INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CHILD NEGLECT: RESEARCH & PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

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From 1965 to almost 1990, the most common explanation of child abuse, i.e., physical abuse, among scholars and advocates was intergenerational transmission – abusive parenting was learned from abusive parents early caregivers.

This explanation of child abuse was initially based on studies of battered child syndrome.
MIXED RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings regarding intergenerational transmission of physical abuse were mixed, in part because researchers used different types of samples in which caregivers had engaged in very different types of abuse. For example, excessive punishment of children was conflated with battered child syndrome, torture, serial battering, etc.
QUESTIONS ABOUT INTERGENERATION TRANSMISSION (IGT)

Early research indicated that experiences of abuse in childhood sometimes resulted in neglectful parenting rather than abusive parenting. In other words, child maltreatment did not appear to be learned in any straightforward way, i.e., through social modeling.

Some theorists had recourse to psychodynamic explanations for how IGT impacted victims of child maltreatment.
In 1987, Kaufmann & Zigler published an influential summary of studies of IGT which concluded that the rate of inter-generational transmission of childhood maltreatment was about 30%.

Breaking the cycle of child abuse was asserted to be more common than intergenerational transmission of abusive parenting.
FOCUS ON RISK ASSESSMENT

For the 20-25 years following the publication of Kaufmann’s & Zigler’s article, a childhood history of physical abuse or child maltreatment became another risk factor for child abuse and neglect rather than a stand alone explanation.

Child welfare scholars appeared to lose interest in conceptual frameworks for explaining child abuse and neglect, focusing instead on prediction and/or risk classification.
During recent years, there has been a renewed interest in intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment due to an increased interest among both scholars and advocates in child neglect and in prevention and in the sources of children’s resilience.

Discussions of causation of child abuse and neglect have re-entered child welfare scholarship.
NEW RESEARCH

Studies of intergenerational transmission of child neglect have been published in recent years by Carolyn Widom & Valentia Nikulina and by Jessica Bartlett & Melissa Easterbrook.

In addition, a wide array of studies regarding the effects of child neglect on child development have been published, most notably by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard, by Melissa Johnson Reid & Brett Drake and by Diana English & her colleagues from LONGSCAN samples.
RATES OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION (IGT)

Widom & Nikulina and Bartlett & Easterbrook using very different methods and samples have found rates of IGT of child maltreatment and/or child neglect that range from about 20-44%.
BARTLETT’S & EASTERBROOK’S FINDINGS

Bartlett’s & Easterbrook’s studies of young parents of babies and toddlers have found that:

1. A history of physical abuse in childhood is more likely to lead to neglectful parenting than abusive parenting.
2. A parent’s history of physical abuse in childhood increases the risk of neglectful parenting by a factor of four.
3. The experience of multiple types of maltreatment in childhood greatly increases the risk of IGT of neglect.
4. The frequency and dependability of social support and positive experiences of nurturance moderates the effects of child maltreatment on parenting in the next generation.
In their 30-40 year longitudinal study, Widom & Nikulina found that the rate of IGT depended on the measures used:

1. CPS reports to public agencies – 20%
2. Self reports of maltreating behavior – 40% for neglect.
3. Reports of children – almost 60%.
Widom & Nikulina found evidence in their for IGT of neglect and sexual abuse but not for physical abuse. They also found that detection bias had an influence on rates of CPS reports and almost certainly substantiation.
DISCONTINUITY IS THE RULE

These studies agree on one main point: Discontinuity in patterns of abusive and neglectful parenting is the rule rather than the exception for all types of child maltreatment.

The main question which scholars need to answer is not ‘how do some maltreated children break the cycle of child abuse and neglect but, rather, why many do not?’
MECHANISMS FOR IGT

1. Total adversities per ACEs research

2. Transmission of conditions such as substance abuse, mental health disorders, domestic violence & poverty that undermine self efficacy, i.e., personal agency.


4. Characteristics of the nurturing environment in which children are raised, regardless of abuse and neglect.
CONSIDERING MULTIPLE HYPOTHESES

These are not mutually exclusive hypotheses; for example, high numbers of ACEs lead to elevated rates of substance abuse, mental health conditions and physical health problems in adult life. Poverty is associated with elevated rates of depression.
Widom’s & Nikulina’s and Czada’s studies indicate that the combination of poverty and psychological problems is especially impactful on adult functioning.

Poverty combined with major depressive disorder is highly impactful on parenting.
EFFECTS OF NEGLECT ON CHILDREN

It is highly likely that the effects of chronic early neglect on children’s development mediates IGT of neglect.

Children with early onset mental health conditions, for example depression and PTSD, and with impaired cognitive functioning, are at high risk for a wide range of social problems and for impaired parenting.
UNDERMINING RESILIENCE

Child maltreatment that undermines the sources of resilience in children increases the risk of impaired parenting.

1. Capacity for affiliation
2. Emotion regulation
3. Self reliance and persistence in problem solving
4. Socially valued talents
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE

Child welfare systems should pay more attention to the cumulative developmental and emotional effects of chronic neglect and chronic maltreatment. It is these effects that constitute the main damage done to children by severe and chronic neglect. Amelioration of these conditions should be viewed as a key part of the child welfare mission.
EFFECTIVE THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES

There needs to be persistent efforts to develop more effective therapeutic models for chronic neglect and chronic maltreatment.

Development of day treatment models for mothers and babies with open CPS cases should be a priority.
Both states and the federal government should make a determined effort to eliminate severe poverty and child homelessness.

Studies in Washington State and Ohio have found rates of severe poverty among parents with open child welfare cases of 33-48%.
TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE

Adoption of trauma informed practices by schools, child welfare systems and child placing agencies is an important first step. Helping severely neglected and traumatized children and youth with emotion regulation should be a goal of foster care systems.
Earlier interventions for parents with chronically relapsing conditions are urgently needed.

The structure of child protection system in the U.S. has design flaws that are difficult to overcome.