Family Patterns and Child Abuse

Murray A. Straus and Christine Smith

The Social Causes of Child Abuse

What can cause a parent to punch, kick, bite, burn, or stab a child? The causes are complex in at least two ways.

First, there seem to be a multitude of factors, each of which increases the probability of a violent physical attack on a child. At the same time, no one of these factors accounts for a very large proportion of the cases of child abuse. For example, this chapter will show that men who hit their wives are much more likely to abuse a child than are other men. Still, most men who hit their wives do not attack a child violently enough for it to be considered child abuse by contemporary standards.

A second complication making it difficult to pinpoint the causes of child abuse is that these factors do not operate in isolation from each other. Rather, it is likely that certain combinations of factors are much more potent than either of the factors by themselves and also much more potent than one might imagine by just adding together the effects of each of the two factors. For example, living in a low-income family is associated with child abuse, as is having witnessed violence in one’s childhood home (Chapter 24; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). Let us say (hypothetically) that each of these factors increases the chances of a child being abused by 75%. But the combination of poverty and a parent’s prior history of witnessing violence during childhood may increase the probability of committing child abuse by 400% rather than 150%. In short, there are likely to be “explosive combinations,” or what statisticians call “interaction effects,” among the factors contributing to child abuse.
The purpose of this chapter is to present data on several of the factors that have been found to be related to the incidence of child abuse in the two National Family Violence Surveys. To be more specific, the data to be presented relate 25 different variables to child abuse. One might therefore think that the first complication in studying child abuse—the multiplicity of causal factors—has been addressed. But that is not entirely the case because all of the factors to be discussed are, broadly speaking, social variables. That is, they describe the social characteristics and social interactions of parents and children. We do not have data on the psychological characteristics of the parents—their mental health, aggressiveness, anxiety, rigidity, etc.—that may well be part of the explanation for child abuse.

**Sample and Method**

The findings reported in this chapter are based on data from the 1975 and the 1985 Family Violence Surveys. The 1975 data include 1,146 American families who had a child age 3 through 17 at home. A limitation of the 1975 sample is that it does not include children younger than three years of age—a high-risk age. The 1985 survey includes 3,235 families with children from infancy through age 17. Further details on the sampling methods of the two surveys are given in Appendix 1.

Interviews in both surveys were conducted with the father in a random half of the families and with the mother in the other half of the families. The data on physical violence were obtained for only one child in each family and only concerning violence by the parent who was interviewed. When there was more than one child, the "referer child" for the study was selected by a random number table.

Child abuse was measured using the Conflict Tactics Scales (described briefly in Chapter 1 and fully in Chapters 3, 4, and 5). The measure that pertains to severe violence by the respondent parent toward the referent child included all the items that refer to violence more severe than spanking, pushing, shoving, slapping, and throwing things. Specifically, the list consists of whether, during the 12 months prior to the interview, the parent had ever kicked, bit, or punched the child, hit the child with an object, beaten up the child, or used a knife or gun on the child. The 1985 survey contains an additional item for burning or scalding the child. A parent who did any of these things was counted as having abused the child.

The two surveys covered a great many aspects of family patterns and life circumstances. Data from both of the surveys were used in the analyses for this chapter. If data for both 1985 and 1975 are available, and if the findings for 1985 parallel those for 1975, we report the 1985 data because
they are the most comprehensive and most recent data.\textsuperscript{1} However, some of the variables are available only for the 1975 sample, in which case findings based on the 1975 study are reported. If findings from the two surveys do not agree, these discrepancies will be presented, along with possible explanations for the differences.

**Men, Women, and Jobs**

We begin this discussion of the social causes of child abuse with two of the most elementary but also the most important characteristics that are associated with child abuse: gender and socioeconomic status.

It is widely known that women are less violent than men. The rates of assault and murder by women are a fraction of the rates by men. But in the family it is different. Using our index of child abuse, the rate in 1975 for child abuse by fathers was 10.1 per hundred children whereas the rate by mothers was 75\% greater: 17.7 per hundred children. In the 1985 sample, the rates are more similar: 10.2 per hundred children by fathers and 11.2 per hundred children by mothers. The rates from both samples indicate that women are at least as violent as men against their own children.

This finding emphasizes the importance of social, rather than psychological, factors in explaining child abuse. These, after all, are the same women who, outside the family, are much less violent than men. So the reasons why they are as violent as men toward their own children is unlikely to be anything in the personality or other mental characteristics of women as compared to men. Rather, the reasons start with the simple fact that husbands and wives do not have equal responsibility for the care of their children. The way our type of society is organized, child care is the responsibility of women. So women are simply exposed more to both the joys and the trials and tribulations of caring for children—they experience more time “at risk.” This could also explain the reduction between 1975 and 1985 in the difference in child abuse rates of mothers and fathers. To the extent that fathers are assuming somewhat more responsibility for child care (and some studies, e.g., Thorton, Alwin, and Cambrun, 1983, suggest that this is happening), they share more equally in this “time at risk.”

“Time at risk,” however, is not the whole story. The factors underlying women’s “equality” in violence against children go well beyond that. At least two other factors need to be considered. First, it is the mother who tends to be blamed if the child misbehaves or does not achieve what is expected of children at a given age. Since all children misbehave and since standards of achievement are ambiguous, almost all mothers tend to feel
anxiety, frustration, and guilt about their children and their adequacy as mothers. This is true not because women are any more anxiety prone than men, but because our society creates a situation in which a high level of anxiety and frustration is almost inevitable in the maternal role.

A third factor that might account for child abuse by women is that the unequal division of labor and the responsibility for the child’s conduct is not a voluntary choice. These are roles assigned to women by long historical tradition and on which most husbands insist. It may be less of a problem for those women who wish to focus their lives on the role of mother and homemaker, but in a society where other opportunities beckon, millions of women feel frustrated by the fact that they—not their husbands—still have the overwhelming responsibility for the children, even when these women work outside the home.

_Homemakers_

The cultural ideology of women as mothers and homemakers may make it difficult to see the argument just presented. There is neither the space nor the evidence to prove the point. But there is a way of getting at this issue indirectly. We can compare mothers who are full-time homemakers with mothers who are also employed outside the home. Chapter 15 provides a more complete analysis of this issue using the 1975 data.

From one point of view, the higher rate of child abuse should be among women who have paid employment in addition to their work as mothers and housekeepers. This is true because the research shows that such women continue to have the major burden of housekeeping and child care. They therefore carry a double burden. The opposite point of view is also plausible. Women who have jobs outside the home may have a lower rate of child abuse because the hours spent in the workplace (and away from the home) reduce their time at risk, because they can escape the stress and frustration of being occupied in the homemaker role (which may not be of their own choosing), and because being employed for wages gives women more power in the family and control over their own lives.

Neither theory is supported by the findings of the 1975 or the 1985 survey. In 1975 women with full-time paid employment had a child abuse rate of 17.1, as compared to 17.4 for the full-time homemakers. In 1985 women with full-time paid employment had a child abuse rate of 10.3 as compared to 11.1 for the full-time homemakers. Neither of these differences is large enough to be statistically significant. However, the consistency of results between the two surveys suggests that this small difference is statistically dependable. One can therefore interpret the findings of the
two surveys as indicating that, although mothers with paid employment have a lower rate of child abuse, the difference is very small. A related conclusion is that the decrease in child abuse from 1975 to 1985 described in Chapter 7 occurred for both mothers with full-time paid employment and mothers who were full-time homemakers.

**Socioeconomic Status**

Child abuse is found at all social levels, from paupers to royalty. But that is not the same as saying that the rates are equal at all social levels. Officially reported cases of child abuse are much higher among the poor. Studies of professionals' attitudes have shown that physicians, nurses, police, and other officials are more likely to report suspected cases of abuse involving poor or minority families than those from more middle-class backgrounds (Hampton and Newberger, 1985; O'Toole, Turbett, and Nalepka, 1983).

Our data do not depend on official reports. Table 14.1 displays child abuse rates for mothers and fathers from the 1985 Resurvey by various socioeconomic measures. The first row of Table 14.1 reveals that families earning less than twenty thousand dollars a year have the highest rates of child abuse. This seems especially true for mothers, whose child abuse rates in lower-income families is more than a third higher than for mothers in higher-income families (14.6 versus 10.8). Although this is a substantial difference, it is a much smaller difference than is typical when officially reported child abuse rates are used to compare social classes. Thus part of the social class differences in officially reported child abuse does seem to be the result of biases in the system of reporting. At the same time, the data also suggest that there is a considerably higher rate of actual child abuse in lower-income families.

Another measure of social class is, of course, occupational status. Rows 4 and 5 of Table 14.1 show that the incidence of child abuse by either parent is higher in families where the husband is a blue-collar worker. Blue-collar fathers have a rate of abuse that is a third higher than white-collar fathers (11.9 versus 8.9). Interestingly, wives of blue-collar workers also have higher child abuse rates (p < .001). Perhaps the higher rates of abuse by wives of blue-collar workers reflects more traditional family roles where these mothers are charged with the full responsibility of raising the children.

Of course, it is not just the absolute level of poverty that matters, important as that is. Also entering the situation is the importance of
TABLE 14.1
Child Abuse Rates by Socioeconomic Measures for Fathers and Mothers in the 1985 Resurvey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Status Variable</th>
<th>Rate of Child Abuse by Fathers (N=1267)</th>
<th>Rate of Child Abuse by Mothers (N=1966)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Annual Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None - $20,000</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.6***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 - $40,000</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 and over</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s Occupational Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.9***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s Occupational Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Collar</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Collar</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student, retired</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife’s Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Time</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping House</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student, retired</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square tests: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

income as a symbol of personal worth. A measure of this symbolic dimension was included in the 1975 data. Anyone with a family income of under six thousand dollars in the U.S. in 1975 in effect received with each paycheck a reminder that he or she is not worth very much. The child abuse rate for husbands who were dissatisfied with their standard of living was 61% greater than the rate for other husbands (14.4 versus 8.9), and for
wives who were not satisfied with their standard of living the rate was 77% greater than for other wives (22.3 versus 12.6).

There is also the frustration imposed by an unstable economic system, which was particularly true at the time of the 1975 survey. Families in which the husband was unemployed in 1975 had a child abuse rate that was 62% greater than that of other families (22.5 versus 13.9). A similar high rate of child abuse was associated with part-time employment of the husband (27.3 versus 14.1). These large differences were, for the most part, not replicated in the 1985 survey. However, the second column in Table 14.1 shows that mothers whose husbands were unemployed in 1985 had a child abuse rate nearly 50% higher than those whose husbands worked full-time (16.2 versus 11.0). This probably reflects the added stress on the family when the father is out of work.

Finally, there are a number of factors on which we do not have data but which are likely to enter the picture. Working-class parents are known to be more authoritarian with their children and to have greater faith in physical punishment as a means of child rearing and a lesser understanding of child psychology (Hess, 1970; Kohn, 1985). In addition, low-income areas of American cities have much higher rates of violence outside the family. Each of these in their own way is a condition making for higher rates of child abuse among lower-income or working-class families.

Family Structure and Child Abuse

Some analysts of child abuse, for example David Gil (1975), write as though the direct and indirect effects of an unjust and unstable economic system and its associated oppression of women and minorities fully explain the paradox of child abuse. Unfortunately, the etiology of child abuse is far more complicated. One can see this from a comparison of child abuse in Black and in White families. Blacks are one of the most economically and socially oppressed groups in American society. Yet up to the time of the 1975 survey both that study and some studies of officially reported child abuse (Billingsley, 1969; Young, 1963) showed that Blacks did not have a significantly higher rate of child abuse than Whites. Blacks in the 1975 sample had a rate of 15.7, which was only 11% greater than the White rate of 14.1. The analysis of race and support networks of the 1975 sample in Chapter 19 suggests one reason why Blacks had a rate of child abuse that was much lower than expected on the basis of their low income, high unemployment, and rejection by the rest of the society: the aid and support, especially in the care of children, provided by Black extended families.
The 1985 study, however, presents quite a different picture. In Chapter 7 we present data showing that the rate of child abuse for Whites decreased substantially between 1975 and 1985. However, for the Black part of the sample there was essentially no change in the rate of child abuse between 1975 and 1985. The decrease in the rate for White children from 14.1 to 10.3, combined with essentially no change in the rate at which Black children are abused, means that Black children in the 1985 sample were abused at a significantly higher rate than White children. It is possible that the changes in family structure and economic circumstances (such as later age at marriage and a lower unemployment rate) that we suggested in Chapter 7 as partly responsible for the decrease in the rate of child abuse have so far had relatively little impact on Black families. These and other possible explanations for the 1985 findings are analyzed in detail in Hampton and Gelles (1988).

_Husband-Wife Conflict_

An important aspect of the pattern of interaction in the family is the amount of conflict between husband and wife. To measure the extent of such conflict we obtained information on how often the couple disagreed on five issues: money, sex, social activities, housekeeping and maintenance, and children. The first row of Table 14.2 enables us to compare the child abuse rates of fathers in the 1985 survey who reported an above-average level of conflict with the child abuse of fathers in more harmonious marriages and the same for mothers. The column headed Fathers shows that men who reported more than the average amount of conflict have a higher incidence of child abuse (a rate of 13.0 for husbands in high-conflict marriages abused one of their children compared to 7.4 for other men). The columns headed Mothers show more mothers in high-conflict marriages abused a child than other mothers (13.6 versus 8.0).²

_Verbal Abuse and Physical Abuse_

At least as important as the amount of conflict are the tactics used when a couple has a conflict. Some family therapists argue that the best tactic is to release and not to repress one’s anger. One advocate of this approach is quoted by Howard (1970:54) as recommending: "Don’t be afraid to be a real shrew, a real bitch. Tell them where you’re really at. Let it be total, vicious, exaggerated, hyperbole . . . ." Venting one’s anger in this way is claimed to provide a release from the tension of a dispute and therefore to help avoid physical aggression. The research evidence, however, shows that the more husbands and wives are verbally aggressive to each other,
TABLE 14.2
Child Abuse Rates by Family Characteristics for Fathers and Mothers in the 1985 Resurvey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Characteristic</th>
<th>Rate of Child Abuse By:</th>
<th>Fathers with Characteristic</th>
<th>Mothers with Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRESENT</td>
<td>ABSENT</td>
<td>PRESENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Marital Conflict</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>7.4***</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband-Wife Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.9**</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife-Husband Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>4.1**</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband-Wife Violence</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>8.0***</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife-Husband Violence</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>8.2***</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Child Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-Child Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>4.2***</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s Childhood Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father used physical punishment</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>8.1**</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother used physical punishment</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>8.4*</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father hit Mother</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother hit Father</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>9.3**</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square tests: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
N for fathers = 1,267; N for mothers = 1,966.
the higher the rate of physical aggression (Straus, 1974). The main reason for this is that verbal aggression, no matter how emotionally satisfying it may be, does not come to grips with the substance of the dispute. Rather, it creates additional animosity, which makes it even more difficult to deal with the original source of the conflict.

Exactly the same results were found in this study for the relation between verbal aggression and child abuse. Parents who were verbally aggressive to the referent child in 1975 had a child abuse rate that is six times that of other parents (21.0 versus 3.6). In 1985, Row 6 of Table 14.2 shows a child abuse rate nearly ten times greater for verbally abusive mothers (16.3 versus 1.8) and three and a half times greater for verbally aggressive fathers.

It could be argued that verbal aggression is a consequence rather than a cause of this high rate of violence. A child has been slapped and then either slaps back or kicks or insults the parent. The parent then verbally assaults the child. No doubt that does happen. But such a sequence does not explain another finding: the rate of child abuse is also higher for parents who are verbally aggressive to each other. Row 2 demonstrates that husbands who were verbally aggressive to their spouses, have a child abuse rate of 11.2, compared to 4.9 for other husbands. Row 3 shows that wives who were verbally aggressive to their husband have a child abuse rate of 12.3, compared to 5.3 for other wives. All of this suggests that verbal aggression is a relatively stable pattern in such families and, as just suggested, is a mode of relating that interferes with dealing with the actual issues, creates additional problems, and often sets in motion an escalating cycle of events that ends in physical violence.

Violence as a Mode of Relating

Marital Violence and Child Abuse

One of the clearest findings to emerge from the two National Family Violence Surveys is that violence in one family relationship is related to violence in other family relationships (see Chapter 23, Baron and Straus, 1987; Straus, 1971; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, 1980). In families where the husband had hit his wife during the year of the 1985 survey, even if the violence was restricted to slaps, pushes, and throwing things, the incidence of child abuse was 150% greater than in other families (22.3 versus 8.0). If it is the wife who hits the husband, this is associated with a 120% greater incidence of child abuse by the mother (22.9 versus 9.2).
Physical Punishment as Training for Child Abuse

Early in life, most of us receive a kind of basic training in violence in the form of physical punishment. Mommy slaps an infant’s hand to teach the child not to put dirty things in his or her mouth. But this also teaches the child that love and violence go together. Moreover, it does more than establish the empirical fact that those who love you are those who hit you. Ironically, it also teaches that the use of violence within the family is morally right.

In some families slapping a child is replaced by non-violent forms of punishment and by the use of reasoning and negotiation. If this happens, what is learned in infancy and early childhood can be replaced by non-violent modes of dealing with others—though the earlier patterns may still emerge in extreme conditions. But when the use of physical punishment continues into the early teen years and when children observe their parents being violent to each other (as is the experience of millions of American children), the chances are greater that the use of physical force will become a regular part of the way these children will later interact with others in adulthood (see Chapter 23; Gelles and Straus, 1979; Owens and Straus, 1975).

To what extent are the ideas expressed in the previous two paragraphs supported by the data for these two nationally representative samples of parents? To find out, we asked the parents how much their own parents had used physical punishment when they were about age 13. The first two rows in the section of Table 14.2, labeled “Parent’s Childhood Family,” demonstrate the relationship between having been physically punished at age 13 and later abusive behavior toward one’s own children for the 1985 sample of parents. The first of the two rows shows that parents who were physically punished by their father were more likely to engage in severe violence against their own children. Fathers who had been hit at age 13 by their own fathers exhibited a child abuse rate of 13.1, compared to 8.1 for fathers who had not been hit (p < .01); likewise, mothers who had been hit show a rate of 17.6, compared to 9.3 for mothers who had not been hit (p < .001). Row 8 reveals that parents who were physically punished by their mothers show similarly higher rates of child abuse than parents who were not. Since very similar results were found for the parents interviewed in 1975, both studies indicate a connection between having experienced physical punishment as a child and later committing child abuse as a parent.

Observing Parents Fight as Training for Child Abuse

The data just presented suggest that one of the ways children learn to be violent to others is by being the victims of violence at the hands of their
parents. Ironically, the learning effect is probably enhanced because, by and large, parental violence is done out of concern for the child and for other morally desirable ends. Parents also teach violence to their children in a number of other ways, for example, by teaching boys to "stand up and fight like a man" (Stark and McEvoy, 1970), and by example, through violence toward each other.

More than one out of ten of the parents in both the 1975 and the 1985 samples could remember at least one instance when they saw their own parents hitting each other. And in both studies being the child of parents who hit each other was associated with a greater rate of child abuse compared to not having grown up in a household in which the parents assaulted each other. The last two rows of Table 14.2 show that among the fathers interviewed in 1985 those who had witnessed their father hit their mother had a 25% higher rate of physically abusing a child (12.5 versus 10.0) and those who witnessed their mother hit their father had almost double the rate compared to fathers who had not grown up in a family with this type of violence (18.5 versus 9.3). Similarly, mothers who observed their father hit their mother had double the rate of child abuse compared to other mothers in the 1985 sample (20.2 versus 10.1). Mothers who observed their own mother hit their father were also twice as likely to have engaged in child abuse (23.1 versus 10.3).

**Isolation from Kin and Community**

Chapter 19 refers to the important role played by the extended family in the Black community. Moreover, the results for the entire sample using the 1975 data reveal that when we take into account the length of the marriage and the social class of the parents, important differences emerge. Having lived in a neighborhood only a relative short time (zero to three years) makes only a small difference for those who had been married for less than ten years. Their child abuse rate is high, regardless of whether they had lived in the neighborhood four or more years (18.5) or zero to three years (21.8). But for the older couples, lack of neighborhood ties is associated with much more child abuse. Those who lived in the neighborhood less than four years have a child abuse rate that is 84% higher than the rate for parents who had been in the same neighborhood for four or more years (17.8 versus 9.7).

Similar differences were found for the 1975 sample using an index of participation in organizations such as clubs, lodges, unions, church groups, etc. One point was given for each group belonged to and one point for each meeting of such a group attended in a month. Those who neither belonged to nor attended such meetings have a child abuse rate of 18.5
Family Patterns and Child Abuse 257

compared to 12.0 for those with a score of one or more. Since involvement in organizations tends to be associated with being more settled in life, the same comparison was computed for those married less than ten years and for those married ten or more years. For the younger group, their generally high rate of child abuse reduced the effect of organizational involvement. Still, the incidence of child abuse among those with no ties to organized groups is a third higher than the rate for those who have even a minimal organizational involvement (21.4 versus 15.5). For the longer married group, those without organizational ties have a 72% greater rate of child abuse (14.3 versus 8.3). Both these data and the results of other studies (see the review in Maden and Wrench, 1977; Smith, 1975) all point to a strong association between child abuse and social isolation.

A Child Abuse Checklist

Up to this point, each of the factors associated with child abuse has been considered separately from the others. This is clearly inadequate. These factors do not exist in isolation. Some overlap, and the existence of certain combinations may be particularly important. As a first approach to at least partly overcoming these limitations, a child abuse checklist score was computed.

A discriminant analysis of the 1975 data (Nie et al., 1986; Chapter 36) identified 16 variables that distinguished between abusing parents and other parents and that did not significantly overlap with each other. For the 1985 sample, information was available on 14 of the original 16 variables. A new discriminant analysis used these 14 variables and 2 additional variables (family income and whether the respondent reported any instances in which his father hit his mother). Fourteen of these 16 variables were found to differentiate abusing from non-abusing parents. These 14 variables are listed in Table 14.3.

These 14 variables were used to create a “Child Abuse Checklist” score for each parent in the sample. First, the 14 variables identified in the discriminant analysis of the 1985 data were dichotomized at the point where the earlier cross-tabulations had shown the highest rates of child abuse. Second, each parent was given a checklist score by assigning a point for any of the 14 variables on which his or her characteristics matched that of the abusing parents. Since all 14 variables distinguished between abusing and non-abusing mothers, the mothers in the sample could have a score theoretically ranging from zero to 14, but the actual scores ranged from zero to 12. Ten of the variables differentiated between abusing and non-abusing fathers and were used to assign checklist scores
TABLE 14.3
Characteristics Included in Child Abuse Checklist For the 1985 National Family Violence Resurvey*

A. Significant for Child Abuse by Either Parent

Was verbally aggressive to the child
    (insulted, swore at, etc.)
Husband verbally aggressive to wife
Wife verbally aggressive to husband
Husband physically aggressive to wife
Wife physically aggressive to husband
Marriage high in conflict
More than one child in family
Parent was physically punished as adolescent by father
Parent was physically punished as adolescent by mother
Mother hit father in parent’s childhood family

B. Significant for Child Abuse by Mother

Father hit mother in parent’s childhood family
Husband is a blue collar worker
 Married less than 10 years
Lived in neighborhood five years or less

*The three variables which did not replicate for the 1985 sample were:
(1) For abuse by fathers: wife was a full-time homemaker. (2) For abuse by mothers: wife age 30 or younger, and wife was a manual worker. The additional variable found in the 1985 sample was mothers who had witnessed their own father hit their mother.

to the fathers. Thus fathers’ scores have a theoretical range from zero to ten, but the actual range was from zero to eight.

Figure 14.1 clearly shows the powerful relationship between the combination of these factors and the incidence of child abuse. Parents with none of the factors present were entirely free of child abuse. Parents with scores of no more than 4 had relatively low rates of child abuse, ranging from 4 to 7%. The incidence of child abuse climbs steadily from there on, reaching a rate of over 35 per hundred children for fathers with 7 or more (on the scale of 0–10) of these factors and for mothers with a score of 11 or more (on a scale of 0–14).

The social factors identified in this research obviously are strongly associated with child abuse. The incidence for abuse for those unfortunate enough to be characterized by most of the elements of the syndrome is staggering. But even among this group of parents, about two thirds did not abuse a child. This fact should serve as a caution against attempting to use
FIGURE 14.1
Incidence Rate of Child Abuse by Checklist Score of Father and Mother

- Per 100 Children

the Child Abuse Checklist as a means of locating high-risk parents in order to provide services that might prevent child abuse. Tempting as is that possibility, it is not worth the harm that is likely to be inflicted on millions of parents who have high scores but who have not and will not abuse a child.

The fact that the child abuse rate for mothers with scores of 12 is "only"
49 per hundred children also indicates that we still have a long way to go in pinpointing the causes of child abuse. As suggested in the introduction, there is an obvious need to include data on the psychological characteristics of the parents and the characteristics of the child (Parke, 1978). If such characteristics were included and if we were to use more adequate methods of measuring the unique combinations of factors, it might be possible to account for even more of the cases of child abuse. But even limiting the study to purely social factors and using a technique as simple as the checklist score, we have been able to isolate many of the factors associated with child abuse.

Summary and Conclusions

The main purpose of this chapter was to examine social factors that might account for the extremely high incidence of child abuse reported in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. The findings suggest that the causes of child abuse can be found in (but are not limited to) the following factors: (1) The structure of the contemporary American family, for example, the practice of placing almost the whole burden of child care on mothers. This is a main reason why women have an equally high rate of child abuse as men, despite lower rates of violence outside the family. (2) The economic and psychological stress created by poverty and an unstable economic system. Illustrative of this is the finding of a higher incidence of child abuse among lower-income families and manual workers. (3) Isolation from the help and social control that occur when a family is embedded in a network of kin and community. This is illustrated by the finding that short-term residents of a neighborhood have a higher incidence of child abuse than longer-established residents. (4) Unintended but powerful training in the use of violence as a means of teaching and resolving conflicts. Parents who had been physically punished abuse their children much more often, as do parents who engage in physical fights with each other. Parents who saw their parents hit each other have a much higher rate of child abuse than other parents.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that a large part of the explanation of child abuse is in the very nature of American society and its family systems. This has profound implications for the prevention of child abuse (see Chapter 28). Although psychotherapy may be appropriate in some cases, a more fundamental approach lies in such things as a more equal sharing of the burdens of child care, replacement of physical punishment with non-violent methods of child care and training, reducing the stresses and insecurity that continue to characterize our economic system.
for many families, and strengthening the ties of individual families to the extended family and to the community.

Notes


2. The effects in 1975 were less pronounced for wives: a 28% greater rate (20.0 versus 15.6 for those low in conflict). For husbands, a high level of conflict with a wife was associated with a 79% greater rate of child abuse (12.7 versus 7.1).

3. As measured by the Verbal Aggression scale of the CTS described in Chapter 3 and Appendix 2. This includes such things as insults, sulking, venting anger by smashing things and slamming doors, and cutting remarks.

REFERENCES


