



A systems approach to addressing child maltreatment in China



Jin Peng

Nationwide Children's Hospital and The Ohio State University

Huiping Zhu**

Capital Medical University

Jianbo Shao, Wenyan Yao

Wuhan Children's Hospital

Chuanhua Yu

Wuhan University

Hongyan Yao

Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Junxin Shi, Huiyun Xiang*

Nationwide Children's Hospital

China needs a formalized child protection system

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* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Huiyun Xiang, Center for Pediatric Trauma Research, The Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital, 700 Children's Drive, Columbus, OH 43205, USA. Electronic mail may be sent to huiyun.xiang@nationwidechildrens.org.

** Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Huiping Zhu, School of Public Health at Capital Medical University, Beijing, The People's Republic of China. Electronic mail may be sent to zhuhuiping@ccmu.edu.cn.

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Although child maltreatment may have a long history in Chinese society, only as recently as the early 1990s has it received societal recognition. Despite the lack of national data, an increasing number of child abuse cases have been reported in Chinese media and in professional journals in recent years. According to the China National Radio, the number of abused children treated at a child protection center in Xi'an City increased steadily from 18 in 2006 to 361 in 2010. There is an urgent need to address this issue. The question is: what child protection strategies can effectively address child maltreatment in China? Our research suggests that a systems approach has the greatest potential to address child maltreatment in China.

A Systems Approach to Child Maltreatment

Child protection efforts have historically focused on single issues such as violence, neglect, child trafficking, street children, and child labor. In the absence of an understanding of how each single issue relates to the overall system, this diffused approach often results in fragmented child protection response and ineffective programs. This approach is neither sustainable nor capable of reaching all children who are in need of protection. To be more effective in addressing child maltreatment, a systems approach is recommended by many child protection organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and Save the Children. In a child protection system, children, families, communities, and formal and informal organizations are brought together through a set of common goals.

Each child protection system has its unique *structures, functions, and capacities*, based on the socio-cultural context in which it operates. In some countries, formal system structures are not appropriate because parents, family members, and community members protect children through informal mechanisms. In other contexts, formal system structures are necessary to coordinate a variety of stakeholders within the system. Common functions of a child protection system include governance, management, and enforcement. Specific functions usually fit with the overarching system goals. Finally, capacity refers to human resources, funding, and infrastructure. A well-functioning system is able to optimize the use of resources to achieve its goals.

In addition to structures, functions, and capacities, a child protection system often has an accountability mechanism that incorporates data collection, research, and communication with stakeholders (e.g., social workers, the general public). Without accountability, it is hard to know how well the system operates, how the context has changed, and how to improve its structures, functions, and capacities. Within a given context, the boundary between a child protection system and other formal systems (e.g., education, health) is an important indicator of how that specific child protection system defines its functions, capacities, and accountability.

The Nature of Child Maltreatment in China

In this *Directions* article, we discuss key contributing factors to child maltreatment in China. These factors were derived from feedback received on a survey and in focus groups conducted with emergency department physicians and nurses in 2013. In addition to providing a better understanding of the knowledge base and the types of experiences doctors and nurses have regarding child maltreatment, the study provided insight into the role of culture in how child maltreatment is addressed in China. Indeed, this study pointed to major challenges that China must address to effectively reduce child maltreatment.

Following a discussion of contributing factors, we provide some preliminary recommendations of strategies for addressing child maltreatment in China. We realize that child maltreatment is an important but controversial social issue, and we do not portend to offer a panacea. Rather, we hope that this article will help raise public awareness of child maltreatment and improve the understanding of child protection in the Chinese context.

Contributing Factors to Child Maltreatment in China

Factor No. 1: Confucianism

Understanding child maltreatment in China requires an awareness of cultural values such as filial piety (Xiao) and Familism. Derived from Confucianism, filial piety and familism emphasize hierarchical social structures, family reputation, patriarchal authority, obedience, and loyalty. Influenced by such values for thousands of years, childrearing practices in Chinese society have developed

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