

Summary of Monograph No. 1 Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore

Aims

- To answer the following questions:
 - What is child abuse and neglect to the average Singaporean?
 - Who are the victims and perpetrators?
 - What are Singaporeans' views on the issue of reporting child abuse and neglect?

Methodology

Sample

- Public – 401 Singaporeans living in public housing (171 males, 230 females).
- Interviews conducted from Nov 1994 to Feb 1995 (pilot study from Aug – Sept 1994).
- Age range of respondents: 18 – 102 years old.
- Stratified random sampling used: Sampled from 5 HDB estates (mix of old and new estates). Interviewed whichever adult member of the household.
- Respondents include people from different ethnic groups, gender, ages, housing types, income levels, educational backgrounds, occupations, language backgrounds, and who are parents or otherwise.

Procedure and materials

- Structured interview schedules prepared in English, Malay and Chinese. Back translations done.
- 40 interviewers involved; all except one were NUS undergraduates.
- 4 major categories (18 items) of child abuse and neglect included in the interview schedule:
 - Sexual abuse/lack of protection from sexual advances
 - Physical abuse
 - Physical neglect
 - Emotional maltreatment
- The extent to which each item constitutes abuse, and how acceptable it is (3-point scale).

Findings

Public Attitudes to Actions Suggesting Child Abuse or Neglect

- Respondents considered sexual abuse to be the most serious form of abuse; were less concerned with emotional maltreatment than other types of abuse.
- Widespread acceptance of emotionally harsh or insensitive child-rearing style.
- Caning regarded by the fewest respondents to be “never acceptable” or “abuse/neglect”. It is widely accepted as a method of physical discipline.
- Sexual abuse and some forms of severe physical abuse/neglect were generally accepted to be forms of maltreatment; but emotional maltreatment was not as well accepted¹.
- Sex, age, income, highest educational qualifications and housing types did not seem to have an influence on the ratings of acceptability of abuse, except ethnicity and childrearing experiences. But there was negligible amount of overall variation even in instances where differences were found:
 - Chinese less inclined to rate behaviour as abusive.
 - Parents with 2 children seemed less inclined to rate behaviour as abuse or unacceptable.

Circumstances that Might Justify Behaviours

Caning was acceptable if:

- the child was older
- the child was disobedient
- the child was not physically or mentally handicapped
- the child was not treated differently from his siblings
- only limbs and buttocks were caned
- there were no permanent marks or injuries
- it happened infrequently
- the adult had good intentions
- the adult is not under stress

¹ Emotional maltreatment was not mentioned in the Children and Young Persons Act when this monograph was published in 1996, though it was recognized by the then Ministry of Community Development. Emotional injury has since been included in the Act as a form of maltreatment in 2001, when the CYPA was amended.

Telling the child that other children are better was acceptable if:

- the child was older
- the child was disobedient
- it happened infrequently
- the adult had good intentions

Making a child study for a long time was acceptable if:

- the child was older
- it happened infrequently
- the adult had good intentions

Leaving a child alone was acceptable if:

- the child was older

Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect

Method

- Asked respondents if they had personally come across any incident of child abuse and neglect.
- Recall details about the most recent incident: age, gender of victims, how abused, perpetrators, when, how often, interventions if any.

Findings

- About equal numbers of boys and girls were abused and/or neglected.
- Victims were approximately primary school age.
- Perpetrators were natural parents, especially mothers.
- Physical abuse was a major form of child abuse.
- But police indicated sexual abuse as a major form. The discrepancy between police figures and the reports of the respondents may be due to differences in methods of compiling the data.

Attitudes Towards Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Asked respondents 2 main questions:

- Should cases be reported?
- Should reporting be made compulsory?
 - 93.8% felt cases should be reported
 - 63.1% felt there should be mandatory reporting
 - The vast majority (91.5%) of the respondents felt that physical hurt should be reported, followed by sexual exploitation or lack of protection (89.3%), severe emotional/psychological hurt (77.6%) and non-provision of basic necessities (68.8%)
- The results showed a serious discrepancy between attitudes towards reporting (very positive) and actual reporting (not as positive).
- Respondents tended to support reporting physical and sexual abuse more than emotional maltreatment or neglect.
- Respondents felt that the community should report rather than professionals, but in fact the actual cases uncovered were usually reported by professionals.

Conclusion

A definition of child abuse and neglect was proposed:

- Maltreatment of a child occurs in any behaviour, that has or is likely to have a net damaging or adverse consequence on a child, whether or not intended, by any person having the custody, charge or care of the child, or from whom the child could reasonably expect proper treatment (except sexual maltreatment which can be perpetrated by any adult).
- Abuse is maltreatment resulting from wilful action on the part of a person responsible for a child (except sexual abuse which can be perpetrated by any adult). It is broken down into 3 types – 1) child abuse, 2) child sexual abuse and 3) neglect. These types correspond to the categories found in the CYPA.
- Child abuse could be defined as comprising wilful physical and/or emotional maltreatment; child sexual abuse as the wilful sexual maltreatment of the child; and child neglect as the failure to provide adequate care amounting to wilful maltreatment.

Recommendations:

- More research encouraged in the local context
- A central register for child abuse and neglect for recording official and unofficial cases
- Educate the public on reporting child abuse and neglect
- Public education to feature emotional maltreatment
- Therapy for victims to meet psychological, emotional and social needs; not just treatment for physical injuries
- Treatment for perpetrators
- Prevention programmes to target “high risk” parents and provide parent education and support
- Train professionals in the proper management of child abuse and neglect cases; multi-disciplinary child protection teams should be set up
- Consider making reporting mandatory for professionals