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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Child maltreatment and interpersonal relationship among Chinese children with oppositional defiant disorder[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment negatively affects children's development and wellbeing. This study investigated the associations between child maltreatment (i.e., emotional neglect, emotional abuse, and physical abuse) and interpersonal functioning, including parent–child relationship, teacher–student relationship, and peer relationships among children with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). A total of 256 children with ODD and their parents and class master teachers from Mainland China completed questionnaires. Results showed a negative correlation between emotional abuse (parent-reported) and children's interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Emotional neglect and physical abuse were related to poor parent–child relationships. Latent profile analysis revealed three profiles of child maltreatment among children with ODD. ODD children with more severe levels of one type of maltreatment were also more likely to have experienced severe levels of other types of maltreatment. Children with ODD who were in the group of high maltreatment had the poorest quality of interpersonal relationships. Our findings highlight the urgent need to prevent child maltreatment and promote more positive parenting in families with ODD children.

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Introduction

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), a recurrent pattern of negativistic, defiant, disobedient, and hostile behaviors toward authority figures ([American Psychiatric Association \[APA\], 2000](#)), is associated with increased oppositional behaviors and

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an inclination to be angry and resentful of others. Previous studies found that, children with ODD experienced impairment across most domains of social functioning (e.g., school behavior, relationship with parents, activity with peers) (Greene et al., 2002). In particular, these children struggled with impaired interpersonal relationships because of their oppositional, angry, resentful, and aggressive behaviors toward others (Burke, Rowe, & Boylan, 2014).

In comparison to children without ODD, children with ODD have more conflicts with their parents, which leads to poorer parent–child relationships (Munkvold, Lundervold, & Manger, 2011). At school, these children exhibit hostility toward their peers, frequently engage in negative peer interactions (Tseng, Kawabata, & Gau, 2011), and experience negative teacher–student relationships (Hamilton & Armando, 2008). Additionally, due to their oppositional behavior and frequent temper outbursts, the majority of children with ODD are at an increased risk for being maltreated by parents and caregivers (Tseng et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [US-DHHS], 2013). Qualitative research in China conducted with ODD children found that parents and children reported high levels of child maltreatment (Zhao, 2013). To enforce compliance in ODD children, parents frequently kicked, slapped, and pushed their children. Some of the parents even used objects, such as a stick or a shoe, to discipline their children. Confirming the parents' report, ODD children also reported parents striking them and boxing their ears (Zhao, 2013). These studies suggest the importance to investigate the association between the maltreatment of ODD children and their social functioning in interpersonal relationships.

Child Maltreatment and Interpersonal Relationships

Child maltreatment is defined as “any acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child” (Gilbert et al., 2009, p. 69). Forms of child maltreatment are associated with the following categories of child abuse: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and emotional neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2013). In China, many parents consider emotional neglect, emotional abuse, and physical abuse as effective parenting strategies to control child behavior (Wang, Xing, & Zhao, 2014). In an investigation of maltreatment in China, Yang, Du, and Zhang (2007) reported that over 68.6% and 53.5% children experienced emotional abuse and physical abuse in the previous year.

It is well documented that maltreatment during childhood has a negative impact on interpersonal functioning. Additionally, abused children, particularly those who experience emotional neglect and emotional abuse, exhibit more problems in parent–child interactions (Glaser, 2002). For children with ODD, the association of harsh parenting and children's interpersonal functioning is complicated. Previous researchers have suggested reciprocal effects models that demonstrate bidirectional relationships between parenting behaviors and child behaviors (e.g., Burke, Pardini, & Loeber, 2008). The coercive cycles theory is one example of a bidirectional model of parent–child interactions (Patterson, 1982). One premise of the theory asserts that unskilled parents use increasingly harsh discipline to control children's defiant and irritable behaviors—in turn these parenting practices further worsen children's adverse behaviors, creating a vicious cycle (Pardini, 2008).

Research focusing on child disruptive disorders supports the coercive process described by Burke et al. (2008), and indicates that ODD children, who display disruptive problems, are more likely to be maltreated in their family than their non-ODD peers (Lin, Li, Li, Fan, & Liu, 2014; Zhao, 2013). In turn, punitive discipline imposed by parents was an additive risk factor for impaired interpersonal relationships and oppositional, aggressive, and internalizing behaviors among these children (Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000). Beyond family settings, aggressive behaviors displayed by ODD children are frequently accompanied by poor academic performance (Gilbert et al., 2009), placing these children at risk for negative teacher–child relationships. Moreover, in comparison to children who did not experience abuse, maltreated children showed predominantly avoidance interactions with peers (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989). It is noted that not all children who experience maltreatment suffer negative interpersonal outcomes. Some factors may protect children against the adverse outcomes of maltreatment (Edwards, Probst, Rodenhizer-Stämpfli, Gidycz, & Tansill, 2014). One of these factors is the perception of physical discipline, in which this type of parenting response is considered normal. This perception moderates the association between harsh physical discipline and child adjustment. In some cultural contexts, physical discipline strategies are identified as part of responsible parenting and are therefore perceived as normal within certain contexts. For example, in some cultural contexts the relationship between physical discipline and child behavioral problems is weaker than in other cultural contexts where this type of discipline is considered unacceptable (Lansford et al., 2005). Traditionally, under the influences of Confucianism and the Chinese belief of filial piety, Chinese parents are more likely to use strict discipline in parenting children (Tang & Davis, 1996). Although the recent social changes occurring in modern China may ultimately weaken the support for harsh parenting (Wang et al., 2014), many Chinese parents still respect and follow the traditional wisdom “spare the rod, spoil the child.” “Wolf dad” and “tiger mother” recently reported in mass media are highly visible examples of this philosophy (Lim, 2011). This philosophy purports that very strict parenting discipline and punishment helps children to regulate their behavior and lays the foundation for a successful and responsible adult life. Within the cultural context, Chinese children tend to perceive strict parenting discipline, even harsh physical punishment, as more appropriate and normal than do their American counterparts (Wang et al., 2014). Because few studies have explored the associations between maltreatment and children's social functioning and well-being among the Chinese population, particularly for children with ODD, the current study proposes to explore and address this critical area. Specifically, this investigation aims to examine if the interpersonal relationship impairment among ODD children is associated with emotional neglect, emotional abuse, or physical abuse.

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