



Preventing child maltreatment in low- and middle-income countries

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Parent support programs have the potential to buffer the effects of poverty

Child maltreatment prevention is a significant human rights and public health issue, and it has serious consequences for child development. As the many studies of adverse childhood experiences from around the world have shown, children who have experienced abuse or neglect are more likely to

suffer mental and physical health problems throughout life, to under-perform at school, to have difficulties in jobs and relationships, to abuse substances, to engage in risky sex (and therefore to have unwanted pregnancies and contract HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases), and to be involved in violence

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DIRECTIONS

and delinquency. These consequences can be costly. Indeed, there are direct costs associated with the burden placed on the health, welfare, and criminal justice systems and indirect costs associated with lowered economic productivity.

Most countries cannot afford the costs associated with child maltreatment, but there are three particular reasons to focus on low- and middle-income countries (LMIC): (a) child maltreatment tends to occur at higher rates in these countries than in high-income countries (HIC); (b) LMIC are typically facing other huge systemic burdens (e.g., high rates of HIV) alongside urgent needs to grow their economies, and thus costs such as those of child maltreatment create a drain on economies that are already struggling; and (c) the evidence base for effective interventions to prevent child maltreatment is thin in general, but especially in LMIC. LMIC thus have arguably a greater need for interventions to prevent child maltreatment, but a much weaker evidence base for policy makers and practitioners to draw on to identify effective ways to reduce this burden.

In this article, we propose parenting support as a route that should be explored for preventing child maltreatment in the context of LMIC. We then lay out a research agenda for building the evidence base for parent support programs in LMIC. This step is crucial because without evidence of effect, programs may simply waste public funds without achieving anything. Even worse, programs may do harm. LMIC, much more so than HIC, can thus ill-afford to implement untested programs. In addition, traditional targeted clinical interventions reach few parents and are offered *after* a problem has developed. Thus, clinical interventions represent an expensive model of service delivery.

Given the tremendous unmet need and lack of established infrastructure for delivering

parenting programs and services typical of poorer contexts, an approach that emphasizes prevention and scalability – a *public health approach* – offers the greatest capacity to improve child outcomes. To do so in a sustainable manner, interventions should meet four criteria: (a) they must target risk factors causally associated with the outcome to be prevented; (b) there must be evidence that they reduce risk factors and poor outcomes; (c) they must be cost-effective; and (d) there should be evidence that taking the interventions to scale is feasible in the context in which they are needed. The evidence base for preventing child maltreatment through parenting programs is weak in many of these areas, and particularly in LMIC. We therefore offer a research agenda for a public health approach to preventing child maltreatment through parenting interventions in resource-poor contexts.

Why Parenting Support in Particular?

Poverty may present particular risks for parenting. State-level studies in the United States, for example, find that the numbers of families investigated for child maltreatment and numbers of children in care increase when welfare benefits are reduced. Studies of individual children and their families find that the processes of parenting are affected by poverty. Parents struggling with poverty are more likely to suffer depression, which is associated with harsher, more inconsistent parenting. Mothers with depression are less likely to be affectionate toward and to monitor their children and are more likely to use corporal punishment. This style of parenting increases the likelihood of children exhibiting risk behaviors. Parents living in poverty are also less likely to have

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