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Content analysis of selected literature relevant to child abuse and self-esteem

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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SELECTED LITERATURE RELEVANT TO CHILD ABUSE AND SELF-ESTEEM

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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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ABSTRACT
COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

BELL, RICHETTE B.A., CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY-LONG BEACH, 1991

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SELECTED LITERATURE RELEVANT TO CHILD ABUSE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Advisor: Professor Robert L. Smothers, Ph.D.
Thesis dated May, 1997

Statement of the Purpose: Selected pertinent literature was examined to see the effects that child abuse had on the self-esteem and psychological development of children.

Methodology: A content analysis technique of research was used.

Findings: The major finding was that child abuse had negative effects on a child’s self-esteem and psychological development. Some effects were long-termed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Significant Terms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Facility and Self-Esteem</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Today, many young people are abusing drugs, alcohol and other people. Many young people are stressed, depressed, and committing suicide. The issue of self-esteem is to be questioned in each of these situations. Many children are without fathers in the home, and being born to very young parents. The roles of parents are so important because they are the primary sources of helping children develop their self-esteem. However, if parents have their own self-esteem problems, they are less likely to encourage positive self-esteem with their children. In our current society of working parents, financial problems, divorces, lack of family support, and extreme use of babysitters, our children are not being given the types of guidance, nurturing, attention and support that are needed to develop a healthy self-esteem.

Problem

The Department of Family and Children Services has custody of thousands of children due to some form of abuse and neglect. These children are placed in foster homes throughout each state. Children’s lives are being altered
and destroyed, due to bad choices and behaviors of their caretakers. Living with abuse, neglect, and removal from your parents, create, within children, the idea that they have no control over what happens to them. This sense of helplessness assists in lowering these children's perceptions of self-esteem. The long-term effects these kinds of abuse have on children can be varied and extensive. The problem, with which the researcher was concerned, was that of reviewing related literature and summarizing the significant points made or trends revealed, relatively to the effects of abuse and neglect on children.

**Assumptions**

In performing this task, the writer made the following assumptions:

1. that writers had adequately researched the literature for the works they published.
2. that writers had fairly presented the information and comments unbiyasly.
3. that the literature is a valid and reliable source from which valid information about an issue can be obtained.

**Limitations**

Also, the writer recognized the following limitations in performing this task:
1. that there may be a limited amount of published pertinent literature available for critical examination.

2. that writers' preferences would be inherent in their publications.

3. that literature reviewers are limited to the points of view that writers chose to write about.

**Definitions of Significant Terms**

The significant terms, used by the writer, are defined as follows:

**Child Sexual Abuse**: when sexual behavior is forced or coerced upon a child and when the sexual activity is between a child and a much older person.

**Emotionally Abused**: children who are repeatedly called degrading names, ignored and/or exposed to frequent and extreme marital conflicts.

**Esteem**: having high regard for oneself and significant others. Self-esteem is shaped and nurtured by both external and internal factors.

**External Factors**: environmental forces, parental influences, school practices, societal and cultural forces.

**Internal Factors**: self-perception, self-acceptance, assertiveness, integrity and innate skills and abilities.

**Neglected**: children whose supervision, nutrition and/or medical needs are not adequately met.

**Physically Abused**: Children who are bruised from beatings, burned, scalded or physically injured in some way.
Self-Esteem is (1) a feeling of confidence in one's ability to think and cope with the basic challenges of life; and (2) a feeling of confidence in one's right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, and respect for oneself.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Statistics

In 1982, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect reported that over 1 million children are maltreated each year. Healthy child development is defined in terms of issues such as secure attachment relationships in infancy, such as, independent functioning in toddlerhood, and the ability to have wholesome social relations with peers in early childhood (Cicchetti & Schneider-Rosen, 1986).

Kaufman and Cicchetti (1989) studied the effects of maltreatment on school-age children’s socioemotional development. They reported that the maltreated children scored lower on the self-esteem and prosocial measures and higher on withdrawn behavior scales completed by counselors. Also, they stated that children who enter the peer world with low self-esteem are likely to have negative expectations about prospective social experiences. In addition, Kaufman and Cicchetti noted that, although all the children were of low socioeconomic status, those who received the lowest scores on the self-esteem measure, were mostly from families receiving welfare. The children who
experienced the more severe forms of maltreatment were most negatively affected (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989).

The Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Adulthood memories of childhood sexual abuse are very common (Finkelhor, 1986). They have been related to depression, anxiety, dissociative symptoms, substance abuse and low self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1989; Finkelhor & Browne, 1986; Petters, 1988). Sexual abusive experiences can have effects which persist well into adult life, with a high incidence of mental health problems, suicidal behavior, low sexual self-esteem and some tendency to be re-victimized (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Childhood sexual abuse has been associated with high rates of early childbearing (Stevens-Simon & Reichert, 1994) and difficulties in the survivor's own parenting (Alexander, 1992).

Even though many sexually abused children show some signs of disturbed behavior, such as, nightmares, anxiety, low self-esteem, sadness and tendency to runaway from home (Hotte & Rafman, 1992; Mannarino & Cohen, 1986; McCormack, Janus & Burgess, 1986), there is an estimated 21% to 36% of sexually abused children who are asymptomatic and show no signs of disturbed behavior (Finkelhor, 1990; Kendall-Tackett, 1993). These children may access other mediating factors which have positive effects on outcomes, like family support, involvement and early intervention.
The relationship of an abuser to the child may have a more traumatic psychological impact upon the child if the abuser is someone close to the child, for example, a parent figure. This sends mixed messages to the child from someone with whom the child should have a trusting relationship. It has been reported that abused children have lower self-esteem and clinically high significant levels of depressive symptoms (Kazdin, Moser, Colbus & Bell, 1985). Some writers, about depression in children, have expressed the notion that "depressed children may have a systematically negative bias in their thinking" (Kaslow, Rehm & Siegel, 1984, p. 606). Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978) talked of the helplessness model, which depicts the situation when one perceives that a positive outcome is highly unlikely or a negative outcome is highly likely, and one is not able to change the outcome. This model contends that depressive symptoms will develop.

Stern, Lynch, Oates, O'Toole and Cooney (1995) claim that in cases involving self-esteem, depression, behavior and family functioning, families who had a sexually abused child were dysfunctional in terms of marital breakdown, unemployment, mental health and communication problems. The abused children were more likely to be sad and depressed and have low self-esteem, as compared with the control group. Also, they had more behavioral problems and negative perceptions of their mothers. Increasing severity of abuse
is positively related to low self-esteem (Stern, Lynch, Oates, O'Toole & Cooney, 1995). Sexual abuse often coexists with psychologically damaging family experiences.

Some researchers have raised the question of whether sexual abuse affects mental health beyond the influence of dysfunctional family patterns and lack of parental support and nurturance. Also, sexual abuse may cause a change in the perception of childhood nurturance experiences. Alexander (1992) stated that dysfunctional family patterns provide the setting in which abuse can occur and the parent-child relationships can account for some of the effects seen in sexually abused victims.

Brayden, Deitrich-MacLean, Dietrich, Sherrod and Altimeier (1995) studied the effects of childhood sexual abuse on mental health. They reported that sexually abused women made low scores in well-being and self-concept. Also, they found a direct relationship between sexual abuse and self-concept. Browne and Finkelhor (1986) stated that some long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse, such as depression, self-destructive behavior, anxiety, feelings of isolation, poor self-esteem and substance abuse.

One study, on maltreated children, identified evidence of impairments in self-esteem and peer relations (Kaufman & Cicchetti, 1989). It seems that maltreated children are perceived as having less control of events that happen in their lives, particularly bad ones (Cerezo &
Frias, 1994). In this study, school-aged children, who were suffering from physical and emotional abuse, thought that good events were less attributable to themselves, while the bad ones were more self-attributable. When asked, these children stated that bad things were things they did wrong, and good things were things others did well. These findings point out that abused children need to address the abuse, their views and feelings about themselves, and the world. Their perceptions of the levels of their self-esteem must be raised. This would give them a sense of control for good events. Abused children are living under parental, chaotic and aversive control.

In a study, conducted by Kurtz, Gaudin, Howing, and Wodarski (1993) on the consequences of physical abuse and neglect on 22 physically abused and 47 neglected school age children, the majority were white, female, from families with annual income less than $10,000, whose parents had less than a 12th grade education and were from families with five or more siblings. Abused children had poorer levels of performance, behavior, skills and social adjustment, compared with neglected children who had lower levels in school performance and delinquency. Increases in the number of times a maltreated child had been placed in foster care were related to poor home adjustment, low self-concept, high levels of aggression, and poor self adjustment (Kurtz, Gaudin, Howing & Wodarski, 1993). Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin
and Howing (1990) revealed significant problems with academic deficits, behavior problems, low self-esteem, delinquency and feelings of aggression.

**Verbal Facility and Self-Esteem**

High self-esteem is most likely to help one persist in the face of difficulty. Lower self-esteemed individuals may tend to give up and not do their best. Primarily, parents help lead children to view themselves in positive or negative ways (McKay & Fanning, 1992). Words and statements are the most common things used to uplift or lessen a child’s self-esteem. The ways parents respond to children’s actions, questions and behaviors, teach children to judge their own self-worth (McKay & Fanning, 1992). There are ways to correct behavior, or respond to children without damaging their perceptions of self-esteem. Self-esteem is an essential factor in children’s achievement in school, relationships and life. Many parents do not truly understand the concept of self-esteem (Weis, 1995). Parents and other adult role models can enhance children’s feelings of self-esteem by encouraging them to imitate and model positive images.

Certain traumatic life experiences, for example, divorce, death, moving, new siblings, marriage, separation from siblings, friends or family members and abuse, can affect children’s perceptions of their self-esteem. If persons are unable to have self-love or self-respect, they
tend to surround themselves with others who will not love
and respect them (Weis, 1995). How people feel about
themselves is how they expect others to treat them. A
negative self-image has been linked to violence, crime, teen
pregnancy and academic failure (Weis, 1995).

Weis (1995) describes self-esteem as "self-discovery"
because it relays the message of an ongoing process of
growing, learning and developing one’s personality, values,
motivations and abilities. Concepts of infants’ self-esteem
are built by touch (Clarke, 1978). Basic needs are met
through food, water, hugging, kissing and protection. The
more freedom parents allow children to safely explore their
environments and develop their own identities, the higher
will be the levels of their self-esteem.

In 1993, CBS television presented a movie called "A
Place To Be Loved." It was based upon a true story about a
boy who was in foster care. He was on the verge of being
adopted, when his biological parents decided they wanted to
fight to get him back. Both of his parents had abandoned
him. His mother had left him and started another family.
His dad was still battling a drinking problem. This young
boy, who had been with his prospective adoptive parents for
awhile, had begun to see how a loving, stable and supportive
family functioned. He liked what he saw and how he felt.
He went to court and fought for the right to be with a
family that made him feel needed and wanted. Even at a
young age, children know what is right and what feels good to them. The needs to be nurtured, guided, supported and loved unconditionally are essential and sometimes their satisfaction can be stronger than even biological ones. Pre-Laverriere and Jean-Mathias (1987) state that unmet or rejected demands for love and acceptance leave a child with deep feelings of insecurity and lack of self-esteem.

Harter studied the effects of the developmental perspective on self-esteem. It was concluded that parenting contributes to the development of self-esteem. Clarke (1978) described four types of parenting methods. One method is that of being nurturing where the messages are gentle, kind and helpful. These messages give a child permission and encouragement to achieve and develop. The second method is that of being structuring and protecting. These messages "set limits, protect, assert demands, advocate ethics and traditions." They indicate ways to succeed. The third method is that of being marshmallowing. It sounds supportive, but it is really encouraging dependence and implies the children will fail if they do it on their own. The final method is that of criticizing. It ridicules and tears down children. Criticizing "tells ways to fail and negates."

Weis (1995) suggested using this self-esteem inventory to measure children's self-esteem. The questions are to be asked of children preschool through fourth grade.
Circle answers:  
Y = Yes, S = Sometimes, N = No

1 3 5 1. When you’re left with a baby-sitter, do you feel sad?

1 3 5 2. Do you think other kids have nicer families than you do?

1 3 5 3. Do you do lots of things that make other people and your family mad at you?

5 3 1 4. Do other kids like to play with you?

5 3 1 5. If you see something in a store that you want, do you ask your parents to get it for you?

5 3 1 6. When it’s time to go to bed, and a special show is on TV, would you ask to stay up a little longer?

5 3 1 7. When you grow up, would you like to be like your Mom (for girls)? Dad (for boys)?

(Note: Examiner must specify personality and not profession)

1 3 5 8. Are other kids mean to you?

5 3 1 9. Are grownups nice to you?

Raw Score: the sum of circled responses  
High=37-45; Average=25-36; Low=0-24

DON'T ALLOW THE CHILD TO SEE THIS SCORING!
CHAPTER THREE

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the literature relative to the effects of abuse and neglect on children. More specifically, the impact of child abuse on the self-esteem, and social and psychological development of children, was the focus of this study.

Methodology

The methodology was the content analysis of selected relevant literature.

Findings

The findings, derived from a careful analysis of the selected relevant literature, consisted of the following:

1. Many forces influence the development of children's self-esteem. Some examples are secure attachment relationships in infancy, independent functioning in toddlerhood, and opportunities to experience warm and wholesome social relationships with peers in early childhood.
2. School-age children demonstrate the effects of maltreatment by scoring low on self-esteem and prosocial and high on withdrawal scales.

3. Children receive lowest scores on self-esteem measures when their socioeconomic status is low and their families receive welfare.

4. Children's sexual abuses have been related, in adulthood, to such psychological symptoms as depressive and anxiety states, dissociative behaviors, substance abuse, and low self-esteem.

5. Long-termed effects of traumatic sexual abuse, on children, can be associated with high incidences of mental health problems, suicidal behaviors, low levels of self-esteem, and re-victimization.

6. The effects of childhood sexual abuses seem to have been associated with high rates of early childbearing and difficulties in the survivor's own parenting.

7. Twenty-one to thirty-six percent of sexually abused become asymptomatic and show no signs of disturbed behavior because of the positive effects of early intervention, and family support and involvement.

8. Childhood abuses, by close relatives, seem to have more serious psychological effects on the abused child because this sends mixed messages to
the child from someone with whom the child should have a trusting relationship.

9. Families, who have a sexually abused child, have been viewed to be dysfunctional in their marital breakdown, unemployed, suffered from mental health and communication problems.

10. The severity of abuse is positively related to low self-esteem.

11. Children, with low self-esteem, have stated that they were responsible for bad things happening and good things were things others did well.

12. The levels of academic performance have been found to be lower for abused children than those of neglected children with low levels of school performance and delinquency.

13. Words are the most common things used to increase or decrease a child's self-esteem.

14. Children seem to judge their levels of self-worth by the ways their parents respond to their actions, questions and behaviors.

15. Children's levels of self-esteem seem to be essential factors in their achievement in school, relationships and lives.

16. The ways people treat others seem to depend upon how they feel about themselves.
Discussion

Child abuse is a major blemish in the core of our society. Children, because of their size and intelligence, are helpless and defenseless against an adult. They have no choice but to trust in their adult caretaker and believe that their best interest is being taken into consideration. Children learn how to be adults by watching others. They conclude what is just, good and bad, from how things make them feel. Since children are looked upon as half of a person, by so many, without a voice to be heard, many children are acting in ways that are crying out for help and attention. Children need to be heard and respected as a whole person. However, many adults have chosen to take advantage of the vulnerability of children and exercise their frustrations and perverted desires upon them.

How these children’s lives may have turned out if they had not been abused, no one will ever know. Abuse is not the only thing that can negatively affect self-esteem, but it is a major factor in delinquency, poor academic performance, behavior problems, drug abuse and early pregnancy.

This cycle of abuse has to stop somewhere. Early intervention by state and local authorities has been a great benefactor in the lives of many children. The Georgia Department of Family and Children Services has instituted a policy which puts the child’s needs first. This system has
helped to empower many children, and give parents opportunities to address their needs as well.

**Conclusions**

The conclusions, drawn from the findings of this study, were as follows:

1. Children’s self-esteem perceptions are developed by interactions of many forces over long periods of time.

2. Low scores on self-esteem and prosocial measures and high withdrawal may be attributable, in part, to the effects of maltreatment experiences of children.

3. Children’s levels of measured self-esteem are negatively affected by their parents’ socioeconomic status.

4. The effects of some early childhood experiences, especially sexual ones, seem to persist throughout people’s lives.

5. Traumatic sexual abuses of children seem to be associated with long-term maladaptive behavioral patterns.

6. Early sexual abuses of children may be related to the victims’ becoming parents early and surviving their own parenting.
7. Approximately one-third of sexually abused children show no sign of disturbed behavior because they become asymptomatic.

8. Children's trust, in close relatives, may be jeopardized when these relatives are the abusers.

9. Healthy families will not sexually abuse their children.

10. The greater the level of abuse the lower the level of self-esteem.

11. The use of words seems to be very effective in increasing or reducing children's levels of self-esteem.

12. Children's levels of self-worth seem to be greatly influenced by the ways their parents respond to their actions, questions and behaviors.

13. High levels of self-esteem seem to be essential to high levels of academic achievement, relationships and life generally.

14. One's feelings toward oneself seem to determine how one will respond to others.

15. Unmet or rejected demands for love and acceptance leave a child with deep feelings of insecurity and lack of self-esteem.
**Implications**

The conclusions, drawn from the findings of this study, seem to warrant the following implications.

1. The types of experiences children have, especially early in their lives, greatly influence their levels of self-esteem.
2. Traumatic early childhood experiences can have long-term effects on people's lives.
3. A person must have a high level of self-esteem, in our society, to live a productive and healthy life.

**Recommendations**

The implications, inherent in the conclusions drawn from the findings of this study, seem to warrant the following recommendations:

1. That more extensive and thorough studies be made of the importance of levels of self-esteem on people's levels of achievement and mental health.
2. That greater emphasis be placed on the importance of parents modeling good behavior for their children.
3. That more emphasis be placed on the effects of childhood abuses, ways to avoid them, and on the lifespans of people in general.
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