

The Identification of High Risk Parents: A Comparative Analyses of the Parenting Attitudes of Abusive, Non-Abusive, and Foster Parents

Submitted by

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess expressed similarities and differences in the parenting and child rearing attitudes of abusive, non-abusive, and foster parents in Wisconsin. Such assessment could lead to 1) the identification of foster parents whose attitudes towards parenting and child rearing are high risk for physical abuse; and 2) the establishment of a high risk standard of parenting attitudes which could be utilized for screening prospective parents. Utilizing the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI), the results of the study showed variability in scores of +2 to -4 standard deviations among foster parents in all four parenting constructs: Expectations of Children, Empathy, Physical Punishment, and Role Reversal. Inter-group comparisons indicated the attitudes expressed by foster parents were significantly more abusive ($p < .001$) in all four constructs than the expressed attitudes of non-abusive parents. When compared to abusive parents, foster parents were significantly ($p < .001$) more positive in attitudes of empathy towards children's needs, and demands of children to meet parents' needs. However, no significant differences were found between abusive parents and foster parents in the inappropriate expectations of children and the utilization of physical punishment as a means of discipline.

Introduction

The U.S. Children's Bureau estimates that there is a yearly average of 350,000 children in foster family care homes throughout the country (Frank, 1980). The number of children placed each year in foster care due to abusive and neglecting parent interactions is increasing proportionately to the number of validated reported cases of child maltreatment. In Wisconsin, a review of the 1983 child abuse and neglect investigative report published by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Human Services indicates that approximately 5% of all the child abuse cases submitted to the Central Registry that year ended up receiving foster care placements. A percentage of abused children twice as great is thought to receive foster care services in abuse and neglect cases not reported to the central registry.

Foster care placement for abused and neglected children has been ideally designed to provide a temporary stimulating and supportive developmental environment (Kempe & Kempe, 1978). That is, placing abused and neglected children in foster care keeps them safe during a time of family crisis. However, a critical problem in placing some children in foster care is the continued abuse perpetrated by foster parents. Abuse committed by foster parents to foster children in Wisconsin accounts for nearly 2% of the reported cases made in 1983.

Murphy (1976), in an interview with former foster children who were abused by their natural parents lists comments recounting types of abuse that occurred during foster care that were similar to the abuse that occurred with their natural parents: favoring some (biological) children over other (foster) children, misusing funds allotted for foster care, inappropriate restrictions (phone conversations limited to three minutes, no second helpings on food, etc.), no warning before being moved, no involvement in activity planning, and lack of privacy especially during the initial adjustment period. Many recounted physically abusive experiences as well as admitting to having felt sexually threatened by their foster fathers.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to assess expressed similarities and differences in the parenting and child rearing attitudes of abusive, non-abusive, and foster parents in Wisconsin. Such assessment could lead to 1) the identification of foster parents whose attitudes towards parenting and child rearing are high risk for physical or emotional abuse; and, 2) the establishment of a high risk standard of parenting attitudes which could be utilized for screening prospective foster parents.

Procedures

The Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI), developed by Bavolek, Kline, and McLaughlin (1978), was utilized to assess the parenting attitudes of the three parent populations. The AAPI is a 32-item inventory designed to assess parenting and child-rearing attitudes in four areas: A: Inappropriate Parental Expectations; B: Lack of Parental Empathy Towards Children's Needs; C: Believe in the Use of Corporal Punishment as a Means of Disciplining Children; and D: Reversing Parent-Child Roles. Research in utilizing the AAPI to assess parenting differences between abusive and non-abusive parents indicated abusive parents express significantly ($p < .001$) more abusive attitudes in each of the four parenting areas than non-abusive parents (Bavolek, 1982; Bavolek, 1984; Figoten and Tanner, 1981).

The AAPI was administered to 97 parents identified by County Departments of Social Services as physically abusive; 99 foster parents; and 107 non-abusive parents by the child protection worker assigned to the cases during one of their regularly scheduled meetings. The inventory, along with a description of the study, was mailed to 110 foster parents throughout the state from which 99 completed inventories were returned. One hundred and twenty-five (125) descriptions of the study and accompanying copies of the AAPI were distributed to 12 pre-schools for distribution by the teachers to non-abusive parents of the pre-school children. One hundred and seven (107) inventories were returned completed. Care was taken to ensure parents of pre-school children completing the inventory did not have previous histories as abusive parents.

Results

Interest existed in determining the degree to which parents differed in their attitudes towards parenting and child rearing. To this end, attitudes towards parenting analyses were conducted. Factor scores were selected as the unit of standardization for interpreting respondents' scores in each of the constructs. Factor scores express the degree to which each respondent possesses the quality or property that factor describes. Under certain circumstances, factor scores have less error and are therefore more reliable measures. Factor scores have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

The range of factor scores for each of the constructs generated from the administration of the AAPI to the parent populations is set forth in Table I.

A review of the data set for in **Table 1** indicates foster parents had a range of factor scores -4 standard deviations below the mean and +2 standard deviations above the mean. A closer examination of the table shows that 8% to 9% of the foster parents scored -1 to -4 standard deviations below the group mean in Constructs A, B, and C. In Construct D, 19% of the foster parents scored -1 and -2 standard deviations below the mean with the largest percentage -1 standard deviation below the mean. Approximately 15% of the foster parents had factor scores in all constructs +1 and +2 standard deviations above the mean.

Interest existed in inter-group comparisons of the scores generated from the administration of the AAPI to foster parents with the scores of abusive and non-abusive parents. To this end, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed. The data displayed in **Table II** details the results of the ANOVA between the scores on the AAPI by foster parents and non-abusive parents.

The data generated from the ANOVA indicates an overall significant difference ($p < .001$) between the factor scores in all four constructs of foster parents and non-abusive parents. Examination of Table I indicates that the difference was in favor of the non-abusive parents. That is, the mean scores of non-abusive parents are higher indicating less abusive attitudes toward parenting and child rearing than foster parents.

The data displayed in **Table III** details the results of the ANOVA between the scores on the AAPI by foster parents and abusive parents.

A review of the data from the ANOVA indicates significant overall mean differences ($p < .001$) in Constructs B and D. An examination of the mean scores presented in Table I show this difference to be in favor of the foster parents. Foster parents express more empathic attitudes towards the needs of children and make fewer demands on them to meet the needs of the foster parents than abusive parents. However, no significant differences were found between foster parents and abusive parents in their expectations towards children and their belief in the use of corporal punishment.

Summary

A review of the intro-group analyses conducted on the response to the AAPI by foster parents shows a large commonality of beliefs exists among foster parents regarding the parenting and rearing of foster children. Within the population, however, 8% to 18% fall one to four standard deviations below the group mean. These data indicate a sizeable

population of foster parents are apt to place inappropriate demands on their foster children, express less empathy toward the needs of their foster children, use corporal punishment as a means of discipline, express less empathy toward the needs of their foster children, use corporal punishment as a means of discipline, and demand foster children to meet their needs by reversing parent-child roles. The impact of these deviations in expressed parenting attitudes is greatly magnified in light of the fact that, as a population, the expressed beliefs toward parenting by foster parents are significantly ($p < .001$) more abusive than the expressed beliefs of non-abusive biological parents in all four areas assessed. In comparison to abusive parents, foster parents express greater ($p > .001$) empathy toward the needs of their foster children and are less apt to reverse parent-child roles. However, the developmental expectations foster parents have regarding their foster children, and their belief in the use of corporal punishment do not differ from the expressed attitudes of known physically abusive parents. In essence, the overall parenting and child rearing attitudes of foster parents are less nurturing than their non-abusive biological counterparts, more empathic and nurturing than known child abusers, tempered, however, with strong beliefs regarding the use of corporal punishment and expectations of their foster children that are often developmentally inappropriate.

Discussion

The findings of the study have several implications for placing abused and neglected children in foster care and in preventing the recurrence of abuse and neglect. Initially, the belief that foster placements most closely approximate normal, nurturing home environments has to be qualified. In comparison to the standard called "non-abusive," exemplified by nurturing biological families, foster placements appear to fall quite short. However, in comparison to the standard called "abusive," exemplified by known child abusers, abused and neglected children in foster care will often find more consistently caring, nurturing adults interested in creating healthy temporary home environments. Such experiences, however, will be cautioned by the children by the continued use of corporal punishment in foster care and the inappropriate, excessive demands placed on foster children by their foster parents. The use of corporal punishment by more empathic foster parents only tends to reinforce the concept that children should be hit, and adults have that right. The sanctioned use of corporal punishment in foster care and the inappropriate expectations placed on foster children further reinforces feelings of helplessness, rebelliousness, low self-esteem, and poor self-concept in the child initiated in the prior abusive environment.

The assessed attitudes of foster parents may come as little surprise to professionals working with foster parents. Traditionally, the selection process of adults for foster parenthood has focused little attention on parenting attitudes. Steady income, a perceived stable home environment, lack of a known criminal record, letters of reference attesting to the applicant's ability to provide a nurturing environment, a personal interview with the county agency, and a willingness on the part of the prospective foster parents to be generally available to shelter all children, regardless of race, age, sex or developmental history have been set as standards for foster parenthood. Little to no emphasis is placed on assessment of parenting attitudes or child-rearing practices. Eight to 18% of the foster parents surveyed fell one to four standard deviations below the group norm (established by other foster parents) in all four assessed parenting areas. In comparison to the attitudes expressed by other foster parents, expressed parenting beliefs which fall one to four standard deviations below the norms are considered high risk for abuse. It appears screening prospective foster parent applicants with regard to their parenting and child-rearing attitudes may do much to prevent the occurrence of abuse and neglect of foster children.

Foster placements are a vital intervention strategy for abused children and abusive parents. Every care should be taken to ensure abused children grow up in an environment which models appropriate adult-child interactions.

Table I
Factor Score Distribution by Constructs

Construct	Parent Population	x	St. Dev.	% of Responses					
				-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1
A. Expectations of Children	Abusive	0.4071	.78678	0%	0%	0%	17%	71%	8%
	Non-Abusive	.47336	.68781	0%	0%	0%	19%	62%	15%
	Foster	.12088	.92922	0%	2%	0%	6%	77%	14%
B. Empathy	Abusive	.05200	.72097	0%	0%	4%	8%	71%	17%
	Non-Abusive	.88951	.54906	0%	0%	2%	15%	66%	17%
	Foster	.47204	.87134	2%	0%	0%	7%	78%	13%
C. Belief in Corporal Punishment	Abusive	-.01071	.69485	0%	0%	0%	17%	75%	4%
	Non-Abusive	.44840	.66279	0%	0%	2%	17%	66%	15%
	Foster	.02429	.80865	0%	2%	0%	7%	76%	13%
D. Role Reversal	Abusive	.30987	.68104	0%	0%	4%	8%	67%	17%
	Non-Abusive	.92362	.76588	0%	0%	4%	9%	70%	17%
	Foster	.65161	.81698	0%	0%	1%	18%	67%	13%

Table II
Analysis of Variance: Foster Parents and Non-Abusive Parents

Construct		Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Squares	F	Tail Probability
A. Expectations of Children	MEAN	11.25394	1	11.25394	15.23	0.00
	ERROR	106.37888	144	0.73874		
B. Empathy	MEAN	59.08100	1	59.08100	96.38	0.00
	ERROR	88.27238	144	0.61300		
C. Belief in Corporal Punishment	MEAN	7.12108	1	7.12108	12.17	0.00
	ERROR	84.29057	144	0.58535		
D. Role Reversal	MEAN	79.07954	1	79.07954	123.25	0.00
	ERROR	92.39343	144	0.64162		

Table III
Analysis of Variance: Foster Parents and Abusive Parents

Construct		Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Squares	F	Tail Probability
A. Expectations of Children	MEAN	0.50438	1	.050438	0.62	0.4336
	ERROR	98.85490	121	0.81698		
B. Empathy	MEAN	5.30482	1	5.30482	7.43	0.00
	ERROR	86.36036	121	0.71372		
C. Belief in Corporal Punishment	MEAN	0.00356	1	0.00356	0.01	0.939
	ERROR	75.18830	121	0.62139		
D. Role Reversal	MEAN	17.85758	1	17.85758	28.40	0.00
	ERROR	76.07855	121	0.62875		

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