

Maltreatment and Life Stressors in Single Mothers Who Have Children with Developmental Delay

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Abstract

Frequency of child abuse and neglect was reported for the 226 single mothers of children with developmental delay and the 2,734 mothers of children with no delay from the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect. Neglect was most frequently reported, significantly more so for the mothers of children with delay. These mothers were also reported significantly more frequently than the mothers of children without delay to maltreat longer term, to have lower income and levels of employment, to have children with numerous child functioning concerns, and to have a number of caregiver concerns (e.g., mental health issues, few social supports, low education, and being maltreated as a child). Alcohol abuse was relatively high for both groups of single mothers. Increased support for single mothers of children with developmental delay seems warranted.

Child abuse and neglect have been reported increasingly more frequently in recent years. One factor that appears to be related to increased risk of abuse and neglect in mothers is chronic stress related to lifestyle factors (Zuravin, 1988). This may be, at least in part, because life stress is associated with decreased coping strategies, and increased levels of child behaviour problems (Gottlieb, 1998).

Single mothers, in particular, appear to experience a high number of interrelated stressful life situations related to increased risk for child maltreatment. These include poverty (Belsky, 1993), everyday life stressors, depression, history of partner abuse, low self-esteem (Lutenbacher, 1998, 2002), insecure adult attachment style (Moncher, 1996), low cognitive skills, violence sexual abuse experienced in childhood, and poor quality of family and other social relationships (Hall, Sachs & Rayens, 1998).

Single mothers who have children with developmental delays appear to be still more likely to experience a wide variety of interrelated stressful life situations (Wikler, Haack & Intagliata, 1984). In addition, the responsibility of raising children with disabilities falls almost solely on the mother, and is typically felt strongly (Bernstein, 1990; Renwick, Brown & Raphael, 1998). The importance of mothers who have children with developmental delay being able to manage multiple roles has been particularly noted (Bottlieg, 1997; Gabor & Farnham, 1996). This may not be possible where life stressors are great (Marcenko & Meyers, 1991), and this, in turn, may contribute to the reason that numerous studies have noted increased risk of child maltreatment for children with developmental delay (Fudge Schormans, 2003; Fudge Schormans & Brown, 2002).

The purpose of the present analysis was to attempt to shed more light on this issue by examining rates of reported child abuse and neglect in single mothers with and without developmental delay from an available national (Canadian) database, and reporting a number of family life stressors for the two groups of women in three categories: household characteristics, child concerns, and caregiver (single mother) concerns.

Method

This secondary analysis was carried out using a study sample comprised of 226 single mothers who had children with developmental delay within the 7,672 cases of child maltreatment sampled in the *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS)* (for full sampling details see Trocmé et al., 2001). These 226 single mothers represented 33.93% of all CIS families who had children with developmental delay (n=666). The 2,734 single mothers who had children with no developmental delay (39.02% of all families with no developmental delay) functioned as a comparison sample.

Results

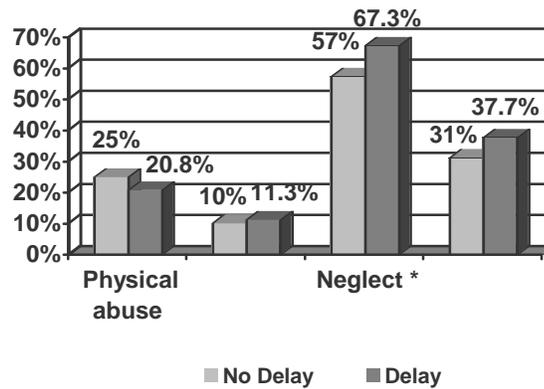
Types of maltreatment

The percentage of single mothers who had children with and without developmental delays and who were reported for each of four main types of child maltreatment is shown in Figure 1. (Note: percentages exceed 100% because some mothers were reported for more than one type of maltreatment.) Sexual abuse was reported least frequently, and neglect was

reported most frequently. Neglect was reported significantly more frequently ($\chi^2=5.82, p=.009$) for single mothers who had children with developmental delay than for the mothers of children without delay.

Single incident vs. long term maltreatment. The pattern of single incident and long term maltreatment for single mothers of children with and without developmental delay showed frequencies that differed significantly from those expected ($\chi^2=3.77, p=.034$). Single incident maltreatment accounted for 11.4% of maltreatment reported for single mothers of children with developmental delay but 22.4% of that reported for the other single mothers. By contrast, maltreatment that exceeded six months duration accounted for 53.2% of maltreatment reported for the mothers of children with delay but only 37.2% of that reported for the others. The percentages of single mothers reported for maltreatment that was more than a single incident but less than six months were similar for both groups of mothers.

Figure 1: Percentage of Four Types of Maltreatment Reported for Single Mothers with and without Developmental Delay



Family life stressors

Single mothers who had children with and without developmental delay were contrasted using a series of chi-square tests for three categories of family life stressors.

Household characteristics. Single mothers who had children with developmental delay had significantly lower ($p < .05$) household income and level of employment than similar mothers whose children did not have delay.

Child concerns. Data was recorded for 14 child concerns. For the children with developmental delay, significantly higher frequencies ($p < .05$) were reported for physical disability, health conditions, depression or anxiety, drug or alcohol related birth defects, psychiatric disorders, self-harming behaviours, behaviour problems, negative peer involvement, violence toward others, inappropriate sexual behaviours, and irregular school attendance. No significant differences were found between children with and without delays for the remaining three concerns: running away, substance abuse, and criminal behaviour, all of which occurred infrequently.

Caregiver concerns. Data was also reported for 10 caregiver (single mothers) concerns. Single mothers who had children with developmental delay were reported significantly more frequently ($p < .05$) than the other mothers for seven of the 10 concerns: cognitive impairment, mental health problems, physical health problems, drug abuse, few social supports, low education, and maltreated as a child. Of these, mental health, few social supports, low education, and maltreated as a child were most often reported (respectively, 39.4%, 52.7%, 60.2%, and 48.6% of single mothers of delayed children). Alcohol abuse was high for both groups of mothers (30.5% for mothers of children with delays, and 27.7% for mothers of children without delays), although the groups did not differ significantly. No differences in reported frequencies were found between the two groups of mothers for criminal involvement or being part of a violent relationship. Violent relationship involvement was relatively high for both groups, however (17.7% for mothers of children with delays and 14.4% for mothers of children without delays).

Discussion

The results indicate that neglect is the most frequently reported form of child maltreatment among single mothers, and that this is particularly the case for single mothers who have children with developmental delay. This may account, at least in part, for the maltreatment associated with the latter group of mothers being described more frequently as long term.

The high number of life stressors examined in the three categories—household (problem) characteristics, child concerns, and caregiver

concerns-for which the mothers of children with developmental delay were reported more frequently is quite dramatic. These single mothers are caring for children with more problems, have fewer resources, and have more problems themselves. It may not be entirely surprising, given this, that neglect was so frequently reported. The implication for service is that these mothers require greater supports to care for their children. This supports views expressed in the literature that risk of maltreatment is rooted within the disadvantaged positions of women and their children in society (Febbraro, 1994), and that concrete and emotional support from others may decrease the potential for child abuse in single mothers (Moncher, 1995).

To do this in the most effective way, it would be interesting to understand through future research if the factors that lead to maltreatment (especially neglect) are related to disability, and what resources are inherent in single mothers who have children with developmental disabilities and who maltreat those children.

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