



IOM report provides blueprint for researching child abuse, neglect

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Each year, more than 600,000 infants and children are substantiated victims of child maltreatment in the United States, according to the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The rates of child physical and sexual abuse have been declining steadily over the past two decades, each dropping by more than half since 1990. Child neglect, however, has not demonstrated a similar decline, decreasing by only 10% in the same timeframe (Finkelhor D, et al. *Updated Trends in Child Maltreatment, 2008*. University of New Hampshire, 2010).

What has contributed to such a meaningful decrease in child physical and sexual abuse, and why has child neglect been so stubborn? These are among some of the vexing questions confronting researchers in the field of child abuse pediatrics.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently released *New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research*, a review of the status of research in this area (www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/New-Directions-in-Child-Abuse-and-Neglect-Research.aspx). The report updates the 1993 *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* report by the National Research Council.

Defining the problem

This comprehensive review begins by recognizing the difficulty in simply “describing the problem.” What constitutes child abuse or neglect differs within various disciplines and among geographic locations. While the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse and neglect quite clearly, this definition may not apply to the social sciences, medical research, legal proceedings or public policy.

The first challenge to research on child abuse and neglect is simply defining what exactly is being studied. As many sources of data may use slightly, or vastly, different definitions, multidisciplinary research is especially challenging.

Identifying causes

Another challenge with research as outlined in the IOM report is the complexity in assigning causation.

Causation of child abuse and neglect likely is multifactorial, involving individual, family, community and societal forces, each of which may change over the life of the child. This elaborate interplay likely is true for both risk factors as well as protective factors.

The complexity makes moving from “associations” to “causes”

daunting. Associations can be gleaned from retrospective self-reports or cross-sectional studies. Research into causes of child abuse and neglect optimally would involve prospective, longitudinal studies involving a range of perceived risk and protective factors, tracking children from preconception to adulthood. Higher-quality research designs require more rigor, time and financial support.

Consequences of abuse, neglect

The report highlights one of the most fruitful areas within the study of child abuse and neglect — the consequences. Since the 1993 report, tremendous advances have been made in neurobiology, which has allowed researchers to gain a more complete understanding of the anatomic and functional impact child abuse and neglect have on the developing brain. Correlations between altered neuroanatomy (particularly with the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex) and cognitive, psychosocial and behavioral outcomes have provided insights into how childhood adversity can manifest in long-term adverse consequences to health and well-being.

Response to maltreatment

One of the least studied aspects of child abuse and neglect is the community and societal response to maltreatment. The report highlights the absence of rigorous studies evaluating the optimal child welfare system processes or structures. This absence of evidence has resulted in variation between states' child protection services.

One innovation highlighted in the report is the increasing adoption of “differential response” by states as a way to provide a therapeutic rather than punitive response to lower risk situations.

The lack of compelling data within the child welfare system is exacerbated by the limited data on appropriate public policy. The report highlights the importance of CAPTA in establishing rudimentary child abuse and neglect definitions, mandatory reporting laws, and modest grants for prevention. However, gaps remain in policy understanding, appropriate reporting thresholds, comprehensive data collection, state child abuse substantiation standards, and workforce training and management.

Need for national infrastructure

A cornerstone of improvement in the research and understanding of child abuse and neglect outlined by the report is that “productive, high-quality scientific research requires a sophisticated infrastructure.”

The national research infrastructure in child abuse and neglect is limited, hampering the development of high-quality, prospective, multisite, multidiscipline, hypothesis-driven studies. Such studies

are required to increase knowledge of the causation, consequences and best practices in identifying, treating and ultimately preventing child abuse and neglect.

The IOM report presents a comprehensive blueprint for the next 20 years.



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