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# VISIBLE BUT UNREPORTED: A CASE FOR THE “NOT SERIOUS ENOUGH” CASES OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

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**Abstract**—This study examined the psychosocial characteristics of cases of child maltreatment labelled as “not serious enough.” The sample consisted of cases of suspected physical abuse ( $N = 48$ ), neglect ( $N = 13$ ), and psychological maltreatment ( $N = 8$ ) identified by teachers, and a nonabused comparison group ( $N = 283$ ). Characteristics of children and their parents were evaluated at three ecological levels: individual, family, and social. Results indicated a poor personal and social adjustment of the children in the maltreatment groups, and suggest that the definition of cases of maltreatment as not serious enough does not represent the psychological reality of these children. Discriminant analysis indicated that the most important variables for discriminating between all maltreatment groups and the nonabuse group were parents and children’s perceptions of parental behavior, children’s behavioral problems and personal adjustment, parents integration and satisfaction in the community, and the importance and direction of personal growth emphasized in the family. The importance of other variables such as socioeconomic status, stress, psychological symptoms or number of children appeared to be a function of the different types of child maltreatment. The importance of prevention and intervention efforts before the maltreatment reaches a serious stage is discussed.

**Key Words**—Severity of abuse, Reporting, Psychological consequences, Parental acceptance-rejection, Ecological model.

## INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH ON CHILD abuse and neglect has drawn mainly on officially reported and substantiated cases of child maltreatment. As Gelles (1975, 1980) pointed out, reliance on these cases produces a bias in the labeling process. For example, the poor and ethnic minorities are more likely to be labeled and reported as abusers and abused (e.g., Hampton & Newberger, 1985; Newberger, Reed, Daniel, Hyde, & Kotelchuck, 1977; O’Toole, Turbett, & Nalepka, 1983). Also, research drawing on officially reported cases of abuse tends to represent the severe end of child maltreatment, since in many instances they come to the attention of professionals and public agencies when the abuse could not be disguised or was serious enough to require an intervention referral by a protection agency. For example, in the National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1981) one reason given for the lack of substantiation of reported cases was “not serious enough,” this being the largest single category (39%) of unsubstantiated cases among the reports from law enforcement and educational sources (Giovannoni, 1989). As Giovannoni observes “these cases were all considered to be *valid* cases of maltreatment;

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the disagreement was around the relative seriousness of the maltreatment as a criterion for intervention'' (1989, p. 18).

The National Study of the Incidence and Severity, in its attempt to get the 'real' incidence of child abuse also included unreported cases that met the definitions of the study (i.e., cases identified but not reported to Child Protective Services [CPS] by investigatory agencies such as law enforcement and public health, and other social and health agencies such as schools and hospitals). The results of this study suggested the existence of a large number of known or suspected cases of child abuse and neglect that were not reported.

Although the National Incidence Study does not explain why those agencies did not report the cases of abuse they suspected, Giovannoni (1989) identified two characteristics of the reported and unreported cases: age (whereas 60% of the children under age 6 were reported, 78% of children aged 12–17 were not reported) and type of maltreatment (less than 25% of the cases designated as emotional abuse, emotional neglect or educational neglect had been reported). More recently, a national survey on teachers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about child abuse (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992) tried to understand why school personnel report only a small percentage of the child abuse they observe (AAPC, 1988; Westat, 1988). In this survey 65% of teachers felt that a significant obstacle to reporting was the lack of sufficient knowledge on how to detect and report cases of child abuse and neglect (see also, Levin, 1983; Nightingale & Walker, 1986). Other barriers to child abuse reporting identified in this study were fear of legal ramifications (63%), fears of the consequences of the report (52%), parental denial and disapproval of reports (45%), interference in family privacy (35%), lack of community or school support (24%), and school board disapproval (14%).

Reporting seems to be also a function of the level of seriousness of the suspected maltreatment. For example, in Tite's study (1993) on teachers' definitions and responses to child abuse, "cases that did get reported generally involved disclosure, the observation and documentation of a series of bruises over time, or one that was sufficiently serious and shocking to stimulate an immediate formal report" (p. 598). In their review, Warner and Hansen (1994) also included the severity of an injury as an important factor that may influence identification and reporting of physical abuse by physicians. Besharov (1993), citing 1986 data from the National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect (Sedlak, 1987, 1989), shows that the surveyed professionals failed to report almost 50% of the moderate physical abuse cases, and about three-quarters of the moderate physical neglect cases.

The distinction between "theoretical" and "reportable" cases (Pelcovitz, 1980; Tite, 1993) is of relevance here. This distinction is useful to explain why less serious incidents and some types of maltreatment such as neglect or emotional abuse are less likely to be reported than other cases (e.g., Nightingale & Walker, 1986; Pelcovitz, 1980). For example, according to this distinction, although both types of maltreatment would be considered in general as theoretical abuse, in many instances they would not be considered serious enough to fit the category of reportable abuse. If we consider the high percentage of reported cases in the National Study of Incidence and Severity that were unsubstantiated because they were not serious enough, or CPS complaints and lack of enthusiasm about cases reported by teachers because they are not sufficiently serious or immediately threatening (Zellman, 1990), the distinction between theoretical and reportable abuse also appears to be implicitly assumed by CPS agencies. Citing also 1986 data from the National Study of the Incidence and Severity, Finkelhor (1993) notes that only 16% of children known to community agencies whose maltreatment was categorized by the study as 'low priority' were investigated by CPS.

However, the distinction between sufficiently or not sufficiently serious abuse is of less significance when the psychological and emotional consequences of maltreatment, rather than the physical consequences, are considered. As Crittenden (1988) notes, when injuries are milder they "are likely to be endured repeatedly in a context of daily interpersonal hostility

and rejection. The chronicity and pervasively detrimental psychological quality of these milder situations may have developmental impact that far exceeds the severity of the injuries themselves" (p. 162). From this point of view most of the consequences of abuse are due more to the psychological component than to other aspects such as physical injuries or deprivation in themselves (Starr, MacLean, & Keating, 1991). As Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley put it, "in almost all cases, it is the psychological consequences of an act that define that act as abusive" (1986, p. 7). From this perspective defining a case of maltreatment as not serious enough becomes more problematic.

There is clearly a gap in the research literature concerning those cases of maltreatment considered not sufficiently serious. This study aims to address that gap by examining the psychosocial reality of those children and their parents that fall under the category of "not serious enough" abuse.

## METHOD

### *Procedure*

The objective of the study was to identify suspected but unreported cases of child maltreatment (not known to CPS services, law enforcement agencies, medical or mental health services), and compare the psychosocial characteristics of these children and their parents with a comparison group where abuse was not suspected. Suspected cases of child maltreatment were identified by teachers from different urban schools who were recruited during a postgraduate course of Community Psychology. In no case did the suspected maltreatment cause injuries that needed medical attention. For teachers, these cases, although they fell into the theoretical concept of abuse and neglect, they did not fit the category of reportable abuse (Tite, 1993).

Teachers also contacted parents to obtain their agreement to collaborate in the study. For the comparison group, children from the same schools, and their parents, were also recruited by the teachers. The acceptance rate for the parents in the suspected abuse group was 45%, and 65% in the comparison group. No reference to the child maltreatment content of the study was made to parents or children.

### *Subjects*

The group of suspected cases of child maltreatment consisted of 69 children and their parents. Of these children, teachers considered that 48 were being physically abused, 13 neglected, and eight psychologically abused. Teachers considered that in some cases of suspected physical abuse (17%) and neglect (7%) psychological abuse was also present. In 7% of physical abuse cases teachers considered that neglect could also be an issue. Cases of psychological abuse were considered to exist in isolation from other forms of maltreatment. Children ranged in age from 7 to 13 years (at this age children are mature enough to be able to respond to the self-report questionnaires with a minimum of external assistance). Of the children, 64% were male and 36% female. In this group, 76% of parents' questionnaires were completed by mothers and 24% by fathers.

The comparison group consisted of 283 children and their parents. Fifty-one percent of the children were male and 49% female. The age interval for the children was the same as the maltreatment group. In this group, 77% of parents' questionnaires were completed by mothers and 23% by fathers.

### *Measures*

Following an ecological perspective (Belsky, 1980; Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986) variables at three levels or contexts were evaluated: individual, family, and social.

### *Individual Context*

*Symptom checklist-90 (SCL-90)*. This self-report measure (Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973) covers a spectrum of psychological distress symptoms such as depression, anxiety, hostility, somatic complaints, and obsessive thoughts. This measure provides a global index of severity that can be used as a general indicator of an individual's psychological adjustment. In this study, the parents' total symptom score was used.

*Child behavior checklist-parent form (CBCL)*. This checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) evaluates the behavior problems and social competencies of children and adolescents as reported by their parents. The Behavior Problems measure used in this study is composed of two broad dimensions: Internalizing and Externalizing. Internalizing includes anxious obsessive, somatic complaints, schizoid behavior, depressed withdrawal, being immature, and being uncommunicative. Externalizing includes being delinquent, aggressive, cruel, or hyperactive.

*Personality assessment questionnaire-child form (PAQ)*. This self-report questionnaire (Rohner, Saavedra, & Granum, 1978b) assesses the way children perceive their own personality and behavioral dispositions. The following scales constitute the Child PAQ: (a) Hostility/Aggression; (b) Dependence; (c) Self-esteem; (d) Self-adequacy; (e) Emotional Responsiveness; (f) Emotional Stability; (g) World View. The scores on the seven PAQ scales can be totalled to create an overall self-reported personality/behavioral dispositions. This study used the total score as a global measure of children's personal and social adjustment.

### *Family Context*

*Parental acceptance-rejection questionnaire-parent and child forms (PARQ)*. This self-report questionnaire (Rohner, Saavedra, & Granum, 1978a) measures perceptions of parental treatment of the child in terms of four dimensions: (a) Parental Warmth and Affection; (b) Parental Hostility and Aggression; (c) Parental Indifference and Neglect; (d) Parental Undifferentiated Rejection. This study used the perceived Warmth/Affection factor, and the perceived composite Rejection Factor (calculated by summing the scores of the hostility, neglect and undifferentiated rejection scales). The two forms used in this study allowed us to obtain three measures of parental acceptance-rejection: parents perceptions of their treatment of their children, and children's perceptions of the way they are treated by both their mothers and fathers.

*Family environment scale (FES)*. This scale (Moos & Moss, 1981) assesses the social environment of the family in three dimensions: (a) Relationships—the degree to which family members are committed to the family and are supportive to each other, the openness for expression in the family, and the nature of conflictual interactions in it (this dimension is composed of three subscales, Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict); (b) Personal Growth—importance and direction of personal growth emphasized in the family (this dimension is composed of five subscales, Independence, Achievement Orientation, Intellectual-Cultural Orientation, Active-Recreational, and Moral-Religious Emphasis); (c) System Maintenance—structure and organization of the family and the degree to which family members control each other (the subscales of Organization and Control constitute this dimension). This questionnaire was completed by both parents and children.

*Family inventory of life events and changes (FILE)—intra-family sources of stress*. This self-report instrument (McCubbin & Wilson, 1981) measures a family's level of life stressors and strains experienced during a 12-month period. In this questionnaire items are grouped

into nine different scales covering intrafamily and extrafamily sources of stress. The overall intrafamily level of stress was obtained by adding the scores in the following scales: (a) Intrafamily Strains; (b) Marital Strains; (c) Pregnancy and Childbearing Strains; (d) Illness and Family Care Strains; (e) Losses; (f) Transitions In and Out.

### *Social Context*

*Family inventory of life events and changes (FILE)*—extra-family sources of stress. The overall extrafamily level of stress was obtained by adding the scores in the following scales: (a) Finance and Business Strains; (b) Work-family Transitions and Strains; (c) Family Legal Violations.

*Community Support Questionnaire (CSQ)*. Based on the definition and dimensions of community support proposed by Lin, Dumin, and Woelfel (1986), a self-report questionnaire measuring community support was constructed. This questionnaire includes the following scales: (a) Community Integration and Satisfaction, which measures social interaction with neighbors and members of the community, and satisfaction with social relations in the neighborhood and with the community as a whole (Alpha coefficient for this scale was .86); (b) Community Association and Participation, measures individual membership and participation in voluntary organizations ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

*Sociodemographic measures* included Socioeconomic Status, calculated from occupation and level of education measures, age of parents, and number of children.

## RESULTS

Discriminant analysis was used to determine the variables along which the three abuse groups differed from the nonabuse group, as well as to test an ecological model of child maltreatment by assessing the adequacy of the group of variables selected in differentiating the abuse and nonabuse groups.

### *Physical Abuse*

A discriminant function was identified as having significant discriminative power among the physical abuse and nonabuse groups (Wilks' Lambda = .57,  $\chi^2(24) = 173.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Table 1 shows the variable loadings on the discriminant function and both groups means (variables have been ordered according to their discriminative power). The variables loading most heavily on the discriminant function were perceptions of parental treatment of the child (parents and children's perspectives), children's behavior problems (Internalizing and Externalizing), and Children's Personal Adjustment. Other important predictors were the variables Personal Growth, Community Integration and Satisfaction, and Intrafamily Stress. The lower loadings on the discriminant function corresponded to the variables Psychological Symptoms, Extrafamily Stress, Socioeconomic Status, and Community Association and Participation. Other variables made marginal or no contribution to the function.

Using the discriminant function scores 90.46% of the nonabuse cases, and 79.17% of the physical abuse cases were correctly classified.

### *Neglect*

The discriminant analysis produced a significant discriminant function between the neglect and nonabuse cases (Wilks' Lambda = .69,  $\chi^2(24) = 102.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As Table 2 shows the variable loadings on the discriminant function present some differential characteristics with

**Table 1. Variable Loadings on the Discriminant Function, Univariate Tests, and Means. Physical Abuse and Non-Abuse Groups**

Variable	Correlation	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Non-Abuse	Abuse
Rejection (P)	-.71	123.75	<.001	71.19	98.60
Rejection (M)	-.66	105.63	<.001	74.49	102.47
Rejection (F)	-.64	99.79	<.001	73.08	101.67
Warmth/Affection (M)	.59	84.87	<.001	71.54	59.25
Warmth/Affection (P)	.54	70.01	<.001	73.03	62.96
Externalizing	-.53	67.42	<.001	16.63	31.45
Warmth/Affection (F)	.52	67.37	<.001	69.86	57.29
Children's Personal Adjustment	-.45	49.31	<.001	94.73	108.03
Internalizing	-.41	42.18	<.001	16.61	27.68
Personal Growth (C)	.41	40.91	<.001	26.20	21.66
Integration in the Community	.38	35.53	<.001	31.05	27.50
Intra-Family Stress	-.33	27.22	<.001	6.46	10.65
Personal Growth (P)	.30	22.04	<.001	26.59	22.46
Psychological Symptoms	-.29	21.50	<.001	151.64	183.77
Extra-Family Stress	-.23	13.32	<.001	4.65	6.60
Socioeconomic Status	.21	10.73	.001	3.59	2.82
Community Association	.18	8.23	.004	5.34	4.96
Relationships (P)	.16	6.72	.010	15.72	14.71
Father's Age	.14	5.13	.024	40.71	38.10
System Maintenance (C)	.14	5.02	.026	11.30	10.39
Relationships (C)	.11	3.39	.066	15.01	14.30
System Maintenance (P)	.11	2.91	.089	11.40	10.66
Mother's Age	.10	2.76	.098	35.82	34.08
Number of Children	-.07	1.31	.252	2.79	3.02

Note. (M) = Child rating mother, (F) = Child rating father, (C) = Childrens ratings, (P) = Parents ratings.

respect to the physical abuse group. Although the perceptions of parental behavior (except parents perspective), and children's behavior problems (Externalizing) are again among the variables loading most heavily on the discriminant function, less relevant or non significant variables in the differentiation of the groups with the physical abuse cases such as Socioeconomic Status and number of children are more relevant in differentiating neglect. The variables Psychological Symptoms, Stress, Warmth/affection (parents perspective), and Internalizing did not make a significant contribution to the discriminant function.

Using the discriminant function scores 93.99% of the nonabuse cases, and 76.92% of the neglect cases were correctly classified. As with the physical abuse cases this discriminant function defines the nonabuse group with more accuracy than the abuse group.

### *Psychological Abuse*

Also, for the psychological abuse group a significant discriminant function was obtained (Wilks' Lambda = .67,  $\chi^2(24) = 110.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Again, as with the others forms of maltreatment, perceptions of parents treatment of the child and children's behavioral problems were among the most important predictors. As Table 3 shows some differentiating features emerge when compared to the physical abuse and neglect groups. Particularly noticeable is the heavy loading of the variable Integration and Satisfaction in the Community on the discriminant function (with lower loadings in the physical abuse and neglect groups). Also, interestingly, the variable Socioeconomic Status did not make a significant contribution to the differentiation of the groups. In contrast with the neglect group, the variables Stress (both intra and extrafamily) and Symptoms were again significant predictors as in the physical abuse group. Other variables loading on the discriminant function were Personal Growth, Children's Personal Adjustment, and number of children.

**Table 2. Variable Loadings on the Discriminant Function, Univariate Tests, and Means. Neglect and Non-Abuse Groups**

Variable	Correlation	F	p	Non-Abuse	Abuse
Warmth/Affection (M)	.62	49.75	<.001	71.54	61.16
Rejection (M)	-.58	44.81	<.001	74.49	101.08
Rejection (F)	-.53	37.52	<.001	73.08	106.13
Externalizing	-.43	24.27	<.001	16.63	30.47
Socioeconomic Status	.34	15.48	<.001	3.59	2.08
Warmth/Affection (F)	.33	14.82	<.001	69.86	57.68
Integration in the Community	.32	13.29	<.001	31.05	26.17
Personal Growth (C)	.31	13.01	<.001	26.20	21.54
Rejection (P)	-.29	11.39	.001	71.19	87.08
Children's Personal Adjustment	-.28	10.25	.002	94.73	105.62
Number of Children	-.22	6.72	.010	2.79	3.43
Personal Growth (P)	.18	4.59	.033	26.59	23.00
Community Association	.18	4.38	.037	5.34	4.91
System Maintenance (C)	.16	3.49	.063	11.30	9.87
Extra-Family Stress	-.14	2.54	.112	4.65	4.87
Warmth/Affection (P)	.13	2.41	.121	73.03	70.16
Psychological Symptoms	-.08	.87	.351	151.64	166.75
System Maintenance (P)	.07	.80	.371	11.40	10.58
Internalizing	-.06	.51	.473	16.61	17.65
Intra-Family Stress	-.03	.16	.687	6.46	7.20
Relationships (P)	.03	.11	.736	15.72	15.54
Father's Age	.01	.01	.898	40.71	40.10
Mother's Age	.01	.01	.899	35.82	36.09
Relationships (C)	-.00	.00	.946	15.01	15.04

Note. (M) = Child rating mother, (F) = Child rating father, (C) = Childrens ratings, (P) = Parents ratings.

This discriminant function correctly classified 97.53% of the nonabuse cases, and 87.50% of the psychological abuse cases, this being the best prediction among the three types of maltreatment (when a discriminant analysis was performed with all cases of maltreatment, 91.17% of nonabuse cases, and 76.81% of the abuse cases were correctly classified).

## DISCUSSION

This study tried to gain a better understanding of the psychosocial reality of those cases of maltreatment labelled as not serious enough. Certainly, according to teachers perceptions the physical health or integrity of these children did not appear to be under serious threat. However, the results obtained in this research indicate that the same may not be true with respect to the personal and social adjustment of these children. Although no causal link can be established from our data set, children who were suspected of being maltreated, when compared to other children, manifested significantly more behavior problems expressed both in an externalizing fashion (i.e., being aggressive, hyperactive, disobedient, overactive, and destructive), and in an internalizing fashion (i.e., being anxious, uncommunicative, immature, submissive, and withdrawn). Also, the personality of these children compared with the nonabuse group of children was characterized by dependency, low self-esteem and self-adjustment, emotional instability, and a negative world view. These findings would be consistent with Rohner's parental acceptance-rejection theory according to which these characteristics are manifested by children who experience rejection (Rohner, 1975, 1980; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). Levels of perceived parental acceptance and rejection were analyzed, and when compared with the

nonabuse group, children in the abuse group perceived less warmth and affection (expressed physically or verbally), and more rejection (manifested by hostility and aggression, indifference and neglect, and undifferentiated rejection) in the way they were treated by their parents.

Cases of maltreatment in this study represent the less severe end of child abuse, or what has been labelled as theoretical but nonreportable cases of abuse (Pelcovitz, 1980; Tite, 1993). This differentiation is usually based on the physical severity and immediate threat rather than on the impact of the maltreatment on the child's psychological and social competence. If the psychological and socioemotional consequences of abuse are taken into account, our data suggest that defining cases of maltreatment as not serious enough is not accurate, and does not represent the psychological reality of the child. This view point is in accordance with Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley (1986), who argue that the psychological consequences of an act are what define the act as abusive. For these authors "once physical survival is assured, the subjective reality of child development is the primary concern" (p. 7).

Also, the results obtained in this study place child maltreatment in the context of parents socialization practices. From this perspective a dichotomy between normal and abusive parenting is avoided, favoring a continuum model of parenting behavior. According to Wolfe (1987), "at one end of the continuum are those practices considered to be most severe and abusive toward the child, and at the other extreme are methods that promote the child's social, emotional, and intellectual development" (p. 25). Data in this study showed that perceptions of parental treatment of the child were among the strongest discriminators between groups. Of particular interest are parents perceptions of parental rejection. Compared with the nonabusive parents, parents in all three groups of maltreatment consistently described themselves as more rejecting. As these perceptions were broadly similar to the children's perceptions, a social desirability factor does not seem to be in operation, which indicates the possibility that these parents may fail to recognize their own inappropriate child-rearing methods (Wolfe, 1991).

**Table 3. Variable Loadings on the Discriminant Function, Univariate Tests, and Means. Psychological Maltreatment and Non-Abuse Groups**

Variable	Correlation	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Non-Abuse	Abuse
Warmth/Affection (M)	.60	51.56	<.001	71.54	58.07
Integration in the Community	.54	41.37	<.001	31.05	25.69
Rejection (M)	-.47	32.23	<.001	74.49	101.07
Externalizing	-.43	26.40	<.001	16.54	33.53
Warmth/Affection (P)	.42	25.56	<.001	73.03	67.23
Rejection (P)	-.36	18.36	<.001	71.63	85.38
Internalizing	-.33	15.32	<.001	16.61	31.92
Warmth/Affection (F)	.32	14.50	<.001	69.86	59.36
Rejection (F)	-.32	14.41	<.001	73.08	94.00
Extra-Family Stress	-.31	13.71	<.001	4.65	8.46
Personal Growth (P)	.28	11.33	.001	26.59	22.92
Children's Personal Adjustment	-.27	10.67	.001	94.73	105.92
Number of Children	-.26	9.75	.002	2.79	3.80
Personal Growth (C)	.24	8.50	.004	26.20	22.53
Intra-Family Stress	-.24	8.29	.004	6.46	11.00
Psychological Symptoms	-.22	6.87	.009	151.64	190.07
Relationships (C)	.19	5.33	.022	15.01	13.46
Socioeconomic Status	.15	3.33	.069	3.59	2.50
Father's Age	.13	2.38	.124	40.71	38.63
System Maintenance (C)	.12	2.16	.142	11.30	11.23
Mother's Age	.11	1.71	.192	35.82	33.72
Relationships (P)	.07	.79	.374	15.72	14.84
System Maintenance (P)	.04	.22	.633	11.40	10.84
Community Association	.02	.10	.745	5.34	5.38

Note. (M) = Child rating mother, (F) = Child rating father, (C) = Childrens ratings, (P) = Parents ratings.

If, as Wolfe (1991) argues, the development of abusive child-rearing patterns follows a more or less predictable course from milder to more harmful interactions over time, in the absence of intervention or major compensatory factors, the need for prevention and intervention efforts before signs of abuse reach a serious stage becomes apparent.

With respect to the adequacy of the group of variables selected in differentiating the abuse and nonabuse groups, perceptions of parental behavior, children's behavioral problems and personal adjustment, parents integration and satisfaction in the community, and the importance and direction of personal growth emphasized in the family, were the most important variables for discriminating between all maltreatment groups and the nonabuse group. The importance of other variables such as socioeconomic status, stress, psychological symptoms or number of children appeared to be a function of the different types of child maltreatment. Globally, linear combinations of these variables demonstrated a good accuracy classifying correctly both the nonabuse cases and the abuse cases, although the accuracy was consistently higher for the nonabuse cases. The lower number of subjects in the abuse groups, the absence of relevant variables in the evaluation model, the difficulty of separating adequate from abusive parenting in some cases that are not clear cut, or the fact that cases of child maltreatment were selected based on teachers' perceptions, and the margin of error that this may involve (as they were not substantiated cases of maltreatment), are possible explanations for this lower accuracy. Nevertheless, the percentage of cases of maltreatment correctly classified is still high, and, in general, the results support an ecological model of child maltreatment as a meaningful and integrative approach that can contribute to our understanding of the complex and multidetermined nature of child maltreatment.

This study has shown that potential child maltreatment is visible even before it reaches more serious stages (and becoming, therefore, reportable abuse). In the abuse groups important deficits and needs have been identified for both children (poor personal and social adjustment), and parents (poor parenting practices, social isolation, high levels of stress, socioeconomic disadvantage, and poor psychological adjustment), which highlight the need for assistance in these families. It is probably when child maltreatment is in the "not serious enough" stage when early interventions, less punitive and less intrusive, are more likely to succeed, and where a more informal approach can be facilitated thus avoiding the stigmatizing effects of labelling (Gelles, 1975). It is also at this stage when the negative developmental consequences and the long term impact of child maltreatment could be reduced and better prevented.

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**Résumé**—Cette étude a enquêté sur les caractéristiques des cas de mauvais traitements considérés comme “pas suffisamment graves”. L'échantillon comprenait des enfants soupçonnés d'être victimes de maltraitance, soit 48 cas de sévices physiques, 13 cas de négligence et 8 cas de mauvais traitements psychologiques—tous signalés par des enseignants. Le groupe de comparaison comprenait 283 enfants non abusés. On a évalué les caractéristiques à trois niveaux : individuel, familial et social. Les résultats indiquent que les enfants dits maltraités éprouvent des troubles d'adaptation personnelle et sociale et que leur situation “plus ou moins grave” ne cadre pas avec un vécu psychologique difficile. L'analyse indique que les variables les plus importantes pour dégager les différences entre les enfants maltraités et ceux qui ne le sont pas sont les suivantes : la perception des parents et des enfants vis-à-vis le comportement des

parents, les troubles de comportement des enfants et leur adaptation individuelle, le niveau d'intégration des parents dans leur communauté et le degré de satisfaction qu'ils en retirent, puis enfin l'importance que la famille accorde au développement personnel et les efforts qu'elle y met pour l'atteindre. D'autres variables sont propres à certains types de mauvais traitements, soient le statut socio-économique, le stress, les symptômes psychologiques ou le nombre d'enfants affectés. L'article souligne l'importance de la prévention et de l'intervention avant que les mauvais traitements n'atteignent des proportions graves.

**Resumen**—Este estudio examinó las características psicosociales de casos de maltrato infantil denominados como "no suficientemente graves". la muestra consistió en casos de sospecha de maltrato físico ( $n = 48$ ), negligencia ( $n = 13$ ) y maltrato psicológico ( $n = 8$ ) identificados por maestros, y un grupo de comparación de niños/as no-maltratados ( $n = 283$ ). Se evaluaron las características de los niños/as y de sus padres en tres niveles ecológicos: individual, familiar, y social. Los resultados indicaron un pobre ajuste personal y social de los niños/as de los grupos de maltrato, y sugieren que la definición de esos casos de maltrato como no suficientemente graves no representa la realidad psicológica de esos niños/as. El análisis discriminante indicó que las variables más importantes para discriminar entre todos los grupos de maltrato y el grupo de no-maltrato fueron las percepciones de los padres y los niños/as sobre la conducta parental, los problemas de conducta y el ajuste personal de los niños/as, la integración y satisfacción de los padres en la comunidad, y la importancia y la dirección del énfasis de la familia sobre el crecimiento personal. La importancia de otras variables tales como el estatus socioeconómico, estrés, síntomas psicológicos o número de hijos, aparecía como una función de los diferentes tipos de maltrato infantil. Se comenta la importancia de los esfuerzos preventivos y de intervención antes de que el maltrato alcance un nivel de gravedad.