

Attribution Theory and Child Abuse

Melanie Horn Mallers, PhD, *CSU Fullerton*

Department of Human Services

Recently, I overheard a mother in a grocery store berate her young child for dropping a glass jar. She yelled, "You stupid child. Why are you so clumsy?" She then proceeded to grab the child and shake him. My husband and I were clearly upset to hear these words and to see such an extreme reaction to a child's mistake. It also brings up a difficult question, when is it necessary to intervene? I, as a parent, understand that parenting is a very difficult process, but I also know that if we don't reflect on how we interact with our children, how can we prepare them to properly cope and function in their world? And in more extreme cases, if we do not take the time to better understand children, including their developmental and cognitive abilities, might we end up physically and/or emotionally abusing children?

Sadly, child maltreatment, including child abuse and child neglect, is not a rare phenomenon. According to *Child Maltreatment 2007*, the most recent report of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, approximately 794,000 children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect. The maltreatment rate was 10.6 per 1,000 children in the population for that year. Data indicates that rates of maltreatment vary by age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Children who are abused or neglected often show signs of delayed development, including slow growth, immature communication, and unusual social interactions¹. Many children also experience post-traumatic stress disorders, a delayed reaction to trauma including hyperactivity and hypervigilance, displaced anger, sleeplessness, sudden terror or anxiety, and confusion between fantasy and reality^{2,3}. Maltreated children also are more likely to experience psychological problems and decreased resilience to stress⁴. While the causes of child maltreatment are not fully understood, and no one factor explains it all, related indicators include family cohesion, poverty, family isolation, teenage pregnancy, parent-child attachment, attitudes toward spanking, lack of parenting skills, alcohol and substance abuse, as well as high risk children (younger children, children with irritable temperaments, and children with special needs such as premature infants, children with developmental disabilities)⁵⁻⁹.

One factor that has received less attention, in terms of contributing to incidences of child maltreatment, is parental attributions of children's behavior. Attribution theory, as originally developed by Bernie Weiner^{10,11} is a social learning model that attempts to explain human behavior and motivation; specifically, it attempts to explain the world and how people come to determine the cause of an event or behavior (e.g. why people do what they do). It assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do by interpreting the causes to an event or behavior. According this theory, attributions are classified along three causal dimensions, including locus of control (internal vs. external); stability (do causes change over time or not?); and controllability (causes one can control such as skills vs. causes one cannot control such as luck, others' actions, etc.). *An important assumption of attribution theory is that people will interpret their*

environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. That is, they will *attribute* their successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves. In general, this means that when people do well, they will attribute their personal success to their own efforts or abilities; but when they fail, they attribute their failure to factors over which they have no control, such as bad luck or other people who caused the bad behavior (or other people's internal personality factors). In the latter case, they will attribute causes to situational factors rather than blame themselves.

If we apply this theory then to child maltreatment, it may be that parents who abuse or neglect their children do so because they are engaging in unhealthy, unrealistic or negative attributions of their children. This is especially likely if they have little knowledge of child development and poor expectations for their children's capabilities. Thus, when children do "bad" things, these parents may see this as something about the child's personality or about some characteristic stable to the child. On the other hand, if the child does something good, the abusive parent may see this as due to luck, and *not* because of some innate quality of the child. Unfortunately, when our attributions are like this, our behavior or reaction follows logically. If we think someone is doing something *on purpose* then we are more likely to get angry and retaliate. If we think that a bad behavior was accidental, then we might have more compassion.

For example, consider the mother who clearly got upset at her son in the market. She may have attributed his behavior accordingly:

- The child's internal *locus of control* ("he is stupid and careless") as opposed to an external locus of control ("the jar is too heavy for a child to carry");
- Something *stable* about the child ("he is always careless" or "he has such bad motor control") as opposed to something unique ("dropping the jar was an accident"); and to
- Something he could *control* ("he should be old enough to not drop a heavy glass jar" or "other kids his age are so much stronger") as opposed to ("he is only 5 years old and that was a heavy jar").

In this situation, the mom may think her young son could have NOT dropped the jar and that he did it on purpose. Additionally, according the theory, the mom was motivated to see herself in a good light, or as a good, loving mom. This may hinder her ability to see that *she* should have prevented this occurrence by giving her son something to do while she was shopping (a snack to eat) and assume, realistically, young children are curious and want to explore.

If parents have misattributions, coupled with lots of stress, poor parenting skills and little knowledge of child development, among other factors, it seems highly explainable, though never justifiable, that maltreatment may occur. What we need is to offer more parenting classes and provide some additional insight for parents. If we allow them to tap into their own personal understanding of *how* they think about their children and their daily behaviors, we could help to break the cycle of abuse.

References

1. Valentino, K., Cicchetti, D., Toth, S. L., & Rogosh, F.A. (2006). Mother-child play and emerging social behaviors among infants from maltreating families. *Developmental Psychology*, 42, 474-485.
2. De Bellis, M. D. (2001). Developmental traumatology: The psychobiological development of maltreated children and its implications for research, treatment, and policy. *Development and Psychopathology*, 13, 539-564.
3. Yehuda, R. (2006). *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences: Vol. 1071. Psychobiology of posttraumatic stress disorder: A decade of progress*. Boston: Blackwell.
4. Manly, J. T., Kim, J. E., Rogosch, F.A., & Cicchetti, D. (2001). Dimensions of child maltreatment and children's adjustment: Contributions of developmental timing and subtype. *Development and Psychopathology*, 13, 759-782.
5. Chambliss, J. W. & Emshoff, J. G. (19093). *Relevant Risk Factors and Outcome Variables for Child Maltreatment Programs*. Emstar Research, Inc.
6. English, D. J. (1998). *The Extent and Consequences of Child Maltreatment. The Future of Children. Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect*. The David and Lucille Packard Foundation.
7. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Caregivers of Young Children: Preventing and Responding to Child Maltreatment," 1992 and "The Role of Educators in the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect," 1992.
8. National Council of Child Abuse & Family Violence, "Facts About Child Abuse & Neglect" (www.nccafv.org)
9. Sedlack, A. J & Broadhurst, D. D. (1996). *Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.
10. Weiner, B. (1980). *Human motivation*. New York: Holt-Rinehart, & Winston
11. Weiner, B. (1992). *Human motivation: Metaphors, theories, and research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage