

# The Prevention & Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect: Identification of High-Risk Parents

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## Introduction

The primary prevention of child abuse and neglect is the single most sought after goal in the helping service fields today. Theories and hypotheses have been tested, examined and reexamined in attempts to identify the most efficient and valid ways of preventing injuries to children by their parents. Of all the primary prevention strategies tested, parenting education for pre-parent and parent populations is often singled out as the strategy most likely to prevent initial injuries to children. The notion that parenting education can be the most effective primary prevention strategy is based on the theory that children learn abusive parenting practices from observing their parents and/or experiencing abuse during the process of growing up. Learned patterns of abusive parenting are transmitted from parent to child and are replicated by the child upon becoming a parent in their own right.

## The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2)

The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) is an inventory designed to assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of adult and adolescent parent and pre-parent populations. Based on the known parenting and child rearing behaviors of abusive parents, responses to the Inventory provide an index of risk for practicing behaviors known to be attributable to child abuse and neglect. The AAPI-2 is the revised and re-normed version of the original AAPI first developed in 1979.

## Purpose of the AAPI-2

The AAPI-2 is designed to assist professionals and paraprofessionals in assessing the parenting and child rearing attitudes of adolescent and adult populations. Developed from the known parenting and child rearing practices of abusive and neglecting parents, data generated from the administration of the AAPI-2 indicate degrees of agreement and disagreement with maladaptive parenting behaviors. As such, responses on the AAPI-2 provide an index of risk (high, medium, low) for practicing abusive and neglecting parenting and child rearing behaviors. The AAPI-2 is useful in assessing individual strengths and weaknesses involved in child rearing. Research data indicate the AAPI-2 may be useful in several ways:

1. ***To assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of adolescents.*** Adolescents have usually developed fairly well defined attitudes toward raising and parenting children by the time they reach junior and senior high school. As schools are continuing to recognize their responsibility for providing parenting education, the AAPI-2 provides school personnel with useful information in recognizing students with specific learning needs in appropriate parenting and child rearing practices. As such, the AAPI-2 can be a primary preventive measure of child abuse and neglect.
2. ***To assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of prospective parents.*** A standard practice among most hospitals and clinics is to offer prenatal childcare classes and postnatal parenting classes. The instructional goals and objectives of these courses usually consist of teaching parents and prospective parents proper nutrition, general care, behavior management, etc. Information generated from the AAPI-2 can be very useful in developing pre and postnatal instructional goals and objectives.
3. ***To assess changes in parenting and child rearing practices after treatment.*** Agencies that provide parenting education to abusive parents often lack a valid and reliable inventory to measure post-treatment effectiveness. Pre and post assessment can provide the examiner with information regarding the attitudinal changes in parenting.
4. ***To screen and train prospective foster parent applicants.*** Current practices by county agencies in screening qualified applicants for foster parenting very seldom incorporate the assessment of their parenting and child rearing attitudes and practices. Based on letters of recommendation, job and financial stability, and appearance of the home living conditions, individuals are often selected to parent and nurture children and adolescents who have been abused and neglected. Maltreatment of children in foster homes is all too common a story. Assessing the parenting applicants for screening and training purposes could help increase the quality of foster parent placements.
5. ***To assess the parenting and child rearing attitudes of prospective employees for child care staff, teacher aides, residential care staff and volunteers.*** An ideal use of the AAPI-2 is to administer the inventory to individuals who will be working with children and adolescents in residential care programs, or as teacher aides, or volunteers in "Big Brother" or "Big Sister" programs. Information generated from the inventory can be used for screening and training purposes.

## What the AAPI-2 Measures

Responses to the AAPI-2 provide an index of risk in five specific parenting and child rearing behaviors:

Construct A	Inappropriate Expectations of Children
Construct B	Parental Lack of Empathy Towards Children's Needs
Construct C	Strong Parental Belief in the Use of Corporal Punishment
Construct D	Reversing Parent-Child Family Roles
Construct E	Oppressing Children's Power and Independence

### Construct A: Inappropriate Expectations of Children

A parenting practice that is very common among reported cases of child abuse and neglect is the inappropriate expectations parents have for their children. Beginning very early in the infant's life, abusive parents tend to inaccurately perceive the skills and abilities of their children. Inappropriate expectations of children are generally the result of three factors:

1. Parents simply don't know the needs and capabilities of children at various stages of growth and development. Ignorant of this knowledge, expectations are made that often exceed the skills and abilities of the child.
2. Many parents who abuse their children generally lack a positive view of themselves and consequently of their children. Inadequate perceptions of self as an adult generally stem from early childhood experiences of failure, ridicule, and disappointment. These patterns of childhood failure are repeated to yet another generation where demands are made for children to perform tasks that they are emotionally, physically, or intellectually incapable of performing.
3. Abusive parents generally lack the empathy that is required to determine what an appropriate expectation is for children at different stages of development. Lacking empathy, (described in more detail in the following construct), is a major contributor to the inappropriate demands parents make of their children.

The effects of inappropriate parental expectations upon children are debilitating. Many children perceive themselves as being worthless, as failures, and as unacceptable and disappointing to adults.

### Construct B: Parental Lack of Empathy Towards Children's Needs

Empathy is the ability to be aware of another person's needs, feelings, and state of being. It is the ability to place the needs of another as a priority. Empathic parents are sensitive to their children and create an environment that is conducive to promoting children's emotional, intellectual, physical, social, spiritual, and creative growth. Empathic parents understand their children from the inside, not from the outside as an interested observer.

Many professionals are of the opinion that the trait of empathy exists in children at birth and is fostered through the manner in which they are treated during the process of growing up. Parents lacking sufficient levels of empathy find children's needs and wants as irritating and overwhelming. Everyday normal demands are perceived as unrealistic resulting in increased levels of stress. The needs of the child come into direct conflict with the needs of the parent, which are often similar in magnitude. Lacking an empathic home life, children often fail to develop a solid moral code of conduct. Right and wrong, cooperation, and kindness are not important because they are not recognized as important values. Others are devalued as "self" takes center stage. The impact of one's negative actions on another is muted as the ability to care about the needs or feelings of another is not important. Children with low levels of empathy are often labeled as troublemakers, disobedient, and often engage in acts of cruelty to themselves, others, and animals.

### Construct C: Strong Parental Belief in the Use of Corporal Punishment

Physical punishment is generally the preferred means of discipline used by abusive parents. Throughout history, the use of corporal punishment has been well documented. Rationale for the practice includes: to teach children right from wrong; as a parenting practice sanctioned by the proverbs of the Old Testament; as a cultural practice of discipline; to provide punishment for children's misbehavior in a loving way; just simply to punish misbehavior; and because it produces quick results.

Abusive parents often believe children should not be "given into" or allowed to "get away with anything." They must periodically be shown "who is boss" and to respect authority so they will not become sassy or stubborn. Abusive parents not only consider physical punishment a proper disciplinary measure, but also strongly defend their right to use physical force.

Physical attacks by the abusing parent are not often a haphazard, uncontrolled, impulsive discharge of aggression by the parent toward his/her children. To the contrary, studies appear to indicate that abusive parents utilize physical punishment as a unit of behavior designed to punish and correct specific bad conduct or inadequacy on the part of children. Much of what abusive

parents find wrong with their children are the same things for which they were criticized and punished for as children, hence the punishment carries the approval of traditional family authority and an aura of righteousness.

The effects of physical abuse are demonstrated in the observed inadequate behavior of children. It is a common tendency for abused children to identify with the aggressive parent in an effort to gain some measure of self-protection and mastery. Abused children often develop a set pattern of discharging aggression against the outside world in order to manage their own securities.

Additionally, children who see and experience recurrent serious expressions of violence in their own family learn that violence is a useful way to solve problems. These children, upon becoming parents, tend to punish their children more severely. As a result, abused children often become abusive parents.

#### **Construct D: Reversing Parent-Child Family Roles**

A fourth common parenting behavior among abusive parents is their need to reverse parent-child roles. Children are expected to be sensitive to and responsible for much of the happiness of their parents. Parent-child role reversal is an interchanging of traditional role behaviors between a parent and child, so that the child adopts some of the behaviors traditionally associated with parents. In role reversal, parents act like helpless, needy children looking to their own children for parental care and comfort.

Although the phenomenon of role reversal is often associated with an inability to be empathically aware of the children's needs, the two behaviors are markedly different. When abusive parents fail to show an empathic awareness of their children's needs, the children are often left to care for themselves. Carried to the extreme, children are emotionally and/or physically neglected or abused. The emphasis is not placed on children assuming the role of the "nurturing parent" as in role reversal. In the latter situation, children are an integral part of the family functions often becoming a source of authority, control, and decision-making.

The effects of role reversal on abused children are destructive. Assuming the role of the responsible parent, children fail to negotiate the developmental tasks that must be mastered at each stage of life if they are to achieve normal development and healthy adjustment. Failure to perform any of the developmental tasks not only hampers development in succeeding stages, but also further reinforces feelings of inadequacy. Children in a role reversal situation have little sense of self and see themselves as existing only to meet the needs of their parents.

#### **Construct E: Oppressing Children's Power and Independence**

Closely aligned with the value of physical punishment and the lack of an empathic awareness of children's needs is the belief that children's independence and power need to be oppressed. The age-old phrase "the terrible twos" most adequately describes this construct. Parents fear that if children are allowed to challenge parental authority, they will become "acting-out" and disrespectful. Hence, obedience and complete compliance to parental authority is demanded. When children's power and independence are oppressed, they are not allowed to challenge, to voice opinions, or to have choices, but rather are told to "do what they are told to do" without question. This demand for compliance to parental authority has many limitations.

1. ***Obedience breeds powerlessness.*** When independence is not fostered as a state of growth, the feeling of dependence becomes a dominant personality trait. Independence fosters power – a sense of self in comparison to others and one's environment. The young child who explores is learning about cause and effect, relationships between concepts: the "if – then law" of logic and nature. For young children, the ability to say "no" is a way of establishing boundaries and developing a sense of power, both necessary for success in life. Obedience to parental rule, however, breeds a sense of helplessness and dependence at a time when learning to be a separate being is critical.
2. ***Obedience breeds inadequacy.*** Inadequacy is the perception that self or others are "less than, incapable, or inferior." By demanding obedience, parents model that power is something to be used on others to get them to do what you want. Power is equated to control. The sense of powerlessness described earlier fosters a personal sense of inadequacy, as being a decision maker for your own life is not an option. Powerlessness, excessive dependence, and a sense of personal inadequacy are common traits of many obedient children.
3. ***Obedience also breeds rebelliousness.*** History teaches us over and over again that the oppressed will rise up to be recognized. It's inevitable. The human spirit cannot be denied its existence. Power struggles, acting out behavior, disobedience are all common behaviors resulting from years of obedience and complete yield to parental rule.
4. ***Obedience breeds compliance – to all.*** Doing only what one is told to do often teaches children a generalized learned response of compliance. When those in perceived power make a demand, like a child's peer group, once again, the learned response is to comply. In the experimental world of teenagers, common sense to stay away from drugs and alcohol, vandalism, and crimes against the community are overwhelmed with the compliance of peer pressure. Simply, children who have been raised as obedient to authority lose their ability to withstand peer pressure. Saying "no" to drugs and other inappropriate behaviors will remain only a concept, not a practice.

5. ***Obedience breeds followers, not leaders.*** Thinkers, problem solvers, visionaries, and leaders are made from early home environments that foster those traits. Obedience as a dominant parenting practice to oppress children's power and independence often has long-lasting, devastating consequences as observed in children and adults unable to make wise choices, take the initiative, and provide the leadership critical to nurturing parenting.

## Intended Populations

Both adult parent and pre-parent as well as adolescent parent and pre-parent populations. Adolescents as young as 13 years old can respond to the AAPI-2.

## Formats

The AAPI-2 is available on CD-ROM and at our new website [www.assessingparenting.com](http://www.assessingparenting.com).

The AAPI-2 on CD-Rom automatically scores and provides printed results.

**WWW.ASSESSINGPARENTING.COM** is the new online testing and scoring Website service for the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory. Advantages of scoring the AAPI online include:

1. **Administer and Score the AAPI-2 online Anytime.** Assessing Parenting is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year anywhere in the world you have access to the World Wide Web. There is no need to carry the CD Rom version or the paper version of the inventory once you establish an account.
2. **Cost Savings.** The ease in which data can be entered and analyzed will dramatically reduce staff time and in manually scoring each inventory.
3. **Accuracy.** Let [assessingparenting.com](http://assessingparenting.com) do the scoring for you. Once the demographic information and the responses to the items have been entered, [assessingparenting.com](http://assessingparenting.com) automatically scores and stores your data. Scoring errors go down: accuracy goes up.
4. **Data Privacy.** Only the agency staff assigned to the account will have access to your data.
5. **Data Export.** [Assessingparenting.com](http://assessingparenting.com) allows you to export saved data into a text style program that converts easily to other statistical programs for more in-depth analyses.
6. **Individual and Group Profiles.** [Assessingparenting.com](http://assessingparenting.com) provides you with hard copies of the Parenting Profile, along with the numeric value of each item's response. Group profile data and standard deviations are also provided along with the dates of the first and latest administration for each client.
7. **Manage Data by Program.** All data are stored in Programs. Programs are the various interventions offered by an agency. Storing data by Programs allows agency staff to review the outcome data of specific interventions.
8. **Clinical Interpretation of Parenting Profiles.** General clinical information is provided to help staff interpret the parenting profiles and to create an effective intervention designed to build positive, nurturing parenting behaviors.
9. **Download Paper Copies of the AAPI-2.** Once you establish an account, you also receive permission to download and print all the Form A's and Form B's you need. ***Please Note: The AAPI-2 on line paper version is presented in a different format than the old, hand-scored regular print version of the AAPI. Only use the [assessingparenting.com](http://assessingparenting.com) paper version to ensure accuracy of data entry and analysis.***
10. **One-Year Free Data Storage.** At the end of each Program, staff is encouraged to download and save their data on their hard drive or on a CD Rom. Participant data can be exported as a tab-delimited text file, which can be imported directly into your favorite spreadsheet program. After 1 year, the data will be deleted and stored in a back up server. Retrieving data after 1 year will result in additional charges

To find out more, log onto [www.assessingparenting.com](http://www.assessingparenting.com)

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