

## Teachers' and Education Majors' Ratings of Parent-Child Interactions as Child Abuse

JAMIE R. TRIBBLE

KAREN L. YANOWITZ\*

EMMANUELLE MONTE

Arkansas State University

*Although actions that endanger a child's life are clearly instances of child abuse, other situations may be more ambiguous. Because teachers may be in a unique position to report cases of potential abuse to the authorities, their definitions about what constitutes child abuse are particularly important. We used 12 parent-child interaction scenarios to examine education majors' and teachers' definitions of child abuse. Each scenario described a potential emotional or physical abuse situation. Participants rated each scenario as to how strongly they agreed or disagreed the situation was an example of child abuse. Professional teachers more strongly agreed the emotional parent-child interactions were examples of child abuse than education majors. In contrast, teachers and education majors did not differ in their ratings of the physical situations.*

WHILE SHOPPING AT WAL-MART, YOU NOTICE a parent slaps his or her child across the face and yells, "I told you NO!" Is this behavior child abuse? Child abuse is any behavior that poses a substantial risk of causing either physical or emotional harm to the child (National Research Council<sup>1</sup>, 1993). Physical abuse is typically nonaccidental behavior on the part of a caretaker that results in physical injury to the child. Emotional abuse includes behaviors intended to control the child through the use of emotional manipulations such as humiliation or shame (Lowenthal, 1996; National Research Council, 1993; O'Hagan, 1995). Although seemingly clear-cut, there is actually much room for interpretation in these definitions, and recognizing an abusive situation is not necessarily an easy task. Most people would probably agree that burning a child with cigarettes or breaking a child's bones due to physical punishment would constitute abuse. However, other situations are less straightforward. For instance, different interpretations about abuse might emerge when considering adult-child interactions that leave the child feeling emotionally worthless.

<sup>1</sup>National Research Council, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Many factors can influence whether or not a person defines an adult-child interaction as a case of child abuse. Maynard and Wiederman (1997) examined undergraduates' perceptions of child abuse by presenting a written description of a neighbor giving and receiving sexual favors from either a 7-year-old or a 15-year-old child. Although Maynard and Wiederman found most participants believed the situation was child abuse, the age and sex of the child influenced their perceptions. The scenario was rated as more abusive when a 7-year-old child was involved than when an older child was involved. Furthermore, the scenario was rated as less abusive if it described opposite-sex interactions rather than same-sex interactions. O'Toole, Webster, O'Toole, and Lucal (1999) found that teachers were also influenced by the characteristics of those persons involved in potential child

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen L. Yanowitz, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Arkansas State University, State University, AR 72467; telephone (870) 972-3064. E-mail may be sent to kyanowit@mail.astate.edu.

abuse situations. The perpetrator's sex, the attitude of the perpetrator, and the victim's sex influenced teachers' beliefs that various scenarios were cases of child abuse.

Equally as important as factors involving the participants in a potentially abusive situation are characteristics of the person making the decision about the presence or absence of abuse. Making a judgment about the presence of child abuse is extremely important; one judgment can help a child escape danger whereas another judgment can falsely accuse a good caregiver. Children and adolescents typically rely on adults to report cases of child abuse. Depending on their specific background, people in different fields of employment may vary in their knowledge about child abuse. Kean and Dukes (1991) examined how jurors, professionals working in child protection systems (CPS), and police personnel perceived potential child abuse situations. Kean and Dukes used six vignettes depicting various psychological abuse, neglect, and physical assault situations. Detectives and jurors rated the vignettes as more abusive than the CPS professionals, whereas uniformed police officers rated the situations as less abusive. Trute, Adkins, and MacDonald (1992) also found that child welfare workers were more likely than police to believe child abuse occurred in different types of families and that anyone could be an instigator of child abuse.

Teachers' definitions of child abuse are particularly interesting to examine, because teachers see children on an almost daily basis and may be in a unique position to recognize abuse (O'Toole et al., 1999; Reyome & Gaeddert, 1998; Tite, 1993; Turbett & O'Toole, 1983). Schools are legally obligated to report suspected cases of child abuse, and many programs have been developed to provide training for teachers about the signs of child abuse (Lowenthal, 1996; Miller, 1996; Randolph & Gold, 1994). Although training programs exist, teachers often report they do not feel well educated about child abuse (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Hazzard & Rupp, 1986; Randolph & Gold, 1994). Crenshaw et al. (1995) surveyed teachers, school counselors, and administrators about their knowledge of child abuse. Only 9.6% of respondents felt very well prepared to recognize child abuse.

Some researchers have compared teachers' judgment of child abuse situations to other professionals. Hazzard and Rupp (1986) assessed pediatricians', mental health professionals', teachers', and college students' knowledge of various child abuse issues such as definitions, characteristics, causes, and effects of abuse. Results showed that mental health profession-

als and pediatricians were more knowledgeable about abuse than teachers and college students. Turbett and O'Toole (1983) examined beliefs of teachers, nurses, and physicians. Participants read four vignettes describing potentially abusive child-adult interactions. The vignettes also manipulated ethnic and socioeconomic status of the family described in the vignette, and severity of injury. A fifth vignette controlled for "obvious" abuse (burning a child with cigarettes). Participants indicated if abuse had occurred using a 5-point rating scale. Turbett and O'Toole found all participants recognized the obvious abuse given in the fifth vignette and stated they would report it to authorities. The more ambiguous cases, however, revealed differences between the professions. Teachers and nurses were not affected by socioeconomic status or ethnic status when recognizing or claiming they would report abuse in the more ambiguous situations. Physicians, in contrast, were affected by these factors. Participants also used different symptoms as indications that abuse had occurred. Teachers noted physical symptoms such as bruises and injuries, as well as behavioral changes such as emotional withdrawal or anxiety. In contrast, physicians relied mainly on physical symptoms as indicating the child was the victim of an abusive relationship.

In summary, although teachers may feel ill-prepared to recognize child abuse, their opinions about what constitutes child abuse and their knowledge of child abuse differs from other professionals. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined differences between experienced teachers in the field and those students majoring in education before they gain such practical experience. As described earlier, people in different professions have differing attitudes, which may be partly based on the particular type of interactions they have with children. Therefore, teachers and education majors may have different opinions as to what type of interactions constitute abuse as a result of their different levels of experience. On the other hand, education majors may be taught the definition of child abuse in their classes and therefore show similar attitudes as teachers. The purpose of the present research was to investigate potential differences in beliefs about what constitutes child abuse between experienced teachers and those majoring in education.

Child abuse may be further subdivided into physical, sexual, or emotional child abuse. Few studies have specifically examined beliefs about different categories of child abuse. Emotional abuse scenarios, in particular, may be more ambiguous to recognize. Crenshaw et al. (1995) found that teachers would be less likely to report suspected emotional abuse com-

pared to physical abuse. Experienced classroom teachers, however, may have had to deal with the effects of emotional or physical abuse in their classrooms. Miller (1996) suggested that training for teachers include recognition of changes in the child's emotional state as an indication of abuse. Therefore, teachers may be more aware of the possibility of emotional abuse than education majors because of their training or experience with emotionally abused children. We believe that differences in opinions concerning child abuse will most likely manifest when considering emotional abuse situations. Teachers and education majors in the present study evaluated situations delineating physical or emotional parent-child interactions and indicated if they believed the situations were examples of child abuse.

## Method

### Participants

Seventeen education majors and 26 professional teachers participated in this study (41 women, 2 men). The students' average age was 23.3 years, and the teachers' average age was 37.8 years. Education-major undergraduates from Educational Psychology or Human Growth and Development classes participated in this study, and had not started any student teaching. The teachers taught kindergarten to 12th grade and were employed at various public schools in Northeast Arkansas. Teachers' average career length was 10.3 years, with a range of 2–25 years.

### Materials

We used 12 parent-child interaction scenarios for this survey (see the Appendix for complete list). We used multiple scenarios to examine participants' responses to a range of situations (Briggs, Hubbs-Tait, Culp, & Blankemeyer, 1995; Kean & Dukes, 1991; Turbett & O'Toole, 1983). Six of the scenarios described parents' physical interaction with a child, such as "A parent got mad at the child. While arguing with her, the parent slaps the child so hard that she is knocked to the ground." The other 6 scenarios described parents' emotional interaction with a child, such as "A parent is having a bad day, and the child comes home 10 minutes late. The parent tells the girl, 'I wish you had never been born, you ruined my life.'" Approximately half of the participants received surveys describing interactions with girls and the other half received surveys describing interactions with boys. Sex of the parents was never specified.

### Procedure

We randomly ordered the emotional and physical abuse scenarios, and all participants received the

same randomly ordered survey. We told participants, "You will be reading a variety of situations involving a parent-child interaction. For each situation, please decide if you think it represents a case of child abuse. Please use the following rating scale for each situation. Please consider each situation *individually*—that is, don't assume that it is the same parent and child in each situation. Think about each situation as an individual event." Half the participants were further told, "For each of the following situations, imagine that the child is a girl," whereas the other half were told to imagine the child was a boy. After reading each scenario, participants rated how strongly they believed each one represented a case of child abuse. Responses could range from 6 (*strongly agree the example was a case of child abuse*) to 1 (*strongly disagree the example was a case of child abuse*).

## Results

In order to determine participants' general beliefs about what constitutes child abuse, we summed participants' ratings to create one total score for the physical abuse scenarios and one for the emotional abuse scenarios. Therefore, participants' scores could range from 36 (*strongly agreed each situation was child abuse*) to 6 (*strongly disagreed each situation was child abuse*) for the physical abuse score and for the emotional abuse score.

Consistent with prior research (Finkelhor, Gomes-Schwartz, & Horowitz, 1984; O'Toole et al., 1999), respondents tended to score at the upper end of the scale. Overall, both education students and professional teachers strongly agreed the situations were examples of child abuse. Results of preliminary analyses revealed no effect of sex of the child, therefore this variable was not considered in further analyses. Using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) statistical procedures, the results revealed that professional teachers were significantly more likely to agree the emotional abuse situations were examples of child abuse ( $M = 34.7$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ , range = 25–36) compared to the education majors ( $M = 33.0$ ,  $SD = 2.3$ , range = 27–36),  $F(1, 41) = 4.9$ ,  $p = .03$ . In contrast, no significant difference in ratings were found for the physical abuse situations. Teachers were just as likely to rate the physical interactions as abuse ( $M = 35.2$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ , range = 26–36) as were students ( $M = 35.0$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ , range = 32–36),  $F(1, 41) = 0.2$ ,  $p = .77$ .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Responses were summed to gain an overall understanding of respondents' opinions concerning physical and emotional abuse in a variety of situations. However, individual *t* tests comparing teachers' and students' ratings of each scenario also revealed that for four out of the six emotional scenarios, teachers were significantly more likely than students to agree the interactions were

## Discussion

Little difference was found between teachers and education students on their attitudes toward the physical abuse scenarios. In contrast, teachers were significantly more likely than the education students to agree that the negative emotional interactions between parents and children were examples of child abuse. Why did teachers and students differ in their definitions for emotional abuse, but not for physical abuse? Physical abuse situations are often more unquestionably instances of abuse, as they typically leave clear physical signs. People may be very familiar with descriptions of physical abuse from various media sources, and so were able to recognize the examples as child abuse. The physical interaction descriptions generated for this study were fairly severe in nature, and average ratings were quite high for all participants. Future researchers may want to generate less harsh scenarios to see if the differences in judgment between teachers and students found for the emotional interaction descriptions would be duplicated using more ambiguous physical interaction scenarios.

Why might professional teachers more strongly agree that negative emotional interactions are examples of child abuse than education majors? Emotional abuse may be more subtle than physical abuse. No obvious bruises can be seen if a parent yells at a child or treats a child as worthless. However, research shows that emotional abuse leaves its own "scars." Various studies have found that children who are subjected to emotional abuse have lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety (e.g., Solomon & Serres, 1999). Teachers may be more likely to rate emotionally charged situations as abusive because they interact with children on a daily basis and may have experienced how negative parent-child emotional interactions affected the child in the classroom. In other words, they may be able to more easily recognize the harmful influences of negative emotional interactions and so more strongly rate them as instances of child abuse. In contrast, education students may have less practical experience with children and therefore are perhaps less certain that negative emotional interactions are instances of child abuse.

Surprisingly, many researchers have found that teachers' reports account for only a small percent-

child abuse (*ps* ranged from .002 to .026). Teachers were marginally more likely than students to agree the situation "The parents constantly compare their child with a younger sibling, sometimes implying the child is not really their own" was child abuse ( $p < .1$ ), and no significant difference was found in ratings for "The parents are constantly screaming at their child, calling (her or him) foul names." In contrast, none of the ratings of the physical interaction situations revealed any significant differences between teachers and students.

age (10–25%) of the cases that come before review boards, because teachers are often uncertain what to do if a child discloses information about a potentially abusive situation (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Hinson & Fossey, 2000; O'Toole et al., 1999; Tite, 1993). The results of the present study suggest that education students should be given examples and taught the definition of all types of child abuse, especially emotional abuse, as part of their training. Training about child abuse for preservice teachers traditionally has not been a very prominent part of the curriculum (Deangelis, 2000; Oseroff, Gessner, & Westling, 1996). If students are more unsure than experienced teachers of whether a situation is an example of child abuse, they may be less likely to report such cases to the authorities early in their careers. We believe students' uncertainties may be even more magnified in a real-life situation. As with the physical interaction situations, the emotional interactions used in this study were fairly harsh, and simply by participating in a study examining their beliefs about child abuse, respondents may have been primed to rate the situations as examples of child abuse. Future researchers may want to examine students' and teachers' definitions of emotional abuse in a more naturalistic setting in order to help devise training programs that will assist teachers more effectively at all levels of their careers in recognizing examples of child abuse.

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## APPENDIX

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### Emotional Abuse Situations

1. A parent is having a bad day, and the child comes home 10 minutes late. The parent tells the (girl or boy), "I wish you had never been born; you ruined my life."
2. A parent calls a child who has a learning disability "stupid."
3. The parents ignore their child most of the time, seldom talking with (her or him) or listening to (her or him).
4. The parents constantly compare their child with a younger sibling, sometimes implying the child is not really their own.
5. The parents are constantly screaming at their child, calling (her or him) foul names.
6. A parent repeatedly tells the child that they wish the child was dead.

### Physical Abuse Situations

1. A parent got mad at the child. While arguing, the parent slaps (her or him) so hard that (she or he) is knocked to the ground.
  2. The parent banged the child against the wall while shaking (him or her) by the shoulder.
  3. The parent burned the child on the buttocks and chest with a cigarette.
  4. The parent put the child in a bathtub of boiling hot water.
  5. The parent hit the child so hard with a wooden stick that it left red marks.
  6. The parent punched the child in the face.
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