

## Teacher Perceptions of Effects of Childhood Trauma

### Teachers' Beliefs about Maltreatment Effects on Student Learning and Classroom Behavior

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*This study sought to examine teachers' perceptions of child maltreatment. Teachers (N = 66) responded to open-ended questions asking how physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect affect student learning and classroom behavior in an online survey. Teachers reported that maltreatment outcomes manifest in academic difficulties, attention-deficit, disruptive and internalizing behaviors, and other maltreatment-related sequelae. Teachers reported more negative consequences from attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors on classroom behavior compared to all other maltreatment outcomes combined. Given the overlapping behaviors exhibited by maltreated children and children with attention-deficit and disruptive behavior disorders, a greater emphasis should be placed on educating teachers on these similarities to better assist them in detecting and responding appropriately to potential cases of child maltreatment.*

**Keywords** child abuse and neglect, teachers, academic performance, externalizing behaviors

Teachers are well positioned to identify possible cases of child abuse and neglect given the amount of time they spend with students. Nonetheless, reports by teachers represent less than one-fifth of all annual maltreatment reports made (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). This low report rate may be a corollary to teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to accurately identify child abuse and neglect (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny, 2004). Additionally, the literature on deterrents to reporting suggests that teachers' fear of making an inaccurate report is one of the most common reasons teachers do not report suspected maltreatment (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Kenny, 2001; Smith, 2010). These findings highlight the need to better understand how teachers perceive the impact of abuse and neglect on their students.

Teachers differ from other mandatory reporters in that they are more likely to have the opportunity to observe behavioral changes when maltreatment occurs. In a study

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comparing how physicians, nurses, and teachers identify child abuse, Turbett and O'Toole (1983) found that, although all three groups of mandatory reporters recognize physical signs such as bruises and appearance, teachers were unique in identifying changes in the child's behavior and academic performance. Teachers' recognition of behavioral change seems logical given their proximal view of the child and opportunity to observe day to day changes; consequently, teachers are in a unique position to identify child maltreatment.

Teachers' assessment of behavior is important given that one of the most consistent findings across the child maltreatment literature demonstrates that abused and neglected children exhibit more emotional, behavioral, and academic problems than their nonmaltreated peers. Specifically, maltreated children are often more withdrawn, anxious, and depressed (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Dodge Reyome, 1994; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001) but are also more likely to be overactive, impulsive, impatient, and noncompliant (Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989). Maltreated children also tend to exhibit more disruptive classroom behaviors than peers (Erickson et al., 1989) and are more aggressive and disrespectful (Anthonysamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Erickson et al., 1989; Manly et al., 2001). Furthermore, maltreated children are likely to exhibit poor academic performance compared to nonmaltreated children. They tend to receive lower scores on standardized tests and lower grades and exhibit a greater risk for grade repetition (Dodge Reyome, 1993; Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Veltman & Browne, 2001). Such learning difficulties may result from deficits in attention (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2008) and executive function (DePrince, Weinzierl, & Combs, 2009), as well as from behavioral and emotional difficulties (Dodge Reyome, 1994).

Classroom behaviors related to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; i.e., inattention and disruptive behaviors) may be especially common in maltreated children. In a population-based study, Ouyang, Fang, Mercy, Perou, and Grosse (2008) found that individuals with ADHD symptoms were more likely to report experiencing child abuse and neglect. Specifically, in comparison to those without ADHD symptoms, children with ADHD/inattentive type were more likely to have experienced both physical and supervisory neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Children with the ADHD/hyperactive/impulsive type were more likely to have experienced supervisory neglect and physical abuse, and those with ADHD/combined type were more likely to have experienced physical and supervisory neglect as well as sexual abuse. These results coincide with research examining the differential effects of child abuse and neglect. For example, neglected children have been found to exhibit both negative internal and external behaviors and tend to be extremely inattentive, lacking focus and involvement in classroom activities (Dodge Reyome, 1993; Erickson et al., 1989). In contrast, physically and sexually abused children tend to be impulsive and disruptive in the classroom (Erickson et al., 1989). Finally, child maltreatment has also been linked to both ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) in clinical samples (Ford et al., 2000). Taken together, this research points to the potentially bidirectional relationship between ADHD symptomatology and maltreatment.

Hypothetical vignettes are frequently used to research teachers' ability to recognize child abuse and neglect and have been informative in determining what type of information is associated with teachers' recognition and likelihood of reporting maltreatment. Such work has frequently found that the frequency of teacher recognition and report of abuse in vignettes is highest in those depicting sexual abuse, followed by those depicting physical abuse, then neglect or emotional abuse (Crenshaw et al., 1995; O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, & Lucal, 1999; Smith, 2010; Walsh, Bridgstock, Farrell, Rassafiani, & Schweitzer, 2008).

Additionally, it has been found that teachers' perceptions of maltreatment severity follow this same pattern (Dodge Reyome & Gaeddert, 1998) and that within a given maltreatment type, the more severe the maltreatment, the more likely teachers will identify and report it (Crenshaw et al., 1995; O'Toole et al., 1999; Smith, 2010; Walsh et al., 2008). Furthermore, teachers indicate that the stronger the evidence or quality of their suspicion, the more likely they would be to report maltreatment (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Smith, 2010).

A shortcoming of vignette research is that changes in student learning and classroom behavior are rarely included (see Crenshaw et al., 1995 for an exception). Even in vignettes where these maltreatment-related outcomes are included, teachers' responses are limited to the specific academic and behavioral outcomes delineated within the vignette, restricting other possible insights they may have. Thus, little is known regarding how teachers perceive child maltreatment as affecting students in the classroom. To avoid limiting teachers' responses, Yanowitz, Monte, and Tribble (2003) used an open-ended questioning methodology to examine teachers' beliefs about abuse effects on behavior. Teachers were asked how physical and emotional abuse impacted classroom behavior, and teachers reported that abused students demonstrated more academic difficulties, aggressive behavior, low self-esteem, and poor social skills. However, no other inattentive or disruptive behaviors, besides aggression, were identified, and the authors did not examine teachers' beliefs about the effects of abuse on academic performance.

The present study aimed to evaluate teachers' perceptions of the effects of physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect on both student learning and classroom behavior. Similar to Yanowitz et al. (2003), we used an open-ended methodology, allowing teachers to formulate their own responses. Consistent with previous literature, we hypothesized that teachers would perceive maltreatment as negatively impacting classroom learning and behavior. Because maltreated children may be particularly likely to exhibit behaviors associated with ADHD (Ford et al., 2000; Ouyang et al., 2008) and because these behaviors may be more disruptive and problematic in the classroom than students exhibiting other maltreatment-related outcomes, we further hypothesized that teachers would identify more attention-related and disruptive behaviors than other potential maltreatment sequelae.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were self-identified preschool through 12th-grade teachers ( $N = 66$ ) from the United States (85%) and Canada (15%). The majority of teachers were female (86%; 5% did not report their gender) and Caucasian/non-Hispanic (96%; 1% did not report their race/ethnicity). Teachers were approximately 42 years of age ( $SD = 11.13$ ) with 13 years of teaching experience ( $SD = 10.15$ ). Most teachers were elementary teachers (50%), some were secondary teachers (middle and high school; 38%), and a few were preschool and kindergarten teachers (9%).

### *Measures*

This study was part of a larger, Internet-based, teacher survey examining how teachers think about and respond to children's stressful life experiences and challenges in the classroom. The full survey took approximately 1 hr to complete and consisted of 12 questionnaires that were listed on a menu screen along with the estimated time to complete each one (ranging from 1 to 10 min). Each questionnaire varied in length (ranging from

six to 44 questions) and primarily utilized forced choice responses. However, the questionnaire used to assess teachers' beliefs about maltreatment utilized all open-ended questions. Teachers could fill out the questionnaires in any order they liked and were permitted to log-off and sign-on additional times to complete unfinished or remaining questionnaires. The first few questionnaires inquired about basic demographic information, professional training, and school and school district characteristics. In addition to demographic and school-related information, teachers were asked four open-ended questions about how maltreatment affects their students. Specifically, teachers were asked about the effects of physical and sexual abuse on students' learning and behavior in two questions: "Many teachers have had children in their classrooms who are, or have been, physically or sexually abused by a caregiver. For children that you have known or suspected to have been physically or sexually abused, how do you think the abuse impacted their (1) learning and (2) behavior?" Similarly, teachers were asked about the effects of emotional neglect by a caregiver on student learning and classroom behavior: "How do you think that parental emotional neglect, whether it is of attention, time, or affection, impacts your students' (3) learning and (4) behavior?" Other questionnaires not examined in this study included surveys assessing teachers' beliefs and experiences referring children to special education, counseling services, and reporting child maltreatment, as well as surveys assessing their own trauma history and trauma-related symptomatology. Data were collected over a period of approximately two years.

### **Procedure**

The study was approved by the University of Oregon institutional review board prior to data collection. Teachers in this convenience sample were recruited through invitations posted on teacher message boards on the Internet, asking volunteers to complete an Internet survey regarding teachers' contexts and how they think about and respond to challenges in the classroom. Invitations were posted on a variety of teacher message boards that were found by searching the Internet with terms including "teacher bulletin boards," "teacher message boards," and "education message boards." Message boards were selected if they were geared toward teachers living in the United States and Canada. Example message boards include those found on Teachers.net (<http://teachers.net/mentors/>), Proteacher.net (<http://www.proteacher.net/>), and Yahoo groups for schools and education ([http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/Schools\\_Education/](http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/Schools_Education/)). A link to the Web survey was provided, and participants created a unique ID to remain anonymous. After providing informed consent, teachers were presented with the survey.

### **Data Coding**

Teachers' responses were categorized based on a combination of a priori and emergent coding methods (Stemler, 2001). The initial coding manual was based on three a priori codes: attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors (i.e., externalizing behaviors), internalizing behaviors, and academic difficulties. Symptoms of disruptive behavior disorders as outlined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* text revision (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) criteria for ADHD, ODD, and conduct disorder (CD) were used to define the attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors category: hyperactive, impulsive, disruptive, or defiant behaviors; attention or conduct-related problems; or aggression and verbal hostility. The internalizing behaviors category was defined by withdrawn, depressed, or avoidant behavior and a lack of motivation or

low self-esteem. The academic difficulties category was defined by acknowledgment of poor academic performance or a negative impact on the student's ability to learn. These three categories encompassed the majority of teachers' responses; however, one inductive code was created to incorporate additional maltreatment-related outcomes. Other maltreatment-related outcomes were defined by responses describing self-harm, lack of sleep, lack of basic necessities (e.g., safety, food), dependent or overly emotional students, and affirmations of negative effects that were not described further. A final category was created to include teachers who indicated that they did not know how abuse or neglect impacted their students. Teachers' responses were not restricted to one category but were coded into as many categories as appropriate (see Table 1 for examples of coded responses).

Teachers' responses were coded by two undergraduate honor students who trained during a one-month period with one of the authors. During training the coders learned the coding manual and practiced coding teacher responses. When they began coding actual responses, they met for weekly reliability meetings. Both coders reviewed all responses. When coding discrepancies were found, the coding team discussed the response and final

**Table 1**  
Coding categories for selected teacher responses

Category	Teacher responses
Academic difficulties	<p>"The abuse delays and impedes their ability to learn."</p> <p>"These kids generally have little or no reasoning skills and big gaps in their knowledge/comprehension on the skills and topics presented."</p> <p>"They often come to school not able to learn as much as they should because of this abuse."</p> <p>"Students who come from neglect situations often fail to perform."</p>
Attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors	<p>"They are poor listeners and have not learned to focus on one task at a time."</p> <p>"These students are bullies, hitting and knocking other kids down almost daily."</p> <p>"They are argumentative and unwilling to cooperate."</p> <p>"They are extremely disruptive and talk out of turn."</p>
Internalizing behaviors	<p>"They often experience periods of depression and anxiety."</p> <p>"Their self-esteem is not good."</p> <p>"They withdraw into a shell and do not interact with other students, teachers, etc."</p> <p>"Usually, it makes the kids try to be invisible."</p>
Other maltreatment-related sequelae	<p>"It causes some students to be clingy and dependent."</p> <p>"Students will sleep most the day since they spend most the night awake in fear."</p> <p>"This particular child bites himself."</p> <p>"Young children play with their private parts. Older children often describe what they know about sex."</p>

codes were made based on consensus. Coders' agreement was 98% for a priori attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and academic difficulty responses and 89% for the other maltreatment-related responses.

## Results

A total of 112 teachers accessed the online survey, but some ( $n = 41$ ) did not respond to the questions regarding beliefs about maltreatment effects on learning and behavior and were not included in this study. Although we cannot be certain why these teachers did not respond to these questions, it is likely because this questionnaire was the longest, with an estimated 10-min completion time. Also, it was the only section with open-ended questions, requiring teachers to develop and report, via typing, their own responses. Five additional teachers were eliminated from analyses because they did not teach in the United States or Canada or did not identify the region in which they taught. The teachers not included in these analyses ( $n = 46$ ) did not differ demographically (i.e., in age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience, or grade level taught) from the analytic sample ( $N = 66$ ).

Teachers' beliefs about the effects of child physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect on their students' academic performance and classroom behavior fit objective criteria for attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors, internalizing behaviors, academic difficulties, and other maltreatment-related outcomes (see Table 2). Teachers believed that physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect affect students' learning by resulting in academic difficulties as well as attention-deficit, disruptive, and internalizing behaviors. Teachers' beliefs about the effects of physical and sexual abuse on learning were more likely to be described as academic difficulties, whereas the effects of emotional neglect on learning were primarily described both as academic difficulties and internalizing behaviors. In contrast, teachers believed that the effects of physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect on student behavior resulted in negative disruptive (i.e., hyperactive, impulsive, aggressive), inattentive, and internalizing (i.e., withdrawn, anxious, depressed) behaviors. Differences in teachers' beliefs of maltreatment outcomes emerged when reporting their

**Table 2**  
Percentages of teacher responses for maltreatment effects on student learning and behavior

Category	Learning		Classroom behavior	
	Abuse % ( <i>n</i> )	Neglect % ( <i>n</i> )	Abuse % ( <i>n</i> )	Neglect % ( <i>n</i> )
Academic difficulties	35 (23)	41 (27)	6 (4)	8 (5)
Attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors	30 (20)	29 (19)	47 (31)	52 (34)
Internalizing behaviors	26 (17)	49 (32)	44 (29)	47 (31)
Other maltreatment-related sequelae	15 (10)	24 (16)	24 (16)	32 (21)
Unknown impact	21 (14)	0 (0)	21 (14)	2 (1)

*Note.* Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers' responses were not restricted to one category.

**Table 3**  
Percentages of teacher responses for attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors and all other outcomes on student learning and behavior

Category	Learning		Classroom behavior	
	Abuse % ( <i>n</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 47)	Neglect % ( <i>n</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 61)	Abuse % ( <i>n</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 48)	Neglect % ( <i>n</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 53)
Attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors	43 (20)	31 (19)	65 (31)	64 (34)
All other maltreatment-related sequelae	57 (27)	69 (42)	35 (17)	36 (19)

beliefs about physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect. Only one teacher reported not knowing how emotional neglect impacted classroom behavior, compared to 21% of teachers who did not know how physical and sexual abuse impacted learning and classroom behavior. Response rates for all four questions were equal.

Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were performed to examine whether differences existed among teachers' beliefs regarding the effects of physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect on learning and behavior for attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors compared with all other maltreatment-related outcomes. Teachers' responses were first dichotomized into two categories: attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors and all other maltreatment-related outcomes (see Table 3). When asked how physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect affected classroom behavior, teachers were significantly more likely to identify attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors related to ADHD, ODD, and CD compared with other maltreatment-related sequelae: physical and sexual abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 4.08, p < .05$ ; emotional neglect,  $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 4.25, p < .05$ . In contrast, when asked how emotional neglect affected their students' ability to learn, teachers were significantly more likely to identify other maltreatment-related outcomes without attention-deficit or disruptive behaviors,  $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 8.67, p < .01$ . Teachers' beliefs regarding the impact of physical and sexual abuse on student learning did not differ significantly,  $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 1.04, p > .05$ .

## Discussion

Given the opportunity to discuss their beliefs about the effects of emotional neglect and physical and sexual abuse on students' academic performance and classroom behavior, teachers in this study reported attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors, internalizing behaviors, academic difficulties, and other maltreatment-related outcomes. Teachers believed that physical and sexual abuse and emotional neglect negatively impacted their students' classroom behavior primarily by resulting in decreased attention and increased disruptive behaviors. In addition, teachers believed that physical and sexual abuse impacted their students' ability to learn not only by causing academic difficulties, reduced attention, and increased disruptiveness but also by resulting in more internalizing behaviors. Teachers also believed that emotional neglect affected learning ability primarily through academic difficulties, internalizing behaviors, and other maltreated-related sequelae, such as emotional dependence and self-harm behaviors. Although the majority of teachers could

readily identify negative outcomes associated with emotional neglect on student learning and classroom behavior, 21% of teachers reported not knowing how physical and sexual abuse would impact their students.

This finding that many teachers were less aware of how physical and sexual abuse may impact student learning and classroom behavior is interesting given that, in vignette research, teachers tend to demonstrate greater recognition of physical and sexual abuse, compared to emotional or physical neglect (Crenshaw et al., 1995; O'Toole et al., 1999; Smith, 2010; Walsh et al., 2008). Thus, when teachers are considering whether a child may be experiencing neglect, taking the student's academic performance and classroom behavior into account may be particularly helpful. In contrast, teachers may consider behavioral responses less for physical and sexual abuse as they tend to be quite variable (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Putnam, 2003). Vignette research has led to a better understanding of how maltreatment, teacher, and school-related characteristics impact teachers' abilities to recognize and report abuse (O'Toole et al., 1999; Walsh et al., 2008), but student classroom performance and behavior have not typically been included in vignette studies. This study reveals that teachers' beliefs about the effects of maltreatment on their students' learning and classroom behavior varies by type of maltreatment. Thus, future research should examine how including details regarding student classroom performance and behavior might enhance or detract from their ability to recognize and report maltreatment.

Our hypothesis that teachers would perceive maltreated students as displaying more attention-deficit and disruptive behaviors than internalizing behaviors or other maltreatment-related sequelae was supported for physical and sexual abuse. These findings support research identifying the behavioral similarities found in maltreated children and children with disruptive behavior disorders, such as ADHD (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2008), as well as the high rates of ADHD and ODD found in maltreated children (Ford et al., 2000; Ouyang et al., 2008). Given these teachers' beliefs that abused and neglected children exhibit poor attention and disruptive behaviors in the classroom, it suggests an opportunity for educating teachers about the similarities and differences between behaviors demonstrated in children who have been maltreated and those with ADHD.

This preliminary study has several limitations. First, these teachers were sampled out of convenience and the sample size ( $N = 66$ ) was relatively small and restrictive. The majority of teachers were female and Caucasian. Perspectives from a more diverse sample would be informative. Also, the study was limited to teachers who access Internet teacher message boards. Thus, additional research with larger, more representative samples of teachers should be conducted to confirm these results. A second limitation is that almost a third of the teachers who accessed the survey did not respond to the open-ended questionnaire. This may have been because it was the only questionnaire that required free-form responses. Although the open-ended format offered a richer data format, this may also have resulted in fewer responses because more effort was required of respondents in order to answer. At this point, respondents also may have been fatigued and less likely to generate and type responses. A third limitation is that teachers were asked to describe the effects of physical and sexual abuse in the same question, limiting distinctions that teachers might make between outcomes from these distinct abuse types. Similarly, teachers were not given the opportunity to comment on other forms of neglect, such as physical neglect, or the severity or duration of maltreatment. Such maltreatment characteristics may influence teachers' beliefs regarding student outcomes but were not assessed in this preliminary study. Finally, it would have been useful to compare teachers' factual knowledge of child maltreatment consequences to their beliefs about maltreatment.

In conclusion, teachers perceived maltreated students as exhibiting poor attention, disruptive and internalizing behaviors, academic difficulties, and other maltreatment-related sequelae. Teachers maintain dual responsibilities for reporting suspected cases of child maltreatment as well as referring children for additional services as a result of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems. Given that teachers report beliefs that maltreatment results in attention problems and disruptive and internalizing behaviors, this suggests that there could be considerable confusion in distinguishing these problems from psychiatric disorders such as ADHD or ODD and, similarly, those associated with internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression. This uncertainty could be reducing accurate detection of abuse and could also be contributing to teachers' reluctance to report suspected abuse to the extent that reluctance is a function of fear of being incorrect. Thus, future research should examine the similarities and differences between behavioral outcomes of psychiatric disorders and those resulting from child maltreatment, highlighting the value of teacher education regarding appropriate detection, response, and intervention.

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