Intergenerational transmission of abuse: a two-generational prospective study of an at-risk sample

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Abstract

Objective: A model was examined in which the association between a parent’s history of abuse and the parent’s own abusive behavior toward his or her children was hypothesized to be mediated by parental psychopathology, early childbearing, and consistency of discipline. Additionally, the effect of severity of abuse on the likelihood of becoming abusive was examined.

Method: Participants were 109 parents (G1) and their male children (G2) who were involved in a longitudinal study. The G1 parents reported on their own experiences of abuse when they were children. Ten years later, the G2 youths reported on the G1 parents’ abusive behavior toward them. A number of other factors, including parental socioeconomic status (SES), antisocial behavior, depression and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), consistency of discipline, and the perceived early difficulty of the G2 children were measured.

Results: As reported by their own children, parents who reported having been abused in childhood were significantly more likely to engage in abusive behaviors toward the next generation. Findings indicated that abuse experienced by the parents, as well as consistency of discipline and depression plus PTSD, were predictive of parental abuse of the child. Contrary to hypotheses, the effects were not fully mediated. However, there were significant interactions between parental history of abuse and consistency of discipline, as well as abuse history and depression and PTSD. Parents who had...
experienced multiple acts of abuse and at least one physical impact were more likely to become abusive than were the other parents.

**Conclusions:** The implications of these findings for preventive interventions are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Child abuse; Intergenerational transmission; Parenting

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**Introduction**

Over the past few decades, researchers have found support for the idea that children who experience harsh or abusive parenting are likely to become harsh and abusive parents (e.g., Egeland, 1993; Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Hemenway, Solnick, & Carter, 1994; Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1991; Zaidi, Knutson, & Mehm, 1989). However, intergenerational transmission of abusive behavior is by no means a certainty; estimated rates of transmission vary widely from 18% (Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979) to 40% (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Paptola, 1989). In large part, the differing estimates are because of a number of methodological problems in the literature, including the use of retrospective designs, varying definitions of abuse, and failure to consider third variable explanations.

The purpose of the current study was threefold: (1) to explore the transmission of abuse from one generation to the next using a prospective, longitudinal study with multiple informants and both abusive and nonabusive parents, (2) to examine a number of other factors that have been linked to child abuse to determine their effect on the likelihood of transmission of abuse, and (3) to examine the hypothesis that more severely abused parents would be more likely to become abusive toward their own children.

Outlined in Fig. 1 is a proposed model of factors that may mediate the association between a parent’s history of having been abused, and their own abusive parenting practices, namely early childbearing, parental psychopathology, and parental inconsistent discipline. Additionally, variables that may be associated with child abuse, but may not be directly related to a parent’s history of having been abused, are represented in the model. The factors were selected because there is evidence in the literature that they may be both antecedents of a history of being abused as a child and predictors of abusiveness in parents. The current study addressed the question of whether these predictors would mediate the relation between a history of having been abused and becoming abusive toward one’s own children. Additionally, the child’s early difficult behavior and parental SES, which may be associated with child abuse but may not be directly related to a parent’s history of having been abused, are represented in the model. Each of these factors and their hypothesized roles in the intergenerational transmission of child abuse will be considered below.

Parent characteristics that may be broadly conceptualized as parental psychopathology have been shown to be both outcomes of childhood abuse and precursors to becoming an abusive parent. In her extensive review of the literature, Widom (1989) found fairly widespread agreement that antisocial and delinquent behaviors may be adolescent and adult outcomes of childhood maltreatment. Parental antisocial behavior also has been implicated
in the etiology of child abuse. Three hallmarks of antisocial personality disorder are impulsivity, irritability, and aggressiveness (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and parents who exhibit these characteristics are more likely to engage in harsh or abusive parenting practices (see Belsky & Vondra, 1989 for a review). Additionally, parents who engage in illegal substance use and alcohol abuse, practices highly associated with antisocial behavior, have been shown to be more punitive toward their children (Miller, Smyth, & Mudar, 1999). Thus, antisocial behavior may mediate the relation between a history of child abuse and a tendency to be an abusive parent.

Like antisocial behavior, high rates of depression have been found in adolescents and adults with a history of childhood maltreatment (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Carlin et al., 1994; Hjorth & Ostrov, 1982; Sternberg et al., 1993), and estimated at three to four times higher than in youth with no history of maltreatment (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999). Risk for suicide attempts was also elevated for young adults with a history of maltreatment. Depression has been implicated in the etiology of maltreatment (Famularo, Stone, Barnum, & Wharton, 1986; Kotch, Browne, Dufort, & Winsor, 1999; Lahey, Conger, Atkeson, & Treiber, 1984). Depressed parents may be more irritable and hostile and thus may react to child misbehavior with abusive discipline (Belsky, 1993). However, in their review of the literature on the link between child abuse and maternal depression, Knutson and Schartz (1997) note that about one half of the studies have failed to support such a link. A
further test of this association for an at-risk community sample with prospective data seems warranted.

Another outcome of the experience of abuse is the development of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Rossman, Bingham, & Emde, 1997). The presence of PTSD has not specifically been linked to abusive parenting, but PTSD in a parent can lead to chaotic family functioning (Davidson, Smith, & Kudler, 1989) and irritability (Jordan et al., 1992), thus increasing the likelihood of abusive behavior. A higher rate of violence toward family members has been found in families of Vietnam veterans with PTSD than in families of veterans without the disorder (Jordan et al., 1992). Thus, it seems plausible that PTSD could be implicated in the transmission of abuse because parents suffering from PTSD as a result of their own history of maltreatment may be more likely to engage in harsh parenting practices.

Early childbearing is another parental characteristic that has been linked to both a history of abuse and abusive parenting practices, and that may mediate the association between the two factors. Smith (1996) found that 62% of a sample of maltreated teens became pregnant as adolescents compared to only 40% of a sample of nonmaltreated teens. Young mothers have been found to be at higher risk for abusing their children (Miller, 1984; Zuravin, 1988), perhaps as a result of the stresses of early parenthood. Zuravin found that an adolescent’s educational status, number of live births, and employment history only partially mediated the association between teenage motherhood and child abuse, suggesting that young parenthood may have an independent effect on the likelihood of perpetrating abuse. However, antisocial behavior predicts early childbearing (Fagot, Pears, Capaldi, Crosby, & Leve, 1998; Serbin et al., 1998); therefore, a prediction model including both antisocial behavior and early childbearing would be helpful in clarifying the independent predictive roles of these factors.

In addition to parental characteristics such as psychopathology and early childbearing, poor discipline skills may mediate the association between a parent’s history of having been abused and risk for becoming abusive. Children growing up in abusive families are unlikely to observe models of consistent and fair parenting. A series of studies by Reid and colleagues (Reid, 1986; Reid, Patterson, & Loeber, 1982) demonstrated that parents’ inability to effectively discipline their children ultimately leads to an escalation in the conflict and possibly to abusive acts. Greenwald, Bank, Reid, and Knutson (1997) found that ineffective parental discipline mediated the effects of parent irritability, child coerciveness, and parent stress on harsh parenting practices. Thus, poor discipline techniques may mediate any association between a history of maltreatment and abusive parenting practices.

Low socioeconomic status has been linked to a higher likelihood of child abuse (Egami, Ford, Greenfield, & Crum, 1996; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991). As illustrated in Fig. 1, SES is conceptualized here as a contextual factor that may affect other parental characteristics such as psychopathology, early childbearing, and poor discipline, rather than as a mediating factor in the intergenerational transmission of abuse. For example, low SES may increase the likelihood of parent antisocial behavior or depression. Antisocial behavior or depression may then lower one’s SES because these characteristics interfere with employment or consistent job performance. Therefore, we would not expect SES to predict maltreatment in a model controlling for these factors, but rather for its effects on abuse to be mediated by these other factors.
A final factor that has been implicated in the etiology of child abuse is child difficulty. Studies have shown that children who exhibit difficult behaviors are at risk for becoming engaged in more conflicts with their parents (Bates, 1980; Reid et al., 1982). Reid et al. found that children in abusive families exhibited a significantly higher rate of aversive behaviors than did children in nonabusive families. Bates found that mothers of children seen as having difficult temperaments engaged in more controlling and rigid behavior toward their children. In the model proposed here, child difficulty is hypothesized to contribute directly to the likelihood of being abused (Fig. 1).

Severity of abusive experiences as a risk factor

Some researchers have suggested that the severity of abuse experienced by a parent may affect that parent’s tendency to be abusive (Milner, Robertson, & Rogers, 1990; Zuravin, McMillen, DePanfilis, & Risley-Curtiss, 1996). However, few empirical studies have specifically examined this association. Zaruvjin et al. found that the more severe the sexual abuse in the first generation, the greater the probability of abuse in the second generation. The frequency and severity of physical abuse did not appear to affect transmission. However, the authors used the part of the body on which the beating took place as the measure of severity of physical abuse instead of whether an injury was suffered. Milner et al. found higher levels of abuse potential in young adults who had received injuries as a result of abuse than in participants who experienced only abusive acts (but no injuries) or no abusive acts. This suggests that the experience of injury as a result of abuse may be particularly important in the transmission of abuse.

Methodological issues in past studies

A major issue in studies of the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment is the tendency to use retrospective designs, especially a tendency to work backward from abusive parents to their abuse histories. This may lead to an inflated rate of transmission because the participants who were abused, but have not subsequently become abusive, are not represented in such designs (Kaufman & Zigler, 1993; Widom, 1989).

A second problem is the tendency to rely upon the same reporter, usually the parent, for descriptions of parenting practices both as experienced in childhood and as used with their own children. The bias that can result in studies from using the same reporter for the independent and dependent variables is recognized increasingly as a substantial problem (Knutson & Schartz, 1997). Parents also may be unwilling to admit that they are engaging in abusive practices toward their children, either because of fear of intervention by outside authorities or because of social desirability biases.

Finally, a problem noted by Widom (1989) and others (e.g., Kaufman & Zigler, 1993; Knutson & Schartz, 1997) is the variability in definitions or thresholds of child abuse across studies. Some studies included regular spanking in their definition of abuse (e.g., Egeland et al., 1988), whereas other studies use more extreme physical behaviors such as burning children with hot objects or causing bruises or broken bones (e.g., O’Keefe, 1995). Such
disparate definitions of child abuse are likely to lead to widely varying estimates of rates of intergenerational transmission.

The present prospective study expands the literature on intergenerational abuse in several ways. Reports of abuse were gathered from the victims in both generations, rather than from the perpetrators. The sample included parents who transmitted abuse as well as abused parents who did not transmit abuse to the next generation. The abuse histories of both the parents and their children were tested as continuous variables in this study. In addition, dichotomous associations were tested to compare findings to prior intergenerational studies. The definition of abuse was conservative, including only behaviors that were likely to result in injuries. Spanking with hands and objects was excluded from the definition because studies show that a majority of the population has experienced these forms of discipline (Berger, Knutson, Mehm, & Perkins, 1988). The term abuse clearly implies lower base rate behaviors. Behaviors that result in injuries are also more likely to be considered abusive in the general population (Knutson & Schartz, 1997).

Additionally, this study presented the opportunity to test the effects of factors other than the parents’ abuse histories on their abusive behavior toward their children, as depicted in Fig. 1. It was hypothesized that the effects of a parent’s (G1) history of abuse on their abusive behavior toward their children (G2) would be mediated by parental psychopathology, early childbearing, and consistency of parental discipline. SES is conceptualized as a contextual factor that will not have a direct effect on child maltreatment once the effects of the other more proximal factors are accounted for. It was further predicted that perceived childhood difficulty of G2 would have independent effects on the abuse experienced by G2, above and beyond the effect of the G1 parents’ own history of abusive experiences.

Next, the hypothesis that the greater the severity of the abuse experienced by the G1 parents the more likely they would be to abuse their G2 children was tested in two ways. First, abuse was examined as a continuous variable in which both abusive acts and the injuries resulting from those acts were combined into one abuse score representing the overall amount of abuse. Second, to determine whether the number of abusive acts experienced or the impact of these acts (i.e., physical sequelae such as bruises, broken bones, and burns) was more important in determining if parents would go on to abuse their own children, parents were grouped according to the level of abuse experienced. Differences between the groups in childrearing behaviors then were examined. It was hypothesized that parents who experienced physical sequelae of abuse would be more abusive than parents who had experienced abusive acts only or no abuse.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The sample included participants in the Oregon Youth Study (OYS) of 206 boys (G2) and their parents (G1) recruited as a representative sample from the highest crime-rate areas of a medium-sized city. The boys were thus at risk for delinquency, but not necessarily showing
conduct problems. The recruitment procedures are described in detail in Capaldi and Patterson (1987).

For the purposes of this study, a subsample of 109 families in which either both biological parents or only a single biological parent was present through the youths’ 18th year was selected. This ensured that the G2 youths’ report of their parents’ abusive practices referred to the same parents who had several years before completed a questionnaire about their experiences of abuse during their own childhoods. The only way to be sure that true intergenerational transmission was being assessed was to use data from families for whom there was little transition in the parental figures.

At the initial assessment for the OYS, the subsample of families included 109 youths and their parents (106 mothers and 73 fathers). The mean age of the youths was 10.04 years (SD = 1.10 years), for mothers it was 34.97 years (SD = 4.55 years), and for fathers 38.00 years (SD = 5.78). The majority of the families were working class, with a median income of $15,000 to $19,999 and a median Hollingshead score (Hollingshead, 1975) of 34. The sample was predominantly Caucasian. At Year 12 of assessment, the youths were approximately 20 years of age, (M = 20.75 years, SD = .46 years).

Independent sample t-tests revealed differences between the subsample and the remaining members of the sample. There was a significant difference between the subsample and the rest of the sample on fathers’ age, t (141) = 3.39, p < .01, and mothers’ age, t (194) = 4.37, p < .001. Mothers and fathers in the subsample were older than mothers and fathers in the rest of the sample (Ms = 32.23 and 34.36, SDs = 5.78, and 7.03, respectively). Additionally, families in the subsample had higher scores on SES than families in the rest of the sample, Ms = 34 and 31, SDs = 10.31 and 9.2, respectively; t (203) = 2.30, p < .05. Parents in the subsample also tended to have lower scores on the antisocial behavior construct, t (204) = –4.32, p < .001, and the depression and PTSD construct, t (204) = –3.94, p < .001, both of which are described below. Finally, the youths in the subsample experienced fewer acts of abuse than did the youths in the rest of the sample [Ms = .10 and .30, SDs = .03 and .06, respectively; t (201) = –3.01, p < .01]. These differences suggest that the families in the subsample were at lower risk for abuse and parental psychopathology than were families in the rest of sample in which multiple parental figures were present during the time of the study.

Procedure

The young men and their families participated in full-scale assessments every 2 years, and completed briefer assessments of outcomes in the years in between the full-scale assessments. The data presented in this study come primarily from Year 1 and 2 of assessment (Waves 1 and 2, respectively) when the boys were in Grades 4 and 5 (9 to11 years of age), as well as from Year 12 (Wave 12) when the young men were 20 to21 years of age.

At the initial assessment, demographic, behavioral, and parenting constructs were assessed for G1 including: SES, age of mother at the birth of her first child, antisocial behavior, consistency of discipline, and their perceptions of how difficult their G2 son had been in early childhood. At Year 2 of assessment, in addition to questions about their childhood experiences (discussed below), parents were administered a short form of the MMPI-R (Hathaway
& McKinley, 1951). Information about G1’s depression was obtained at Waves 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the study. Intergenerational transmission of abuse was assessed during Year 2 of the study by asking the G1 parents about their childhood history and their parents’ behavior toward them. When the G2 youths were 20 to 21 years of age, they were asked to report on the parenting practices of G1.

Measures

As the children were interacting with both mothers and fathers, scores for all of the parent variables were combined across both parents. The pooled scores represent the combined influence of the parents, and more adequately represent the child’s experience than measuring one parent’s behavior alone. An alternative would have been to examine the effects of mothers’ and fathers’ behaviors separately, but the small sample size made this the less viable choice. As noted below, for all of the variables, the mother and father scores were significantly associated. For families in which there was a single parent, only that parent’s score was used for all of the G1 variables listed.

Abuse of G1. At Wave 2 of assessment, the parents of the OYS youths completed the Assessing Environments-III Questionnaire (AE-III; Berger et al., 1988). This measure consists of 162 true/false questions about the characteristics and parenting styles of the respondent’s parents, such as “I received injuries from the discipline used by my parents.” The instrument has been shown to distinguish between nonabused adolescents and those identified by local social service agencies as having been abused (Berger et al., 1988). Furthermore, the retrospective reports have been shown to correlate significantly with direct observational measures of harsh parenting (Prescott et al., 2000).

For the continuous measure, only the items that clearly reflected abusive parenting (vs. items that reflected physical, but not necessarily injurious, practices) were used to ensure that scores reflected physically abusive parenting. The 20 items included in the abuse scale are presented in the Appendix. The scale had high sample-wide, inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .85$ for fathers, .89 for mothers). Sums of the number of items endorsed as “true” were calculated for each parent, and these were averaged to produce one parental abuse score (abuse of G1).

To examine the effects of frequency and severity of abuse, four groups were formed based on the parents’ answers. Parents were grouped into the no abuse group ($n = 48$) if neither parent reported any experiences of abuse. If one or both parents reported that they had experienced physically abusive acts but no physical injuries, they were placed in the mild abuse group ($n = 26$). If one or both parents reported experiencing physically abusive acts and one injury, they were placed in the moderate abuse group ($n = 25$), and parents were placed in the severe abuse group ($n = 10$) if one or both of them reported experiencing both physical acts and multiple injuries. These groupings are based on those of Milner et al. (1990) and reflect the reasoning that abuse with physical sequelae can be considered worse because it is more injurious than abusive acts with no physical sequelae.

G1’s abuse of G2. When the OYS youths were approximately 21 years of age (Wave 12), they were given a modified version of the AE-III consisting of 23 of the original 162 items.
The abuse scale for the youths consisted of the 9 items presented in the Appendix. Respondents indicated whether their parent had used various forms of punishment on a 5–point scale (1 = very true to 5 = never true). Once again, only items clearly reflecting abusive practices were selected. The abuse scale had high sample-wide inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .90$). A mean score was calculated for each respondent (G1’s abuse of G2).

**Socioeconomic status**

SES was computed by standardizing and averaging annual household income and the mean parental Hollingshead scores (Hollingshead, 1975) at the initial wave of assessment. Hollingshead scores are based on education and occupation of the parents (G1).

**Early childbearing**

Mother’s age at the birth of her first child was computed by subtracting the age of her oldest identifiable biological child from the mother’s age. In the three cases for which only data from a father was available, the father’s age at the birth of his oldest biological child was used.

**Parental psychopathology**

*Parent antisocial behavior.* This construct consisted of four multiagent, multimethod indicators: (1) a composite measure of the parents’ substance use from the parent interview; (2) scores on the hypomania (scale 4) and psychopathic deviate (scale 9) scales of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), Form R (Hathaway & McKinley, 1951); (3) number of arrests from court records; and (4) number of drivers’ license suspensions from motor vehicle reports. All measures were from Wave 1 of the study except for the MMPI-R scores, which were from Wave 2. For substance use, parents received a summary score for whether they had experienced a number of problems related to alcohol use (e.g., “do you ever have memory loss after drinking?”) and whether they had ever used a number of drugs (e.g., cocaine, speed, methamphetamine). Additionally, parents indicated how often they had five or more drinks at one time, how often they smoked marijuana, and how often they used drugs for a variety of purposes (e.g., to fall asleep). The scores were standardized and combined to produce the composite substance use score. The scores on the MMPI were re-coded to 0 if the parents’ $T$-scores were below 70 for both scales, 1 if the parent had a $T$-score of above 70 on either scale, or 2 if the parent had a $T$-score above 70 for both scales. Arrests and license suspensions were coded 0, 1, 2, or 3 or more. The mean of the standardized, re-coded indicators were taken as the antisocial behavior score. Scores were computed separately for mothers ($\alpha = .51$) and fathers ($\alpha = .60$). The parent scores were significantly positively correlated, $r = .27$, $p < .01$, and were averaged to produce a mean parent antisocial behavior score.

*Parental depression.* The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D
Scale; Radloff, 1977) was used to measure parent depression. Parents rated items on a scale from 0 to 3 indicating the frequency with which they had experienced a number of depressive symptoms in the past week (e.g., “I thought my life had been a failure,” “I felt sad”). Parents answered this questionnaire at Waves 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the study. Scores were obtained for mothers and fathers at each year by summing across the items. The average alpha across the four years was .90 for mothers and .84 for fathers. For each parent, scores were averaged across the four time periods. The mean scores for mothers and fathers were significantly correlated ($r = .42, p < .001$) and so were averaged to produce one parental depression score.

**Parental post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** Parental PTSD was measured using a MMPI-derived scale (Keane, Malloy, & Fairbank, 1984). This 49–item scale was originally developed for use with combat veterans (Keane et al., 1984), but has been validated with civilian populations (Koretzky & Peck, 1990). In the current sample, the alpha was .90. The mean number of items endorsed was calculated for the mothers and fathers. These scores were moderately correlated ($r = .37, p < .001$) and were combined to produce a mean parental PTSD score. Because both parent depression and parent PTSD are indices of parental distress that are likely to be linked to parent irritability and because they were strongly correlated ($r = .64, p < .001$), these scores were standardized and averaged to produce one parental depression and PTSD score.

**Consistency of parental discipline**

This construct consisted of two multi-item, multiagent indicators measured at Wave 1 of the study: (1) the parent’s report of how consistent they were in response to their children’s misbehaviors (seven items; e.g., “How often do you let your child get away with things that you feel should have been punished?”) and (2) observer’s ratings of how well several statements fit each parent (four items; e.g., “The parent seemed in good control of the target child”). Observer ratings were collected after 1 hour home observations of the youths and their parents, and were collected for a total of three observations of each family. Inter-rater reliabilities were computed for the mothers ($r = .70$) and fathers separately ($r = .75$). All items were coded so that high scores indicated more consistent discipline. The items were standardized and averaged to produce scores for mothers ($\alpha = .76$) and fathers ($\alpha = .72$). Because the parents’ scores were intercorrelated ($r = .54, p < .001$), they were averaged to produce one score for parental consistency in discipline.

**Perceived early childhood difficulty**

This scale consisted of one item asking the parent to indicate how difficult the child had been to care for in the first 5 years of his life, eight items measuring the frequency of several difficult child characteristics during the child’s first 5 years (e.g., colic, temper tantrums, sleeping and eating problems, excessive crying, disobedience, being strong willed, extreme activity, and getting into dangerous situations), and two items asking whether the parent thought that the child had emotional and behavioral difficulties in his first 5 years. These
questions were generally asked only of the mother. The alpha for the scale was .84. Items were standardized and averaged to produce an early difficulties score. Early difficulty was measured instead of concurrent difficulties in an attempt to control for the possibility that later difficulties might be the result of abuse rather than a precursor or correlate.

Results

G1 to G2 transmission

Overview of analyses. In this section, we present descriptive information for all of the variables, followed by first order correlations among the variables. Regression analyses were conducted to determine whether the abuse history of G1 predicted the history of G2 above and beyond the influence of other factors assessed. It was hypothesized that parental psychopathology as measured by antisocial behavior, depression and PTSD, as well as early childbearing and consistency of parental discipline would mediate the association between G1’s experience of abuse in childhood and their abuse of G2. It was predicted that parental SES would not predict unique variance when controlling for the hypothesized mediators, but that early difficult behavior of G2 would have independent effects on G1’s abuse of G2. Finally, an analysis of covariance was conducted to test the hypothesis that G1 parents who experienced more severe abuse, that is, abusive acts and physical consequences of those acts, would be more abusive toward G2 youths than parents who had experienced only abusive acts or no abuse.

Examination of variable distributions revealed that there were four outliers on the G2 abuse scales, two outliers on the abuse of G1 scales, three outliers on the parental antisocial behavior construct, and one outlier on perceived early childhood difficulty of G2. All outliers were re-coded to values within three standard deviations of the mean. This did not change the significance patterns of the results. Additionally, the distributions for the G1 and G2 abuse scales, the parent antisocial behavior construct, parental depression and PTSD, and early childhood difficulties were all positively skewed. The data were transformed by using log transformations to make the distributions more closely resemble normality. Analyses conducted with the transformed variables did not differ significantly from those with the untransformed variables. Thus, for ease of interpretation, analyses with the untransformed variables are presented here.

Descriptive information. At the birth of her first child, mother’s mean age was 22 years (SD = 4 years). Forty-six (43%) of the G1 mothers and 24 (33%) of the G1 fathers reported at least one abusive act by their parent (range = 0 to 17 and 0 to 11 acts for mothers and fathers, respectively). The mean for the abuse of G1 score averaged across parents was 1.07 (SD = 2.07). Nineteen (17%) of the G2 youths had a mean score over 0 for G1’s abuse of G2 (M = .10, SD = .36; range = 0 to 2.89). The remaining scales and constructs were composed of standardized scores, and thus the means are not easily interpretable. They are presented with the correlation matrix.

To examine the rate of intergenerational transmission of abuse, parents were classified
according to whether at least one of them reported a history of having been abused (an abuse of G1 scale score greater than 0) and whether their children reported that they had been abusive (a G1’s abuse of G2 scale score greater than 0). Parents who had experienced abuse were slightly more than twice as likely to have children who reported being abused. Twenty-three percent ($n = 14$) of the G1 parents who had been abused as children had a G2 youth who reported being abused, compared to only 10% ($n = 5$) of the parents who reported no history of having been abused. Thus, of the G1 parents who were abusive toward G2 youths, 74% had been abused as children versus 26% who had not been abused, a more than twofold difference that approached statistical significance, $\chi^2 = 3.17, p < .08$. However, it is important to note that 77% of parents who had been abused as children did not become abusive toward their children.

**Correlational analyses.** The correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, G1’s reported experiences of abuse were significantly correlated with G2’s report of abuse by G1. This confirmed the hypothesis that G1’s abuse history would be associated with their children’s experiences of abuse. G1’s history of abuse was also significantly associated with their own antisocial behavior, their SES, their reports of G2’s early childhood difficulty, and marginally associated with their depression and PTSD. SES was significantly correlated with parent antisocial behavior and depression and PTSD. Higher income also was associated with more consistent parental discipline.

**Regression analyses.** A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in which G1’s abuse of G2 was the dependent variable. At the first step of the equation, SES was entered. Second, the abuse experienced by G1 was entered. At the third step, the hypothesized mediators (mother’s age at first birth, G1’s antisocial behavior, parental depression and PTSD, and

Table 1
Correlation coefficients for the associations between G1 and G2 variables

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<td>5. G1’s Consistency of discipline of G2</td>
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<td>G2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. G1’s abuse of G2</td>
<td>0.37**</td>
<td>−.20*</td>
<td>−.18†</td>
<td>0.17†</td>
<td>−.19*</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. G2 early childhood difficulty</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>−.24*</td>
<td>0.17†</td>
<td>−.34**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>22.60</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.22</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$. 

$\chi^2 = 3.17, p < .08$. However, it is important to note that 77% of parents who had been abused as children did not become abusive toward their children.

Regression analyses. A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in which G1’s abuse of G2 was the dependent variable. At the first step of the equation, SES was entered. Second, the abuse experienced by G1 was entered. At the third step, the hypothesized mediators (mother’s age at first birth, G1’s antisocial behavior, parental depression and PTSD, and
consistency of discipline) and G2’s early childhood difficulty were entered to see if they would affect the association between the abuse of G1 and G1’s abuse of G2, as well as explain additional variance. In a final step, interaction terms for any variables that significantly or marginally significantly predicted G1’s abuse of G2 were entered to fully explore any interactive effects of the predictors on the intergenerational transmission of abuse.

Results (Table 2) showed that, at the first step, the overall equation was significant, $F(1,108) = 4.70$, $p < .05$. SES significantly predicted G1’s abusive behavior toward G2. There was a significant increment in $R^2$ at the second step, $F(1,106) = 13.34$, $p < .001$. As hypothesized, abuse of G1 significantly predicted G1’s abuse of G2. SES no longer contributed unique variance to the equation, suggesting that G1’s history of abuse mediated the relation between SES and G1’s abuse of G2. When the hypothesized mediators were entered into the equations, there was a significant increment in $R^2$, $F(5,101) = 2.61$, $p < .05$. Contrary to the hypothesis, the association between abuse of G1 and G1’s abuse of G2 was not mediated by early childbearing, parental psychopathology, and consistency of discipline. G1’s history of abuse continued to add unique variance to the equation above and beyond the effects of the other variables. Additionally, consistency of parental discipline and parental depression and PTSD explained unique variance in G1’s abuse of G2, although the effect of consistency of discipline was only marginally significant. More consistent discipline and higher depression and PTSD scores were associated with less abuse of G2 by G1.

At the fourth step, two terms for the interactions between the abuse of G1 and both their depression and PTSD and the consistency of their discipline were entered. The interaction
terms were based on the significant or marginally significant predictors from the second and third steps. The incremental change in $R^2$ was significant, $F(2,99) = 11.07, p < .001$. G1’s history of abuse and mother’s age at the birth of her first child both explained variance in G1’s abuse of G2. Additionally, the interactions between the abuse of G1 and consistency of parental discipline, as well as between the abuse of G1 and their depression and PTSD scores, contributed uniquely to the variance. Fig. 2 illustrates the interaction between the abuse of G1 and discipline. Parents were divided into high and low consistency of discipline groups based on a median split. Examination of the plot suggested that G1 parents who had been seriously abused and exhibited poor discipline were more likely to be abusive toward G2. Fig. 3 illustrates the interaction between the abuse of G1 and depression and PTSD. Parents who had scores in the highest one third of the distribution, and thus were more likely to be in the clinical range, were considered high in depression and PTSD, whereas all other parents were considered to be low. The plot reveals that high abuse of G1 coupled with high depression and PTSD scores made it less likely that G1 would be abusive toward G2.

**Severity of abuse effects**

It was hypothesized that the G1 parents who had experienced more sequelae from the abusive acts of their own parents would perpetrate more abuse than parents who had experienced no abusive acts or abusive acts only. Accordingly, it was predicted that G1 parents in the severe abuse group (one or more acts of abuse and multiple sequelae) would show more abusive behavior toward their children (as measured by G2’s scores on the abuse scale) than would parents in the moderate (one or more acts, one sequelae), mild (one or more acts, no sequelae), or no abuse groups. It was further predicted that the G2 abuse scores for children of parents in the moderate abuse group would be higher than those of children of parents in the mild and no abuse groups.
An analysis of covariance with G2 abuse scores as the dependent variable and G1 abuse grouping as the independent variable was conducted. G1’s consistency of discipline and G1’s depression and PTSD scores were included as covariates because multivariate analyses had indicated an interaction between these variables and the abuse of G1. There were significant differences between the abuse groups on mean levels of abuse of G2 by G1, $F(3, 103) = 10.07, p < .001$. Planned comparisons indicated that, as predicted for the G1 parents in the severe abuse group, their mean levels of abusive behavior toward G2 were higher than that of any of the other G1 groups. Contrary to hypotheses, if G1 experienced multiple abusive acts but only one physical injury, the mean levels of abusive behavior that they directed toward G2 were not significantly different than those of G1 parents who had experienced mild or no abuse. The means are displayed in Table 3. Consistency of parental discipline was a significant covariate in the analysis, $F(1,103) = 4.90, p < .05$, and parental depression and PTSD was a marginally significant covariate, $F(1,103) = 2.86, p < .10$.

![Fig. 3. Interactive effects of parents’ histories of abuse and parental depression and PTSD on parents’ abuse of their children.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean levels of G1’s abuse of G2 by abuse of G1 severity group</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. No abuse of G1</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mild abuse of G1</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moderate abuse of G1</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Severe abuse of G1</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$**p < .01.$
Discussion

As expected, parents’ own histories of abuse predicted abusive behavior toward their children. None of the factors that had been implicated both as outcomes and precursors of maltreatment, and that were predicted to mediate the association, proved to do so. Rather, they explained additional variance. This suggests a direct effect for the intergenerational transmission of abuse. Reliance in the finding is strengthened by the fact that different reporters of abuse were used in the two generations, and reports were separated by a period of approximately 10 years. Furthermore, few other studies have tested the effects of a history of abuse while taking into account other risk factors, even though a number of researchers have advocated searching for factors that might mediate the association between the experience of abuse and abusive behavior.

The 23% rate of intergenerational transmission found in this study is comparable to Kaufman and Zigler’s (1987) best estimate for the rate of transmission of 30%. This once again illustrates that having a history of abuse is not a guarantee that one will become abusive. However, those parents whose children reported being abused were twice as likely to have been abused themselves than to have had no such history, confirming that having been abused is indeed a risk factor for transmitting abuse (Egeland, 1993).

Parental depression and PTSD and consistency of parental discipline had significant or marginally significant independent effects on the parent’s abuse of the child, although they did not mediate the association between being abused and becoming abusive. These effects were nonsignificant when interaction terms were introduced into the model. There was a significant interaction between parent depression and PTSD and a history of abuse, such that parents who had experienced high levels of abuse but who also demonstrated high levels of depression and PTSD were less likely to be abusive than parents who had experienced high levels of abuse but had low levels of depression and PTSD. It may be that parents who are depressed and experiencing symptoms of PTSD tend to withdraw from interactions with their children, making it less likely that they will be physically abusive. The negative correlations between parental depression and PTSD and consistency of discipline suggest that these symptoms do, however, take a toll on parenting skills.

Parents who experienced high levels of abusive acts and injuries, but who were consistent in their discipline, were less abusive than abused parents who were inconsistent disciplinarians. This is congruent with prior research suggesting that abusive parents may represent an extreme group of unskilled and ineffective parents (Burgess & Youngblade, 1988; Greenwald et al., 1997; Knutson & Bower, 1994; Zaidi et al., 1989). A parent who has very poor discipline skills is likely to experience a great deal of stress and frustration in dealing with their children. When this is coupled with a history of having received severe physical punishment, it is not surprising that the outcome might be the transmission of abusive treatment from one generation to the next.

The link between consistency of discipline and a parental history of abuse is an important one from a prevention standpoint. The combination of a history of having been abused and poor discipline skills could serve as an early marker for parents at risk for abusing their children. A number of studies have shown that parents can be taught skills to help them become more effective and consistent, thus reducing the aversive exchanges between themselves and their children and also reducing child behavioral problems (Brestan &
Analyses indicated that the effect of SES on parents’ abusive behavior toward their children was mediated by the parents’ own experiences of abuse. This is consistent with other studies showing that the effects of contextual factors like SES on behaviors may be mediated by more proximal factors, such as parenting skills (DeGarmo, Forgatch, & Martinez, 1999). Perceived early difficulty of the child was hypothesized to have a main effect on the child’s risk for abuse. Although the correlational analyses indicated a significant association between early childhood difficulty and abuse of the child, this association was nonsignificant once other risk factors were controlled in the multivariate analysis. It might be argued that the effect of perceived child difficulty on the child’s risk for being abused could be expected to be mediated by the parents’ skill at consistent, effective discipline. However, additional post hoc analyses not reported here did not support such a mediational model. Because the measure of early childhood difficulty was based on parent report, it is also possible that the correlation between difficulty and abuse was due to a bias of abusive parents toward viewing their children as problematic. A further test of the association of early difficulty and abuse, using a measure of early difficulty based on observation or the report of someone other than the parent, would be helpful.

As predicted, greater severity of experienced abuse was linked to more abusive behavior toward the next generation. This association was found even though less severe physical punishment was not included in the measure. Interestingly, it was only the parents who had experienced both multiple physically abusive acts and multiple injuries who demonstrated higher levels of abusiveness toward their children. This is consistent with other studies that have shown that as the level of the severity of experienced punishment increases so does the risk for abusing one’s own children (Zaidi et al., 1989). This is also consistent with findings that the experience of physical trauma appears to be more important than experiencing physically abusive acts (Milner et al., 1990). This finding also converges with the results of the regression analysis that demonstrate that as the level of experienced abuse rises so does the amount of abusive behavior toward one’s own children.

It should be acknowledged that although this study corrected some limitations of past research by using different informants for the two generations, using a conservative definition of abuse and including both parents, it still relied upon the retrospective reports of those informants. The informants could have recalled the events inaccurately. However, the instrument used, the AE-III, has been shown to be a valid indicator of abuse (Berger et al., 1988; Prescott et al., 2000). It should also be noted that the sample used here was selected to minimize the number of transitions in parental figures for children, to examine intergenerational transmission of abuse. Analyses showed that this subsample was less at risk in terms of income, parental psychopathology, and abuse than the rest of the sample. This might have resulted in the attenuation of some of the effects and even possibly an underestimation of the rate of transmission of abuse. As family transitions are a source of stress, it may be that the more family transitions, the greater the likelihood that abuse will occur. Additionally, the more parental figures with whom a child has contact, the greater the possibility that one of those figures might be abusive. The fact that youths in the subsample experienced less abuse than the portion of the sample who had experienced more transitions supports this idea.
Alternative mediators of the intergenerational transmission of abuse than those examined in the current study have been proposed from differing theoretical perspectives. Attachment theorists have shown that children who experience rejection and abuse from their parents may become insecurely attached to the parents (Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Schneider-Rosen & Cicchetti, 1984). This insecure attachment, if unresolved, may increase the likelihood that, as parents, these individuals will exhibit the rejecting, abusive behavior toward their own children that they internalized as children (Main & Goldwyn, 1984). Domestic violence (Cappell & Heiner, 1990; O’Keefe, 1995) and community violence (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998) also have been implicated as predictors of the abuse of children, and vulnerability to domestic violence (Cappell & Heiner, 1990) may be an outcome of a history of having been abused. Thus, these are additional possible mediators in the intergenerational transmission of abuse. Finally, factors such as social support may help to buffer the effects of having been abused as a child (Egeland et al., 1988; Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979; Milner et al., 1990). Sample size and the constructs assessed on this particular longitudinal study placed practical limitations on the factors that could be considered in the current study. Future studies using larger samples might be able to include these and other possible mediators.

Because of the small sample size, it was not possible to look at the effects of a history of abuse on becoming abusive separately for mothers and fathers. Thus, abuse scores were pooled across mothers and fathers in two-parent families. This could have obscured gender differences in rates of transmission. It also makes it difficult to determine whether the parent who had been abused, or had experienced the most abuse, was the actual perpetrator in cases in which the G2 youth reported mistreatment. However, the findings indicate that children are more likely to be abused in families in which either one or both parents have some history of having been abused. Future research should examine whether there is a greater likelihood that fathers, compared with mothers, who have been abused will mistreat the next generation. The issue of whether having two parents with a history of abuse puts a child at greater risk of being abused than having only one parent who was abused as a child should also be addressed.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that higher levels of abuse in childhood predict higher levels of abusiveness toward the next generation. This was the case even when other risk factors were included in the model. Furthermore, the experience of multiple injuries from physical abuse appeared to place parents at particular risk for transmitting abuse. The current study also demonstrated that consistent parental discipline may serve as a protective factor against repetition of a history of child abuse, although this finding should be replicated in a larger sample. Preventive intervention efforts with parents with a history of having been abused might focus on parenting skills, including consistent discipline. Furthermore, in the treatment of parents who are abusive, a focus on increasing the consistency of their discipline, using nonphysical discipline techniques, is indicated. In this way, the cycle of ineffective and violent parenting might be broken.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank John Knutson and John Reid and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.
Appendix

Items Used for the Abuse Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>G1 Abuse Items</th>
<th>G2 Abuse Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) When I was bad, my parents used to lock me in a closet.</td>
<td>(1) I had a parent or stepparent who used to lock me in a closet when I was bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) My parents used to punch me when they got angry with me.</td>
<td>(2) I had a parent or stepparent who used to punch me when they got angry with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) My parents used to hit me with their hands (other than spanking).</td>
<td>(3) I had a parent or stepparent who used to hit me with their hands (other than spanking).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) My parents used to kick me when they got angry with me.</td>
<td>(4) I had a parent or stepparent who used to kick me when they got angry with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) I was severely beaten by my parents.</td>
<td>(5) I had a parent or stepparent who severely beat me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) When my parents were angry, they sometimes grabbed me by the throat and started to choke me.</td>
<td>(6) I had a parent or stepparent who when they were angry, grabbed me by the throat and started to choke me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) When I did something wrong, my parents sometimes tied me up.</td>
<td>(7) I had a parent or stepparent who used to tie me up when I did something wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) I required medical attention (at least once) for injuries caused by my parents.</td>
<td>(8) I had a parent or stepparent who gave me injuries (at least once) that required medical attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) I received bruises from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td>(9) I had a parent or stepparent who caused an injury to me from discipline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) I received broken bones from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) I received burns from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) I received head injury from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) I received dental injury from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) I received cuts from the discipline used by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) I required stitches for injuries caused by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) I required a cast for injuries caused by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) I required hospitalization for injuries caused by my parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18) My parents used to hit me with the buckle on a belt when I did something wrong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19) My parents used hot water or a hot object to discipline me when I did something wrong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20) I have been hit by an object thrown by my parents when I did something wrong.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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Prescott, A., Bank, L., Reid, J. B., Knutson, J. F., Burraston, B. O., & Eddy, J. M. (2000). The veridicality of...


Résumé

**Objectif:** On a examiné les expériences de mauvais traitements que des parents auraient vécues en enfance et leur propre comportement abusif envers leur enfant. On a postulé que la psychopathologie du parent, la façon dont il/elle a été élevé(e) en bas âge et la cohérence au niveau de la discipline en sont des facteurs. De plus, on a étudié la probabilité que les abus sérieux en enfance puissent mener à un comportement parental abusif.

**Méthode:** 109 parents (G1) ont participé à une étude longitudinale ainsi que leurs fils(G2). Ces parents ont décrit leurs propres expériences en tant qu’enfants victimes de mauvais traitements. Dix ans plus tard, leurs fils ont décrit les expériences de mauvais traitements que le parent leur a fait subir. On a mesuré un nombre de facteurs additionnels tels le niveau socio-économique du parent, son
comportement antisocial, la dépression, le désordre de stress post-traumatique, la cohérence au niveau de la discipline et les difficultés que les fils ont perçu avoir vécues.

Résultats: Tel que l’ont dévoilé les enfants, les parents abusés en enfance étaient beaucoup plus portés à adopter des comportements abusifs envers leur enfant. L’étude dénote que ces expériences de mauvais traitements, la cohérence au niveau de la discipline, la dépression et le désordre de stress post-traumatique prédisent les agressions envers leur enfant. Contrairement à ce qu’on a postulé, les effets n’étaient pas entièrement sujets à des influences. Cependant, on a noté des liens considérables entre les expériences du parent et la cohérence au niveau de la discipline, ainsi que ces expériences et la dépression et le désordre de stress post-traumatique. Les parents qui ont vécu des agressions multiples et qui en ont subi au moins un effet physique étaient plus portés à adopter des comportements abusifs que les autres parents.

Conclusions: L’article discute de l’importance de ces constats par rapport à la prévention.

Resumen

Objetivo: Se examinó un modelo con la hipótesis de que la asociación entre la historia de abuso de un padre y la propia conducta de abuso del padre hacia su hijo o hija estaba mediatizada por la psicopatología parental, embarazos tempranos, y consistencia en la disciplina. Además, se examinó el efecto de la severidad del abuso sobre la posibilidad de convertirse en abusador.

Método: Los participantes fueron 109 padres (G1) y sus hijos arones (G2) quienes estaban involucrados en un estudio longitudinal. Los padres G1 reportaron sobre sus propias experiencias de abuso cuando eran niños. Diez años después, los jóvenes G2 reportaron sobre la conducta abusiva de los padres G1 hacia ellos. Se midieron otros factores, incluyendo estatus parental socioeconómico (SES), conducta antisocial, depresión y desorden de Stress Post-traumático (PPTSD), consistencia en la disciplina, y dificultad temprana percibida en los niños G2.

Resultados: De acuerdo a lo reportado por sus propios hijos, los padres que reportaron haber sido abusados en la niñez presentaban significativamente más posibilidad de tener conductas abusivas hacia la próxima generación. Los resultados indicaron que el abuso vivido por los padres, así como la consistencia en la disciplina y la depresión además del PTSD, eran predictores de abuso parental de los hijos. Contrario a las hipótesis, los efectos no estuvieron completamente mediatizados. Sin embargo, se obtuvieron interacciones significativas entre la historia de abuso parental y la consistencia en la disciplina, así como una historia de abuso y depresión y PTSD. Los padres que habían vivido la experiencia de múltiples actos de abuso y por lo menos un impacto físico tenían mayor probabilidad de convertirse en abusivos que los otros padres.

Conclusiones: Se discutieron las implicaciones de estos hallazgos para las intervenciones de prevencción.