

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Young Children's Adjustment as a Function of Maltreatment, Shame, and Anger

Bennett, D. S., Sullivan, M. W., & Lewis, M. (2005). Young children's adjustment as a function of maltreatment, shame, and anger. *Child Maltreatment*, 10(4), 311-323. doi:10.1177/107755950278619

SUMMARY: An examination of young children's adjustment to maltreatment was conducted. More specifically this study tests a model that states a child's shame is the link between maltreatment and anger, and anger is the link between and child's shame and behavior problems. Overall, the findings suggested that shame and anger, as well as the type of maltreatment and child age, are important factors in explaining some behavioral adjustments following a history of maltreatment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Physical child abuse, but not neglect, was related to increased shame felt by the child
- Both child abuse and shame were related to age, such that the older children had more abuse allegations and exhibited more shame.
- Anger exhibited by the child was also connected to shame, behavior problems, and externalizing problems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Encourage military-connected youth and children to participate in programs that help them become more aware of their feelings of shame and anger; thereby, developing ways to effectively manage their behavior
- Provide military families resources that build awareness around the effects of child maltreatment on children's behavior

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Include activities that help military-connected abused youth and children to decrease their propensity towards shame as well as better manage their shame
- Develop curriculum for military families that focuses on the inclusion of targeted prevention of child neglect and abuse strategies

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Build awareness across military branches around the importance of supporting and promoting effective parenting for Service members and their partners
- Recommend education of professionals who work with military families (e.g., child caregivers, mental health, and education professionals) on the potential effects of child maltreatment on the child and their behaviors

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METHODS

- Participants were children enrolled in publicly funded preschool or therapeutic programs that were known to include children referred by Child Protective Services.
- A female examiner, who was blind to the child's diagnosis, conducted the evaluation of each child using several different child development measures.
- Analysis examined the relationships between maltreatment (physical abuse and neglect), emotional behaviors, and behavior problems among participants.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 177 children - 93 boys, 84 girls who ranged in ages from 3 to 7 years old. Children with a substantiated history of sexual abuse and children with known histories of mental retardation were excluded from the study.
- Mothers of 90 children had a history of one or more substantiated incidents of maltreatment. Among this group, 44 had a history of neglect, 21 a history of physical abuse, and 25 a history of both physical abuse and neglect.
- Participants' mothers' ethnicity was as follows: 67% Black, 18% White, 11% Hispanic, and 4% other.

LIMITATIONS

- The most severe cases of physical abuse in which the child is removed from the home were not included; therefore, the findings may have been different if this population was included.
- The study recruited participants through CPS records; therefore, parents without a CPS record who exhibit high rates of maltreatment may restrict the true relation between maltreatment and child adjustment.
- This study was not designed such that directionality of the relationship between anger and shame could be determined; therefore, findings need to be interpreted with caution.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore the effects of military branches increased support of the military family on rates of maltreatment
- Conduct a longitudinal study that measures maltreatment, emotional behaviors, and behavior problems across multiple time periods
- Examine the chronological relationship between the shame and anger of military-connected youth and children who have been maltreated

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