, this research is motivated by the need to determine which areas of functioning or case history should be investigated further with the view to developing interventions and/or policies that reduce the developmental impact of maltreatment (Pears & Fisher, 2005a).

There is some evidence that type of maltreatment has different effects on language and social skills. Fox, Long, and Langlois (1988), Allen and Oliver (1982) and Culp et al. (1991) found poorer language skills in children who had been neglected compared to those who had been abused. Hoffman-Plotkin and Twentyman (1984) and Bousha and Twentyman (1984) found differences in the social skills between abused and neglected children. Abused children were found to interact more with others compared to neglected children. However, the abused children exhibited higher rates of aggression compared to neglected children. One factor that may contribute to individual differences is the age at which maltreatment commences, with earlier onset being associated with greater problems (De Bellis, Baum et al., 1999a; De Bellis, Keshavan et al., 1999b), although data in this area are currently lacking. Indeed, the meta-analysis undertaken by Lum et al. (2015) found only one study, (conducted by Barnett, Vondra & Shonk, 1996) that investigated the relationship between onset of maltreatment and language and social skills. In that study, no association was found between maltreatment onset and language or social skills. However, it is important to note that the sample size in the study was small ($n = 13$) and further study is required to determine the replicability of the result.

Another aspect of maltreatment that may impact language and social skills is the influence of the out-of-home care environment. It is becoming increasingly more common for maltreated children to be removed from their homes and placed in the care of others for varying periods of time. For example, in Australia, there was a 67% increase in out-of-home placement from 2005 to 2012 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013). However, there is a paucity of research that specifically investigates the effects of the out-of-home care environment on language and social skills (Byrne, 2016). Pears and Fisher (2005a) examined the relationship between out-of-home care placement characteristics and language skills. In that study, no relationship was found between language and the age of first placement or the number of days in foster care. In a subsequent study, Pears and Fisher (2005b) found no association between indicators of social skills (emotion understanding, theory of mind) with the length of time in out-of-home care or the number of transitions between out-of-home placements. Whether other aspects of out-of-home care impact on language and social skills is yet to be examined.

1.1. Aim of the current study

The aim of the current study was to further examine the correlates of language and social skills in a sample of maltreated children currently in out-of-home care. In this study, we sought to extend the current literature by examining the extent to which different maltreatment types as well as, the age at which they were substantiated, correlated with language and social skills. Additionally, we studied associations between these two variables and out-of-home placement characteristics. To our knowledge, research undertaken to date in this area has only focused on the length of time in out-of-home care placements (Pears & Fisher, 2005a; Pears & Fisher, 2005b). In this study, we examined whether the educational levels and socioeconomic status of the carers were related to the measures of language and social skills.

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