

Summary of Monograph No. 2

Professional and Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore: An Overview

Aims

- Understand perceptions and attitudes of different professionals on child abuse and neglect in Singapore.
- Compare professionals' views with that of members of public obtained from Monograph 1.
- 5 questions asked:
 - Do the relevant professionals agree to a common set of norms and standards with regards to child abuse and neglect?
 - Do the relevant professions share a common attitude towards abusive/neglectful actions?
 - Do professionals agree with the public with regards to beliefs on child abuse and neglect?
 - What kinds of child abuse and neglect cases do front-line professionals deal with?
 - What are professionals' attitudes towards the reporting of child abuse and neglect?

Methodology

Sample

- Questionnaires distributed to 2141 randomly or conveniently sampled professionals including the police, lawyers, nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers, child care professionals and psychologists.
- 1238 professionals responded to the questionnaires (817 females; 401 males; 20 unknown).

Procedure

- Respondents were encouraged to give their personal views instead of professional opinions.

Findings

Categorisation of Actions

- This chapter looks at how professionals classify actions, as a way to explore how people define child abuse and neglect.
- For a list of 18 behaviours, professionals indicated if the behaviour is abuse/neglect, and if the behaviour is acceptable.
- Moderate to high levels of consensus on acceptability among professionals for 13 items:
 - Have sex with child
 - Parent not protecting child from sexual advances of other family members
 - Adult appearing naked in front of child
 - Burning child with cigarettes
 - Tying child up
 - Shaking child hard
 - Caning child
 - Ignoring signs of illness
 - Locking child outside home
 - Locking child in room
 - Threatening to abandon child
 - Making child study for a long time
 - Telling child other children are better
- High levels of consensus among different professions and the public only for items related to sexual and physical abuse.
- Moderate to high levels of consensus for abuse status for 7 items among professionals:
 - Have sex with child
 - Not protecting child from sexual advances of other family members
 - Burning child with cigarettes
 - Tying child up
 - Caning child
 - Ignoring signs of illnesses
 - Locking child outside home
- No clear trend of consensus on abuse ratings among professionals when compared with the public. In general, the patterns of response were similar as between the public and the professionals.
- Social workers had moderate to high levels of within-group consensus for the most no. of items in acceptability and abuse status ratings.
- Lawyers had lowest within-group consensus for acceptability; but highest consensus for abuse status.

Circumstances that may influence perceptions of actions that suggest Child Abuse and Neglect

- 8 items (2 representing each of the 4 types of maltreatment) were described with different circumstances and checked for acceptability:
 - Caning
 - Slapping face
 - Appearing naked in front of child
 - Parent not protecting child from sexual advances of other family members
 - Make child study for a long time
 - Tell the child that other children are better
 - Leave the child alone at home
 - Ignore signs of illness
- Intentions of parents and frequency of actions were major determinants of acceptability.
- But actions that are bad for children (e.g. appearing naked in front of child) were regarded as unacceptable nevertheless.

Scenarios presented to elicit judgements of seriousness

- Actions thought to be most serious amongst professionals:
 - Parents fondles child's genital area
 - Parents repeatedly show the child pornographic materials
- Actions thought to be least serious amongst professionals:
 - Parents live with two children in a flat with few furnishings
- Actions thought to be of intermediate seriousness amongst professionals:
 - Parents cane the child because the child did not excel in an examination
 - Parents foster the child out to a relative and bring the child home every weekend
 - Parents usually punish the child by spanking him
- Most of the incidents were rated similarly by the professions and differences found were small in absolute terms.

Professionals' Recollections of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases

- Physical ill-treatment the most recalled type of child abuse and neglect.
- Recalled sexual abuse cases a lot more scarce; not in line with cases reported under official statistics.
- Neglect or emotional abuse seldom mentioned; showed that these types of maltreatment either unnoticed, regarded as unimportant or genuinely infrequent.
- Professionals felt that child abuse and neglect was increasing rather than decreasing over time.
- Likely factors behind maltreatment identified by professionals (in order of prevalence):
 - Socio-economic (poverty, large families, low educational level)
 - Family dysfunction (poor parenting, broken families, fostered children)
 - Parental load (unemployment, overwork, stress)
 - Parent dysfunction (psychiatric problems, drug/gambling etc)
 - Child dysfunction (Hyperactive/handicapped children)
 - Ethnic related (no consistent view, but more respondents mentioned Malay cases than Indian or Chinese)

Suggestions on how the handling of child abuse and neglect cases should be:

- Administrative
 - Clear guidelines for recognising, reporting and managing cases
 - Closer co-operation between medical and social services
- Treatment and follow-up
 - Provide fostering arrangement for abused children
 - Better support for at-risk families and victim support groups
- Detection and prevention
 - Early detection and intervention; faster responses from relevant bodies
 - Improved public education, counselling provision, community services like drop-in centres for children
 - More proactive family life efforts and reduce education system stress on children

- Legal
 - Stricter laws and more willingness to prosecute
 - Mandatory reporting

Professionals' Attitudes Towards Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect

- All respondents very supportive of mandatory reporting for all professions and general public
- Top 3 reasons for reporting
 - Protect the child
 - So that child's physical injuries can be treated
 - So that the child can be given therapy
- Top 3 reasons for not reporting
 - The situation may be misunderstood
 - Not enough evidence to establish a case
 - It's a family problem; others should not interfere

Conclusion

- Implications of findings
 - Need for greater agreement among professionals on what constitutes abuse
 - Need for greater awareness among professionals on the importance of early interventions, even for potential child abuse cases
 - Need for coordination and collaboration among professions and relevant organisations
- Recognizing limits when detecting and dealing with child abuse and neglect
 - Though young children's memories are quite accurate when first recalled, they are susceptible to suggestion with repeated interviewing or after long delays
 - Repeated physical examination, interviewing or multiple interviews may cause discomfort or trauma
 - Stress of separations of abused children (or suspected to be abused) taken into foster care may be underestimated
- Recommendations
 - De-emphasize the "abuse" label may allow a wider range of unacceptable harmful actions to be brought to the attention of the public and professions
 - Public or professional education is likely to be more readily accepted and effective if emphasis is on maltreatment (unacceptable damaging actions) rather than labeling it as abuse
 - Consider mandatory reporting for some professions such as social workers, teachers and medical doctors
 - Emphasize on good care practices that minimize emotional maltreatment and consequences