

ABSTRACT

How Frustration Impacts the Relationship Between Potential for Child Physical Abuse Perpetration and Emotion Processing

By

Amanda Zwilling

Advisor: Justin Storbeck Ph. D.

Research conducted over the past 20 years has substantiated the serious, long-lasting impacts of child physical abuse (CPA) has on individuals, families, and society. Research has also suggested several appreciable risk factors for perpetration of CPA. Intergenerational transmission of abuse, described as the personal experience of abuse or neglect during childhood, is prominent in the literature as a predictor of subsequent perpetration of CPA. However, the majority of individuals who experience abuse in childhood do not subsequently engage in perpetration of child abuse as adults. As such, the literature has sought to investigate risk factors that mediate the relationship between experiencing and perpetrating CPA. Factors including trauma symptoms, childhood distress following abuse, and frequency of abuse, have been identified as mediators. Several other putative risk factors have been established, including low family social economic status, low parental age, experience of domestic violence in the home, parental psychopathology, and maladaptive cognitive styles.

Joel Milner's social-information processing model (1993) describes a number of cognitive distortions, biases, and errors in emotion that may increase likelihood for perpetration of abuse. For example, this model suggests that individuals at high risk for perpetration of CPA may interpret their children's behavior through a biased lens such that behavior is seen as more negative. Additionally, Milner's model indicates that parents at high risk of perpetration of abuse may have deficits in their ability to identify children's emotions and that low frustration tolerance may impact their ability to process their children's behavior. This suggests that the interplay between poor ability to recognize and interpret children's emotions paired with a tendency towards negative mood may be related to heightened risk to perpetrate CPA. This theory highlights a cognitive style similar to that often seen in individual with depression and, more broadly, psychopathology.

The present study seeks to further this theory by investigating the relationship between state emotion, emotion regulation skills, and potential for perpetration of CPA in a diverse sample of undergraduate students (N = 78). Risk for perpetration of CPA was assessed using the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAP; Milner, 1986). The CPA has been well-established in the literature and has high sensitivity and specificity in identifying individuals at high- vs. low-risk for perpetration of CPA. This study compared individuals determined to be at high- versus low-risk for perpetration of CPA, as defined by the CAP, on self-report of emotion regulation and state emotion, and whether this relationship was influenced by presentation of a frustration condition. This study aimed to combine known predictors of CPA and the effect of a frustrating stressor to understand the relationship between state emotion, emotion regulation, and risk for perpetration of CPA.

Hypotheses of the current study were that individuals at high risk for perpetration of CPA and individuals in the frustration condition would have more negative emotions and fewer positive emotions than those at low risk for perpetration of CPA, and those in the no-frustration condition. We also hypothesized that an interaction would emerge between the two such that those at high risk for perpetration of CPA who experienced the frustration condition would endorse the highest level of negative state emotions and the lowest level of positive state emotions. Regarding perceived emotion regulation abilities, we hypothesized that those at high-risk for perpetration of child abuse and those in the frustration condition would perceive themselves to be poorer at regulating their emotions than those in the at low risk for perpetration of CPA and those in the no-frustration condition. We similarly hypothesized that an interaction would emerge such that those at high-risk for perpetration of CPA who were in the frustration group would result in report of lowest perceived ability to use adaptive coping strategies and highest tendency towards use of poor emotion regulation strategies. Findings revealed that participants at high-risk for perpetration of CPA endorsed significantly lower levels of positive affective states and significantly higher levels of negative affective states than individuals at low risk for perpetration of CPA. State anxiety nor state anger were related to propensity to perpetrate CPA. A main effect for frustration was not found and an interaction between risk for perpetration of CPA and frustration did not emerge.

A main effect emerged for risk of perpetration of CPA on emotion regulation such that those at high risk for CPA endorsed use of significantly more maladaptive emotion regulation and significantly fewer adaptive coping strategies. With regard to frustration, individuals in the control condition reported a significantly greater perceived ability to suppress positive emotions than those in the frustration condition; other measures of perceived emotion regulation strategies did not significantly differ between groups. A significant interaction between risk for perpetration of CPA and frustration on perceived use of emotion regulation strategies failed to emerge.

An appreciable limitation of the present study was the failure of the frustration-induction paradigm to elicit feelings of frustration in the participants. Thus, the results must be considered with this caveat in mind. Nevertheless, the results of the present study suggest that deficits in emotion regulation may underlie risk for perpetration of CPA and thus may be a target of intervention aimed to prevent child abuse perpetration.