

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PARENTAL COMMUNICATION AND PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Every day, millions of children worldwide experience maltreatment in their families. Understanding the nature of family processes that lead to this outcome is not only a scientific challenge but also a moral task for the research community. This paper examines the topic from a communication perspective, providing an overview of issues addressed in the present literature as relevant for illuminating the relationship between parent-child communication and physical child abuse. The first part of the paper is focused on different approaches to communication between parents and their children, especially considering the classic typology of parenting styles, as well as patterns of family communication. Afterwards, a brief overview of different models of physical child abuse is laid out. Finally, we present a review of studies that have explored the characteristics of physically abusive parents' communication with their children. In concluding remarks, we propose that the communication perspective has the potential to strengthen not only the theoretical understanding of this topic but also to empower the practical approaches dedicated to the detection and prevention of domestic violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Since communication is at the core of family relationships, including the relationship of parents with their children, it is natural to pose a question of whether we can detect connections between: a) incidents of physical child abuse in the family, and b) characteristics of communication between parents and children, especially during conflicts. Researchers who approach the problem of domestic violence from a communication perspective point out that this viewpoint has the potential to treat the issue in a multidimensional and integrative way (Swanson and Cahn, 2009.). A physical incident cannot be seen just as an isolated phenomenon but must be analyzed in the context of characteristics of the overall communication between parent and child (Fitzpatrick, 2002.; Swanson and Cahn, 2009.).

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that physical abuse has its roots in patterns that pervade everyday communication and occasionally culminate in acts of violence. Some theorists, for example, see violence as a pathological attempt to resolve conflicts that comes after unsuccessful efforts to use verbal communication to achieve one's goals, such as a child's obedience. Thus, violence can be conceptualized as dysfunctional or incompetent communication (Swanson and Cahn, 2009.).

Of course, conflict communication in the family does not always result in violence; moreover, conflict is an inevitable and natural part of human interactions, while constructive resolution of conflicts has the potential to improve the mutual understanding and closeness of its participants. However, family violence mostly arises as an escalation in the process of conflict communication. If we perceive family conflict as a continuum, harmless arguments are at one end, while physical violence is at the other (Koerner, 2013.).

This topic has significant implications. Violent patterns can remain unchanged for years or decades, with long-term consequences for a child's mental (and physical) health. In the realm of intimate partner violence, an adult victim has a certain degree of autonomy in seeking outside help. However, children's degree of autonomy in this sense is low. Parents largely shape a child's external and internal world, and therefore it is difficult for a child to imagine a different reality, while they also internalize parent's violence as a message about themselves.

We should also have in mind that communication and physical abuse have a two-way relationship since abuse has a significant impact on future communication in the family (Anderson, Umberson and Elliott, 2004.). Abused children are at risk of impaired socio-emotional development (Luke and Banerjee, 2013.), and often exhibit a lack of language and social skills in interacting with others (Strathearn et al., 2020.; Hwa-Froelich, 2012.). When the victims of abuse grow up, their interaction with others can still be burdened by the effects of traumas inflicted by the abuse, and

they are more likely to become aggressive in relation to their parents. So, although a parent can use violent methods to force a child to temporarily obey, this behavior paradoxically leads to long-term disobedience and aggression (Gershoff, 2002.). Also, there is a statistical relationship between experiencing abuse in childhood and aggression towards emotional partners in later life (Faulkner, Goldstein and Wekerle, 2014.). Thus, these abusers seem to have adopted the abusive pattern of behavior they were once subjected to.

In the following lines, we will present an overview of the basic concepts regarding communication in the parent-child relationship, including the most prominent typologies in this area. Then, we focus on the issue of physical child abuse, the communication aspects of this phenomenon, the theories that try to explain it, as well as the consequences it leaves behind regarding interpersonal relations. Finally, the concluding remarks summarize some key points about the wider significance of further research in this field.

Parent-child communication

The relationship between parents and their children is a complex area that poses many challenges to researchers. Three types of approaches can be distinguished in this regard: unidirectional, bidirectional and systems perspectives (Segrin and Flora, 2005.). *Unidirectional* perspectives are focused on the influence that parents exert on their children. In this sense, *warmth* and *control* are central terms that define parental influence, although different authors use various terms for these two dimensions (Grolnick and Gurland, 2002.). The term *warmth* refers to all (verbal and non-verbal) messages that make the child feel loved and accepted. The context of family warmth is important for acquiring a basic sense of security that gives the child the freedom to explore the world autonomously and also fosters the development of fundamental social skills. On the other hand, *control* refers to discipline, i.e. to all parental efforts to modify the child's behavior. Much of the literature on parenting deals with the question of how to strike a balance so that control and warmth are optimally applied.

On the other hand, *bidirectional* approaches focus on the ways in which parent and child mutually influence each other. Researchers of this orientation emphasize concepts such as *reciprocal responsiveness* and *synchrony* (common focus) in communication (Segrin and Flora, 2005.). *Systems approaches* do not perceive the parent-child relationship as an isolated phenomenon, but place it in the context of overall relationships in the family, as well as wider social systems outside the family itself (Segrin and Flora, 2005.; Dixon, 1995.).

In the following lines, we will make a brief introductory overview of two prominent theoretical classifications that try to map the complex field of communication between parents and children, and which can help us to better understand the nature of the conflicts that arise within it.

Parenting styles

First, we will refer to the classic division that distinguishes four styles of parenting (Baumrind, 1971.). Authoritarian parents strive to establish control over their children in order to enforce a specific set of values and behaviors. Such parents demand obedience and do not tolerate situations in which the child shows a different opinion or behaves in a confrontational manner. They seek to maintain the child's respect for traditional structure. Permissive parents allow and accept their child's behavior without much control or discipline. Not much is expected from the child, no demands are placed on them, and rules are not imposed. The parent assumes the role of fulfilling the child's desires and needs. The authoritative style implies a healthy authority that simultaneously provides the child with discipline and emotional support. An authoritative parent does not demand blind obedience, but presents rational reasons behind their demands, and also encourages the child's autonomy and individual expression when appropriate. They love their children the way they are, but at the same time, they influence them so that in the future they progress in different domains of development and socialization. Finally, the neglecting style is characterized by the absence of both positive interactions and control. Such parents are disinterested and do not pay much attention to the child. They do not impose demands on them, but they also do not provide warmth and are not sensitive to their needs (Baumrind, 1971.).

Theorists of parenting styles established a connection between the mentioned styles and two basic dimensions of parenting - responsiveness and demandingness (Bornstein and Zlotnik, 2008.; Baumrind, 1995.). Responsiveness refers to warmth and support, while demandingness implies control and discipline. The authoritarian style is characterized by high demands but low responsiveness, the permissive style is marked by high responsiveness and low demands; in the case of the authoritative style, both dimensions are high, and with the neglectful (or indifferent) style, both are low.

Research shows that there is a positive correlation between authoritarian parenting style and physical child abuse. A link between the authoritarian style and the use of corporal punishment⁴ was established (Robinson et al., 1995.; Rodriguez,

⁴ Research shows that the use of corporal punishment has similar consequences as (other) forms of physical child abuse (Koerner, 2013.). Although corporal punishment ensures short-term compliance, in the long term it increases the child's aggressiveness and even contributes to a greater risk of criminal behaviour.

2010.). Authoritarian parents make rigid demands on their children, asking for absolute compliance, and are more inclined to resort to violence due to children's disobedience. On the other hand, the authoritative style is associated with a lower risk of all types of abuse (Lo et al., 2019.; Rodriguez, 2010.; Morgan, Pu and Rodriguez, 2022.).

Family communication patterns

Fitzpatrick and Ritchie, based on the work of McLeod and Chaffee, conceptualized two dimensions that define family communication: conversation orientation and conformity orientation (Ritchie and Fitzpatrick, 1990.; Shearman and Dumlao, 2008.). If the family has a high conversation orientation, it means that its members tend to talk frequently and openly about various topics; and if this orientation is low, the communication in the family is less frequent. With a high conformity orientation, there is a strong tendency for family members to agree on common values, attitudes and hierarchy, while a low conformity orientation implies the occurrence of independent, individual attitudes and behaviors.

Families that have a high conformity orientation are more inclined to avoid conflicts, but they also have weaker skills of constructively resolving conflicts when they do occur. Although such families try to prevent conflicts because they perceive them as a threat, their conflicts are characterized by greater hostility. On the other hand, families with a high conversational orientation do not avoid conflicts, but, at the same time, they tend to use more positive strategies in their resolution (Koerner, 2013.).

Conformity orientation has a positive correlation with corporal punishment and verbal aggression since parents with this orientation prefer instant obedience over open communication and understanding (Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2006.). With a high conversational orientation, the case is reversed - although more communication means more frequent conflicts, they are less hostile and violent because constructive communication is present.

The intersection of these two orientations results in a typology that categorizes families into four types. Pluralistic families have a high conversation and low conformity orientation. Therefore, there is frequent family communication in which children are encouraged to express their ideas freely and parents do not impose their views on them. In protective families, conformity orientation is high and conversation orientation is low: there are not many conversations between family members, and great importance is given to respecting parental decisions and family values, which are not questioned or explained. This combination is linked to

higher rates of physical child abuse compared to all other types (Borsella, 2006.). Consensual families are characterized by high levels on both dimensions. In such families, there is freedom of conversation, but with the aim to make children adopt their parents' views through conversation and explanation, rather than letting them develop their own independent, divergent attitudes. In laissez-faire families, communication is not frequent, and there are no demands for conformity. Family members are predominantly focused on the relationships and activities outside the family. Therefore, both dimensions are low.

Theories of child abuse

A definition given by the World Health Organization states that »Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power« (WHO, 1999.:15).

Physical child abuse is »defined as those acts of commission by a caregiver that cause actual physical harm or have the potential for harm« (Krug et al., 2002.:60).

Cahn recognizes three different currents within communication studies when it comes to interpreting the phenomenon of violence (Cahn, 2009.). The communicator personality trait approach focuses on the hostility of family members as individuals. The communication cognition approach emphasizes the importance of mental predispositions and beliefs that enable the expression of violence. Finally, the communication interaction approach tries to explain violence as an escalation or the last phase of repetitive rituals of aggression in family communication.

Three generations of child maltreatment models are identified by Gómez-Cantarino et al. (2022.). The first generation, developed in the 1970s, includes psychiatric-psychological models, which focus on the psychopathology of the abuser's personality, traits and mental problems. An example is the social learning theory, which assumes that abusive parents themselves were victims of abuse during childhood and that their behavior has been learned in this way (Segrin and Flora, 2005.; Kolinović, 2022.; Armfield et al., 2021.).

The first generation of child maltreatment theories also includes the sociological model, which does not only focus on psychological dimensions but takes into account social variables as well (Gómez-Cantarino et al., 2022.), such as isolation, socio-economic level and cultural context. It is also worth mentioning attachment theories, which link abuse to dysfunctional attachment styles: anxious, avoidant

and disorganized, as opposed to healthy secure style (Finzi et al., 2001.; Ungren and De Luca, 2014., Ade-Ridder and Jones, 1996.).

The second generation has emerged in the 1980s (Gómez-Cantarino et al., 2022.). Within this wave, the social interaction approach takes into account a more complex set of factors. For example, Belski's ecological model is based on four levels of social interdependent systems (Belsky, 1980.), and Vasta's model highlights two components that result in violence against children: 1) disciplining children through punishment, 2) parents' emotional hyper-reactivity (Vasta, 1982.).

Finally, the third-generation models of child maltreatment, created in the 1990s, represent an attempt to delve into the deeper causes of child abuse. A prominent example is the theory of social information processing, which analyses the cognitive schemas a parent has about their child and about parenting. The theory recognizes four possible stages: 1) misperceiving the situation, 2) misinterpreting child's behavior (negative attributions⁵), 3) choosing physical punishment as a form of discipline (without considering alternatives), 4) poor monitoring of punishment implementation, resulting in escalation (Wilson 1999.; Rodriguez, Wittig and Silvia, 2020.).

When it comes specifically to communication-oriented perspectives, the issue of the relationship between parental physical and verbal aggression becomes particularly important. Communication researchers have predominantly studied this topic using the communication skills deficiency model, according to which verbal aggression periodically escalates in the form of physical violence, due to the attacker's lack of competence to achieve their goals (e.g. child obedience) through verbal means (Roberto, Carlyle and McClure, 2006.). Research shows that domestic violence statistically correlates with a lack of communication skills (Anderson, Umberson and Elliott, 2004.). Due to the inability to resolve the conflict through communication, these families turn to violence, an ineffective way of problem-solving. Communication scholars also emphasize that verbal aggression can serve as a catalyst for physical aggression (Wilson et al., 2006.).

⁵ Abusive parents perceive their children's behaviour as problematic in situations where neutral observers evaluate the same behaviour as normal (Reid, Kavanagh and Baldwin, 1987.).

COMMUNICATION OF PHYSICALLY ABUSIVE PARENTS WITH THEIR CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Methodology

The objective of this review is to examine the relationship between parents' communication with their children and physical child abuse, as documented in the existing literature. The following inclusion criteria were utilized:

- a) The reviewed studies examine a sample of parents who had either been identified by social services as perpetrators of physical child abuse or who self-reported abusive behaviors (additionally, some cases were identified indirectly through elevated scores on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory).
- b) Studies examined the parents of children aged 0–12 years, encompassing the developmental stages prior to teenage years.
- c) The studies included data on distinct communicative characteristics of physically abusive parents in their interactions with their children, derived from either observational assessments or self-reported measures.
- d) All studies considered for inclusion were published within a 50-year timeframe preceding the writing of this review.

We applied the following exclusion criteria:

- a) Papers evaluating the effectiveness of various intervention strategies of child abuse prevention are excluded as they fall outside the scope of this paper. This criterion was introduced to maintain the thematic focus and define practical confinements of the review.
- b) Studies dealing with CSA were excluded. The concept of physical child abuse as used in this paper does not include sexual abuse, since its predatory nature arguably has a different genesis compared to abuse that arises in the context of communication patterns (Koerner, 2013.).
- c) This review excluded the studies that approach the notion of child abuse only in regard to psychological maltreatment and omitting the physical aspect.
- d) Studies that solely analyzed instances of childhood neglect, without accounting for physical abuse, were excluded.
- e) Studies focusing exclusively on child behaviors within parent-child communication dynamics were excluded from the analysis.

Two sets of keywords were used in mutual combinations: the first set related to abuse (»child abuse«, »child maltreatment«, »physical child abuse«, »violence against children«), and the second set related to communication (»communica-

tion«, »interaction«, »parent-child communication«, »parent-child interaction«, »parental communication«, »parenting«).

Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO and PubMed databases were searched in August 2023. Furthermore, manual searches of articles, reference lists, and online sources were conducted. While systematic searches were completed in the databases mentioned, Google Scholar and ResearchGate were reviewed manually, applying various combinations of search terms to check for any additional relevant publications. Subsequently, we examined the reference lists of the identified sources and cross-referenced citations within the included studies. We also consulted reference lists of narrative reviews.

A comprehensive search resulted in a total of 422 scientific papers. Following the removal of duplicate records and the process of application of exclusion criteria, the final dataset consisted of 47 studies. Full texts of the remaining papers were screened for eligibility by all three authors in order to reach a consensus on including them in this review. An overview of the basic characteristics of the included studies is outlined in the Appendix, containing authors' names, publication year, titles of the papers, parents' gender, children's gender distribution and children's average age.

Results and discussion

Various forms of *negative communication* comprise the first significant group of behaviors that distinguish physically abusive parents in a large number of reviewed studies. Lyons-Ruth et al. (1987.) found that maltreating mothers were rated higher than nonmaltreating mothers on covertly hostile and interfering behaviors toward their infants at home. Wilson et al. (2006.) observed that mothers with higher verbal aggressiveness had higher scores on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory, on the total and on three subdimensions (distress, rigidity, problems with others). Rodriguez (2010.) reported that parent-child aggression was related to child abuse potential, and both were associated with dysfunctional parenting styles, primarily with overreactive, authoritarian and harsh parenting. Interestingly, permissive parenting was also noted as possibly related to physical abuse. Mash, Johnston and Kovitz (1983.) indicated that abusive mothers were more directive and controlling during stressful task situations.

Timmer, Boreggo and Urquiza (2002.) found that during structured play tasks, when children did not answer parents' questions, abusive parents were more prone to giving commands, and they gave neutral comments less frequently. Trickett and Kuczynski (1986.) observed that abusive parents were more inclined to em-

ploy punitive disciplinary methods, compared to nonabusive parents who preferred using reasoning and straightforward commands. Abusive parents also frequently admitted to feeling anger and disgust after disciplining their children. Nonabusive parents adapted their disciplinary approach depending on the specific misbehavior exhibited by their children. However, abusive parents consistently relied on punishment as their primary form of discipline, regardless of the nature of their children's misdeeds. Cerezo, D'Ocon and Dolz (1996.) reported that important aspects of maternal behavior were significantly related to the abusive or nonabusive status: most variance was explained by the (elevated) rate of maternal instruction, and the second variable was aversive behavior. Concerning the indexes of inappropriate behavior, the inappropriate maternal behavior towards child prosocial behavior was the strongest factor.

In a similar vein, Lorber, Felton and Reid (1984.) found that abusive mothers were significantly more aversive towards their children and demonstrated incompetence in stopping aversive interactions, effectively punishing undesirable behavior, and providing appropriate responses to prosocial behavior. Alessandri and Lewis (1996.) observed that maltreating mothers gave more negative feedback than non-maltreating mothers, especially in relation to their daughters. Silber et al. (1993.) reported that abusive fathers exhibited more coercive behavior and negative responses in communication with their children and wives; mothers in abusing families tended to criticize their husbands more frequently. Francis and Wolfe (2008.) indicated that abusive fathers were more likely to experience anger and express it aggressively, and had less empathy for their children; they were also more inclined to interpret children's emotional expressions as representing negative feelings.

In alignment with these findings, Caselles and Milner (2000.) found that abusive mothers were more inclined to employ power assertion tactics, which encompass physical and verbal force, and they anticipated lower levels of compliance from their own children. Valentino et al. (2011.) detected a small effect size for the difference in scaffolding between abusing and non-abusing mothers, as well as small effect for maternal controlling behavior (however, the effect size was medium when comparing abusing mothers with neglecting mothers). Whipple and Webster-Stratton (1991.) observed that abusive mothers showed high frequency of giving critical remarks to their children; abusive fathers frequently spanked their children.

Another notable characteristic that distinguishes the communication style of physically abusive parents is, conversely, a lack of certain types of interactions – specifically, of positive communication (support, warmth etc.), as well as a generally lower frequency of overall communication and attention given to their children. Walker (1977.) found that abusive mothers scored significantly lower on all measures of maternal warmth and supportiveness. Stokes (2011.) observed that abu-

sive parents talked significantly more and, after additionally controlling for the total amount of talk, gave significantly less praise to their children. Schindler and Arkowitz (1986.) reported that abusive mothers engaged in less behavior with their children and contingently praised appropriate behaviors less often. Kavanagh et al. (1988.) indicated that abusive parents exhibited notably lower levels of positive parenting and displayed significantly lower responsiveness to the child's attempts to initiate interaction (significant differences in abusive behavior were not observed). Burgess and Conger (1978.) found that abusive mothers were less verbal, spoke less often and made less positive contacts with their children; they were also less likely to interact physically. They were not more aversive in total but had a higher percentage of aversive interactions. Except for their low levels of compliance, fathers in the abusive group showed no significant differences from the control group.

Nastasi and Hill (1982.) found that abusive mothers did not offer additional guidance and direction to their children in the task-oriented scenario compared to the free-play scenario. In contrast, mothers of both control and behavior-disordered children increased their utilization of these control strategies during the task-oriented situation. Wilson et al. (2004.) observed that mother's child abuse potential is inversely correlated with the frequency of engaging in soliciting and affirming behaviors during playtime. Shipman and Zeman (1999.) reported that mothers who mistreated their children were less inclined to participate in conversations that showed an understanding of emotions, such as discussing the reasons behind emotions and their outcomes. Moreover, there were notable connections indicated between a mother's behavior, like discussing emotions, and their children's proficiency in understanding emotions. Valentino et al. (2006.) found that mothers from abusing families demonstrated fewer verbal strategies to direct their child's attention, compared to nonmaltreating mothers, while there was no difference detected in regards to physical attention-directing behaviors. Edwards (2005.) observed that parents who engaged in physical abuse displayed lower levels of problem-solving abilities and exhibited less nonverbal supportive behavior compared to parents in the control group.

A substantial body of research has identified both dimensions: the presence of negative communicative behaviors and a reduced frequency of positive and attentive interactions. Wasserman, Green and Allen (1983.) found that abusing mothers paid less attention to their children, initiated less play, and engaged in less verbal teaching while showing more negative behavior and less positive affect. Oldershaw, Walters and Hall (1986.) observed that abusive mothers utilized a greater number of commands, and employed more power-assertive control strategies while demonstrating less positive orientation. Additionally, they exhibited higher levels of intrusiveness and inconsistency in their parenting techniques, maintained a more sub-

duced emotional expression during their interactions, and showed less adaptability in their efforts to elicit compliance from their children. Webster-Stratton (1985.) reported that significantly more instances of physical negative behavior, commands and criticism were detected in abusive mothers. In contrast, a negative correlation was observed in the case of physical positive behavior and praise.

Likewise, Alessandri (1992.) found that maltreating mothers exhibited reduced involvement with their children, employed fewer physical and verbal tactics to guide their children's focus, and demonstrated higher levels of negativity. Bousha and Twentyman (1984.) reported that abusive mothers exhibited significantly fewer verbal and nonverbal positive behaviors, and showed significantly higher rates of verbal and physical aggression. Their children also showed fewer positive and more aggressive behaviors. Dolz, Cerezo and Milner (1997.) indicated that mothers with high risk for physical child abuse made fewer neutral approaches, showed more negative behaviors and made more indiscriminate responses to their children's pro-social behavior (when compared to low-risk mothers). Lau et al. (2006.) found that abusive parents over-reported externalizing problems in their children, and they showed more emotional control and less supportive behavior.

Borrego et al. (2004.) found that abusive mothers were more likely to respond negatively after a child's noncompliance; after a child's compliance, abusive mothers were less likely to engage in positive behavior other than praise. Schaeffer (1983.) observed that mothers involved in maltreatment provided more negative (and fewer positive) responses to their children while maintaining less contact. Oldershaw, Walters and Kordich (1989.) identified three subgroups of physically abusive mothers based on the observed parenting styles: emotionally distant, intrusive, and hostile.

In a similar vein, Brassard, Hart and Hardy (1993.) found that abusive mothers had significantly higher scores on four emotional maltreatment scales (spurning, terrorizing, denying emotional responsiveness, and corrupting/exploiting). They had lower scores on all scales related to the Quality of Emotional Support (response to task, mutual pleasure, denied emotional response, body harmonics, mental status, supportive presence) as well as on scales that belong to the Facilitation of Social and Cognitive Development (control strategies, respect for autonomy, quality of instruction). Lahey et al. (1984.) observed that abusive mothers exhibited significantly more negative physical behavior and fewer positive behaviors towards their children. They also had higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory, Emotional Distress and Physical Symptoms scales of the Cornell Medical Index. Herrenkohl et al. (1984.) reported that income level emerged as a notable factor, with higher-income parents displaying a greater tendency towards child-centered and supportive behavior, while lower-income parents leaned more towards parent-centered and

child-rejecting behavior; maltreatment was linked to increased parental rejection and reduced warmth towards the child, regardless of income level.

However, a more detailed comparative analysis of all the studies in the review actually reveals a mixed and inconsistent nature of results. Namely, while most studies show differences in how abusive and non-abusive parents communicate with their children, not all do; additionally, in examining the diverse dimensions of parental communication across various studies, we observe notable variability, with studies showing statistical distinctions in disparate categories of parental behavior.

For instance, Stokes (2011.) analyzed videotaped interactions of 70 caregiver-child dyads, showing that parents in the abuse group gave significantly less praise than those in the comparison group. However, after controlling for child age and total talk, there were no significant differences in the amount of negative talk or critical statements, or in the number of commands given. Moreover, some of the studies did not detect any differences in communication of abusive parents compared to the control group. Bennett, Sullivan, and Lewis (2006.) assessed parenting behaviors using both self-report measures (the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale) and direct observation of mother-child interactions. The study involved mothers of 139 children aged 3 to 6 years, including 58 children with a history of maltreatment. Mothers with a history of maltreatment reported higher scores on the Neglect, Nonviolent Discipline, and Psychological Aggression subscales of the CTSPC. These differences were only evident among mothers who acknowledged their history of maltreatment (in contrast to those who have concealed it). However, observations of mothers' behaviors during a (short and non-stressful) task did not distinguish between mothers who abused their children and those who did not. This result highlights a notable contrast: while self-reported measures such as the CTSPC could identify higher levels of negative parenting behaviors (among mothers who admit to maltreatment), these differences are not apparent in observed interactions, possibly due to the influence of socially desirable responses.

Furthermore, Koenig, Cicchetti and Rogosch (2000.) found that there were no discernible distinctions between the groups concerning maternal control strategies. Coster et al. (1989.) found that the language of the abusive mothers did not differ from the control group. Camras et al. (1990.) found that maltreating and non-maltreating mothers did not differ overall in their facial behavior.

In order to investigate and elucidate the conflicting findings, a wide array of methodological differences and limitations of the studies must be pointed out: relatively small sample sizes, the use of disparate or *ad hoc* coding systems, control samples not matched socioeconomically with abusive samples, lack of monitoring of children's behavior, different locations and types of given tasks (e.g. home or clin-

ics; structured tasks, unstructured tasks or no tasks), different ways of observing/recording, different time lengths etc. (Stokes, 2011.).

Also, the complexity of the studied phenomena could lead to apparent superficial contradictions. For example, contradictory results regarding whether abusive parents are more prone to criticizing their children can be explained when the difference between frequency and proportion is taken into account: abusive parents have less *overall* communication with their children, but their *percentage* of negative talk is significantly greater compared to other parents (Wilson, 2000.). Another significant factor of complexity is the question of how parents' communication changes under observation, leading to different interactions with their children compared to their behavior at home under the pressure of social expectations, as well as whether the two groups differ in this regard.

The need for an integrative insight into the general picture calls for a meta-analytic approach that can give a more comprehensive and synthesizing perspective that rises above conflicting results from different individual sources. Wilson et al. (2008.) conducted a significant meta-analysis of 33 observational studies that compared physically abusive, neglectful, and non-maltreating parents during interaction with their children. Medium-sized differences were observed in three clusters of behavior: aversiveness, positivity, and involvement. *Aversiveness*, which had the strongest correlation with physical abuse, refers to actions that communicate negative emotions, encompassing various types of parental behavior, including negative physical touch, critical statements, verbal aggression, disapproval, humiliation, threats, spurning, intrusiveness, using a loud voice, denying requests, negative demands, terrorizing, etc. *Positivity* equally differentiated both physical abuse and neglect, through negative correlation. It is characterized by providing support and displaying positive emotional expressions (e.g. laughter, positive physical touch, verbal praise, encouragement, supportive presence, parental compliance, using a soft voice, smiling, etc.). *Involvement*, on the other hand, had a stronger (negative) correlation with neglect than with physical abuse. This cluster is related to responsiveness and showing interest in the child (e.g. cooperating, asking questions, giving reflective comments, verbal teaching, demonstrating, showing empathy, etc.), as opposed to ignoring or disengagement (Burgoon and Newton, 1991.).

Therefore, the meta-analytic evidence we have so far supports the assumption held by most theoretical frameworks that physically abusive parents communicate with their children differently compared to other parents. However, more research is needed to draw additional specific conclusions that could be valuable for practical applications.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The approach taken in this paper focuses on highlighting the relevant results of each individual study and grouping them within larger categories of communication characteristics. However, this brings about a limitation in terms of a lack of comparison between different coding systems, whose diversity and disparity present a challenge. The studies included in this review vary widely in their methodologies, populations, and contexts. Differences in sample sizes, demographic characteristics, and measurement tools can make it challenging to draw consistent conclusions. For instance, the variation in how physical child abuse and parental communication are defined and assessed across studies can lead to inconsistencies in the findings. This heterogeneity makes it difficult to generalize the results and identify clear patterns.

The terminology used in the reviewed studies for describing parental behavior was also not always particularly precise when it comes to illustrating all the relevant dimensions of their communication. For instance, many studies did not examine non-verbal cues, which provide important insights into communication dynamics.

The inherent methodological characteristics of reviewed studies also pose other challenges. In the case of observational studies, which compose a significant portion of the reviewed studies, the fact that parents were observed by researchers may have altered their behavior in terms of social desirability, leading to results that may not accurately represent a real-life dynamic playing out in domestic environments. Furthermore, the possible influence of observation on the behavior of children would additionally alter their parents' behavior. Potential bias in observer ratings represents another potential factor for consideration. However, self-report measures represent even greater challenges in regard to reliable and objective insight into abusers' behavior.

The lack of samples coming from diverse cultural backgrounds is one of the factors that may limit the generalizability of the findings, especially when it comes to understanding different cultural perceptions of physical abuse and corporal punishment.

The tendency for studies with significant or positive results to be published more frequently than those with null or negative findings is another concern. This publication bias can skew the overall picture presented by the review.

The selection process of the studies included in this review is a factor that may introduce bias. Although a thorough search of scientific databases was conducted, there is always a possibility that some relevant studies were overlooked. This could be due to the search terms used, the databases chosen, or the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied. Studies published in languages other than English, unpublished

dissertations, or reports not available in academic journals may contain pertinent information lacking from this review.

Decisions made during data extraction, such as which results to emphasize or how to interpret ambiguous findings can influence the overall conclusions of the review. Moreover, the synthesis of qualitative data from diverse studies involves a level of interpretation that may introduce bias.

Additionally, this review's scope is narrowly focused on parental behavior, meaning that the characteristics of children's communication are not significantly illuminated. The deliberate exclusion of studies about maltreatment prevention was also necessary to maintain a focused scope; however, that could omit potentially valuable information.

Another nuanced factor that is lacking in our analysis refers to how a child's age and developmental stage influence communication dynamics related to abuse.

Finally, one of the most significant limitations of our review is revealed in the methodological confinements that prevented an examination of how interventions or treatment programs influence communication patterns after instances of abuse. This gap limits our understanding of whether and how abusive communication behaviors can be altered through targeted interventions, such as counseling, parental training, or therapeutic programs.

Future research implications

Further research is especially needed for unraveling the deeper and more intricate causal mechanisms at play, particularly regarding how characteristics of parental communication may shape the perceived meaning and ultimate consequences of physical abuse. While it is acknowledged that physical abuse can have severe psychological effects on a child, a detailed analysis of the underlying mechanisms is necessary. Namely, the meaning of parental physical actions is interpreted by the child according to the existing internal cognitive systems, which are largely formed under the decisive influence of previous verbal communication with the parent. Therefore, the child does not perceive the act of physical violence as a *tabula rasa* but attributes meaning to it based on the patterns of messages received from the parent during years of preceding communication. While the physical act of violence may leave transient bruises, the *message* communicated by the abuse leaves more lasting effects (Morgan and Wilson, 2005.).

Additional important questions emerge as well, such as the nature of causal relationships between communication and violence. Are both phenomena the result of common underlying factors, does violence represent an extension of

communication processes, or is there a reverse direction in which violent incidents shape the characteristics of further communication for all parties involved? Also, although the literature is dominantly focused on unidirectional communication from parent to child, bidirectional dynamics calls for a deeper understanding, including the child's behavior (Azar, 1991.).

Many studies included in this review are cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of the relationship between parental communication and physical child abuse at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies, following participants over an extended period, offer another avenue for further research.

Also, as is clear from the review, there is a significant lack of research on fathers' communication, a noteworthy deficiency, as it is possible to assume that violence done by fathers has some specific communication characteristics compared to mothers. It would be necessary to shed more light on this topic. We must also point out that there is a shortage of research conducted in non-Western cultural contexts as well. All future research efforts have to be sensitive to many factors influencing the ultimate results, including race, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics (Stokes, 2011.).

A promising contemporary avenue for future research lies in the growing role of digital communication in parent-child interactions. Investigating this dynamic could provide completely novel insights into the evolving nature of family communication in the digital age.

The existing research on the relationship between communication and physical child abuse is lacking in providing a thorough comprehension of all these issues. Surface-level quantitative correlations are not sufficient for penetrating the fundamental processes in this area.

Practical implications

Creating a communication profile of a parent who abuses their child contributes not only to the theoretical understanding but also offers valuable insights for practitioners, including professionals in competent institutions striving to better identify such parents during child custody evaluations. On the other hand, insight into studies of this nature is necessary for fully informing intervention strategies, especially considering the importance of methodologies that include independent observers (Wilson et al., 2008.).

All creators of child abuse prevention programs should be familiar with the latest research on the behavioural characteristics of abusive parents. These programs should not be based solely on theoretical frameworks but should consult the empirical insights.

Research results are also a valuable resource in the context of the evolution and reform of education systems at the broadest level. Awareness of the warning signs of child abuse should become part of general education and awareness.

In summary, the practical implications of this review emphasize the importance of a multi-faceted approach to preventing physical child abuse through improved parental communication. By integrating these insights into policy, practice, and research, relevant social subjects can foster a supportive environment that promotes healthy family dynamics and protects children from harm.

CONCLUSION

The presented review can serve as a practical signpost for future research, summarizing the current state in a clear and concise way, highlighting the most relevant findings, while also pointing to insufficiently examined and challenging dimensions of the relationship between parent-child communication and physical child abuse.

A review of scientific literature can equally be beneficial regarding prevention efforts. When a specific case of abuse has already become visible to social services, media and the general public, it means that society's reaction came too late (Stanić, 2021.).

We believe that examining the communication between parents and children is crucial for a fundamental understanding of the phenomenon of physical child abuse. As we have already indicated, abuse is generally not a matter of isolated incidents, but occurs in a repetitive context that can be long-lasting. This is why addressing family violence requires an approach grounded in understanding communication within a long-term context. This furthermore implies that psychological and physical violence cannot be interpreted only as separate phenomena; otherwise, only visible consequences will be treated, while the latent causes will remain unaddressed.

This paper presented a basic overview of a complicated topic that certainly deserves the attention of both communication researchers and those from the fields of social work, psychology, pedagogy, and all other disciplines interested in parent-child communication and child welfare. We believe that much more attention needs to be paid to this issue, not only within the academic community but also on a broader social level.

The importance of understanding the connection between parental communication and physical child abuse extends far beyond academic inquiry; it touches the very essence of our collective responsibility to nurture and protect the most vulnerable members of our society. This topic holds profound significance as it

dives into the foundations of family dynamics, the roots of human behavior, and the profound impact of early experiences on a child's development and future. By illuminating these critical interactions, we open doors to fostering environments where children are not only safe but also able to thrive emotionally and psychologically. This journey towards deeper understanding and effective intervention is a testament to our shared humanity, underscoring the beauty of a society that values empathy, compassion, and proactive support.

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POVEZANOST IZMEĐU RODITELJSKE KOMUNIKACIJE I FIZIČKOG ZLOSTAVLJANJA DJECE: PRIKAZ ISTRAŽIVANJA

Milijuni djece diljem svijeta svakodnevno doživljavaju zlostavljanje u svojim obiteljima. Razumijevanje prirode obiteljskih procesa koji dovode do ovog ishoda nije samo znanstveni izazov, već i moralni zadatak za istraživačku zajednicu. Ovaj rad istražuje temu iz komunikacijske perspektive, pružajući pregled pitanja koja se u sadašnjoj literaturi obrađuju kao relevantna za rasvjetljavanje odnosa između komunikacije roditelj-dijete i fizičkog zlostavljanja djeteta. Prvi dio rada fokusiran je na različite pristupe komunikaciji između roditelja i djece, posebno s obzirom na klasičnu tipologiju roditeljskih stilova, kao i obrazaca obiteljske komunikacije. Nakon toga daje se kratak pregled različitih modela fizičkog zlostavljanja djece. Na kraju, donosimo pregled istraživanja koje su analizirala karakteristike komunikacije fizički nasilnih roditelja s djecom. U zaključnim napomenama predlažemo da komunikacijska perspektiva ima potencijal ojačati ne samo teorijsko razumijevanje ove teme, već i osnažiti praktične pristupe posvećene otkrivanju i prevenciji nasilja u obitelji.

Ključne riječi: komunikacija roditelj-dijete; roditeljstvo; fizičko zlostavljanje djece; zlostavljanje djece.



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APPENDIX: Table of reviewed studies

Author(s)	Title	Parents' gender	Parents' age	Children's gender % (M/F)	Children's age (years)
Haskett, Neupert & Okado, 2013.	Factors associated with 3-year stability and change in parenting behavior of abusive parents	F&M	32.2	61/49	4.45
Stokes, 2011.	Comparison of parent-child interactions in abusive and control families: an observational study	F&M	30.13	60/40	4.97
Valentino et al., 2011.	Mother-Child Play and Maltreatment: A Longitudinal Analysis of Emerging Social Behavior From Infancy to Toddlerhood	F	28.6	44/54	1.05
Rodriguez, 2010.	Parent-child aggression: association with child abuse potential and parenting styles	F&M F&M F	30.48 37.62 40.65	- - -	- - -
Shackman et al., 2010.	Emotion expression among abusive mothers is associated with their children's emotion processing and problem behaviours	F	37.4	-	9.6
Francis & Wolfe, 2008.	Cognitive and emotional differences between abusive and non-abusive fathers	M	38.44	-	-
Bennett, Sullivan & Lewis, 2006.	Relations of parental report and observation of parenting to maltreatment history	F	30.8	55/45	5.03
Haskett et al., 2006.	Factor structure and validity of the parenting stress index-short form	F&M	34.4	52/48	7.0
Lau et al., 2006.	Abusive parents' reports of child behavior problems: relationship to observed parent-child interactions	F	-	59/41	11.46
Valentino et al., 2006.	Mother-child play and emerging social behaviors among infants from maltreating families	F	26	44/56	1.5

Author(s)	Title	Parents' gender	Parents' age	Children's gender % (M/F)	Children's age (years)
Wilson et al., 2006.	Mothers' trait verbal aggressiveness and child abuse potential	F	31.05	-	-
Edwards, 2005.	Parent child interactions in physically abusive families: an examination of family problem-solving and interactive processes	F&M	-	-	-
Borrego et al., 2004.	Physically abusive mothers' responses following episodes of child noncompliance and compliance	F	29.6	60/40	4.15
Wilson et al., 2004.	Mothers' child abuse potential as a predictor of maternal and child behaviors during play-time interactions	F	31.05	62/38	4.83
Timmer, Boreggo & Urquiza, 2002.	Antecedents of coercive interactions in physically abusive mother-child dyads	F	30	63/37	4.2
Caselles & Milner, 2000.	Evaluations of child transgressions, disciplinary choices, and expected child compliance in a no-cry and a crying infant condition in physically abusive and comparison mothers	F	33.15	-	-
Koenig, Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2000.	Child compliance/noncompliance and maternal contributors to internalization in maltreating and nonmaltreating dyads	F	-	52/48	3.61
Cerezo & D'Ocon, 1999.	Sequential analyses in coercive mother-child interaction: The predictability hypothesis in abusive versus nonabusive dyads	F	-	72/28	8.36
Shipman & Zeman, 1999.	Emotional understanding: A comparison of physically maltreating and nonmaltreating mother-child dyads	F	-	68/32	9.0
Dolz, Cerezo & Milner, 1997.	Mother-child interactional patterns in high- and low-risk families	F	36.6	60/40	8.4
Alessandri & Lewis, 1996.	Differences in pride and shame in maltreated and nonmaltreated preschoolers	F	27.3	50/50	4.38
Cerezo, D'Ocon & Dolz, 1996.	Mother-child interactive patterns in abusive families versus nonabusive families: An observational study	F	33.68	66/34	8.02

Author(s)	Title	Parents' gender	Parents' age	Children's gender % (M/F)	Children's age (years)
Cerezo & D'Ocon, 1995.	Maternal inconsistent socialization: An interactional pattern with maltreated children	F	38.5	67/33	8.10
Brassard, Hart & Hardy, 1993.	The psychological maltreatment rating scales	F	-	55/45	6.67
Silber et al., 1993.	Patterns of influence and response in abusing and nonabusing families	F&M	-	12/88 12/88	10.5 10.5
Alessandri, 1992.	Mother-child interactional correlates of maltreated and nonmaltreated children's play behavior	F	27.91	53/47	4.42
Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991.	The role of parental stress in physically abusive families	F&M	32.5 35.2	69/31 69/31	4.9 4.9
Camras et al., 1990.	Maternal facial behavior and the recognition and production of emotional expression by maltreated and nonmaltreated children	F	-	50/50	4.92
Dilalla & Crittenden, 1990.	Dimensions of maltreated children's home behavior: A factor analytic approach	F&M	24	51/49	2.16
Coster et al., 1989.	Communicative functioning in maltreated toddlers	F	-	55/45	2.6
Oldershaw, Walters & Kordich, 1989.	A behavioral approach to the classification of different types of physically abusive mothers	F	27	48/52	3.75
Kavanagh et al., 1988.	Interactions between children and abusive versus control parents	F&M	-	-	3.11
Lyons-Ruth et al., 1987.	Infants at social risk: Relations among infant maltreatment, maternal behavior, and infant attachment behavior	F	25.5	54/46	1
Oldershaw, Walters & Hall, 1986.	Control strategies and noncompliance in abusive mother-child dyads: an observational study	F	24.5	50/50	3

Author(s)	Title	Parents' gender	Parents' age	Children's gender % (M/F)	Children's age (years)
Schindler & Arkowitz, 1986.	The assessment of mother-child interactions in physically abusive and nonabusive families	F	29.5	91/9	4.8
Trickett & Kuczynski, 1986.	Children's misbehaviors and parental discipline strategies in abusive and nonabusive families	F&M	-	60/40	6.68
Webster-Stratton, 1985.	Comparison of abusive and nonabusive families with conduct-disordered children	F	30	73/27	4.8
Bousha & Twentyman, 1984.	Mother-child interactional style in abuse, neglect, and control groups: Naturalistic observations in the home	F	-	-	4.45
Herrenkohl et al., 1984.	Parent-child interactions in abusive and nonabusive families	F&M	-	52/48	4.12
Lahey et al., 1984.	Parenting behavior and emotional status of physically abusive mothers	F	27	63/37	5.67
Lorber, Felton & Reid, 1984.	A social learning approach to the reduction of coercive processes in child abusive families: A molecular analysis	F	-	56/44	5.96
Mash, Johnston & Kovitz, 1983.	A comparison of the mother-child interactions of physically abused and non-abused children during play and task situations	F	-	67/33	4.79
Schaeffer, 1983.	Peer behavior, caregiver-directed behavior, and mother-child interaction in maltreated children	F	-	50/50	2.8
Wasserman, Green & Allen, 1983.	Going beyond abuse: maladaptive patterns of interaction in abusing mother-infant pairs	F	-	-	1.2
Nastasi & Hill, 1982.	Interactions between abusing mothers and their children in two situations	F	-	100/0	6.94
Burgess & Conger, 1978.	Family interaction in abusive, neglectful, and normal families	F&M	29.8 29.8	-	6.50 6.50
Walker, 1977.	Patterns of affective communication in abusive and non-abusive mothers	F	23	50/50	2.5