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The Abused Child and His Parents

RICHARD DAVID YOUNG

Children in our society pass through a prolonged period of dependency during which they are taught the complex technological and social skills necessary for successful adult functioning. The child’s experiences during this period can have profound effects on the development of his potential for meaningful interpersonal relationships, competency, and creativity. The child’s dependence needs are the complement of the caretaker’s nurturance. When nurturance fails or is inconsistent, societal loss merges with individual tragedy. Yet nurturance does occasionally fail. Some of those charged with the care of children abdicate their responsibilities, and do not provide the physical and/or emotional necessities for the child’s normal development. Such children often suffer anaclitic depression, failure to thrive, marasmus, psychogenic retardation, etc. Other caretakers harm the child through acts of commission, inflicting non-accidental traumatic physical injury. It is the latter phenomenon, child abuse or the battered child syndrome, which concerns this article.

The literature on the mistreatment of children has burgeoned in recent years. The problem engages experts in many fields, and much of the available material deals with specifically legal or medical aspects of child abuse. This paper will focus primarily on the psycho-social origins and the effects of child abuse. What brings a caretaker to assault a child? What effects does the experience of abuse have on the child’s emotional development and interpersonal relationships? Most of the literature which touches on these issues is in the form of clinical reports describing cases seen in hospitals and psychiatric facilities. One of the most extensive of such studies is the report on clinical information and follow-up of children admitted to the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh between 1949 and 1962 (Elmer, 1963, 1967; Elmer & Gregg, 1967). Some articles draw upon clinical data and other reports in an attempt to answer specific questions about child abuse. Many such papers have been included in Helping the Battered Child edited by Kempe and Helfer (1972) and The Battered Child edited by Helfer and Kempe (1968), both of which are useful references for readers seeking compact sources which deal with many aspects of child abuse. A very few investigators have approached specific questions about...
child abuse experimentally (e.g., Melnick & Hurley, 1969; Rolston, 1971), or have designed and conducted surveys of large samples of cases (e.g., Gil, 1970; Kempe et al., 1962; Schloesser, 1964; Simons, Downs, Hurster & Archer, 1966; Young, 1964). Finally, a few writers have reviewed the existing literature (Nomura, 1966; Silver, 1968; Spinetta & Rigler, 1972).

THE NATURE OF ABUSE

Like much human behavior of clinical significance, child abuse is difficult to neatly categorize and define. Parents may harm their children in any number of ways. Clearly abuse refers to intentional rather than accidental injury; but how is one to categorize the by-accident-on-purpose attacks of troubled neurotics or the uncontrolled acts of psychotic caretakers? Again, where does one draw the line between abuse and neglect? Some, like Fontana (1968), see abuse and neglect as belonging to a single continuum. Both may have common roots in the parent's rejection of the child; both may result in devastating harm to the child. Some clinicians have observed that infant “failure to thrive”, often a sign that the child is being neglected through lack of proper feeding, can be an early warning sign for subsequent child abuse (Fontana, 1966). On the other hand, parents who beat or both beat and neglect their offspring show different patterns of family and community interaction than parents who simply neglect their children (Young, 1964). Parents can be found who feed, clothe, and generally care for their children more than adequately, yet willfully torment them. Others seldom if ever beat their children, but do allow them to go hungry consistently or emotionally ignore them completely. Wherever sources permit the differentiation, this review will treat child abuse as the caretaker’s apparently non-accidental infliction of physical injury upon a child, which is different from, though occasionally concurrent with, generalized neglect, emotional deprivation, or sexual molestation.

Even this definition does not enclose a homogeneous population. As we shall see, a number of different behavior patterns may lead up to an incident labelled “child abuse”. Furthermore, the label may be applied to countless types of injuries; bruises, burns, cuts, toxic states, and internal injuries may all result from caretaker’s aggressions. Much attention has been focused upon a particular syndrome likely to present itself in abused children below three years of age. The clinical symptoms include bone injuries at several stages of mending as determined by X-ray examinations, sometimes accompanied by subdural hematoma and/or generally poor health. If the medical findings cannot be explained satisfactorily by the parent’s report of illness or accidents, child abuse is suspected. Although Kempe (1962) coined the term “battered child syndrome” to call attention to child abuse in all its forms, this set of symptoms is frequently associated with the term and many studies seem to center on it. However, child abuse includes many forms of maltreatment unlikely to break bones, and its victims are often children whose bones have matured beyond the point of easy fracturing. The general term “child abuse”, then, refers to a host of evils as different as a mother’s battering of her tiny infant or a father’s savage whipping of his pre-adolescent daughter.

The consequences of abuse can be devastating for the child. Death is a definite risk, particularly for children returned to their abusing environments with no attempt at family rehabilitation (Broadman, 1962). Permanent scars, physical
deformities, and central nervous system damage can be the end products of abuse. Mental retardation is far more common among abused children than their non-abused peers, although in some cases the retardation may have preceded and helped to provoke abuse. Speech and language development may lag behind overall development for some maltreated children. Elmer (1967), Elmer and Gregg (1967), Martin (1972), Rolston (1971), and Terr (1970) have presented comprehensive studies of the sequelae of abuse, a topic which will be treated at length in a later section of this chapter.

It is difficult to estimate the incidence of child abuse. Gil (1970) estimates the upper limit at 13.3 to 21.4 incidents per 1000 persons; however, he suggests that his method of tallying survey respondents claiming to have knowledge may have involved some double counting. He also points out that since the more severe cases are the ones most likely to be reported, abuse does not present such a major health problem as might be indicated by extrapolations from reporting rates. Kempe (1971), on the other hand, views it as a serious problem, setting the incidence of the battered infant syndrome at six cases per 1000 live births. He believes that it accounts for 10-15% of all trauma in children under three years of age, and for 25% of all fractures in the first year of life. Whatever its magnitude in terms of numbers, child abuse is tragic for its perpetrators and its victims, and costly for the society which must replace or reform the abusing caretaker, rescue and heal the victims, and live with the results of the warping pattern of behavior.

PROBLEMS IN STUDYING CHILD ABUSE

The multifarious nature of child abuse introduces problems into its study. If one merely sets different researchers' findings against one another, one ends with a confusing welter of information. To make the information meaningful one must take into account each investigator's definition of the abuse, his method of gathering data, and the limits and characteristics of the population from which his sample is drawn. Fortunately, most authors have been conscientious in indicating factors which may have skewed their samples in particular directions.

Definitional Difficulties. Authors describing and studying the phenomenon of child abuse use somewhat differing definitions in selecting their sample and hence their findings are not always strictly comparable. Obviously, authors utilizing different criteria may reach divergent and conflicting conclusions. The tendency of many clinicians to diagnose abuse at least in part by X-ray findings has already been mentioned, and may account for the frequent suggestion that abuse is concentrated among infants and toddlers. Gil (1970) explicitly rejects this notion in his study, reporting that less than a quarter of his sample of children were younger than two years; his criterion for inclusion was not X-ray findings, but a legal report of an act or omission intended to harm. Since he defines cases by a single incident, his population is likely to be much broader than those who use X-rays showing multiple past injuries. Young (1964) defines "moderate abuse" as occurring "when parents beat their children only now and then, that is when they were drunk or under some stress" [p. 10]; it is not clear whether a single incident would qualify a family for her sample. At our present stage of understanding child abuse it would seem profitable to separate those cases with a demonstrable history of abuse from the single incident cases until similarities in their dynamics and outcomes have
been demonstrated. Finally, some authors include negligent accidents (Johnson & Morse, 1968) while others exclude them (Elmer, 1967; Elmer & Gregg, 1967). The disagreement on differentiation between abuse and neglect has already been mentioned. Again, it would seem to be more profitable to restrict the criteria to only those cases involving the commission of an intended physical assault.

**Sample Selection.** Another problem besetting the field is that many of the cases of child abuse are not known to people outside the home. Indeed, the degree of parental and family collusion seen in some cases is astonishing in light of victims' pain and suffering. Investigators such as Adelson (1961) and Young (1964) have been staggered by the number of cases long known only to the abusive parent, his or her terrified offspring, and the often equally cowed spouse; this familial crime, whose perpetrator may drastically punish its revelation, may never become known beyond the family confines. Teachers and physicians frequently see the results of an assault but do not want to get involved and simply "buy" the cover-up story and begin to think of the child as "accident prone". Finally, the victim more often than not will either acquiesce to the caretaker's explanation of the injury or will say nothing at all.

Not all families are equally able to conceal abuse. Some sources (e.g., Gil, 1970; Young, 1964) report that child abusing families are more likely to be receiving public assistance. However, welfare families are also more likely to be under frequent supervision and observation leading to legal reporting (Gil, 1970), to be subject to direct intervention by social agencies (Young, 1964) and to use a hospital near a poor neighborhood rather than a private physician (Elmer, 1967), all of which makes their detection more probable. One might also question whether or not the type of agency from which the sample is drawn might not have some biasing effects; for example, younger children tend to suffer more serious injury during abuse and so may be disproportionately represented in hospital studies.

**Stereotyping Distortion.** Cultural stereotyping has undoubtedly skewed many of the clinical samples. Poverty, nonwhite racial identity, large families and broken homes have all been found by various studies to be related to abuse. However, these are factors associated in popular and professional minds with many kinds of behavioral deviance. Given two families suspected of child abuse but markedly different in these respects, a policeman, school teacher, social worker, nurse, or doctor is likely to perceive the poor, nonwhite, chaotic family as a more probable setting for child abuse. To believe that an educated, white, middle class couple from the suburbs could willfully harm a child introduces a great deal of cognitive dissonance. The observer may reduce the dissonance by perceiving similar signs as different in the two cases. Thus one family can be suspected of serious child abuse while the other is seen as having had an unfortunate accident or a mild and temporary lapse of control. These and other prejudicial factors may serve to inflate the number of families with certain characteristics who are reported as child abusers. Further research must be much more critical of the potential biasing effects of stereotyping processes.
Nowhere in the child abuse literature is the need for caution more apparent than in the study of demographic variables. These variables can easily be confounded with factors which bias samples, as mentioned above, and it is essential to keep these caveats in mind when considering population characteristics associated with child abuse. Low socioeconomic class, occupation, educational status, need for public assistance, or a combination of these factors, has been persistently linked to abuse (Elmer, 1967; Elmer & Gregg, 1967; Gil, 1970; Nurse, 1964; Simons et al., 1966, whose sample unfortunately includes victims of accidents due to negligence; Young, 1964), although almost all the authors cited state that sample selection or reporting bias may have brought about this linkage. Race has also been considered an important variable, with nonwhites sometimes found to be overrepresented in the abusing group (Elmer, 1967; Gil, 1970; again, qualifications are offered by the authors). Other authors do not find racial imbalance in abusing samples (Schloesser, 1964; Young, 1964). Large families (Elmer, 1967; Simons et al., 1966; Young, 1964, with note of sample selection) and those that depart from the nuclear family norm by dissension, separation or divorce (Bryant, Billingsley, Kerry, Leefman, Merrill, Senecal & Walsh, 1963; Cohen, Raphling & Green, 1966; Delsordo, 1963; Elmer, 1967; Gil, 1970; Johnson & Morse, 1968; Terr, 1970; Young, 1964) are overrepresented. Previous disturbances such as illness or trouble with the law frequently characterize the abusing family (Gil, 1970; Young, 1964), and recent arrival in community may also mark such families (Gil, 1970; Holter & Friedman, 1968). All or most of these factors tend to be related to one another in our culture and as noted previously many are also related to reporting and agency population biases.

Age had been thought to be important, with younger parents considered more likely to abuse and younger children more likely to be victims (see for example Schloesser, 1964, who learned age of parents in 51 of her 85 cases). Obviously, these two factors are not independent. As suggested previously, this generalization may have been related to hospitals seeing more serious cases and defining abuse by skeletal anomalies. Recent comprehensive studies by Gil (1970) and Simons et al. (1966) have failed to support the higher frequency among the young.

In general, investigators do not note a predominance of one sex or the other among victims. However, Gil (1970) notes that while the sexes are evenly distributed over the entire sample, after age twelve about 63% of the abused children are girls. He explains this by suggesting that girls are perceived as better behaved than boys until they start to seek their place in sexual relationships, when parents may exert more forceful control. At the same time boys are becoming too physically strong to abuse with impunity. Elmer (1967) writes that although the first child (as reported in Johnson & Morse, 1968), or the first child of a given sex, had been thought to be particularly liable to abuse, birth order was rarely significant in her cases. It was important only where it awakened unhappy associations in the caretaker's mind. Additionally, Simons et al. (1966) found that a parent is more likely to abuse a child of his or her own sex.

In an overwhelming number of cases, the abuser is a parent or surrogate parent. For example, Gil (1970) reports that approximately 87 percent of the
cases he studied were abused by parents and that usually just one parent is the abuser. He observes that more mothers than fathers appear to be implicated in child abuse; however, due to the nature of the sample studied many of these homes contained the mother as the only parent. Correcting for this factor, Gil decided the actual involvement rate for fathers and stepfathers exceeds that of mothers.

Despite the probably serious biasing effects operating on the demographic information currently available, it is not possible to disregard the hypothesis that there is an actual higher incidence of abuse among the poor and the non-white. It is clear that no simple relationship exists between poverty and racial factors and child abuse. White, wealthy college graduates abuse their offspring and the vast majority of poor nonwhites do not. It is likely that in some cases demographic factors do play a role in causing abuse, but that role is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause. Rather, as we shall see, environment and situational stresses, some of which are reflected in demographic studies, may be a part of the complex constellation of factors which bring caretakers to assault their charges.

THE DYNAMICS OF CHILD ABUSE: A MODEL

Since the concept of child abuse embraces so many diverse caretaker-child interaction patterns, any conceptualization of its dynamics must take into account numerous factors. Yet, to remain useful, the conceptualization must retain some simplicity. Fortunately, Schneider, Pollock and Helfer (1972) have provided such a model. Designed for the use of professionals interviewing parents suspected of abuse, it seems particularly applicable to an understanding of abuse's causes.

In the interview, we first must determine if the parents have the potential to abuse a small child. Second there must be a particular child—not just any child, but a very special child. Finally we must determine the crisis(es) that precipitated the abuse. It is unlikely that the battering situation will occur unless each of the factors plays some role [p. 55].

With little modification, this conceptualization can be extended to tie together the literature on the causes of child abuse. What are the respective contributions of parental characteristics, child characteristics, and situational variables to nonaccidental injury of children?

THE CARETAKER'S POTENTIAL

Overt psychopathology is indubitably involved in some instances: Delsordo (1963) believes it was implicated in four of his 80 cases, while Holter and Friedman (1968) mention presence in 14 of their 18 families. However, no single diagnosis “explains” abuse, so a search for components common to all or most abusers may prove more fruitful than an exercise in psychodiagnostics.

Cultural Permission. It has become a cliche that ours is a permissive society; but in one sense it appears to be all too true: Parents are allowed to use an enormous range of corporal punishment techniques in rearing their children. It is only after the child is damaged or destroyed that people become concerned, since the parents' right to discipline almost always takes precedence over the child's right to humane
treatment. The American culture historically granted parents tacit permission to use force against their children. Gil (1970) believes that all other causal factors to child abuse rest on the substratum of "the general, culturally determined permissive attitude toward the use of a measure of physical force in caretaker-child interaction" [p. 135]. Surveying attitudes toward abuse he found that 58.3% thought that "almost anybody could at some time injure a child in his care", while 22.3% thought they could do so themselves and 15.9% said they had at one time come close to doing so. Gil argues that these figures indicate that abuse is accepted in our culture. One may question his grounds for this argument, particularly in the light of the known discrepancy between attitudes and behavior; nevertheless the figures are impressive.

Gil is not alone in his concern; Steele and Pollock (1968) write:

There seems to be an unbroken spectrum of parental action toward children ranging from the breaking of bones and fracturing of skulls through severe bruising to severe spanking and on to mild "reminder pats" on the bottom... The amount of yelling, scolding, slapping, punching, hitting, and yanking acted out by parents on very small children is almost shocking. Hence, we have felt that in dealing with the abused child we are not observing an isolated, unique phenomenon, but only the extreme form of what we could call a pattern or style of child-rearing quite prevalent in our culture [p. 104].

Gil further speculates that subcultural differences with respect to the use of force may help to account for his findings that poverty and minority status are often associated with child abuse. He writes: "A second dimension [of abuse] is determined by specific child-rearing traditions and practices of different social classes and ethnic and nationality groups, and the different attitudes of these groups toward physical force as an acceptable measure for the achievement of child-rearing objectives" [p. 135].

Gil's explanation of the linkage between poor or nonwhite status and abuse is plausible and worthy of empirical test. However, it is based merely upon two assertions, often made by mental health specialists: that members of lower socioeconomic classes and some minority groups are more likely than white middle-class parents to approve of and use direct methods in disciplining children, and that aggressive acts in general are also more common and accepted in these subcultures. There is essentially no empirical data available on lower-class parental discipline techniques. The assertion is at best an extrapolation from research which has generally shown that middle-class parents are more likely to use reasoning, isolation, show of disappointment, or guilt-arousing appeals whereas working-class parents are more likely to use ridicule, shouting, or physical punishment (Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Kohn, 1963; Miller & Swanson, 1960; Sears, Maccoby & Levin, 1957). It is most unfortunate that Gil did not test the applicability of these assertions to the "lower-class" subcultures mentioned; it would seem that he had an excellent opportunity to include relevant questions in his national survey of views on child abuse. Lacking verification of its premises, Gil's theory remains unproven.

There are problems with the view that the general culture permits rough usage of children. The general cultural attitude may be present, as Gil points out,
even in our proverbs: "Spare the rod and spoil the child." But it is hard to see how this general attitude operates to promote any given case of abuse. It is important to note, for example, that often not all of the children in a given family are abused (e.g., Nurse, 1964); this finding weakens the hypothesis that broad cultural or subcultural effects are largely responsible. Again, abusing families tend to use a wider range of types of discipline than do nonabusing families (Elmer, 1967), and to apply discipline quite differently to various family members (Nurse, 1964), suggesting that individual rather than trans-group factors may be at work. Furthermore, abusing families tend to be socially isolated (Bryant et al., 1963; Elmer, 1967; Johnson & Morse, 1968, although their sample also contains victims of accidents due to negligence; Nurse, 1964). One might argue that a prevailing attitude favoring violent treatment of children would affect them less strongly. Since it is isolated families that tend to abuse, and since no culture or subculture actually advocated serious injury to its younger members, it is possible that abuse has more to do with breakdown in cultural transmission than with adherence to cultural norms.

These arguments may provide support for Young's (1964) contention that abuse is not part of the same continuum as culturally acceptable aggression against children: "abuse ... is not the impetuous blow of the harassed parent nor even the trans'ent brutality of an indifferent parent expressing with violence the immediate frustrations of his life. It is not the too severe discipline nor the physical roughness of ignorance. It is the perverse fascination with punishment as an entity in itself, divorced from discipline and even from the fury of revenge" [p. 44].

The implications of general childrearing attitudes for abuse is, at best, unclear. That is not to say that no connection exists. Cultural permission may play a role in abuse as an unfortunate guide to uncertain parents or as a rationalization for guilty ones, at the very least. One must look both at cultural attitudes favoring harshness, and beyond them, in order to get a clear picture.

The Abuser's Childhood. One common and often fruitful approach in understanding aberrant behavior is to study the individual's early learning history. Some authors (Cohen et al., 1966; Galdston, 1965; Wasserman, 1967) have asserted that abusing parents have failed to learn to delay immediate gratification in favor of later social reward. However, many abusing parents appear to have very adequate impulse control in other spheres of life, i.e., schooling, professional training, and in their jobs; and groups often noted for the lack of impulse control, such as female criminal offenders, do not appear to disproportionately abuse their children. Furthermore, some therapists report that abusers tend if anything to be overly eager to please authority figures, which is not characteristic of impulsive individuals (Alexander, 1972; Davoren, 1968). The act of battering a child may appear to be impulsive itself but it is doubtful if this is a general personality characteristic of abusers.

The learning of impulse control would seem to be less critical than the potential parent's acquisition of another set of behaviors and attitudes. While a child is growing up his parents serve as models of caretakers so that at least part of his later behavior in that role can be acquired by observational learning. Thus parents can hand down attitudes and behaviors which permit the use of direct force, or at least do not provide alternative means for handling child care difficulties. A family can go further, and create in its children feelings and behaviors that will
make them a danger to their own children. Investigators who have turned their
attention to the psychosocial background of abusive caretakers find that the
treatment they received during their childhood left them with residues that cripple
their parenting ability (Feinstein, Paul & Esmiol, 1964; Morris & Gould, 1963;

What sort of family rears children that are likely to assault their own offspring?
Not surprisingly, abuse itself appears to be a major factor. A note of caution must
be injected at this point, as all of the data discussed in this section is based on
retrospective reminiscences of current child abusers about their childhoods. Such
data is notoriously unreliable. To date there is no systematic research available
which has examined medical histories, police or court records, social agency or
school files of the abusers; nor has there been any follow-up on the later behaviors of
children known to have been abused.

Feinstein et al, (1964) worked with six women troubled by the impulse to
harm their children. They discovered that: “Characteristically the group members
had at least one parent or significant parental figure who had uncontrolled out-
bursts of temper during which they were the object of or witness to acts of
violence” (p. 882). Johnson and Morse (1968) studied 85 families in which
caretaker action or negligence caused injury to a child; fragmentary information
indicated that “almost a third of the parents . . . had been raised outside their own
homes” (p. 151). Similarly Nurse (1964) found that some aggressing parents
in her sample had been deserted or farmed out to one relative after another,
while seven of twenty reported that they had been chronically neglected.

However, the extremes of physical abuse, neglect, and abandonment do not
seem to be necessary to produce abusive parents. Wasserman (1967) believes that
the injurious parent was emotionally abandoned as a child. Nurse (1964) feels
that the underlying experience for the non-neglected thirteen of her twenty
aggressive parents was rejection by parent figures; rejection was sometimes expressed
by blame for all the family’s difficulties as well as by desertion. Feinstein et al.
(1964) have a similar view: “Most prominent in the history is a strong feeling of
resentment toward their parents, particularly their mothers, for not meeting their
dependency needs during childhood” (p. 882). Summarizing data gathered on
300 cases of abuse and neglect, Young (1964) states that only nine seemed to have
had any positive relationships with a member of their family or with a relative. For
many abusing parents the lack of love was exacerbated by rivalry with a favored
sibling (Feinstein et al., 1964; Nurse, 1964; Wasserman, 1967). A deep sense that
they were unwanted and unloved, that they were not prized by their own parents,
appears to be a typical, if not universal, experience for abusers. Several individual
case studies underline this poignant observation (e.g., Cohen, Raphling & Green,

According to Steele and Pollock (1968), a crucial factor is not simply that
abusers did not feel they received love from their parents but that they also felt
their parents placed insatiable demands upon them:

Without exception in our study group of abusing parents, there is a
history of having been raised in the same style which they have recreated
in the pattern of rearing their own children. Several had experienced
severe abuse in the form of physical beatings from either mother or
father; a few reported “never having had a hand laid on them.” All had experienced, however, a sense of pervasive, continuous demand from their parents. This demand was in the form of expectations of good, submissive behavior, prompt obedience, never making mistakes, sympathetic comforting of parental distress, and showing approval and help for parental actions. Such parental demands were felt to be excessive, not only in degree but, possibly more importantly, in their prematurity. Performance was expected before the child was able to fully comprehend what was expected or how to accomplish it. Accompanying the parental demand was a sense of constant parental criticism. No matter what the patient as a child tried to do, it was not enough, it was not right, it was at the wrong time, it bothered the parents, it would disgrace the parents in the eyes of the world, or it failed to enhance the parents’ image in society. Inevitably, the growing child felt, with much reason, that he was unloved, that his own needs, desires, and capabilities were disregarded, unheard, unfulfilled, and even wrong. These factors seem to be essential determinants in the early life of the abusing parent; the excessive demand for performance with the criticism of inadequate performance and the disregard of the child as an individual with his own needs and desires. Everything was oriented toward the parent; the child was less important (pp. 111-112).

The primacy of the parent’s needs over the child’s needs, like the use of force in child-rearing, is at least a partially accepted norm in our society. “We believe we have seen this type of childrearing or pattern of parent-child relationship existing in three successive generations. . . To a large extent, it has been socially acceptable, although subrosa, and to some extent it is probably culture-bound” (Steele & Pollock, 1967, p. 112). Oliver and Taylor (1971) analyzed the pedigree of an abused child and found mental and intellectual problems extending back for five generations. They concluded that persons who lack good mothers do not themselves become good mothers.

It is important to note that Steele and Pollock’s formulation is intended to apply only to parents who abuse children under three years of age. They believe that sexual issues may be of more importance when older children have also been subjected to what they felt were excessive demands and criticisms and a test of that hypothesis could be a valuable contribution to the literature.

Plainly, the abusing parents’ childhood does not leave them with very many warm memories of interpersonal experiences from which they can build patterns of mutuality with their own children. Steele and Pollock (1968) refer to the quality of “motherliness”: a caretaker (of either sex) shows motherliness in empathizing with the child’s needs and in interacting with the child to arrive at behavioral patterns for meeting needs with a minimum of strain. Some empirical observations confirm the absence of the components of motherliness in abusing parents. Morris, Gould and Mathews (1964) clinically observed that abusive and neglectful parents showed: (a) little concern about the child but a great deal of concern about what would happen to themselves and others involved in the child’s injury, (b) failure to respond to the child or inappropriate responding, (c) preoccupation with themselves and the concrete things in life, and (d) no indication of empathizing with how the child could feel, physically or emotionally. It appeared that sensitivity to the child’s needs and willingness to meet them were seriously lacking. A study by
Melnick and Hurley (1969) confirms the deficiency in motherliness through a different methodology. These investigators compared ten abusing mothers (defined by the presence of subdural hematoma, bruises and swellings and repeated fractures in their children under age three) with ten non-abusing mothers from the same socioeconomic class and neighborhood. Their study is of great value not only because of the control for demographic variables but also because it experimentally tested hypotheses drawn from the clinical literature. These investigators tested for failure of empathic, confident concern on the part of parenting persons by use of the Pathogenic Index, which differentiates mothers of schizophrenics from mothers of non-schizophrenics. The abusing mothers scored significantly higher (less empathic) on this index \((p < .002)\). TAT scores of the abusing mothers revealed a lower need to be nurturant as well \((p < .05)\). Melnick and Hurley conclude that these findings indicate that abusing mothers may have difficulty in sensing and meeting their children’s needs.

Insensitivity to others’ feelings may also play a role in interactions with peers, helping to account for the abusive parents’ social isolation and unsatisfactory marriages which will be discussed later. It certainly seems to be a prominent feature of their exchanges with their own infants. Having experienced little warmth and personal concern from their own parents, either as infants or later when corrective experience might have helped, abusers have not learned the attitudes and skills necessary to interact considerately with their children.

As is evident in the choice of the term “mothering”, the emphasis has been upon the female abuser. Most of Steele and Pollock’s cases involved abusive mothers. We know considerably less about the role of “fathering” and the dynamics of the male child abuser. Steele and Pollock feel, however, that the model suggested here is applicable in the male case.

But if battering parents have not absorbed the quality of motherliness, what did they learn in the austere schools of their own families? They seem to have become imbued with the conscious or implicit belief that aggression is appropriate in parent-child interaction, and at least in some cases, they have acquired the view that children should serve their parents’ needs and that punishment is an acceptable, even optimal, response to their failure to do so. The processes of cognitive structuring, modelling, and identification with the aggressor may have acted in varying combinations to inculcate these attitudes. Many of these parents communicate both verbally and nonverbally the idea that the coldness and critical demand with which they treat their children is justified, acceptable and the correct pattern for parent-child interaction. They seem to have learned, more or less explicitly, that to spare the rod is to spoil the child and that children owe their parents every filial duty and have precious few rights of their own. Observers have noted that many abusers seem to feel no guilt or remorse about injuring their children, viewing their behavior as entirely defensible or at worst an unfortunate accident (Morris & Gould, 1963; Young, 1964; Cohen et al., 1966). Here, psychodynamic and cultural determinants of abusive behavior meld.

The demands with which abusing parents confront their children probably represent more than imitation and ideology. In demanding so much from their children, abusing parents may be driven by their own powerful needs. Raised in an atmosphere of unrelenting demand and criticism, the parent has been denied love,
care, and emotional support. He or she continues to hunger for these things. When other sources fail, the parent seeks from his own child the affection missed (Johnson & Morse, 1968; Steele & Pollock, 1968; 1970).

Repeating their own parents' tragic error, such people place their offspring's needs second to their own, and demand that the children fulfill parental yearnings instead of receiving the nurturance proper to their helplessness and dependency. In effect, parent and child switch roles. Morris and Gould (1963) have labeled this inverted relationship "role reversal" and consider it the fundamental dynamic of child abuse.

Clinical and empirical observations support the hypothesis that the parent's state of emotional deprivation is in part responsible for the attack on the child. Morris, Gould and Mathews (1964) noticed that parents considered responsible for their children's needs for hospitalization revealed that they were concerned about having been abandoned and punished by their parents and were still yearning for a mother. Melnick and Hurley (1969) found that abusing mothers' TAT protocols disclosed a far higher frustrated need for dependence than the nonabusing mothers showed. Perhaps more dramatic is the following statement made by a battering mother: "I have never felt really loved all my life. When the baby was born, I thought he would love me; but when he cried all the time, it meant he didn't love me, so I hit him" (Steele & Pollock, 1968, p. 110).

Parents of abused children may be looking to their children for other satisfactions besides love. Devalued and criticized by their own parents, abusers have had little chance to develop feelings of worth, achievement, and integrity of identity. They manifest low self-esteem compared to other mothers in their social class (Melnick & Hurley, 1969) and tend to show overwhelming feelings that they and their children are worthless (Morris, Gould & Mathews, 1964). Pressed by their own parents to do well but seldom given the sense that they had achieved or could achieve adequately, the abusers may feel an enormous desire to prove competence but have no clear idea of how they might accomplish this. Unprepared to handle the normal difficulties of child rearing, they perceive any occasion when they cannot control the child's behavior as a direct threat to their competence. Their reaction to the threat is aggression toward the threatening object.

A tendency to identify too closely with the child's accomplishment or lack thereof is rendered especially serious because the parent has been unable to develop a stable sense of identity. A person needs a substratum of basic trust in himself and his environment, a record of satisfactory achievements, and the experience of finding a niche in the social context in order to be sure of who he is. The parent who has been emotionally deprived, disparaged, and often denied the opportunity to form relationships outside of the home, does not have the foundation of an adequate self-identity and cannot become a competent parent. An hypothesis worthy of test is that in some cases the parent's need for vicarious achievement plays a role equal to or greater than the need for affection. Excessive concern for high-level performance may loom particularly large where an older child, who is more active in school and community, is involved. One of the authors has seen several cases of severe battering following school failure and lack of success in Little League!

Some of the more psychoanalytically inclined scholars of child abuse have noted that the cruel treatment and/or frustration of their needs that abusing
Parents have experienced must have aroused anger and hostility. Since they could not express negative feeling toward their parents with safety, the potential abusers turned these emotions upon themselves, developing depression, intolerable self-hatred and guilt (Galdston, 1965; Steele & Pollock, 1968; Wasserman, 1967). Wasserman suggests that they learn to ward off depression by aggressive action, and that this is a factor in the violence with which they treat their children. His argument, while applicable to abusers who employ aggression frequently and in many contexts, needs modification to explain the behavior of abusers who limit their hostile acts to only their own children and sometimes to only one of these. To understand how the long stored hostility makes its contribution to specific incidents of child abuse, it is necessary to look beyond the historical sources of pent-up anger.

In summary, it appears that some, perhaps all, of the parents who later abuse their children emerge from their own childhoods burdened with deficiencies and impairments. They have had no opportunity to learn motherliness, since they did not experience empathic, supportive interchanges with their own parents. They have learned and accepted, through a variety of processes, that it is acceptable to confront children with high levels of demand and aggression. They appear to have no stable sense of themselves, their worth, or their achievements, and must look continuously to others for confirmation and support.

Unsatisfactory Marriage. Given the background and personality characteristics of the potential child abuser, the probability of finding a stable partner and making a successful marriage must be rather low. It is possible, however, that through a fulfilling marriage relationship some potential abusers could receive the corrective experiences of love, security, and worth that they require. Schneider, Pollock and Helfer (1972) discuss three logical relationships between parents as they may affect potential abuse: (1) if an adult with a weak potential to abuse children marries a normally reared individual then physical abuse will probably not occur; (2) if the potential in one adult is very strong and the spouse is a rather passive individual then abuse may indeed occur; and (3) if two adults, both with weak or moderate potential, marry, then abuse is highly likely.

We cannot know how many potential abusers marry stable, supportive partners and thus escape actually inflicting injury on their children. It is known that marital dissatisfaction and discord are common in the families of abused children (Cohen et al., 1966; Johnson & Morse, 1968; Terr, 1970). Melnick and Hurley (1969) report that abusers were less satisfied with their families than were the control group parents, and Elmer (1967) also found that social class differences did not account for the low level of marital functioning in the abusing as compared to the nonabusing families she studied. Young (1964) and Elmer (1967) found that even among abusing families that stayed together there was a very high proportion of couples that experienced repetitive, temporary separations, which suggests a failure to arrive at any real solution to the problems of family living.

In abusing families, sheer marital stability may be more a reflection of pathology (e.g., extreme apathy or even a sharing of mutually destructive needs) rather than health (Young, 1964). Steele and Pollock (1968) suggest "... it was often a desperate, dependent clinging together out of fear of loneliness and losing everything, which held the partners together despite incompatibilities and friction" (p. 107). Studying abusive families, Nurse (1964) found that many
parents had histories of shifting intimate relationships prior to the current marriage; she suggests this indicates their excessive dependency strivings, which may tie them to the current mate. Feinstein et al. (1964) found that the women they treated for obsessional thought of harming their children showed "the inclination to seek maternal care from their mates. . . . When the mate that they selected did not fulfill their maternal yearning, it reinforced their hatred for men and disappointment" (p. 883). Steele and Pollock (1968) found that where abuse does occur the non-battering parent often had a childhood similar to the abuser's, if somewhat less extreme in the privations it represented. The picture emerges of two people locked together by their immense need, but neither quite capable of fulfilling the other.

Frequently, the interactions of parents whose children suffer abuse are marked by extremes of dominance and submission (Delsordo, 1963; Terr, 1970; Young, 1964). Terr further specifies that the partners of abusers have difficulty in handling aggression, showing either inappropriate hostile assertion or excessive passivity. The problem of dominance-submission and inability to deal with aggression can contribute to child abuse through one of two patterns. First, the abusing parent may be the passive, submissive partner, venting his or her rage against the domineering parent upon the child. The child may be chosen as the target because it is less able to retaliate, or because the parent identifies it with the aggressive domineering spouse. Secondly, the abuser may be the dominating spouse. The passive partner, who may also be abused by the spouse, fails to protect the child. In most cases, the passive nonabuser remains with the family and actually protects the abuser from detection (Broadman, 1962), even to the point of flatly denying that problems exist (Young, 1964) or voicing sympathy for the very spouse who may have abused him or her (Nurse, 1964). Sometimes, the passive partner may fear that betrayal of the abusing partner will meet drastic punishment. More subtly, some parents may feel that the aggression would be displaced to them if deflected from the child victim; therefore they hesitate to interfere. In other cases, it is apparently the nonabuser's extreme dependence upon the spouse which makes him or her elect silence rather than jeopardize the relationship, unsatisfactory as it is (Galdston, 1965; Steele & Pollock, 1968; Young, 1964).

Johnson and Morse (1968) have observed that the sex of the nonabusing parent is of significance. Nonabusing fathers, according to these authors, tend to withdraw more or less totally from their children. Nonabusing mothers make more of an effort to provide children with support, consistent rules, and protection. No other study has reported this difference. It would be interesting to know whether this finding is an artifact of cultural stereotyping (the nurturant mother-punitive father) or whether such mothers actually do provide more parental help than their male counterparts.

The nonabusing parent contributes to the child's injury indirectly through failing to protect the child. Even where a passive parent does finally flee the home, the children are left behind, unsheltered (Young, 1964). Also, nonabusers increase the likelihood of abuse by not meeting the potential abuser's overwhelming needs for love and support; unfulfilled, or heightened by the partner's desertion or criticism, these needs will be turned upon the child with increased intensity, and the child is likely to suffer when he cannot satisfy the parent. The nonabusing partner may handle crises in childrearing in a way that allows or provokes abuse,
failing to aid the partner with difficult situations (Schneider et al., 1972), or even asking or advising the potential abuser to discipline a child (Steele & Pollock, 1968). To some degree, the nonabuser may join the battering parent in using the child as a family scapegoat, projecting blame for family difficulties onto the chosen victim (Galdston, 1970) or tacitly encouraging the abuser to vent aggression on this target rather than other family members (Nurse, 1964; Young, 1964).

Thus, the marriage relationship may contribute significantly to the potential for abuse. If the relationship dissolves or never materializes, the single parent confronts the child burdened with needs, lacking support, and additionally hurt by the failure in adult interpersonal relations. If the marriage shows some superficial stability, it still may not satisfy the potential abuser's needs. Finally, the partner may be unwilling or unable to meet the abuser's needs and may even instigate abuse through unwitting or malevolent acts.

**Misperceptions of the Child.** So far, all of the factors adding to the potential for child abuse could affect all of a couple's children equally. Indeed, sometimes abuse does affect all the children in a family, for example, Silver, Dublin, and Lourie (1969) found this to be the rule. Often, however, only one child is the selected victim of injury. Nurse (1964) observed that patterns of punishment showed that victims of abuse were punished with a severity uncharacteristic of disciplinary measures usual to the family. Nonabusing parents who helped discipline other siblings often avoided disciplining the abused child, and the victim was often contrasted unfavorably with one or more siblings. An important element in child abuse accounting for this specificity is a significant misperception of the child. Kaufman (1970) notes that: "the point in time at which the attack occurs requires a major distortion in reality for the parent to be able to carry out a brutal assault on a child. The child is no longer perceived as helpless, dependent on his parents for love, care, and nurturance, but as some symbolic referent upon whom the assault is launched" (p. 26).

Several observers have noted abusers' tendencies to perceive their victims as having adult capabilities and motivations. (Galdston, 1965; Johnson & Morse, 1968; Morris & Gould, 1963; Nurse, 1964; Steele & Pollock, 1968). This misperception is present in the phenomenon Morris and Gould describe as "role reversal", which they and Steele and Pollock believe is fundamental to abuse: The caretakers hope to receive from their offspring fulfillment and emotional support, unrealistically believing that the children are capable of meeting these needs. When the youngsters fail, the caretakers see their charges as hostile, persecutory adults. They perceive the children's failure to please them as evidence of willful naughtiness, rejection, or intentional hostility, since they presume that their offspring could fulfill their desires if they so chose.

This progression of desire and disappointment is not the only form of misperception abusers have of their children. Specific negative fantasies also occur:

A number of parents insisted that the scapegoat child was "different," implying that he did not actually belong to them. They did not question that the child was born to them, but they thought of him as a changeling imposed upon them by some wicked witch out of a fairy tale. Some of them even used the words "evil," "born wicked," a "monster," "unlike
other children," "like an animal," to describe their feelings about the child [Young, 1964, p. 51].

Other parents see their children as repellant, retarded, or fated for "no good" (Nurse, 1964). All of these perceptions may bear no relationship to the reality of the child's behavioral status, but they provide an almost classic example of rationalization thus avoiding any anxiety or guilt which might follow an attack on the child. In the extreme case the child is, or is almost, killed to save it from its "evil ways".

Terr (1970) describes other specific fantasies which abusing parents have fixed on their victims and argues that the "role reversal" phenomenon is an overly simple view of the dynamics of abuse. Three of the ten parents she evaluated viewed their victim as a punishing figure, or as an actual punishment for a specific wrongdoing. Other parents saw their child as so totally helpless that they were overwhelmed; their caretaking efforts were so marked by panic or despair that they were ineffective and the children suffered "accidental" or purposeful injury. Other observers have remarked on the parent's feelings that the child presents an unbearable burden (e.g., Johnson & Morse, 1968; Morris, Gould & Mathews, 1964).

Often, the abused child is thought to resemble or symbolize a class of persons or an individual that represents a threat to the insecure parent. For example, Feinstein et al. (1964) note that some of their mothers saw the child unrealistically as a grown man. The child is frequently perceived as a competitor: he or she may be said to resemble a parent's envied sibling (Feinstein et al., 1964; Wasserman, 1967) or to represent a contender for the spouse's love, either as a particular favorite of the spouse (Young, 1964) or as a seductive sexual rival (Terr, 1970). Still other abusers react to the child as if he or she were the partner who has hurt the parent through conflict or desertion (Nurse, 1964; Feinstein et al., 1969). In this latter case, displacement of aggression, perception of similarity between spouse and child, or both may be involved.

Another significant kind of misperception of the child is related to the parent's identity diffusion, already described. The child can be perceived as identical to the parent's own negative self image. "The abuser usually does not hit the child until he can rework the situation to see the child as his own bad, needy, crying self. Then the super-ego can approve the attack and punishment, because in this super-ego structure the parent has a right to attack a no-good infant. Repeatedly we hear parents say that hitting their baby was like hitting themselves" (Steele, 1970, p. 32). Steele and Pollock (1968) call this an identification process rather than projection, because projection involves denying the rejected traits in oneself, while these parents are concerned with similarities between their bad qualities and their children.

The generality or specificity of the parent's perceptions help to determine whether all of a family's children or only one of them will be injured at the hands of a caretaker. In either case, the distorted parental perceptions of the child, whether they grow from the potential abuser's general attitudes toward the roles of parent and child, from needs and memories originating in his own childhood, or from disharmony between spouses, appear to play a significant role in provoking and directing abuse.
In this section, some of the components that Schneider et al. (1972) see as contributing to the potential for abuse have been enumerated: the state of want and the needs emerging from the parent's own childhood, the inadequate relationship with the partner, and the parent's distorted perceptions of the child. To these factors may be added, with reservations, sociocultural permission for a demanding, punitive attitude in childrearing practices.

**THE CHILD**

There is a tragic lack of information concerning the behavioral characteristics of the battered child. In some peculiar sense, investigators have neglected the psychological aspects of the victims almost as much as the parents have neglected the child. The child abuse literature, like most of the clinical parent-child interaction research, has concentrated on the question of effects of parents on children, but there are clearly bi-directional effects. Children do not enter the family as *tabulae rasa* and they do have an enormous influence on eliciting and shaping their parents' behavior. For example, nearly a decade ago Bell (1964) found that mothers of children with congenital defects showed consistently more negative attitudes on a parent-attitude scale than did mothers of normal children. The differences were attributed to the effect on mothers of their children's limited coping ability. For a review of the literature on the direction of effects in normal socialization the reader should see Bell (1968). The brilliant research work of Thomas, Chess and Birch (1968) on temperament and behavior disorders in children has a number of important implications for further research in child abuse. As one example of a temperamental subgroup which could be of significance in the abuse field, one might consider the "difficult children" or "mother killers". These children, with normal parents, are characterized by multiple irregularities in biological functioning, a predominance of negative (withdrawal) responses to new stimuli, very slow adaptability in most new situations, a high frequency of expression of negative mood (fuss and cry easily) and a predominance of intense reactions. Such an infant could provoke abuse in many parents who have a very weak potential for battering; Gil (1968) notes that "persistent behavioral atypicality of child" is a factor in nearly a quarter of his cases (see also Johnson & Morse, 1968). Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that what is seen in the clinic and hospital is the end product of a history of bi-directional interaction which has changed both the parent's and the child's behaviors. Therefore, careful, direct behavioral observation of the parent/child interactions is as necessary as the taking of developmental histories.

A child who is for some reason particularly hard or unrewarding to care for is a potential victim of abuse. For example, Elmer and Gregg (1967) noted that prematurity was far more common among white abusing families in their sample than among white families in general (see also Elmer, 1967). Other reports of high prematurity rates in abused children come from Simons et al. (1966; sample includes victims of negligent accidents) and Steele and Pollock (1972) do not find prematurity significant. Physical problems and mental retardation are also common in abused children (Elmer, 1967; Martin, 1972), although as Elmer points out it is difficult to tell in which cases these conditions provoked and which resulted from abuse.
Milowe and Lourie (1964) observe that the abused child may have particularly irritating mannerisms which lead even nurses and foster parents to negative reactions if not outright abuse, but again it is impossible to know whether these behaviors predate incidents of abuse. Once abuse has begun children may come to present behaviors that elicit parental violence. They suggest that children may come to invite abuse in a masochistic fashion, although no case studies are reported to confirm this possibility. Terr (1970) observes that the abused children he studied engaged in difficult, even provocative behavior, which he interpreted as retaliatory action. Eliciting behavior might also be explained, as Lovaas et al. (1965) and Lovaas and Simmons (1969) have done with self-mutilating behaviors, on the basis that it is socially reinforced by caretakers through gaining their attention.

Aside from physical and behavioral characteristics that may present difficulty for the parent, the child may have other properties which cause the caretaker to invest him with negative attributes. Illegitimacy and premarital conception are unusually prevalent among victims of abuse (e.g., Nurse, 1964; Simons et al., 1966); however, Johnson and Morse (1968) find illegitimacy as common in nonabused siblings as in the injured children). The parent in some cases may view the child begotten out of wedlock as a punishment or reminder of their transgression, or as the source of family difficulties (Steele & Pollock, 1972). Finally, the child’s appearance, sex, ordinal position in the family or attainment of a particular stage of development may remind the parent of a negatively evaluated condition in the caretaker’s own development (Elmer, 1967; Feinstein et al., 1964; Galdston, 1970; Milowe & Lourie, 1964; Young, 1964). For example, some investigators report that parents are more likely to abuse children of their own sex (Simons et al., 1966), which may relate to parental fantasies of the child as an extension of the “bad self” or, possibly, as a sexual rival.

One should not infer that abuse is the child’s fault, or that the criteria for selecting victims are clear-cut. Martin (1972) reports that only 7 percent of his sample had been hard to nurture from the beginning, and cites another study showing victims may have been placid babies. Again, Johnson and Morse (1968) found as much illegitimacy among noninjured siblings as among accidentally and purposely injured children. Nevertheless, it appears that through maturational and physical characteristics, accidents of birth, temperamental qualities and the more or less unwitting behaviors he shows, a child may call down his parent’s wrath upon him. We must come to know a great deal more about the contribution of the child to the problems of abuse if we are to develop more effective prevention and treatment programs.

**THE CONTEXT OF ABUSE**

Parents and children both furnish elements which can contribute to the probability of child abuse. However, even the parents’ glaring anger or premeditated cruelty or the childrens’ persistent crying and irregularity might never find drastic expression if their situations were relatively free of tension and anxiety, if additional untoward events did not occur to provoke them, or if the agencies of help and social control were more available to them. Schneider et al. (1972) and Pollock and Steele (1972) discuss crises, both chronic and acute, which interact with the parent’s potential and the child’s characteristics to result in injury.
Situational Stress. Frequently, abusing parents are observed to be under situational stress of great intensity and duration. In our society, to be poor, or a minority group member, or deserted by a spouse is to be placed under enormous stress and could certainly set the stage for abusive incidents. These sources of strain may provide links between demographic variables and abuse. There are other situational stresses. Elmer (1967) noted that abusing families in her sample were more likely than nonabusing families to have had a child born less one year before or after the index child’s hospital admission. She suggests that child-bearing may represent recurrent crises for some women, rendering them less well able to cope with their needs and childrearing problems. Tallying points for this and other stresses (out-of-wedlock conception, mother’s youth, and short intervals between pregnancies), she reported that abusive families scored higher than nonabusive ones. She further noted: “The conditions on which we scored the families were all of a kind that generally place a far greater burden on the mother than on the father, and the fact that the fathers were probably the ones guilty of abuse in most families with low stress scores suggests that fathers may assault their children for quite different reasons from those attributed to mothers” (p. 79). This suggestion ties in well with the observation that abuse is sometimes inflicted by fathers who suddenly become disabled and unemployed, and have to take up the caretaker’s role while the mother acts as the breadwinner (Galdston, 1965). Of course, this relationship between father’s unemployment and his abuse of children may simply reflect the fact that such fathers spend more time with their children than do employed fathers. No one has compared unemployed abusing versus employed abusing fathers.

Parents with abusing potential sometimes arrange to have others assume the task of caring for their children; abuse is likely if these arrangements break down (Galdston, 1965). As mentioned previously, marital problems are frequently associated with abuse. It would seem that any such long-term stress would heighten the parent’s needs and potentially weaken behavioral controls, rendering abuse more likely.

Precipitating Event. With rare exception the abused child is not battered or tortured on a daily or regular basis. Even under considerable situational stress an inadequate parent will interact with the child for days or months at a time without injuring the youngster. What is the final signal for release of aggression against the child? Once again the available literature is nearly silent on an important issue. In most clinical reporting, the acts of parental aggression have been identified with the emotional state of the individual and thus studied independently of the social context in which they occur. Cairns (1972) notes:

the contributions of social and contextual events as determinants of behavior are lost by such a “monadic” strategy. This would be a minor issue for the analysis of pain-producing acts if the primary determinants of such responses were in fact internal and endogenous. But, should the behaviors be significantly controlled by the reciprocal activities of the other individual or by events in the situation or the context in which the interaction occurs, then serious problems arise. Abstraction of the behavior from the more general dyadic interchange would then serve to inhibit rather than facilitate the identification of the principal determinants of the phenomenon [p. 62].
Further research must take more seriously the context and the social interaction if we are to come to a deeper understanding of abuse.

The little that we know about the final signal for release of aggression can be rather briefly summarized. With more disturbed parents, the stimuli for attack appear to be largely self-produced events, related to the parent's fantasies and desires rather than to any discernible critical event in the external world (Young, 1964). In most cases, the clinical literature suggests the potential abuser's negative emotions and experienced stress may be abruptly heightened by some threat to security or self-esteem. Pollock and Steele (1972) write:

... [other crises] appear quite trivial, such as a dented fender, or a hair tint that did not turn out exactly right. It must be borne in mind that what might appear trivial to the casual observer may not be insignificant to abusive parents. They live with a very precarious sense of stability; the slightest untoward event in the environment may topple the balance, resulting in a feeling of worthlessness and anger [pp. 7-8].

Abuse may be a more or less immediate response to sudden, acute stress. Where situational stress does not become acute or where response to the crisis is delayed, the child's behavior may provide the final instigation to abuse. Many parents report that some particular act of the child's was displeasing to them and provoked the attack (Johnson & Morse, 1968). Gil (1970) reports that 63% of the abuse incidents were responses to a specific child behavior, but in only 22% of the cases did independent observers feel the child had misbehaved by community standards. Finally, Steele and Pollock (1968) have described the dynamics and context of abuse which is particularly applicable to the battering of younger children:

The parent approaches each task of infant care with three incongruous attitudes: First, a healthy desire to do something good for the infant; second, a deep, hidden yearning for the infant to respond in such a way as to fill the emptiness in the parent's life and bolster his low self-esteem; and third, a harsh, authoritative demand for the infant's correct response, supported by a sense of parental rightness. If the caring task goes reasonably well and the infant's response is reasonably adequate, no attack occurs. ... But if anything interferes with the success of the parental care or enhances the parent's feelings of being unloved, and inferior, the harsh, authoritative attitude surges up and attack is likely to occur [p. 130].

Social Isolation. Even where potential abusers encounter crisis, abuse need not occur if the parent can turn to others for help with his or her problems and with the processes of caring for the child. Even the pressure of effective social control that would place limits on the caretaker's behavior might help avoid injury to the child (Galdston, 1970; Nurse, 1964; Young, 1964). Virtually every investigator reports that abuse occurs in families which have few if any links to neighbors and relatives; indeed, Schneider et al. (1972) view isolation as a part of the parent's potential for abuse. The social isolation is not a simple function of the parent's socioeconomic class; it is characteristic of both middle class and poor abusers, and is a pattern that distinguishes abusers from nonabusers within each class (Elmer,
1967). Furthermore, one gets the impression that abusers actively resist involvement in meaningful associations outside of the home. Although abusive families seem uniquely aloof, general cultural factors may contribute somewhat to their isolation; greater mobility, the breakdown of the extended family, and norms respecting privacy and independence make it less likely that a family which shuns outside contact will be coaxed or coerced into closer relationships beyond the nuclear family (Schloesser, 1964; Young, 1964). Perhaps the most significant element in the social isolation phenomenon is that the potentially abusing parent may ultimately have no one but the child to turn to.

Summary. This review of the literature has described a constellation of factors which may combine to cause incidents of child abuse. These factors are: The parent's own potential for abuse, determined in part by his own childhood experiences and culture, the quality of his relationship to his spouse, and his misperceptions of the child; the child's characteristics and behavior which may make him a burden or a symbol to the parent; and the context of abuse composed of situational stresses, a specific precipitating event, and social isolation. All of these factors need not have equal weight or be present in every case of abuse.

The varied salience of the three factors in different cases probably accounts for the diversity seen in child abuse. The factors may be of some help in devising a typology of child abuse which could have consequences for prevention and treatment. Past attempts at typologies such as Merrill (1962), Delsordo (1963) and Zalba (1967) have concentrated almost exclusively upon the first factor, or parental personality characteristics. These efforts might be successful in identifying high-risk parents but ultimately consideration of the child and the context will be necessary. The relationship of the factors is somewhat analogous to the old arguments concerning heredity versus environment: Ultimate significance practically never lies with one or the other, but with the relative contribution of each and their interaction effects. Gil's (1970) typology, derived from factor analysis of responses to a checklist describing abusive incidents contains some child-related and situational variables.

As Zalba (1967) emphasizes, the most important function of a typology of abuse is to aid treatment efforts by indicating precisely what interventions will have maximum therapeutic impact on specific cases. In setting forth his own tentative typology, he also stated the treatment objectives and methods which seemed to promise the best results for each type of abuser. He noted the need for research to validate the usefulness of the recommendations; unfortunately, as yet his is a challenge to which no one seems to have responded.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ABUSED CHILD

What happens to the victim of child abuse? How do his catastrophic early experiences influence his later development? The answers to these questions could shed light on important issues in the fields of child development and personality; they could assist helping personnel in planning interventions that would deal with the child's problems more effectively. However, the literature on the consequences of abuse on the subsequent life of its victim is embryonic. Many therapists, hospital staff members, social workers, and other professionals offer information on the victims of abuse, but it is almost entirely descriptive, incomplete, nonstandard-
ized and uncontrolled. Some interesting exceptions are Elmer's investigations (Elmer, 1967; Elmer & Gregg, 1967), Martin's (1972) paper setting follow-up information in a theoretical framework, and Rolston's (1971) study of the way formerly abused children handle aggression.

The General Clinical Picture. Victims of inflicted injury may suffer from deformities, slowed physical development, scars, and mental retardation. Studying 20 abused children, Elmer and Gregg (1967) found that 50% of their subjects had subnormal intelligence, their intelligence quotient scores falling below 80 points (compare with 33% of Martin's 1972 sample). They also found that only two of the children were within normal limits of physical, intellectual, and emotional development. However, only the physical defects could be blamed entirely on abusive incidents: Length of time spent in the abusive environment prior to hospitalization, placement of child after discovery of abuse, and the complicating effects of malnutrition all influenced outcomes.

It seems likely that emotional problems will be prevalent in victims of parental aggression. For one thing, we might assume that physical and intellectual difficulties may have a great impact on the child's later psychosocial development. Also, abusive parents often deny their children normal contacts with peers and other families beyond the dysfunctional family circle, and this constriction must seriously impede personal growth (Young, 1964). Another sign that bodes ill for victims' later adjustment is the fact that some of them, trying desperately to arrive at some understanding of the things that happen to them, and frequently bombarded by their caretakers' derogatory statements, arrive at the conviction that they themselves are totally "bad" (Young, 1964). Evidence of the emotional problems arising in the injurious context is offered by Elmer and Gregg (1967), who report that eight of their 20 abused subjects showed emotional disturbances: As assessed by a psychiatrist and research psychologist, four were rated as having mild disturbances, two moderate, and two severe. One must be somewhat cautious in this area. Although all of Elmer and Gregg's subjects received identical examinations, it is probable that in many investigations only the most severe abuse cases gain detailed clinical study.

Behavior Patterns. It is important to make a distinction between what may be called early and late responses to caretaker-inflicted injury (Galdston, 1965; Martin, 1972; Morris, Gould & Mathews, 1963; Rolston, 1971). Another approach is to distinguish the behavioral effects on very young children as compared to the responses of older victims (Johnson & Morse, 1968; Terr, 1970). It is not always possible to tell whether maturation or time elapsed since abuse is responsible for changes in the children's behavior.

Early Response. An early response to abuse appears to be apathy to both physical and social environments. People are treated with some indifference, and the child does not seek their support nor respond to them with cooperation and interest (Galdston, 1965; Terr, 1970). The child may withdraw from physical contact actively, flinching or crying (Galdston, 1965). The only affects which the children are likely to display are fear and depressive withdrawal; they seldom smile and seem to vigilantly watch the environment for signs of danger (Johnson & Morse, 1968; Martin, 1965; Morris, Gould & Mathews, 1963). After a short intervention period, the child may initiate more activity, but the behavior is not always appropriate
and may even be obstreperous (Galdston, 1965; Martin, 1972). Some children begin
to show excessive dependency and clinging behavior (Galdston, 1965; Martin, 1972).

Later Development. As the child matures and recovers from the immediate
effects of abuse, his behavior continues to evolve. Perhaps most noteworthy is the
emergence of what Terr (1970) calls the “Hail fellow well met” attitude which he
considers an age defect characteristic of older abused children. Many past victims of
abuse display a surface friendliness to all adults indiscriminately. This friendliness
is shallow, often with obvious signs of manipulativeness. The extent of compliance
to adults’ wishes may be extreme, with the child expressing sympathy for the adult’s
problems and acting in a nurturant manner toward the adult (Martin, 1972).
Steele and Pollock (1968) report heightened responsiveness to parental demand even
in the first six months of life, and by the time they reach toddler stage, abused
children can react with incredible sensitivity to their parents’ wants. Martin (1972)
describes the victim months or years after abuse:

His external being seems quite adaptive, but his inner self is rarely seen and
seems tenuous at best. He has difficulty developing deep trusting
relationships with special people. His peer relations are casual. He must rely
on external rather than self-directed monitors to determine appropriate
behavior [p. 107].

In general, the child’s behavior is overcompliant and his relationships are marked by
superficiality. Martin, following Erikson’s model, speculates that the child’s impaired
ability to trust deprives him of the conviction that he can control his behavior, act
meaningfully upon the environment, and form deep relationships with others. The
victim of abuse lacks the rudiments of a stable identity.

A major investigation of the personality characteristics of victims some time
after abuse is Rolston’s (1971) dissertation. It tends to confirm clinical observations
of overcompliance and superficiality. Rolston’s subjects were forty children living
in foster homes. Children were between seven and fifteen years of age with IQ
scores above 60. Twenty subjects, randomly selected from a larger pool, had
previously suffered tissue damage or severe beatings at the hands of caretakers, or
had been confined or tied up for long periods as punishment. The other twenty foster
children had not been abused and acted as a control group. The experimental
measures included TAT protocols and ratings by foster mother, teacher and welfare
caseworker on a number of scales.

Rolston found a number of statistically significant differences between abused
and nonabused foster children. One wishes for comparison data on a group of normal
controls, but the contrast of foster children prevents the confounding of the effects
of abuse per se with the general effects of disruptions inherent in any foster
placement. In summary, the abused children as compared to nonabused fosterlings
were more “callous” (as opposed to “sensitive”) and more “somber” (as opposed
to “gay”). Nonabused children were perceived as more “negativistic” (rather than
“suggestible”), more competitive, and subject to severer temper tantrums than
victims of abuse. On TAT measures, abused children used fewer aggressive words
than nonabused peers, but the two groups’ use of words referring to affiliation
and punishment was about equal. Victims tended to use fewer words in general
than nonabused children.
Rolston concluded that:

prior physical abuse . . . result[ed] in a decrease or inhibition in children of both overt and fantasy aggressive behavior and needs when compared to a control group with similar deprivation and separation experiences but without a history of physical abuse. . . . Behavioral characteristics related to aggression which described the abused children, as differentiated from the non-abused group, were: (1) less destructive of objects; (2) less quarrelsome—greater desire to placate; (3) docility; (4) less severe temper tantrums; (5) less competitiveness; (6) less direct aggression exhibited in the home; (7) lower frequency of projected fantasy aggression to the T.A.T. cards [p. 73].

Rolston also argues that abused children seem to show a general inhibition of responsiveness to stimulation from others and the environment, coupled with a regressive or fixated responsiveness to self-stimulation. However, this generalization uses terms so global that information is lost; it is more important to note the behavior upon which Rolston bases his general statement (somberness, speech problems, relative unselshiness with possessions, fewer truancies from home; and high appetite, thumb sucking, and masturbation). Rolston notes that specific indices of responsiveness are needed since generalized activity level and shyness do not distinguish abused from nonabused foster children.

Despite reservations about globalized expression of his findings, Rolston's results are of interest. He has confirmed empirically the picture of overcompliant behavior described by others, noting also “callousness” which may correspond to the superficiality observed by others. He finds an inhibition of aggressive expression, and sees a continuation of the apathy and sadness characteristic of victims immediately after abusive incidents.

Interestingly, both Martin (1972) and Rolston (1971) remark on language difficulties in abused children, independent of general intelligence. Although both authors recognize that several determinants may be involved, they hypothesize psychogenic factors in the origin of these language problems. Martin suggests that language may be a particular casualty of the abused child's impaired trust. The victim of abuse may be uncertain of his own inner life, or since he is so focused on other's reactions, he may be afraid to share any thought when he cannot be sure that significant adults will accept it. It might be very revealing to determine if the abused child is better able to express himself to peers; if not, one would expect tremendous difficulties developing consensual validation of emotions and interpersonal relationships. One might also consider that in learning to play organized games normal children seem to discover that thinking out loud gives your opponent the advantage; thus they learn to inhibit some speech. The abused child may have overlearned the same principle in his early interactions with his abuser.

On the other hand, Rolston observes that the abused child’s sparing use of words may be related to the stuttering that appears to be disproportionately common among the victims. He tentatively mentions the psychodynamic interpretation that stuttering is a sign of fierce, suppressed aggressive impulses. Both Rolston and Martin admit that the language problems may stem from more prosaic sources, but their descriptions etch deeply the picture of the abused child as one who has
failed to achieve the minimum of self-assertion proper to optimal personality development.

Handling of Aggression. The picture of passivity is not uniformly reported in the literature. Elmer (1967) had mothers report the frequency of anger in abused, unabused, and unclassified children. Eight of twenty-one abused children received deviant scores while none of the children in other classifications received such scores. Half of the abused children with deviant scores were reported to have a complete inhibition of anger while the other half had unusually frequent outbursts. While the use of a caretaker's rating without independent evaluations may introduce bias, Elmer's findings correspond to Johnson and Moore's (1968) description of extremes of behavior in abuse victims over five years of age. Their children tended to be either "selfish and inconsiderate or unassertive and self-sacrificing", hyperactive and boisterous or listless and silent, bullied by peers and siblings or abusive to their siblings (p. 150). While Bryant et al. (1963) reaffirm the unresponsiveness, depression, and fear in abused victims, they also report overreaction to hostility (which unfortunately could imply capitulation and flight or counterattack) and destructiveness. They further state that some of the child's deviant reactions are specific to the home setting or the abusive parent, which may be a very significant point of interest for additional research. Terr (1970) describes what he calls "retaliatory behavior" on the part of most of the abuse victims in his study; the retaliatory acts he names range from infants' feeding problems to older children's stealing, lying, soiling or destroying parent's property. Young (1964) supports Rolston's (1971) findings of inhibition of aggression in reporting that children of abusive families enact "a low proportion of crimes of violence and those requiring organized planning", but she does mention "indications of a high proportion of minor delinquencies" (p. 72). In many clinical case reports, the therapist or social worker making the record may perceive extremes that are more a function of their expectations than of actual deviance. However, on the whole, the available evidence suggests that at least some abused children manifest either indiscriminate assertiveness or tightly encapsulated, channelized aggression.

What determines whether an abuse victim will display or inhibit aggressive behavior? If aggression does occur, what determines its target and form of expression? There is virtually no clear-cut evidence bearing on these questions. In the studies just reviewed there is a suggestive element that retaliatory behavior and aggression are more likely to be observed in the behavioral repertoire of victims still living with their abusers with an absence of aggression in children who have been removed from the context and perpetrators of abuse. Most of the past research on aggression in children has treated it as a unitary entity in itself; however, Patterson and his co-workers (Patterson & Cobb, 1971) have recently presented a dyadic analysis of aggression and fighting which clearly demonstrates the escalation process between the two participants. Toch (1969), in examining the interchange between criminal offenders and police officers, has also noted a process of the escalation of violence. A careful dyadic analysis of the aggression-counteraggression process in child abuse could be of significance not only for our understanding of the phenomenon but for changing the process as Patterson has been able to do with extremely aggressive children.

It was noted earlier that many writers believe that the abused child of today is likely to become tomorrow's battering parent. Certainly their tendency to
handle aggression with either extreme inhibition or excessive expression resembles abusive parents' difficulty with aggression as reported by Terr (1970). Victims' callousness (Rolston, 1971) and lack of stable identity (Martin, 1972) seem to parallel abusers' shifting identities and insensitivity to their children as remarked by Steele and Pollock (1968). Others view the victim as prone to other forms of violence. Rolston (1971) cites several studies suggesting that the use of severe physical punishment was a major antecedent to development of later aggressive delinquent behavior. Ducan et al. (1958) interviewed six first-degree murderers, who were white, middle class, intelligent, and drug free. In this rather select sample, they found that four men had been brutally treated by their caretakers. Curtis (1963) cites Bender and Curran's report that identification with an aggressive parent and modelling behavior after his example is a pattern common to many of the murderers they studied. It would be illogical to assert that all those who commit violent crimes were victims of child abuse, but one can hypothesize that for some individuals a history of child abuse predisposes them to potential violent behavior.

It should not be concluded that violence inevitably begets violence. Similarities between abused children and abusing parents are not identities. Many victims of abuse can be helped to develop meaningful and satisfying lives and abusing parents can profit from social and psychological therapy. The reader interested in the various therapeutic intervention techniques utilized in the field of child abuse should consult the papers in The Battered Child (Helfer & Kempe, 1968) and Helping the Battered Child (Kempe & Helfer, 1972). as well as Feinstein et al., (1964) and Zalba (1967).
REFERENCES


