



# "Love covereth all transgressions": Children's experiences with physical abuse as portrayed in their narratives during forensic investigations



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study is to promote understanding of children's lived experiences with physical abuse. This is an important area of research that has rarely been studied, and the current study provides a unique opportunity using children's narratives during forensic investigations. One hundred and seventeen forensic investigations with children, alleged victims of continuous physical abuse by their biological parents, were randomly selected from all of the interviews that were conducted in Israel in 2011. The forensic investigations were conducted by well-trained forensic interviewers, and all interviewers used the NICHD Protocol, which allows standardized interviews. The analysis paradigm of the interviews was phenomenological, and a thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns within the children's narratives. Following a thorough thematic analysis, five key categories were identified based on the children's narratives: the children's sensations during the abusive incidents, the children's emotions, the children's understanding of their experiences, the dynamics within the families and the children's desires for the future. The discussion addresses the importance of integrating children's voices regarding their lived experiences into the work of practitioners and policy makers. The information that was gathered from the children's narratives can enhance the work of practitioners in both forensic and clinical contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

The physical abuse of children has received less research attention than the phenomenon of sexual abuse of children, and the studies that have been conducted have focused mainly on the definitions of physical abuse, its spread, its consequences to different areas of the children's lives and the therapeutic challenge of addressing it. Little is known regarding the manner in which children who have been physically abused by their parents understand these incidents and their lives in this context. The aim of the current study is to capture these experiences and perceptions using thematic analysis of the children's narratives during forensic investigations.

In 2013 (Dubowitz, 2013), data from the United States indicated that the rate of identified possible child maltreatment is 70/1000 children, with 30% of these children being suspected victims of physical abuse. In 2007, 26% of all child fatalities in the United States were abuse-related (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In 2010, 35,632 children in Israel were referred to social workers in the welfare system. Of these cases, 36% involved physical abuse (Benbenishti, Sluzki, Levi, & Levi, 2010). Statistics on child abuse only exist for those cases that are reported to child protection agencies (CPS) or law enforcement offices;

therefore, it is highly probable that official statistics underestimate the true extent of the problem (Melton, 2005).

Although many factors affect children's adjustment, abuse can profoundly affect their socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Corwin & Keeshin, 2011; Malloy, Lamb, & Katz, 2011) and sometimes can result in death (Katz, 2013a). Despite the various consequences and injuries these children endure at the hands of their abusive parents and others, these children tend to blame themselves for the abuse (Toth, Cicchetti, MacFie, Maughan, & Vanmeenen, 2000). That feeling of self-blame was recently further elaborated upon in a study that reported that children who are the alleged victims of physical abuse tend to accommodate the abuse by their abusive parent (Katz & Barnetz, 2013).

Given the adverse effects that physical abuse has on children, it is important to stress the challenges faced by practitioners when contending with this alarming phenomenon. First, when parents perpetrate such abuse, they are often slow to seek medical care, and if they do, they often provide implausible or vague explanations for the injuries. Moreover, a physical examination to assess physical abuse is highly complicated. This compound reality places the only chance for a solution on the children's disclosure of the abuse and, thus, on the testimonies they provide (Malloy et al., 2011).

Addressing children as witnesses was the strategy of many researchers who identified a special set of characteristics that have profound effects on a child's ability to retrieve and report alleged

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incidents of maltreatment (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). These characteristics, which were exhaustively studied in both laboratory and field studies, relate to the children's cognitive, social, and emotional developmental abilities, which are of special interest to forensic child interviewers (Bruck, Ceci & Principe, 2006). Furthermore, to identify children's capabilities as witnesses, intensive efforts addressed the manner in which children should be interviewed in a forensic context, including the development of practical guidelines (for example, Katz & Hershkowitz, 2013) and the integration of innovative techniques in forensic investigations (for example, Katz & Hershkowitz, 2010; Olafson, 2012).

All of this cumulative knowledge with respect to child abuse has resulted in better services for the children. However, to further enhance our understanding of abuse and to facilitate and better modify practices, studies should also address the children's voices, voices that were silenced following the abuse and should be respected. Few studies on children's perceptions of abuse have been conducted. Peled's qualitative study (Peled, 1998) explored children's experiences following domestic violence and reported several themes from the children's narratives. The children addressed the issue of living with a secret and elaborated on the complexity of living in a conflict of loyalties between the father and the mother. The children also reported on living in terror and fear for themselves following the father's aggression. Finally, the children addressed in their narratives living in an aggressive and dominance-oriented context. Another qualitative study was conducted by interviewing children on their experiences of witnessing domestic violence (Joseph, Govender, & Bhagwanjee, 2006) and pointed to the evident fear and psychological distress following these experiences.

In addition, two recent studies address children's perceptions and experiences following attempted filicide (Katz, 2013a) and Internet child sexual abuse (Katz, 2013b). Children who survived an attempted filicide addressed in their narratives experiencing several abusive incidents by their parents and reported that the attempted filicide was no different, in terms of context and dynamic, from other abusive incidents. The children also provided insightful information regarding the family dynamic, stressing the unique relationship among siblings who risked themselves to save their siblings. The study of children's experiences with Internet child sexual abuse provided essential information on the suspects' grooming process with the children and of the children's perceptions of themselves (as prostitutes or stupid), which stressed the consequences of this traumatic experience on the children. These two studies emphasized the potential of children's narratives during forensic investigations and the manner in which this information can promote understanding of children's traumatic life experiences.

The current study's aim is to explore children's experiences and their perceptions of alleged physical abuse they repeatedly experienced by their parents. Because all of the interviews in the current study were conducted according to NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) protocols, it is important to stress that those protocols do not directly ask children to talk about their experiences; rather, the protocol focuses on their description of the alleged abuse by addressing it in open-ended dialogue. Based on the phenomenological approach, the aim of the current study is to focus the children's experiences and perceptions of the physical abuse as spontaneously reported in their narratives.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Data

The study involved transcripts of the first recorded forensic interviews of 117 alleged victims in Israel. The sample was randomly selected from all of the forensic investigations with children that were conducted in Israel in 2011 ( $n = 15,502$ ). Transcripts were obtained only if the children's language was Hebrew, no developmental

disabilities were documented and the children provided allegations with respect to the abuse.

The 67 boys and 50 girls, ranging from 5 to 13 years of age ( $M = 9.97$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ), were interviewed by one of 55 investigative interviewers who had been trained to use the NICHD protocols. Fifty (42.7%) children had disclosed the abuse prior to the investigation whereas 67 (57.3%) children disclosed the abuse for the first time during the investigation. All of the children were interviewed following suspected multiple incidents; and in all cases, the suspects were their biological parents. In 53 interviews, the suspects were the children's fathers, in 40 interviews the suspects were the mothers, and in 24 interviews, both of the parents were the suspects. Fifty-five children reported hitting incidents, that is, hitting the children with the suspect's body parts such as hands or legs or with an object that serves as the continuance of a body part such as a belt or chair, and 62 children reported incidents that resulted in injuries, indicating that in terms of the severity of the abuse, these children were hit by their parents and the hitting resulted in physical injury.

All of the interviews were videotaped, and the mean duration of the interviews was an hour and a half, ranging from 40 min to two and a half hours.

### 2.2. The NICHD Protocol

The NICHD Protocol (Lamb et al., 2011) presents practical guidelines for forensic interviewers that cover all phases of an investigative interview. In the introductory phase, interviewers introduce themselves, clarify the children's task (the need to describe experienced events truthfully and in detail), and explain the ground rules and expectations (i.e., the child can and should say, 'I don't remember', 'I don't know', or 'I don't understand' or correct the interviewer when appropriate). The rapport-building phase comprises two sections. The first is an open-ended section designed to encourage children to provide personally meaningful information. In the second section, children are prompted to detail one recently experienced event to practice the retrieval of episodic memory and further develop rapport between the child and the interviewer. In addition to its rapport-building function, this phase of the interview is designed to simulate the open-ended investigative strategies and techniques used in the substantive phase and the related patterns of interaction between interviewers and children while demonstrating to the children the specific level of detail expected of them.

In a transitional phase between the pre-substantive and substantive portions of the interview, open-ended prompts are used to identify the target event/s under investigation. If the child does not disclose in response to open-ended prompts, the interviewer gradually narrows the prompts, referring to available information regarding previous disclosures, physical marks or other evidence as needed.

The NICHD Protocol's primary aim is to promote the use of open ended prompts, based on the notion that these types of prompts elicit from children richer and more reliable narratives and testimonies (Lamb et al., 2011; Malloy et al., 2011). Open-ended prompts have different formats. One is the main invitation ("You told me that Daddy is hitting you all the time. Tell me about the last time Daddy hit you, from the beginning to the end, as best as you can"). Another format is the follow up invitation (for example, if the child said, "The last time Daddy hit me was when I was in the shower. He entered the room and yelled at me really loud", the interviewer will offer a follow-up invitation: "And then what happened?"). An open-ended prompt can also be in the format of time segmentation (for example, "Tell me everything that happened after Daddy entered the room") or in the format of a cued invitation, which focuses on one aspect of the child's narrative and invites him to further elaborate on it (for example, "You said that Daddy hit you with a belt. Tell me everything about the belt").

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