

# Parental satisfaction in child abuse and neglect: A review of standardized measures

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Received 16 February 2006; accepted 16 February 2006

Available online 6 March 2006

## Abstract

Low levels of parental satisfaction have been implicated in parents' utilization of harsh disciplining strategies and perpetration of child abuse and neglect. Although measures of parental satisfaction have been present for more than 3 decades, the employment of these instruments in child maltreatment populations has been limited, perhaps due to a lack of empirical evaluation. This paper reviews extant studies that demonstrate the need to examine the relationship between parental satisfaction and child maltreatment, and provides a critical examination of existing measures of parental satisfaction, including their psychometric support and application to child maltreatment. Recommendations are offered regarding the utility of these measures in child maltreatment.

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**Keywords:** Child abuse and neglect; Child maltreatment; Parent satisfaction

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In the most recent annual report by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (Children's Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), over 3 million children were involved in child maltreatment investigations, leading to an estimated 896,000 child victims of abuse and neglect, and approximately 1400 child fatalities. Though these

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numbers seem daunting, they are gross underestimates of the true incidence of abuse and neglect, as many incidents are not reported to authorities.

State definitions of child abuse and neglect must meet Federal minimum standards set by the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act (42 U.S.C.A. §5106g), and amended by the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003. According to these standards, child abuse and neglect is, at a minimum, any recent act, or failure to act, on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical injury, or emotional harm. Injuries include, but are not limited to, shaking, biting, kicking, hitting, and choking, and range in severity from minor bruising to death. Emotional abuse typically involves any pattern of behavior that negatively affects a child's intellectual or psychological capacity, emotional growth, or self-esteem, and can include threatening or continuous criticism. Neglect generally entails failure of the guardian to meet the physical (e.g., food, shelter, supervision), medical (i.e., necessary medical or mental health treatment), emotional (e.g., continuous yelling, belittling, critical remarks to child, severe lack of attention), or educational (e.g., denying education, failing to assist in schoolwork) needs of children (National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, 2004).

### 1. Need to assess parent satisfaction in child abuse and neglect

As might be assumed, caregivers of abused and neglected children have been found to be more dissatisfied with their children than caregivers of children who are not abused and neglected (Mammen, Kolko, & Pilkonis, 2003). Maltreated children evidence greater behavioral problems than non-abused and neglected children, making it more difficult for caregivers to develop strong bonds with maltreated children (Grist-Litty, Kowalski, & Minor, 1996). This is particularly problematic, as effective parent–child relationships are critical to the prevention of child maltreatment (Sidebotham, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 2001). Kolko, Kazdin, Thomas, and Day (1993) emphasize the importance of assessing child, parent, and family characteristics in understanding potential contributors to abusive behavior, especially behavioral indicators of the *interactional* process resulting in parent to child aggression, and precursors to dysfunctional relationships between the child and parent. Parental warmth, parental involvement, and parental satisfaction with the child have all been shown to influence child maltreatment (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Sazinger, 1998). Particularly relevant to this article, examination of parental satisfaction in child maltreatment has yet to be adequately explored, although the results of several studies suggest dissatisfaction of parents with their children is positively associated with child maltreatment.

Simons, Beaman, Conger, and Chao (1993) investigated parent satisfaction and use of harsh discipline in a sample of 451 two-parent households of children who were not identified for child abuse and neglect. In this endeavor, parent satisfaction with the child was inversely related to harsh discipline (i.e., observational and child self-reports of the frequency with which the parent “yells, spansks, slaps, or hits with an object”). Medora, Wilson, and Larson (2001) investigated the relationship between child physical abuse potential and parent satisfaction in a sample of 176 low-income mothers. Albeit non-significant, there was a trend for parent satisfaction to be negatively associated with abuse potential. Parent satisfaction was also found to be inversely related to the extent of behaviorally based problems, suggesting measures of parent satisfaction may be utilized to monitor progress in treatment. In the only study of parent satisfaction conducted in a population of parents of maltreated children, Mammen et al. (2003) found aggressive parental behavior and parental satisfaction with their children were negatively correlated. The investigators also emphasized the importance of measuring parental satisfaction when conducting research involving child abuse. In doing so it is important to employ psychometrically validated measures of parental satisfaction that are anchored to behavioral domains that fit within child maltreatment.

As reported by Guidubaldi and Cleminshaw (1985), “despite previous development of satisfaction scales relevant to vocations, marriage, general life conditions, and so forth, almost no effort has been directed to the issue of parenting satisfaction” (p. 298). Indeed, investigators have continued to ignore satisfaction of parents with their children, while instead focusing on marital satisfaction (Henry, Peterson, & Wilson, 1997). This apparent lack of research is surprising considering the importance placed on parent satisfaction and the parent–child relationship (Goetting, 1986). The few investigators who have examined parental satisfaction assert there is a great need to identify specific areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within the parent–child relationship (e.g., DeCato, Donohue, Azrin, & Teichner, 2001; Donohue et al., 2003). For instance, Donohue, DeCato, Azrin, and Teichner (2001) point out problems in parent–child relationships most often occur in areas that can be objectively defined and targeted in treatment (e.g., communication, chores, conduct). Along these lines, assessing parental satisfaction in behaviorally specific domains affords clinicians the

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