



Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Child Maltreatment

Taylor Robinson, M.S.

Mary Breaux, Ph.D.

Though the terms child abuse and child maltreatment are sometimes used interchangeably, child maltreatment is considered an umbrella term that encompasses both child abuse and neglect. According to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, the federal definition for child maltreatment is “any recent act or failure to act on the part of the parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation” or failure to act which can cause “imminent risk of serious harm” to a child (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g). Nevertheless, each state also has its own legislation regarding child abuse and neglect. This report will provide a brief overview on the forms of child maltreatment. Following this discussion, theoretical frameworks that help understand the causes and consequences of child maltreatment are reviewed. Practical implications for practitioners working with abused or neglected children in Texas are then discussed.

Child Maltreatment Defined

The term *child maltreatment* includes physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect. These forms of abuse (i.e., physical, emotional/psychological or sexual) are harm that is inflicted on the child by the parent or caregiver. On the other hand, neglect involves actions that a parent or caregiver fails to do for the child. Neglect can also be further unpacked into four additional subcategories, which include physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical neglect, and educational neglect. We review each of these in more detail below.

Physical Abuse. Physical abuse, in the state of Texas, is defined as physical injury that results in substantial harm to a child. Physical abuse also includes the threat of harm (Fam. Code § 261.001). There are signs that can indicate that physical abuse has occurred and include multiple bruises that are at different stages of healing, unexplained injuries that are inconsistent with the child’s age, such as scrapes on the knees of a newborn, and injuries on the body that are normally covered by clothing, such as injuries on the thighs and chest (Saisan, Smith, & Segal, 2011). Other factors that should be considered are the child’s age, the location of the injury, injury pattern, and proposed explanations of injuries.

Sexual Abuse. In accordance with the state of Texas’ penal code, sexual abuse is defined as “sexual conduct harmful to a child’s mental, emotional, or physical welfare, including conduct that constitutes the offense of continuous sexual abuse of a young child, indecency with a child, sexual assault, or aggravated assault” (Fam. Code § 261.001). Failure to prevent sexual conduct harmful to a child, encouraging a child to engage in sexual acts, such as trafficking or prostitution, as well as child pornography are all included within the Texas definition of sexual abuse (Fam. Code § 261.001). Indicators of sexual abuse may include physical and behavioral

symptoms like sexually acting out, having difficulty walking or sitting, and pregnancy (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013).

Emotional Abuse. Texas legislation defines emotional abuse as “mental or emotional injury to a child that results in observable and material impairment in the child’s growth, development, or psychological functioning” (Fam. Code § 261.001). Additionally, causing or permitting a child to be placed in a situation to experience emotional abuse is also considered abuse. For example, humiliating a child in a public setting, constantly threatening a child, or ignoring/limiting physical contact with a child are all forms of emotional abuse (Saisan et al., 2011). The consequences of emotional abuse can be detrimental and long term (Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003). Emotional abuse is difficult to detect and, consequently, underreported (Lau, Krase, & Morse, 2009). Warning signs of emotional abuse include poor self-esteem, substance abuse, depression, suicidal thoughts, and destructive behavior or aggressively acting out. The warning signs may differ for boys and girls. Girls who are experiencing emotional abuse may be more socially withdrawn or depressed compared to boys who may act out with destructive or aggressive behavior (Lau et al., 2009).

Neglect. The state of Texas defines neglect as “acts or omissions by the person responsible for a child’s care, custody, or welfare” (Fam. Code § 261.001). *Physical neglect* includes: 1) placing a child or failure to remove a child from a situation that could result in bodily injury or risk of harm to the child; 2) failing to provide “food, clothing, or shelter necessary to sustain life,” excluding failure due to poverty, unless assistance was declined (Fam. Code § 261.001); or 3) leaving a child in a situation where the necessary arrangements for care of the child are absent, with the intention of not returning by the parent or caregiver (Fam. Code § 261.001). Physical neglect can also include abandonment, ignoring a child’s welfare (e.g., driving intoxicated with a child), or leaving a child in a car without supervision.

Medical neglect comprises “failing to seek, obtain, or follow through with medical care for a child,” (Fam. Code § 261.001) in which such failure results, or could potentially result, in death, disfigurement, or bodily injury. *Emotional neglect* involves a caregiver’s “inattention to a child’s emotional needs [or] failure to provide psychological care” to a child (Daigle & Muftić, 2016, p. 189). An example of emotional neglect is failure to thrive, which is when a child’s developmental growth is hindered by a parent or caregiver’s lack of affection. Lastly, *educational neglect* encompasses “failure to educate a child or attend to special education needs” (Daigle & Muftić, 2016, p. 189).

Theoretical Frameworks for Child Maltreatment

Theories have been formulated to help understand and explain the phenomena of child maltreatment. Such theories are applicable to the many forms of child maltreatment. These theories include attachment theory, social learning theory/intergenerational transmission of violence, general strain theory, self-control theory, filicide typology, and three-factor theory. Below each of these theoretical perspectives are reviewed in greater detail.

Attachment Theory. Bowlby (1973) hypothesized the theory of attachment and defined the concept of attachment as “any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, usually conceived as stronger and/or wiser” (p. 292). Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) expanded Bowlby’s (1973) definition of attachment and identified, as well as categorized, different types of behavioral attachment styles. These attachment styles include 1) secure attachment, 2) insecure-avoidant attachment, 3) insecure-ambivalent attachment, and 4) disorganized-disoriented attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986; 1990).

In a secure relationship, the parent or caregiver is attentive to the needs of the child. According to Tarabulsky and colleagues (2008), “a secure child who has received consistent, sensitive, and attentive care is able to strike a balance between autonomous exploration of his or her own environment and dependency” (p. 323). Second, in insecure-avoidant relationships, the child physically and emotionally avoids the parent or caregiver and does not rely on the parent or caregiver to help manage distress. Third, an insecure-ambivalent child “demonstrates resistance and behavioral conflict with the parent or excessive immaturity as a way of attracting and maintaining the caregiver’s attention and monitoring skills” (Tarabulsky et al., 2008, p. 323). The fourth attachment style, disorganized-disoriented, includes children who cannot depend on the parent or caregiver for comfort and protection. The parent or caregiver of a disorganized-disoriented child demonstrates atypical responses to infant signals and behaves in a frightening manner when near a child (Tarabulsky et al., 2008). Researchers have reported that physically abused or neglected children are more likely to exhibit insecure attachment than children who have not experienced physical abuse or neglect (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Lyons-Ruth, Connell, & Zoll, 1989; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Schneider-Rosen, Braunwald, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1985). Several researchers have indicated that the disorganized attachment is most common among maltreated children (Barnett, Ganiban, & Cicchetti, 1999; Carlson et al., 1989; Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2006; Lyons-Ruth, Connell, Grunebaum, & Botein, 1990; Zeanah & Smyke, 2005).

Social Learning Theory and the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence. Social learning theory is based on the idea that an individual learns through modeling, observation, and cognitive processes (Bandura, 1977). According to social learning theory, crime and criminal behavior is learned (Akers, 1973). When examining child maltreatment specifically, social learning theory posits that abusive behavior can be learned (Daigle & Muftić, 2016). According to social learning theory, parents and caregivers who abuse or neglect their children do so because they experienced or witnessed abuse or neglect at a young age (Daigle & Muftić, 2016). Indeed, Widom (1989a) suggested that “there is a higher likelihood of abuse by parents if the parents were themselves abused as children” (p.160).

The intergenerational transmission of violence, or the cycle of violence, is premised on the principles of social learning theory. Widom (1989a) noted that the intergenerational transmission of

violence refers to the “assumptions or hypotheses about the consequences of abuse and neglect in relation to a number of different outcomes” (p. 160). In other words, children who are exposed to violence in childhood view violence as acceptable behavior. Widom (1989a) indicated that children who have been abused or neglected have a higher risk of becoming criminals, delinquents, and violent. Individuals with a history of child maltreatment were three times more likely to perpetrate child abuse (Milaniak & Widom, 2015). Nevertheless, it is important to note that Widom (1989b) did not indicate that every abused or neglected child will become criminal or violent. Intervention and recognition of child maltreatment can reduce the chances of delinquency and criminal behavior in children who have experienced abuse and neglect (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Widom (1989a) also noted that, “it is important to understand the potential protective factors that intervene in the child’s development and to compare the development of those who succumb and those who are ‘resilient’” (p. 165). Protective factors, such as high intelligence, demographic characteristics (e.g., being White or older), or mentorship may mitigate the effects of child maltreatment and future adult violence (Wright, Turanovic, O’Neal, Morse, & Booth, 2019).

General Strain Theory. In terms of child maltreatment, the experience of abuse or neglect is seen as a severe strain, or negative experience, that may lead to delinquency (Agnew, 2001; 2013). More specifically, Agnew (2001) proposed that strains are seen as unjust, high in magnitude, associated with low social control, and create pressure to participate in criminal coping behaviors. Prior scholars (Iratzoqui, 2018; Watts & McNulty, 2013) have used the general strain theory framework to understand the impact of child abuse on delinquent behavior. Iratzoqui (2018) found that abused and neglected children were more likely to engage in substance abuse during adolescence. Watts and McNulty (2013) found individuals who experienced physical or sexual child abuse, particularly by a parent or caretaker, were more likely to engage in adolescent delinquency.

Self-Control Theory. Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory can be applied to child maltreatment. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), low self-control is not indicated by socialization or a learned behavior but by the “absence of nurturance, discipline, or training” (p. 95) from a parent or caretaker. Child maltreatment that occurs because of poor parenting can hinder the development of self-control in a child and, as a result, can possibly cause delinquency in adolescence and adulthood (Rebellon & Van Gundy, 2005). In essence, low self-control, caused by the experience of child abuse, can increase the likelihood of delinquency. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) established three minimum conditions that are necessary for proper parenting, which can affect an individual’s self-control: 1) nurturing a child (attachment), 2) watching a child (governance), and 3) acknowledging and punishing delinquent behavior (discipline; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Therefore, low self-control exhibited by delinquents may be partially the result of prior child maltreatment.

Resnick’s Filicide Typology. In some cases, the consequence of child maltreatment is the death of the child. Annually, 2.5% (approximately 500 arrests) of all homicide arrests in the United States are instances of filicide (Resnick, 2016). The term *filicide* is defined as the murder of child by a parent or caregiver (West, 2007). Infanticide, the killing of child under the age of one, and neonaticide, the killing of a child within the first 24 hours of life,

fall under this more general category of filicide. Based on a review of cases from 1757 to 1967, Resnick (1969) created a five-category typology of filicide which included: 1) altruistic filicide, 2) acutely psychotic filicide, 3) unwanted child filicide, 4) accidental filicide, and 5) spouse revenge filicide. The first category, altruistic filicide, occurs when the parent kills his or her child because he or she believes it is in the best interest of the child. West (2007) described two acts associated with altruistic filicide. The first act occurs when the killing of a child is a result of the parent's suicidal thoughts in which the parent "may believe the world is too cruel to leave the child behind after his or her death" (West, 2007, p. 50). This act of filicide, for example, can be demonstrated by a parent with depression due to poverty who does not want to leave the child behind without adequate care. The second act occurs when the parent wants to alleviate the child's suffering, such as a child with a "disability, either real or imagined, that the parent finds intolerable" (West, 2007, p. 50). These associated acts are not mutually exclusive. The second category, acutely psychotic filicide, is the murder of a child as a result of the parent suffering from a psychotic mental illness. An example of acutely psychotic filicide is the Andrea Yates case. Yates drowned her five children in bathtub at her home in Houston, Texas. The children's ages ranged from six months to seven years old. Prior to the drowning of her children, Yates exhibited depression with psychosis symptoms, which were heightened during her postpartum periods. Yates had previously been hospitalized four times and claimed that killing her children saved them from eternal damnation (West, 2007). The third type of filicide, unwanted child filicide, is defined as when a parent kills a child because he or she did not want the child. The fourth type, accidental filicide, is when the child is unintentionally killed by the parent or caregiver as a direct consequence of abuse. This type of filicide includes Munchausen syndrome by proxy, which involves the fabrication of a child's illness by a parent or caretaker (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The final filicide type is spouse revenge filicide, which occurs when one parent kills the child to get revenge on the other spouse or partner because of either abandonment of the relationship or outside affairs (West, 2007).

Three-Factor Theory. Lesnik-Oberstein, Cohen, and Koers (1982) developed a three-factor theory on the cause of physical abuse, and psychological/emotional abuse. Lesnik-Oberstein, Koers, and Cohen (1995) hypothesized that when three factors are present, the risk of maltreatment increases: 1) "high level of parental hostility," 2) "low level of parental inhibition of overt aggression," and 3) "focusing on parental aggression on the child." The type of abuse experienced by a child is dependent upon the ratio of factor one and factor two. The higher the ratio, the greater the likelihood of experiencing physical abuse. Conversely, as the ratio decreases, risk of psychological/emotional abuse increases. If the ratio of parental hostility and parental inhibition of overt aggression is low, then the risk of child abuse should remain low. Additionally, other factors that connect with each of the three factors include lack of coping skills, a parent's childhood upbringing characterized as affectionless, high stress levels, high levels of strain, one's own past abuse, substance abuse, and low levels of empathy, can affect the likelihood of abuse (Lesnik-Oberstein et al., 1995). The three factors and the subfactors help explain how parental hostility may lead to child abuse, specifically physical and psychological abuse.

Implications for Texas

Theoretical frameworks can assist in helping to understand the causes and effects of child maltreatment. The theories can be ap-

plied to all forms of child maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect. Nevertheless, it is unlikely one theory alone can explain why child maltreatment occurs. By using multiple theoretical frameworks, we are able to better understand child maltreatment and its consequences. The Texas Family Code requires educational and medical personnel, such as teachers, day-care employees, nurses and doctors, and clinical and mental health professionals; law enforcement and legal personnel, such as juvenile probation officers, juvenile detention officers, attorneys; and social workers to report suspected child maltreatment, usually in the form of calling 911 or a CPS agency (Fam. Code § 261.101). With the understanding of these theoretical frameworks, multiple institutions, such as schools, family violence organizations, CPS agencies, and federal agencies can enact laws and regulations that recognize child maltreatment, encourage reporting, and provide training/prevention on the issue of child maltreatment.

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