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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to review the problem of child abuse and neglect, discuss the implications of the abusive/neglectful environment, and present possible intervention strategies focused upon both parent and school or day care settings. The introductory section focuses briefly on the complexities of defining child abuse and neglect and offers a definition from an environmental viewpoint. In the second section the scope of the problem is discussed. Three explanatory models of child abuse are discussed in the third section. The models discussed are the psychiatric, the sociologic, and the social-situational. The fourth section examines environmental effects on child rearing and specifies appropriate child rearing environments. In the concluding and fifth section, aspects of Helfer's (1978) intervention program (based on the thesis that abusive parents have not progressed normally through developmental stages), and the Head Start example of community intervention to improve children's environments are discussed. (Author/RH)

THE CONDITION OF CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

by

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(Abstract)

Educators and child developmentalists continually assess appropriate environments for the optimal education and development of the child. The phenomenon of child abuse/neglect has been viewed as a social occurrence but not as a developmental environment. Since it is apparent that significant numbers of children do spend some time exposed to atmospheres that may be described as either neglectful or abusive, it is worthwhile to examine this social condition from the environmental perspective. It is the purpose of this article to review the problem, discuss the implications of the abusive/neglectful environment and present possible intervention strategies focused upon both parent and school or day care setting.

I. Introduction

The concept of child abuse is historically ancient. Death in childhood was so common as to be rarely investigated prior to the early 1800's. It has been the gradual awareness of child rights interposed with some conceptualizing of appropriate child development that has permitted heretofore frequent patterns of child maltreatment and care to be defined as unacceptable. In 1961 Dr. C. Henry Kempe resurrected the phrase "child abuse" in a paper he presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics. In 1962 his findings regarding "The Battered Child Syndrome" appeared in print (Kempe 1962). The phenomenon of child abuse was thus defined in terms of a medical model, and remained within this framework until the concept of neglect was added to the term, at which time the maltreatment of children by whatever manner or mean expanded into a social issue.

A definition of the terms child abuse/child neglect is far more complex than might be thought upon initial inquiry. Both cultural and social standards impact upon the definitional criteria. Because of the nature of the subject (e.g. abuse (and sometimes neglect) are often manifest in physical findings) a medical parameter must remain in the definition. Progressing from the simple to the more complex, child abuse/neglect may be defined in terms of an action, a result, or a culturally defined condition. Buss (1961) perceived abuse as an aggression toward another individual which results in injury to the recipient. This definition does not concern itself with intentionality, thus presents serious limitations.

Kempe and Helfer (1972) give recognition to intentionality in their definition: "...any child receiving non-accidental physical injury (or injuries) as a result of acts (or omissions) on the part of his parents or guardians." Intentionality, however, is an elusive concept, primarily because of the inability to observe or measure it, thus creating serious problems with regard to reliability and validity of judgements which may surround it.

Judgement operates within the cultural arena, giving abuse and neglect a social label. This label is then applied to the observed behavior or outcomes. There are obvious problems with this framework because of the wide variability in limiting parameters assigned to an act or behavior (i.e., an injury or condition may be labeled as abusive in one social context but not in another). An adequate definition of abuse or neglect must recognize the impact of social and community standards of appropriate behavior.

For the purpose of this paper, which addresses child abuse and neglect from an environmental viewpoint, child abuse or neglect can appropriately be termed non-accidental (or intentional) injury as a result of acts of omission or comission on the part of a parent or guardian, and which violate prevailing community standards regarding appropriate child care and treatment. It should be noted that injury can be broadly defined to include both physical and emotional occurrence, and likewise can be the result of omission of appropriate caregiving behavior as well as consequent to aggressive behavior.

II. Scope of the Problem

Because of the strong emotional as well as, for many, despicable nature of abuse and neglect of children, it is unlikely that good approximations of the numbers of afflicted children can ever be determined. Most available statistics reference abused children because the most lucrative source of these numbers is hospitals and physicians. Estimates vary from 60,000 case/year (Kempe 1973) to 1.5 million cases per year (Fontana 1973). Eighty percent are estimated to be under age six (Gil 1970). Neglect, by contrast, is less discernible and thus much less available to estimate.

Child Protection Report (1980) subcategorized neglect and estimated 108,000 cases of physical neglect, 181,500 cases of educational neglect (intentional withholding from school for more than five days per month) and 59,400 cases of emotional neglect for the year 1980.

Most estimates of child maltreatment combine abuse and neglect and for the purposes of this paper it is appropriate to follow this lead. Despite the unreliability of the estimates the maltreatment of children exists in sufficient numbers to force recognition of the fact that significant numbers of children spend some part of their developmental life in environments which threaten their physical well being.

III. Child Abuse Models

There are three differing models of child abuse most commonly employed when attempting to develop some explanatory rationale for the condition (Parker and Collmer 1975). The most predominant model is psychiatric in origin and focuses upon the parent as the principle cause of abuse.

The sociologic model emphasizes social values, cultural organization, community standards, and the family as contributors to abuse. The third model is termed the social-situational model and, as implied by the name, considers situational variables as primary in explaining abusive conditions and behaviors. All three models offer important insights into both causes and effect concerning child abuse. However, when considering the phenomenon as an environmental influence on child development, the sociological and social situational models interact to provide the applicable framework within which to explore the effects of the abusive environment. The role of the parent is not intended to be ignored, and will, in fact, be addressed at the point of intervention. At this juncture it is intended to look at environment as an entity independent of the individuals who create and manipulate it.

The sociological model is strongly environmental in its orientation, thus important when assessing circumstantial effects on child development. This model addresses the very basic impact of both social and cultural values upon child rearing practices. There are multiple sociological variables to consider, each having a unique contribution to the environment of the developing child. Obvious social considerations include socio-economic status, educational level of parents, family size and structure and family-community relationships. In an effort to maintain a narrow scope focusing on the environment as an agent for abuse, it seems appropriate to consider in some detail the cultural attitudes toward violence as well as the relationship of the family as an institution in the community.

It has been proposed that, in general, American society in particular tends to sanction physical response to conflict (Gil 1970) which, in turn, accounts for the level of child abuse present in this country. In 1972 the murder rate was reported to be 8.9 per 100,000 population (Kelly 1973). Kempe (1973) projected 175-225 cases of child abuse per million population per year. While not precisely equal there is close approximation between the numbers of murders and number of abused children in the population, with murders being somewhat higher. Nonetheless, this does indicate a fairly high level of violence by comparison to other societies in which violence is reported to be less (Steinmetz 1974). Steinmetz (1974) further found that violence in families is, not surprisingly, adopted by children in these families as a means of settling conflict, both within and outside the family. To this extent it appears that children contribute actively and thus perpetuate the level of violence and aggression within their own environment.

Because of the evidence suggesting this replication in patterns of violence, it becomes not surprising that physical punishment is widely used as a disciplinary and child rearing technique. It has been reported that 93% of all parents use physical punishment, many confining the behavior to young children (Stanck and McEvoy 1970). From the developmental perspective it would be worthwhile to examine the effects of a punitive child rearing environment.

It goes without saying that every child has the right not to grow and develop in a punitive or violent environment. However, it is obvious that for many children this right is violated. From a purely developmental view, a pertinent question concerns appropriate developmental stage

progression. To the extent that certain environments are likely to facilitate stage progressive development, it would be logical to likewise assume that certain other environments would be likely to inhibit or deter development. However, this appears not to necessarily be the case. Burgess and Conger (1978) studied both normal and abusive/neglectful families, and found no differences in behavior between normal and abused/neglected children. This is surprising and may be an artifact of either the sample, the data analysis or both. There is other research evidence which fails to support this finding (Friederich and Boriskin 1976). It seems conceptually difficult to view an abusive or neglectful environment as having no effect on normal child development. The essential question is one of methodology and design. It seems likely that developmental effects do exist, it is more a matter of finding them through appropriate investigation.

The social effects, while not entirely separate from the stage developmental effects, are somewhat more easily observed. It has long been recognized that abusive parents were, themselves, abused as children. Further, Erlanger (1974) suggests that children who experience physical aggression within the family will translate this behavior pattern to those outside the family. Bandura (1967) first pointed out the circularity of the violent act when used as a disciplinary technique. It is apparent that physically punishing a child in an effort to restrain physically aggressive acts on the part of the child is confusing and models physical aggression as a means of control. Additionally, there is a possible value-behavior dissonance factor operating in social situations when violence and aggression is condemned, yet physical

punishment employed. Thus, from the sociologic perspective violent behavior and cultural acceptance of violent behavior tends to beget itself.

The family-community relationship impacts upon child abusive environments to the extent that it is community standards and norms that provide the parameters by which acceptable child rearing environments are measured. These standards influence both the family and the educational system. The community is also the locus of change in environmental criteria. Thus, to the extent that a society of community has the right to determine appropriate environments for all of its members and, in particular, its children, it becomes the social responsibility to define non-appropriate as well as beneficial environmental circumstance.

The social situational model of child maltreatment, because of its interactive character, yields valuable insights into both causality and environment. This model considers abusive behavior to be a consequence of certain individual traits of the parent and the child in combination with certain situational circumstance. The situational circumstance can be of a chronic nature, as described by social class variables or of an immediate nature, as described by individual or familial stress. It is important to note that there is likelihood of a significant inverse relationship between social class and stress; the lower the socio-economic class the higher the stress level. Child abuse and neglect have been shown to cross all socio-economic barriers (Steinmetz and Strauss 1974), however evidence does exist that shows it to be more prevalent among the lower class. Gil (1970) conducted a large, nationwide survey in orde to develop some demographic descriptors of child abuse/neglectful families and found that undeniably the lower socio-economic (and

educational) classes did show a statistically higher incidence of abusive and neglectful behavior toward their children.

Other social stress/social class interactives include housing and living conditions, numbers of children in the family and available outside (community) resources that are family supportive. All of those variables come together under the singular heading of environment. This environment becomes abusive, according to this model, when an outside circumstance acts in a catalytic manner to trigger a violent act.

There exists an abundant body of literature which carefully examines parent-child relationships from all possible perspectives, further subdividing the issue into mother-child and father-child interaction. Recently there has been some emphasis upon the role of the child in child abuse (Milow & Lowrie 1964; Sameroff & Chandler 1975). Overall findings indicate that certain children do exhibit particular characteristics which predispose them to maltreatment by adults. It is vital to recognize, however, that these predisposing characteristics are not under the direct control of the child, hence the role played is not an active one. The increased incidence of child abuse that occurs among premature infants (Fontana 1968) provides a case in point.

Young (1964) performed a classic study which attempted to differentiate between abusive and neglectful families and, in fact, found marked differences between them. Physically abusive parents have a particularly unhealthy interaction with their children. The child who is the recipient of the abuse seems to have some pathologic meaning to the parent(s). In neglectful situations, by comparison, it appears that it is the

personality characteristics of the mother, as primary caretaker, that are both key and found to be more diffuse than in physically abusive families.

Burgess and Conger (1978) conducted a microanalysis of interaction in abusive, neglectful and normal families. In combining both abusive and neglectful family interaction it was found that parents in these families demonstrated significantly lower rates of interaction over all, and appeared more likely to emphasize negative perspectives in their relationship with their children. To be scored as negative a behavior must include a statement that indicates dislike, disapproval, or lack of support of the recipient's actions, characteristics or possessions. It becomes appropriate to question the emotionally developmental effects of an environment containing a significant quantity of negative behaviors. To the extent that self confidence, self esteem and self concept are developed by the observation and experiences of an individual within his environment, negative feedback of an ongoing and continual nature would obviously affect development of these emotional and personality traits.

IV. Child Rearing Environments

It is beyond reasonable dispute to recognize an abusive and/or neglectful environment as less than conducive to child development. Accepting that premise, it would seem worthwhile to briefly examine some environmental effects on child rearing as well as appropriate child rearing environments.

Broadly, the environment is the arena within which all development occurs and, to the extent that environment impacts upon and influences it, development can be viewed as being environmentally controlled. Some theorists have suggested that there are critical periods or discrete stages in human development (Piaget 1969; Erikson 1963). This concept of critical period refers to the belief that some environmental occurrences have a maximal influence on a child's development at a particular time, and perhaps less or negligible effects before or after the critical time. This, of course, suggests that certain developmental acquisitions can only occur at a particular time. Referencing back to the developmental effects of an abusive or neglectful environment it would logically follow that, for a particular child, the developmental effects of such an environment would directly depend upon the particular developmental stage of the child.

A second issue which concerns the stage concept is the presuppositions which surround mastery and progression. Basic to stage theory is the assumption that successful mastery at one level is necessary before the next stage level can be attained. Hence, it could be posited that certain environments considered not conducive to facilitating development could, in fact, arrest normal developmental progression, at least for a period of time.

The time problem is an essential one, and concerns the issue of permanency. In effect, the question becomes one of whether or not development which becomes interrupted ever rights itself so that, over time, it becomes equalized and normal. Deprivation research by Kagan

(1978) indicates that, in fact, children do overcome early social deprivation and, in the case of his work, by age 11 the children in his study were considered developmentally normal. Jenks et al. (1972) further examined environmental deprivation particularly as it pertains to educational systems and concluded that it is clearly not one particular environmental consequence that bears prime responsibility or exerts primary control over development. Rather, it is the interaction of many environmental factors which serve to impact upon and thus control developmental progress. Jenks further suggests that it appears to be the home environment that is more influential than the school environment in children's lives. This is not surprising when one considers the primacy of the parent-child relationship. It also follows that an abusive home environment would logically produce developmental effects that, while not easily measured would nevertheless exist, particularly in light of the commonly accepted notion that every individual is, in part, a producer of his/her environmental experiences.

Although Jenks (1972) suggests that the home environment surpasses the school environment in importance to the child, it would still seem of some benefit to briefly examine the educational environment. Within this environment, the role of the teacher and the role of punishment would seem particularly relevant when considering child maltreatment.

Katz (1970) examined the role of teacher (care-giver) in the nursery school and day care setting, and then developed three basic role models.

1. Maternal role model. The maternal role model emphasizes keeping a child healthy, comfortable, and safe, providing affection, providing security, providing friendly, everyday responses by smiling, nodding.

and casual verbal comment, and making the child aware of danger. The teacher is a mother substitute who fulfills the mother's responsibilities and duties while the child is at the day care center.

2. Therapeutic role model. The therapeutic role model emphasizes a child's need for emotional support and his need for help in expressing inner feelings, working out tensions, and resolving conflicts.

3. Instructional role model. The instructional role model emphasizes the planned transmission of knowledge and information; the direct instruction of a child in developing skills, strategies, and interests.

In addition to providing teachers and caregivers a basis from which to define and develop their role, these models also provide a basic definition of a nourishing, facilitating child development atmosphere. Translating the components of this model from teacher to environment, it is apparent that it is of prime importance that the needs of the child be both paramount and directive. In essence the child must have some control over his own development by providing input into the environment in which it occurs.

Not to be ignored within the educational framework is the day care environment. There exists considerable evidence in favor of day care as a child rearing environment (Belsky and Steinberg 1978; Golden and Birns 1976; Moore 1975; Golden et al. 1978; Doyle 1975) and further evidence to suggest that a lack of available day care places some children in neglectful child rearing environments (Dail 1980). The need for day care is increasing at a time when availability is declining. Thus the implications of the non-availability of day care

of creating potentially neglectful child rearing atmosphere must be addressed.

Punishment in various forms is a commonly used mechanism by which behavior in children is enrolled. Considerable controversy exists, however, with regard to both its usefulness and appropriateness. There are multiple variables which impact upon the effects of punitive behavior by adults toward children (Parke 1972). These would most commonly include timing of punishment; intensity; the nature of the relationship between the adult and the child; rationale (and ability of child to comprehend the rationale); and consistency of punishing behaviors. It should also be noted that punishment is a broad based term encompassing a wide range of behaviors from verbal to physical.

In general there is little doubt that punishment is an effective means of controlling behavior, particularly on a short-term basis. However, the question of cost cannot be ignored. Determination of the price paid for using punishment to modify behavior is a complex process, and represents the sum total of the interplay between the aforementioned impacting variables. A socializing environment heavily weighted with punitive experiences is likely an expensive one in terms of the development of the child. Punitive environments, having some parallel and commonality with frankly abusive environments can thus be assessed by the same criteria. Indications are that these environments do not facilitate or enhance the development of a child experiencing this environmental atmosphere.

In sum, the adult is a powerful orchestrator of appropriate environmental circumstances for the child. Because of certain abilities inherent in adulthood and lacking in childhood, the adult has ownership of power, control and responsibility for generating the atmosphere for the child.

The child has limited, but existent ability to manipulate his environment, but may lack appropriate cognitive ability to do so in an active and beneficial manner.

V. Intervention

There are multiple approaches to intervention in child abusive/neglectful situations, each having a particular focus. Commonly, and appropriately, intervention programs place strong emphasis upon not only parent-child interaction, but on parents as individuals. Secondarily, intervention incorporates community resources in terms of available day care and Head Start programs. Part of the rationale of this appraoch lay in "shared" child rearing and parent education, both of which relieve parents of the total, and sometimes overwhelming burden of responsibility for child rearing.

While various intervention programs exist and are far too numerous to examine here, there is one program that bears some notation because of its unique developmental approach. Developed by Helfer (1978) this program is based upon the stage theory of development, adhering to the supposition that stage progression is dependent upon mastery at each particular level. It is Helfer's thesis that abusive parents have failed to progress satisfactorily through the normal developmental stages and as time has gone on a wide gap has developed between chronological age and developmental level. This gap becomes pathologic when the distance widens to the point that certain age appropriate behaviors occur (i.e. parenthood) without the support of appropriate, synchronized emotional development. Based upon this premise, and using the psychiatric technique of regression, this program takes the adult through an accelerated course

in human development beginning with trust and control and finally issues of human relationships. The obvious goal is that of increased understanding of self which hopefully will radiate into increased ability to positively interact with other adults and children.

Helfer's approach is based upon a negation of Kagan's (1978) belief that over time delayed development will equalize itself. It is possible that certain environmental constraints may prevent this equalization in some cases, allowing for the age-developmental level gap to be perpetuated. Conversely, in order for the gap not to develop it may be necessary for certain environmental conditions to exist. Helfer reports high success rates utilizing this approach.

With regard to community intervention, the Head Start Program provides a case in point. Originally, it was developed to provide disadvantaged (or neglected by some definitions) children with an advantaged beginning, in education specifically, that their home environments, mostly because of SES, could not provide. By incorporating a high degree of parental input into the program, both parent education and parent responsibility became a shared responsibility. Four of the eight original goals of the Head Start Program pertain to the child in the context of both his family and his school. These goals include (Grotberg 1969):

1. Increasing the capacity of the child to relate positively to family members and others while strengthening the ability of the family to relate positively to the child.

2. Developing, in both child and family, a responsible attitude toward society.

3. Fostering constructive opportunities for society (schools and educational programs) to work together with the poor (families) to solve their families.

4. Increasing the sense of dignity and self worth within the child and family.

Clearly Head Start, a forerunner of more modern day care, had in mind to support families who were under uncommon stress. Strong emphasis was placed upon the self-worth/self-esteem aspect of the program which is notable with reference to treatment programs for child abuse/neglect programs (Kempe & Helfer 1972; Helfer 1978). Virtually all of these programs emphasize increased parental self esteem as vital to successful intervention and maintenance of the new, non-abusive environment.

By way of a personal note, when we developed the Head Start Pilot Project in Denver, strong concerns were voiced by parents concerning the environment that their child was experiencing. Many saw themselves as helpless in controlling both themselves and their environment despite a strong desire to do so. We worked very hard at helping parents realize their own strengths and ability to manipulate their environments, and found parents to be eager and responsive students. For myself, as director of this pilot project, I began to see Head Start as an early intervention opportunity for parents, while their children were young and most pliable. My strongest recommendation concerned the maintenance and further development of the parent-focused aspect of Head Start.

In sum, adult input into the child's environment is at the root beginning of developmental growth. It is falacious to believe development to be so rigid and inflexible as to be unable to sustain negative adult

input. However, it is equally in error to believe that a nurturant environment is not important to normal sequential growth. The adult parent who has benefit of experience and cognitive understanding not yet possessed by the child bears prime responsibility for orchestrating the child's environment. Baumrind (1972) speaks with clarity of parental control. The message reflects parental control of both environment and self, thereby translating into the avoidance of acts of committed violence or ommited caregiving within the parent-child relationship.

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