



**National Resource Center for  
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*at the Hunter College School of Social Work*

## **Information Packet**

**Prevention of Repeat Maltreatment: Addressing Contributing Factors**

**Based in an Ecological Model**

By Daisy Boyd

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**129 East 79th Street • New York, NY 10021  
TEL 212/452-7053 • FAX 212/452-7475  
[www.nrcfcppp.org](http://www.nrcfcppp.org)**

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# **Prevention of Repeat Maltreatment: Addressing Contributing Factors**

## **Based in an Ecological Model**

### **Relevant Data and Statistics**

Child abuse and neglect is defined by The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation; or An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Children’s Bureau Annual Report, 2008, summary xi).

- Once an act of child maltreatment has been substantiated by a child protective services worker, CPS works to intervene thus preventing another occurrence of abuse.

Unfortunately, there are times that CPS’ intervention efforts are unsuccessful. When multiple occurrences of maltreatment are substantiated, we are confronted with the issue of repeat maltreatment (Mallon & Hess, 2005, p. 297-299).

- In an effort to combat the recurrence of child maltreatment, The Children’s Bureau has set a national standard for the “absence of maltreatment occurrence” at 94.6% (Children’s Bureau Annual Report, 2008, p. 29).
- As of 2007, 24 states have been in compliance with this standard, with the average for all states being 93.2% (Children’s Bureau Annual Report, 2008, p. 29). Although this percentage standard seems high, it still ultimately means that of the over 750,000 children who were the victims of abuse or neglect in 2007, over 97,000 were subjected to repeat maltreatment (Children’s Bureau annual report, 2008, p. 37-43).

With this data in hand, we must ask ourselves how we can improve interventions and lessen the number of occurrences of repeat maltreatment.

Certain factors have been identified as reliable predictors for repeat maltreatment. According to Iowa's Department of Human Services, re-abuse is more likely to occur among "larger families, younger caregivers, single parent households, families who lack social supports, families in extreme poverty, families with multiple needs, and families engaged with multiple public systems..." Caregiver challenges include: "alcohol/drug abuse, mental illness, serious health problems, and domestic violence" (Children and Family Services, 2009). It can be agreed that societal as well as individual issues can have a tremendous impact upon families and how they interact. Parenting can at times be a daunting task for even the most supported and financially secure adults. As social workers we must identify these issues and work to direct our interventions to the unique needs of each family.

### **Contributing Factors to Consider**

#### *Corporal Punishment and its Implications*

One frequent recurring theme when addressing abuse and neglect as well as its recurrence was the issue of using corporal punishment to discipline children. According to the study entitled "Spanking Children: Evidence and Issues", 74% of parents of children 17 and under spanked and 94% of parents of children who are between 3 and 4 years old use spanking as a form of punishment (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 99). The refrain from parents loudly states that spanking is seen as a necessary and effective disciplinary tool (Bolen, McWey & Schlee, 2008; Kazdin & Benjet, 2003). Spanking can often be a cultural issue that begins with the *intention* of being a

quick and direct corrective tool. As Kazdin and Benjet note, hitting children is “intertwined with religious beliefs, cultural views, government, law, and social policy...” (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 100). The study goes on to acknowledge that spanking is rarely endorsed in academic and professional settings but is “alive and well” in society (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 100).

Unfortunately when the use of a physical reprimand is paired with the multiple stressors mentioned earlier, the physical interaction can evolve into abusive behavior. What adds to the confusion of the topic and brings about additional “grey area” in terms of abuse, is the fact that sometimes corporal punishment has been shown to have some positive results, typically in the form of “immediate compliance” (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 100-101). The long term effects of using violence to quell “bad” behavior, however, is harder to capture. Bolen et al.’s article quoted parents as stating that they believe in spanking and they did not “buy-in” to it when CPS workers would try to have them use other tools such as “time out” (Bolen et al., 2008).

To effectively address abuse and its recurrence, we must a) become culturally competent around issues of disciplining children and b) gather more data on effective ways to change the thinking for parents that corporal punishment is indeed the most effective disciplinary tool (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 102). Once a parent has been identified as an abuser, it is critical to take the time to listen to the parent and directly address the contributing stressors in an effort to combat repeat maltreatment (Bolen et al., 2008). Overall, spanking has been found to be associated with “decreased internalization of morals, diminished quality of parent-child relations, poorer child and adult mental health, increased delinquency and antisocial behavior for children, and increased criminal and antisocial behavior for adults”; additionally, it is linked to “an

increased risk of being a victim of abuse or of abusing one's own child or spouse" (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003, p. 101).

### *Implications of Neglect*

Neglect is often not taken as seriously as abuse. Interventions are less aggressive and often not as quickly implemented. In fact, in the article "Chronic Child Neglect: Needed Developments in Theory and Practice," Dee Wilson and William Horner (2005) assert that "CPS agencies may respond to the chronicity of neglect by under serving them compared to physically abusing or sexually abusing families" (p. 472). It is commonly known that CPS workers are overworked and have limited resources, so it would stand to reason that on the priority list, abuse would perhaps take precedence over neglect with regard to interventions. Neglect of children has also been tied to the same factors of poverty, poor mental health, drug/alcohol abuse, and domestic violence as is abuse (Wilson & Horner, 2005). If we act to intervene at the first signs of neglect, we may be able to avoid a recurrence of neglect or the progression of neglect into abuse.

## **Intervention**

### *Implementing an Ecological Approach*

Even three decades ago, it was asserted that child maltreatment should be considered from an "ecological perspective" (Bolen et al., 2008, p. 342). This simply means, as per Urie Brofenbrenner, that families should be viewed within the framework of "individual factors, to community issues and broader social contexts" (Bolen et al., p. 341). This ecological perspective has the potential to positively impact child abuse and neglect in general, but with regards to

recurrence, once there is a documented case of maltreatment, the causal factors can be dissected and interventions can be applied that are uniquely targeted to each case.

One study conducted with parents who were identified as “at-risk” for being repeat abusers noted that “intervening with an understanding of the identified stressors from an ecological perspective seems critical because the majority of these families experienced multiple, concurrent, interrelated stressors (i.e., poverty, single parenting, parenting adolescents, and social isolation)” (Bolen et al., 2008, p. 352). Jeannette Harder goes on to say that issues ranging from substance abuse to lack of safe housing to domestic violence and more, all contribute to increasing the risk of a child becoming abused, but these factors are rarely considered amidst current research on child maltreatment prevention (Harder, 2005). Additionally, in the article: “Are At-Risk Parents Getting What They Need? Perspectives of Parents Involved with Child Protective Services”, the author asserts that CPS often implements programs that they presume will be beneficial, but ultimately the perpetrators of the abuse do not feel that their needs are being addressed. Parents in this study felt unsupported and felt that CPS did not consider the cultural context of the family (Bolen et al., 2008).

The conclusion that we can draw from this is that it would be impossible to implement effective intervention strategies if we are not equipped with the data necessary to effectively inform practice. By ignoring the voices of parents in this equation, we are not shaping the interventions to address the real needs, but rather the perceived needs, of the offending adult. The ecological framework encourages us to take into consideration all the players and the context in which we find them.

### *Strategies to Combat Repeat Maltreatment:*

- More research on individual and communal factors affecting repeat occurrences of maltreatment (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003)
- Longer studies on the success rates of CPS family interventions (Harder, 2005)
- Considering the voices of the “offending” parents/adults (Bolen et al., 2008)
- Intervening at the first signs of neglect (Wilson & Horner, 2005)
- Training CPS workers to be more culturally competent (Wilson & Horner, 2005)
- Addressing the culture of corporal punishment (Kazdin & Benjet, 2003)
- Adapting intervention strategies that are targeted at the unique needs of each family (Bolen et al., 2008)

### **Conclusion**

Frequent criticisms of the current interventions employed by Child Protective Services are that CPS does not collect sufficient empirical data on intervention techniques, nor does CPS access adequately the parents’ voices to learn what they feel is needed to help them improve their parenting (Bolen et. al, 2008; Harder, 2005). Often too, the cultural and communal influences upon abuse and neglect are not fully taken into consideration. Employing a targeted and informed ecological intervention approach to child abuse and neglect addresses the underlying issues contributing to recurrent maltreatment and on a grander scale, if implemented early enough, contributes to combating child abuse and neglect in general (Bolen et al., 2008).

## Web Resources

*Several links that can provide information on repeat maltreatment.*

Iowa Department of Human Services Repeat Maltreatment Practice Bulletin:

[http://www.dhs.iowa.gov/docs/02.08-Repeat\\_Maltreatment.pdf](http://www.dhs.iowa.gov/docs/02.08-Repeat_Maltreatment.pdf)

NYC Administration for Children's Services, Low Repeat Maltreatment Child's Borough Summary:

[http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/outcomes/out5\\_not\\_nyc.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/outcomes/out5_not_nyc.pdf)

Society for Social Work and Research, "Domestic Violence Increases the Risk for Repeat Maltreatment":

<http://sswr.confex.com/sswr/2006/techprogram/P4413.HTM>

Rhode Island Department of Children Youth and Families, "Risk Factors for Repeat Allegations of Child Abuse or Neglect":

[http://www.dcyf.state.ri.us/docs/reports/risk\\_factors\\_repeat\\_allegations.pdf](http://www.dcyf.state.ri.us/docs/reports/risk_factors_repeat_allegations.pdf)

The Effects of Domestic Violence, Mental Health and Substance abuse on Repeat Child Maltreatment:

[http://chfs.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/373892E6-3C4F-4C7C-A8ED-86EE42515ECB/0/2005FSCHILDABUSEANDNEGLECTSafetyBartley\\_Jane.pdf](http://chfs.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/373892E6-3C4F-4C7C-A8ED-86EE42515ECB/0/2005FSCHILDABUSEANDNEGLECTSafetyBartley_Jane.pdf)

Children's Bureau Express, NSCAW Research on Child Welfare Populations:

<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?event=website.viewArticles&issueid=102&articleID=2514&keywords=repeat%20maltreatment>

Results-Oriented Management in Child Welfare, © The University of Kansas, "Preventing Recurrence of Maltreatment":

<http://www.rom.ku.edu/EBP5.pdf>

<http://webdocs.nyccouncil.info/attachments/71002.htm?CFID=155946&CFTOKEN=54702180>

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