World Perspectives on Child Abuse:  
An International Resource Book  
Ninth Edition  

Executive Summary

OVERVIEW

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) initiated its World Perspectives on Child Abuse: An International Resource Book in 1992, as part of the Ninth International Congress on Child Maltreatment held in Chicago, Illinois. Since that time, eight editions of this publication have been produced and released at subsequent biennial Congresses sponsored by ISPCAN. This document is the Ninth Edition in the series and is being released in conjunction with the 18th International Congress being held in Hawai‘i, USA. All of these efforts have sought to bring attention and understanding to the worldwide problem of child abuse and neglect and to highlight key differences across national policies in this area.

The Ninth Edition of World Perspectives has a particular focus on child maltreatment data and is divided into six main sections. The first section includes the commentaries obtained from respondents on innovative studies or major issues they have faced in developing their local child abuse response systems. These 11 commentaries cover two broad areas – the use of research to improve policy and practice efforts addressing child abuse, and research on the incidence or impacts of child maltreatment. As a group, they underscore the variability that exists in how child abuse is defined and addressed worldwide and how this variability presents unique challenges in crafting international policy or training to address child maltreatment and child protection.

The second section includes five articles describing diverse aspects of data collection: the challenges and issues raised in efforts to include child maltreatment questions in a large health survey of the general population; an overview of the recent developments and initiatives concerning child abuse and neglect data collection in Greece and South East Europe; a public health perspective to child abuse and neglect; and, the use of child helpline data to understand the magnitude of maltreatment in a very specific group of children who uses a children’s helpline.

Next are the findings from representatives from ten countries - Australia, Flanders/Belgium, Canada, Lebanon, New Zealand, the Philippines, England, Scotland, Wales and United States of America - who were invited to give a short impression of maltreatment data collection methods and trends in their area. Each contribution presents country specific data on child maltreatment and is organized around 5 central topics: legal aspects; data collection methods and systems; maltreatment patterns; strengths and limitations; and future plans and directions.

This section is followed by an overview of the recent activities and future plans in different countries worldwide. A short questionnaire was sent out to all members of ISPCAN’s Working Group on Child Maltreatment Data and its partner organisations. Informants from 23 countries responded to the survey. They came from five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America and Oceania. The findings are summarised and future directions for national data collection programs are discussed.

The fifth section provides an executive summary of the findings related to the child parental discipline module of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) of households in 35 middle and low income countries. The child discipline items in the module provide one of the few resources available to the field of child protection to help develop a more complete understanding of the prevalence of child disciplinary practices in a cross national context. The MICS3 implementation is also the first and most comprehensive effort to collect such
data from middle and low income countries. The data are an important source of information for policy makers, health and social service delivery practitioners, researchers and the general public.

Finally, an annotated bibliography incorporates research from over 35 countries and summarises 89 journal articles and reports published from March 2008 through to the end of May 2010. The bibliography touches on a wide variety of topics, from the correlation between childhood maltreatment and obsessive-compulsive symptoms and beliefs later in life to attachment-based interventions for families where child maltreatment is a concern. It begins with cross-national studies and then follows with literature organized by country in alphabetic order.

SUMMARY OF EACH SECTION

Selected Issues and Concerns

The development of child abuse policy and practice reforms around the world is complex and diverse. Each country’s response to maltreatment reflects its comfort in labelling certain behaviours as child abuse and its capacity to generate the resources necessary to systematically measure the scope of the problem and establish a specific response. As such, professionals incorporate a variety of strategies in raising public awareness, crafting an interdisciplinary response, or building service systems. In order to capture some of this diversity, ISPCAN solicited brief commentaries from its members on innovative studies or major issues they have faced in developing their local child abuse response systems. Specifically, we requested commentaries in two broad areas – the use of research to improve policy and practice efforts addressing child abuse, and research on the incidence or impacts of child maltreatment.

Overall, a total 11 commentaries were submitted. As a group, the commentaries underscore the variability that exists in how child abuse is defined and addressed worldwide and how this variability presents unique challenges in crafting international policy or training to address child maltreatment and child protection.

Child maltreatment data collection

Child maltreatment data collection is challenging for many reasons; including methodological, legal, ethical, and definitional reasons. Different types of data provide pieces of the puzzle, whether sector specific or population based.

In this section, there are five articles describing diverse aspects of data collection. The respective articles:

- describe challenges and provide advice on issues raised in the efforts to include child maltreatment questions in a large health survey of the general population;
- give an overview of the recent developments and initiatives concerning child abuse and neglect data collection in Greece and South East Europe;
- provide a public health perspective to child abuse and neglect. With respect to data collection, a health indicator approach is suggested to facilitate comparison among jurisdictions;
- address mortality and morbidity data based on International Classification of Disease (ICD) codes. Both the utility and the shortcomings of using ICD codes to understand child maltreatment are stressed; and
- use child helpline data to understand the magnitude of maltreatment in a very specific group of children who use a children’s helpline. Some strengths and limitations of using children’s helpline reports are presented.

These five briefs all point to both strengths in using various data sources and limitations. It is important to keep in mind that all child maltreatment data sources suffer from under reporting, but together they assist in providing a better understanding of the magnitude of the problem.
Frameworks for International Comparison of Trends in Child Maltreatment Data

Any child maltreatment data collection, analysis and dissemination is, and must be, conducted to improve the physical, emotional, social and cognitive health and the well-being of children and youth. When such data collection systems are ongoing, they provide a basis for assessing trends in the incidence and nature of the problem. Such data trends can be useful in making inter-jurisdictional comparisons, and revealing patterns in investigations and substantiations. Thus, ongoing data collection systems provide more information than point estimates and are especially useful in assessing changes and outcomes of policies and practices and to set goals to reduce child maltreatment rates.

The ISPCAN Working Group in Child Maltreatment Data Collection (WGCMDC) believes that child maltreatment data collection, data analysis and dissemination are needed to assist in informing the development of policies and programs for at-risk children and youth. Despite ethical and privacy concerns, but with these concerns clearly in mind, strategies for making data more available are sought and appreciated and hold significant analytic promise for understanding, preventing, and treating child maltreatment. As acknowledged in previous editions, World Perspectives 2010 recognizes that ongoing data collection provides a basis for trend analysis and can be useful in making inter-jurisdictional and international comparisons.

Aiming at a global impression of the “state of the art” concerning child maltreatment data collection methods, the Working Group (WGCMDC) invited several world regions to give a short impression of maltreatment data collection methods and trends in their region.

The contributions of representatives from the ten countries, who contributed to this section, have been conceptualized as a compilation of freestanding articles. Each article presents country specific data on child maltreatment, and is organized around 5 central topics: Legal aspects, data collection methods and systems, maltreatment patterns, strengths and limitations and future plans and directions.

Mini-survey on national developments and challenges

To provide an overview of recent activities and future plans in different countries worldwide, the Working Group conducted a mini survey of members and ISPCAN’s partner organisations. This section summarizes the findings as at the end of June 2010 and provides a discussion of future directions for national data collection programs.

A short questionnaire form was sent out comprising open questions on the most important national developments in the field of child abuse and neglect in the last two years and on the three national key challenges regarding child protection at the moment. Additionally, the questionnaire inquired about the presence of national data collection programs, about their affiliation, about responsibility for operation, and about future perspectives of these programs. Moreover, another open question asked whether other non-regular data collection activities, for example, related to research were done.

Informants from 23 countries responded to the survey. They came from five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America and Oceania. According to the responses there are national data collection programs in 14 countries, mostly operated by governmental agencies. In a few countries data collection is performed by NGOs or there is a collaborative effort of NGOs and governments. The data collection programs vary considerably in their configuration, purpose, and allocation of responsibilities. A variety of sectors are covered by the data collection, mostly social services, but also health services and the criminal, juvenile and family court systems. The frequency of data collection varies from “continuously” to “occasionally”. Eight countries of the 23 countries responding reported an annual data collection procedure.
A wide range of recent national developments and activities in the field of child abuse and neglect (CAN) were reported by members of the WG and ISPCAN’s partners. The activities identified were: legislation, political initiatives, follow-up of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), prevention/public health programs, systematic review of fatal cases, training of professionals, development of professional guidelines, quality management and child welfare service development. It appears that some countries focus on legislation and others focus on forensic evaluation, such as mandatory reporting, whereas other countries focus on improvement of social services and prevention.

The key challenges mentioned by the respondents reflect both generic and special national characteristics related to CAN. There are general factors influencing both the risk for CAN and the existence and the quality of prevention programs and child protection services. In general, many respondents from different countries referred to the difficulties of allocating appropriate financial and professional resources to the child protection system. It is striking that the economic crisis and increasing poverty of a significant part of the world’s population now has reached many developed countries, and that the lack of resources is hindering the development of services in more than traditionally poor countries. Another key challenge across countries is the difficulty of coordination and collaboration between different systems, services and organizations. Specific national laws, political systems, administrative structures, the responsibilities of different stakeholders, and cultural factors (for example, different values and attitudes towards children and care giving) have to be considered in the field of child protection. Despite the high international commitment to implementing children’s rights, 20 years after the CRC there remain severe obstacles and difficulties in this process. Examples include parental and societal attitudes regarding corporal punishment, attempts to limit children’s rights if opposed to parental rights, and even the presence of deadly rituals such as child sacrifice. Key issues repeatedly mentioned by respondents of the survey are: the need for widely available primary prevention programs, such as education and training of parents and child carers in positive care giving, the development and implementation of secondary and tertiary prevention strategies for high risk groups, increasing awareness of new phenomena of CAN such as internet-based sexual exploitation, fighting for a better funding and resisting the budget cutbacks, activities to improve the quality of child welfare and child protection by reducing and overcoming poverty, the need for recruitment and training of professionals to work in the child protection system, improvement of service co-ordination, and of the performance of the justice system.

In some countries, non-recurring data collection is performed, often in the context of epidemiological studies or as a one-time child abuse survey study. These efforts usually result in a subsequent publication and reporting of the results. In other countries there are fragmented data files, bound to specific services or programs and without aggregation with information from other sources. Some countries plan national surveys, and within these efforts there is a tendency to use standard instruments such as the I-Cast tool.

**Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey: Executive summary**

The executive summary of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) is reported in this edition of World Perspectives. The report of the survey describes the findings related to the child parental discipline module of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) of households in 35 middle and low income countries. The child discipline items in the module provide one of the few resources available to the field of child protection to help develop a more complete understanding of the prevalence of child disciplinary practices in a cross national context. The MICS3 implementation is also the first and most comprehensive effort to collect such data from middle and low income countries. The data are an important source of information for policy makers, health and social service delivery practitioners, researchers and the general public.

Child discipline as exercised by caregivers is a universal aspect of child rearing in all cultures. Child discipline can be thought of as deliberate actions on the part of parents designed to teach children self-control and
acceptable behaviour. While the need for child discipline is generally recognized, the application of physical and harsh psychological discipline is a matter of considerable discussion and debate. Most important in the context of this report, the degree to which physical and harsh psychological discipline is used, and the types of non-violent discipline used, have implications for global concerns regarding violence to children and especially the prevention of such violence.

The comprehensive global analysis found in the United Nations World Report on Violence Against Children states that its primary message is that "no violence against children is justifiable, and all violence against children is preventable" (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 5). As a fundamental concern the study addresses the lack of data to identify and monitor violence to children due to caregiver action or inaction. And while not the first to recognize the importance of surveillance data, among several recommendations emerging from the study is to foster development of research programs that incorporate the development of surveillance data collection. The UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Version 3 represents a significant beginning effort to collect information on a multi-national basis about parental child discipline in households.

Findings from the analyses indicate that violent physical and harsh psychological discipline focused on children 2 to 14 was quite common across all the countries included in the MICS country level samples. While overall rates of violent discipline are high (39 to 95 percent of children 2 to 14 are reported to receive violent discipline) they do not appear to be unusual compared to those found using similar methods in high income countries. With the exception of general socio-demographic variables, i.e. education and wealth, some of the most interesting findings are specific to individual countries and small clusters of countries. The education of caregivers in particular deserves greater attention from researchers and should be of interest to policy makers. Further, from the standpoint of educating and training parents about child rearing, higher indications of positive interaction between caregivers and children under five appeared to account for lower levels of violent discipline along with correspondingly greater levels of active non-violent discipline. The strongest association by far with the prevalence of violent discipline is the belief of caregivers that the child needs physical punishment in order to be raised properly. Unfortunately, impacting this belief through prevention programs may have only limited impact on prevalence since the large majority of caregivers in most countries do not indicate that such discipline is needed, suggesting that modification of such beliefs in and of themselves would have a marginal impact on reducing violent discipline and that other approaches to modifying behavior are needed. The disparity between generalized views that harsh discipline is not necessary, along with reports that nevertheless a great many young children receive harsh punishment, deserves further analysis.

Annotated bibliography

The annotated bibliography incorporates research from over 35 countries, summarizing 89 journal articles and reports published between March of 2008 through to the end of May 2010. Articles were found using the Medline, Science Direct, WorldCat, Cochrane Collaboration, and ASSIA: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts electronic databases. These databases were selected because they access literature from a broad range of disciplines such as public health, psychiatry, psychology, social work, education, social sciences, law, medicine, and social welfare. This review sought only English-language articles that resulted in a disproportionate number of articles from English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This review is by no means exhaustive with respect to current published research; however an attempt was made, given time and resource constraints, to represent a wide range of research topics and methodologies from a variety of countries and/or professional disciplines in order to give the reader an overview of the available research on child abuse and neglect. Research conducted solely in the United States was not included in this review.
This bibliography touches on a wide variety of topics, from the correlation between childhood maltreatment and obsessive-compulsive symptoms and beliefs later in life to attachment-based interventions for families where child maltreatment is a concern. That said, to ensure that this bibliography remained reasonably focused, some specific topics related to child abuse/maltreatment that have their own body of literature (for example, child labour, child prostitution and the use of child soldiers) were not included in it.

**Conclusion**

This ninth edition of World Perspectives, which has been supported and contributed to by many dedicated ISPCAN members and partners, provides an important resource for all those professionals working in the field of child abuse and neglect. It is our hope that ISPCAN, through its members and National Partners, will be able to improve service availability and quality through its ongoing education and training programmes and its dissemination of best practice.