

PROFESSIONAL AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN SINGAPORE: A COMPARATIVE CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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AIM
To study whether there is a difference between the perceptions of Child Abuse & Neglect (CAN) among relevant professionals and the public.

INTRODUCTION

Perception of abusiveness in CAN is strongly associated with child protective behaviours (e.g., Collins, 1996; Zellman, 1992). A past study by the Singapore Children's Society (Chan, *et al.* 2002; Elliott, *et al.* 2000) found that

- (1) Professionals' and the public's perceptions of actions suggesting CAN were similar;
- (2) Perception of abusiveness varied similarly across different CAN behaviours for both groups, and
- (3) Emotional maltreatment was perceived as less abusive than sexual abuse, physical abuse and physical neglect.

The Society has now repeated the study to compare how contemporary child protection professionals and the public perceive the abusiveness of actions suggesting CAN in Singapore.

METHODOLOGY

Professionals: 1,155 professionals;
Convenience sampling;
Five fields of work (Medicine, Law, Social Work, Education, & Psychology)

Public: 500 participants;
Stratified random sampling

Respondents were asked to assign abusiveness ratings to 18 CAN behaviours using a three-point Likert scale (i.e., "Is not abuse", "Can be abuse", & "Is abuse"). These CAN categories were Sexual Abuse, Physical Abuse, Physical Neglect and Emotional Maltreatment.

RESULTS

Correspondence plots of professionals' and public's perception of abusiveness of CAN behaviours were overlaid to compare perceptual differences between the groups (See Figure 1). Differences between professionals' and the public's perception of abusiveness of CAN behaviours is visually represented by distance between them for each CAN behaviour. Axes represent respondents' tendency to assign "Is abuse" (i.e., 'Abusiveness') and "Can be abuse" (i.e., 'Uncertainty') ratings to CAN behaviours.

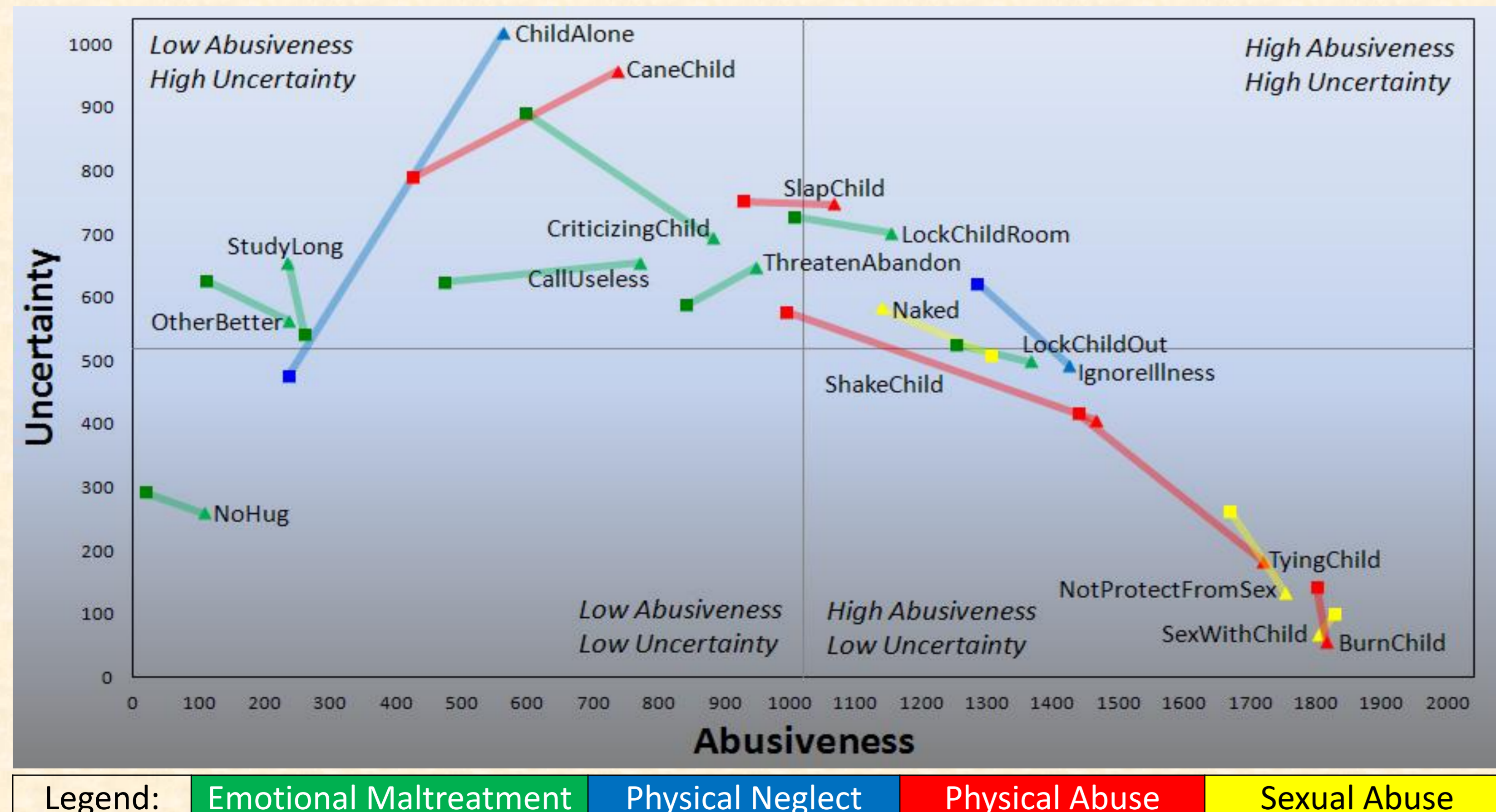


Figure 1. Overlaid correspondence plot comparing differences in professionals' (Δ) and the public's (□) perception of abusiveness of behaviours.

Table 1, 2 and 3 displayed ordinal regression model and parameter estimates for the comparisons between professionals' and the public's perception of abusiveness of CAN behaviours.

Table 1. CAN behaviours that professionals perceived as more abusive than the public

Behaviours	Model		Parameter estimates				
	χ^2 (df = 1)	Nagelkerke's R-square	Coefficients	Std.error	Wald	Lower	Upper
ShakeChild	97.52 ***	0.073	0.87	0.09	102.66 ***	0.71	1.04
TyingChild	75.26 ***	0.072	0.67	0.08	75.01 ***	0.52	0.82
ChildAlone	66.66 ***	0.047	0.53	0.07	63.12 ***	0.40	0.66
CriticizingChild	43.18 ***	0.031	0.45	0.07	44.82 ***	0.32	0.58
CaneChild	28.89 ***	0.021	0.35	0.07	29.87 ***	0.23	0.48
CallUseless	28.77 ***	0.020	0.36	0.07	29.85 ***	0.23	0.49
IgnoreIllness	12.96 ***	0.010	0.33	0.09	13.39 ***	0.15	0.51
NotProtectFromSex	10.22 ***	0.013	0.21	0.07	10.00 **	0.08	0.34
SlapChild	8.12 **	0.006	0.18	0.06	8.14 **	0.06	0.30
LockChildRoom	8.08 **	0.006	0.22	0.08	8.30 **	0.07	0.37
LockChildOut	6.41 *	0.005	0.17	0.07	6.45 *	0.04	0.30
OtherBetter	5.14 *	0.004	0.23	0.10	5.04 *	0.03	0.44
ThreatenAbandon	4.68 *	0.003	0.13	0.06	4.62 *	0.01	0.25
NoHug	4.16 *	0.003	0.13	0.06	4.20 *	0.01	0.24

Table 2. CAN behaviours that the public perceived as more abusive than professionals

Behaviours	Model		Parameter estimates				
	χ^2 (df = 1)	Nagelkerke's R-square	Coefficients	Std.error	Wald	Lower	Upper
Naked	12.90 ***	0.010	-0.39	0.11	12.64 ***	-0.60	-0.17

Table 3. CAN behaviours perceived with the same perceptual abusiveness

Behaviours	Model		Parameter estimates				
	χ^2 (df = 1)	Nagelkerke's R-square	Coefficients	Std.error	Wald	Lower	Upper
BurnChild	2.52	0.006	0.13	0.08	2.48	-0.03	0.29
StudyLong	1.80	0.001	-0.08	0.06	1.79	-0.21	0.04
SexWithChild	0.67	0.002	-0.07	0.09	0.66	-0.24	0.10

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$

CONCLUSION

As found in the prior study, both professionals and the public perceived emotional maltreatment as less abusive than sexual abuse, physical abuse and physical neglect. But unlike the prior study, professionals perceived physical abuse, physical neglect and emotional maltreatment as significantly more abusive than the public.

Sizes of these perceptual differences varied considerably across different CAN behaviours. Large differences were observed for "Shaking the child hard", "Tying child up", "Leaving child alone in the house" and "Always criticizing child". No significant differences were observed for "Burning child with cigarettes, hot water or other hot things", "Making child study for a long time" and "Having sex with child".

Professionals' greater perception of abusiveness of CAN suggested that this group is more likely than the public to take protective actions when encountering CAN cases. In addition, while reporting of CAN cases is not mandated in Singapore law, it is strongly encouraged and expected in many professional groups.

Continuous public education and advocacy is needed to improve perceptions in both professionals and the public, for better concerted effort in protecting children from harm.

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