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Editorial: Operationalizing child maltreatment: Developmental processes and outcomes

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Significant advances have occurred in our knowledge of the effects of maltreatment on the developmental process since the "battered child syndrome" (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962) was first identified. In fact, during the mid-1980s and onward, the quality and methodological sophistication of investigations of the developmental sequelae of child maltreatment increased dramatically (for summaries, see Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995, and Cicchetti & Toth, 2000). However, overall progress has been hampered by a lack of consensus on the operationalization of the construct of child maltreatment (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993; Besharov, 1981; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979). In recognition of the complexities accompanying definitional issues in the area of maltreatment, a decade ago a Special Issue of *Development and Psychopathology* was devoted to defining psychological maltreatment (Cicchetti, 1991). The challenges associated with defining maltreatment were again highlighted in a Special Issue of *Development and Psychopathology* that addressed advances and challenges in the study of the sequelae of child maltreatment (Cicchetti, 1994a). In the editorial to that issue, Cicchetti (1994b) concluded that "the lack of consensus regarding the definition of maltreatment employed by various investigators [had] made comparability across studies difficult to achieve" (p. 2).

It is therefore disconcerting that despite a recognition of the criticality of clear definitional approaches to maltreatment and almost a decade after the National Research Council (1993) highlighted the need for improved operational definitions of child maltreatment, that approaches to defining child maltreatment continue to be debated (Barnett et al., 1993; Cicchetti & Barnett, 1991; Zuravin, 1999). Moreover, it is important to recognize that definitional considerations cannot be separated from other methodological issues such as the need for sufficiently large representative samples of maltreated and nonmaltreated comparison children, developmentally and culturally appropriate measures, and the importance of examining adaptation over time in longitudinal studies.

Given the difficulties encountered when attempting to define child maltreatment, it is important to examine reasons why this has been so cumbersome despite the recognition of the necessity of achieving definitional clarity. To begin, the fact that the occurrence of maltreatment is a legal matter defined by social service systems rather than by researchers or mental health professionals has added complexity to the area. This situation is further complicated by the fact that in many respects there are not clear standards for differentiating between acceptable parental disciplinary prac-

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tices and maltreatment (Black & Dubowitz, 1999; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995). Variations across periods of history and across cultures regarding "acceptable" versus "maltreating" parenting has further compounded definitional difficulties (Barnett et al., 1993).

In addition to a lack of social consensus regarding what constitutes child maltreatment, there also is a lack of agreement regarding whether child maltreatment should be defined based on the actions of the perpetrator, the effects on the child, or a combination of the two (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1991, 1993; McGee & Wolfe, 1991). The question of whether parental intent should be considered when determining whether or not an act of maltreatment has occurred also has been debated (Barnett et al., 1991, 1993). Thus, for example, if a child is harmed but the parent did not intend to inflict harm, does the act constitute child maltreatment? The answers to these questions also raise methodological issues, as it is more difficult to measure parental intent than parental behavior and linking maltreatment to child outcome makes it difficult to disentangle maltreatment from its sequelae (Barnett et al., 1991; McGee & Wolfe, 1991).

Another longstanding controversy has surrounded the purpose of the definition and whether it is reasonable to expect professionals from various disciplines to agree on a single definitional approach when the ultimate utilization of the respective definition is very different (Aber & Zigler, 1981; Barnett et al., 1993; Zuravin, 1999). For example, a definition that could meet a research agenda might prove to be unwieldy in a courtroom setting. Similarly, a medical model necessarily focuses on overt signs of maltreatment, most often physical. Such approaches most likely minimize psychological maltreatment.

A final area of importance for research purposes relates to the methodological strategy used to assess incidents of child maltreatment. Efforts to ascertain the occurrence of maltreatment most typically have included self-report (of either perpetrator or victim), observational paradigms, and utilization of official child protective services (CPS) records (see, e.g., Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Manly, Cicchetti, & Barnett, 1994). Each of these methods possesses positive as well as negative aspects. In fact, the papers in this Special Issue provide a representation of a variety of techniques and, rather than reiterate them here, readers are urged to evaluate the pros and cons of respective approaches as they read the articles.

In this Special Issue, we have sought to provide a window into the progress that has occurred in the operationalization of child maltreatment. The investigators who have contributed articles are leaders in the field of child maltreatment who have been grappling with issues related to definition for decades. Interestingly, a number of the contributions report the use of classification systems in conjunction with large, representative samples of maltreated and demographically comparable nonmaltreated children. Many of the papers also discuss findings from longitudinal investigations on child outcome. We believe that the work represented in this Special Issue is cutting edge and that it has informed prior research efforts and will continue to set the standards that guide research for the field.

In closing, we think it important that, while acknowledging the complexities involved and the obstacles encountered with defining maltreatment and, more broadly, with conducting research in this area, we not focus on "what's wrong" to the exclusion of "what's right." Moreover, we do not believe that researchers investigating maltreatment should be held to standards not routinely met by related fields of inquiry. For example, not all investigators of conduct disorder or delinquency employ identical methodologies for determining the presence of the disorder. In fact, most phenomena of interest in developmental psychopathology involve a range of self- and other-report measures, semistructured psychiatric interviews, observational methods, and record information. Clearly, it is not reasonable to expect all maltreatment investigations to utilize identical procedures for defining the sample. However, it is not only reasonable but also necessary that all approaches are based on clear operational definitions and that findings are reported in a manner that allows for replication across investigations.

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