Improving the quality of *Child Abuse & Neglect*: The peer-review process does matter

The peer-review process is critical to the success of academic journals. There is, however, no formal training on how to write a review of a manuscript, little has been written about how to prepare a review (Provenzale & Stanley, 2005), and feedback is seldom provided to reviewers except when a reviewer of a manuscript is sent the comments from other reviewers concerning the same manuscript. I, therefore, thought that it would be helpful to our reviewers and readers to highlight how the review process works and what aspects of the reviews are helpful to the Editor-in-Chief and, hopefully, the authors.

The review process

Manuscripts submitted electronically through the Elsevier’s website are received by the Editorial Office and are sent for peer review. Reviewers are selected by the Editor-in-Chief from four sources: (1) the Editorial Board, (2) the Journal’s panel of over 900 reviewers, (3) authors cited in the references of the manuscript, and (4) experts suggested by the authors. I usually select 4 to 7 reviewers and hope to receive reviews from at least 3 or 4. The Journal uses a “double-blind” review process: the reviewers do not know who the authors are (unless the reviewers can tell from the research or references), and the authors do not know who wrote the reviews.

Based on the reviewers’ recommendations and comments and my own review of the manuscript, I make a decision about whether the manuscript will be accepted for publication. The reviewers and I use four ratings:

- **Accept:** This manuscript is perfect and needs no revisions. Occasionally, a reviewer will use this rating.
- **Conditional Accept:** This manuscript is sound and will be published if the authors make the necessary revisions, however, it may require additional review and revision.
- **Revise and Resubmit:** This manuscript needs major revisions. If these revisions are made and the manuscript is substantially improved, it is likely to be accepted. There is no guarantee, however, about acceptance since revisions in the manuscript may highlight serious weaknesses in the research. When a revised manuscript is resubmitted, a cover letter describing the changes accompanies the revised...
manuscript (Cummings & Rivara, 2002). I usually send the manuscript and the letter detailing the revisions to some of the original reviewers and sometimes to new reviewers. Manuscripts in this ranking may be revised several times before acceptance. If substantial progress is not made on improving the manuscript after one to two revisions, then I reject the revised manuscript.

- Reject: This manuscript is not of the necessary quality to be published in the Journal.

Authors sometimes ask about the Journal’s rate of acceptance. Over the last 2 years, approximately 250 original manuscripts have been submitted on a yearly basis. Since Child Abuse & Neglect publishes approximately 75 articles per year, the acceptance rate is 30%.

Qualities of a good review

Reviews of manuscripts are written for two audiences: the editor of the journal and the authors of the manuscript. Most peer-review journals expect the reviewer to direct brief overall comments about the quality of the manuscript and whether it should be accepted to the editor and more detailed, substantive comments to the authors. Comments about the acceptability of the manuscript should not be included in comments to the authors.

As the Editor, I find it very helpful if the reviewer provides a brief summary (one to two sentences) of the research and then answers three critical questions:

1. How good is the manuscript including the research idea, execution of the research, and presentation of the paper?
2. Does the research add in a substantive way to the literature? Is there something new, better, or different about the work?
3. If the manuscript is not of high enough quality, can the problems be fixed or are they fatal ones that are too serious? If these flaws can be fixed, what specific changes are necessary to improve the manuscript so it is of high enough quality (not necessarily perfect) for publication?

Authors find the following eight points to be helpful when receiving a review:

1. Authors like timely feedback, so it is important to meet the Journal’s timeline for reviewers.
2. The tone of the review should be respectful and focus on the science and writing. Sometimes, reviewers get frustrated with the authors for sloppy thinking, poorly constructed manuscripts, or poor writing, and this frustration can be evident in the reviewers’ comments and tone.
3. Authors expect feedback on all three aspects of their work: (a) the idea or purpose of the project, (b) the research itself, and (c) the presentation. Feedback that focuses on just one aspect is usually viewed as limited and not helpful to the authors (or the editor). Sometimes, reviews provide feedback on the writing without providing feedback on the originality or the science.
4. A good review provides a brief overview of the strengths and critical weaknesses of the manuscript. The reviewer does not need to elaborate on the strengths, but should provide details about the weaknesses. This feedback will help the authors revise their work.
5. Certain types of suggestions about the work can be helpful to the authors, and certain types are not. For example, providing advice on better or more sophisticated approaches to the data analysis can be helpful. In contrast, advising the authors to improve the research by enlarging the size of the sample or choosing a different comparison group is unlikely to be helpful; since the authors are submitting
work that has been completed, it would be very unlikely that they could be able to improve on either of these aspects of the study. It is certainly reasonable, however, to be critical of a sample that is too small or too selective or a comparison group that is inappropriate, and these might be legitimate reasons to reject a manuscript.

6. After commenting on the major weaknesses of the study, it does help to comment on important details. Some reviewers organize their reviews by addressing details in each section of the manuscript.

7. Comments on the authors’ writing style can be helpful; for example, noting that an idea is not clearly expressed or that a section is too lengthy and should be shortened by 50% is helpful feedback. In contrast, noting that the manuscript is “poorly written” does not provide constructive suggestions. Since the Journal is an international one, manuscripts are submitted by authors whose first language is not English; for manuscripts that are considered good work, but need substantial help with the presentation or English, the Journal has developed a midwife program (Leventhal, 2005).

8. It helps the authors if the reviewer numbers the comments (or paragraphs). When the authors revise their manuscript and describe in their cover letter the changes made in the manuscript, they can then respond to each of the reviewer’s numbered comments.

The review process requires knowledgeable individuals who are willing to give their time (usually several hours) reading a manuscript and providing a critical review. I am very grateful for the help of these individuals—members of the Editorial Board and the outside reviewers. I have learned from their reviews and hope my suggestions can help improve the quality of the reviews I read and send to authors who submit to the Journal.

References


Editor-in-Chief

John M. Leventhal