

# UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF PARENTS WHO MALTREAT THEIR CHILDREN: AN EDUCATIONAL DEFICIT THAT PERTAINS TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>

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Forty-one parents estimated when their own child and an "average" child would attain a number of different developmental milestones. These milestones and the accompanying normative data were derived from the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (Doll, 1965). Parents were divided into three groups on the basis of a prior history of child abuse, child neglect, or no previous background of abuse or neglect. Results indicate that both the abuse and neglect groups differed from the comparison group when absolute difference scores from the normative data were analyzed. When directionality of scores were analyzed (i.e., too high or too low expectations for the child), no differences were found among the groups. Implications of an educational deficit model of unrealistic parental expectations were discussed.

It is difficult to peruse the child abuse literature and not come into contact with the concept of "unrealistic parental expectations." This commonly used term refers to the process of parents' setting expectations for their child that are clearly beyond the child's capability. When the parents' expectations are particularly deviant (e.g., preschool children who are expected to be totally responsible for self-care or provision of nurturance to the parents) the resulting frustration caused by the child's non-compliance is believed to function as a contributory if not necessary cause of child abuse.

Steele and Pollock (1974) clearly state their belief that unrealistic parental expectations occur and that these expectations are set beyond the child's capabilities:

From direct observation of parents with children and the descriptions given by them of how they deal with their offspring, it is obvious that they expect and demand a great deal from their infants and children. Not only is the demand for performance great, but it is premature, clearly beyond the ability of the infant to comprehend what is wanted and to respond appropriately. Parents deal with the child as if he was much older than he really is [p. 95].

Not only do Steele and Pollock (1974) claim that parents set unrealistically high expectations for their children, but they have incorporated this perspective into a comprehensive explanatory model of child maltreatment. At the risk of some oversimplification, this model can be characterized as describing the following chain of events:

The abusing parent was denied nurturance as a child and consequently matured with unmet needs. Unsuccessful attempts to satisfy the need for nurturance continued throughout adolescence and adulthood with peers and the spouse. Subsequently, the abusing parent's child came to be viewed as the final hope for satisfaction of the parent's unmet needs. When the child fails to comply with the inappropriately high expectations, the parents become frustrated and eventually child maltreatment occurs. In addition to the high demands placed on the child, there is a disregard of the child's own needs and the lack of parental nurturance is, in turn, responsible for the occurrence of a completed generational cycle of child abuse.

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Despite the almost universal acceptance in the clinical literature that unrealistic expectations exist and act as a controlling variable of child maltreatment, this view has not been held up to the scrutiny of experimental investigation. In essence, the questions of prevalence, etiology, and function of inappropriate expectations remain open. Plotkin, Azar, Twentyman, and Perri (in press), for example, reviewed the literature that pertains to causative factors of child abuse and neglect and found it to be replete with explanatory models based predominantly on clinical impressions and anecdotal evidence rather than on methodologically rigorous experimentation.

A first step in the systematic empirical investigation of unrealistic expectations is a definitional clarification of the phenomenon. A recent study conducted in our laboratory (Twentyman & Plotkin, 1981) represented an initial approximation at the task of formulating an accurate characterization of unrealistic expectations. In this method, hundreds of examples of inappropriate expectations were collected from child protective caseworkers and public health nurses who related incidents that they had encountered in their practices. The results had several interesting implications. Most frequently, parents who abused and neglected their children committed errors in expecting too much of their children, but they also expected too little. These results are in contrast with the traditional characterization of unrealistic expectations and are incompatible with a strict dependency model as proposed by Steele and Pollock (1974). The finding that caseworkers reported a bi-directionality of errors (expecting both too much and too little) has stimulated interest in determining whether educational deficits that pertain to child development are characteristic of abusing and neglectful parents.

The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the directionality and magnitude of the error of expectation as measured by deviation from normative data on developmental milestones. Based on our prior research (Twentyman & Plotkin, 1981) it was a priori hypothesized that the errors committed by parents who have abused and neglected their children would be bi-directional and greater than those made by comparison Ss.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The sample included 41 parents from Monroe County, New York who were predominantly from an urban population. Two clinical groups, abuse and neglect, and a matched comparison group were employed. The parents from the clinical groups were recruited from the Mount Hope Family Center, a treatment facility for families referred by Child Protective Division of the Department of Social Services for evaluation and treatment. The differential classification assignment was based on referral information provided by the Department of Social Services and was corroborated by the staff at Mount Hope Family Center. The comparison Ss were recruited from two sources, local day care centers and the Mount Hope Family Center. The parents from the Family Center represented a group referred by the Department of Social Services for a family evaluation within the context of determining legal custody or family problems other than abuse and neglect. The inclusion of this group was an attempt to equate the clinical and comparison groups on level of familial disturbance and the context in which the test was administered. The three groups also were matched on socioeconomic indicators and a variety of familial characteristics. Descriptors that pertain to the demographic data are provided in Table 1. All Ss participated voluntarily, and informed consent was obtained.

### *Assessment Measure*

The Developmental Expectation Questionnaire was constructed to assess the extent and direction of the parents' inappropriate expectations of child development. The questionnaire consisted of descriptions of 20 developmental milestones that occur between infancy and adolescence on which to base their expectations

TABLE 1  
S DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Group	N's	Median age	Sex	Race	Median last grade completed	Marital status	Employment status	Median # of children	Median age of children
Abuse	14	27.5	female—12 male—2	Black—5 White—7 Hispanic—2	11.0	single—2 married/ living together—8 separated/divorced—4	employed—4 unemployed—9 unknown—1	3.0	8.0
Neglect	15	29.0	female—14 male—1	Black—6 White—9 Hispanic—0	11.0	single—2 married/ living together—7 separated/divorced—6	employed—3 unemployed—12	3.0	4.25
Control	12	27.0	female—11 male—1	Black—4 White—8 Hispanic—0	11.0	single—1 married/ living together—5 separated/divorced—6	employed—7 unemployed—5	2.0	5.75

(i.e., talks in short sentences, helps with household tasks, etc.). The items and normative scores for these behaviors were derived from the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (Doll, 1965).

### *Procedure*

Each *S* completed the Developmental Expectation Questionnaire during an individually administered session. *Ss* were instructed to estimate the age at which they would expect their child to be able to attain the stated developmental milestone and also the age at which an "average child" would be able to achieve this milestone. If the parent had more than one child, he or she was instructed to base the expectation on a composite description of all the children in the family. Assistance in reading the questionnaire was provided for any *Ss* who had difficulty.

### RESULTS

The following six computations were employed:

1. *Age estimate of their child minus the age derived from normative data.* This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. The degree to which the total was negative would represent the level of expecting their own child to perform beyond its capability. A total approximating zero would indicate expectations for their own children that were neither advanced nor delayed. The degree to which the total was positive would represent the level of expecting too little with respect to their own child's development.

2. *Age estimate of average child minus the age derived from normative data.* This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. The degree to which the total was negative would represent the level of parent's expecting too much for the average child. A total approximating zero would indicate that expectations were neither advanced nor delayed for the average child. The degree to which the total was positive represents the level of parental expectations for the average child to perform below his or her capability.

3. *Age estimate of their child minus the age estimate of the average child.* This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. The degree to which the total was negative represents parental expectations that their own child would be more advanced than the average child. A total approximately zero would indicate expectations that their own child would not be more advanced or delayed than the average child. The degree to which the total was positive would represent expectations that their own child would be delayed as compared to the average child.

4. *Age estimate of their child minus the age derived from normative data.* (Absolute difference scores). This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. As the total increases in magnitude it represents a greater total error deviation of parental estimates of their own child's development from the normative data of developmental milestones.

5. *Age estimate of the average child minus the age derived from normative data.* (Absolute difference scores). This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. As the total increases in magnitude it represents a greater total error deviation of their estimates of the average child's development from the normative data of developmental milestones.

6. *Age estimate of their child minus the age estimate of the average child.* (Absolute difference scores). This difference score was summed over the 20 estimations. As the total increases in magnitude it represents a greater perceived dissimilarity between their child and the average child.

A one-way analysis of variance was performed on each of the six computations (cf. Table 2). Significant *Fs* were obtained for measures 3, 4, and 5 ( $F = 3.75$ ,

$df = 2,38$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $F = 4.00$ ,  $df = 2,38$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and  $F = 6.86$ ,  $df = 2,38$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively). No a priori predictions were made pertaining to measure 3; therefore to determine the nature of the group differences, post hoc analyses (Duncan's Multiple Range Test) were applied. The results of these analyses indicated that the abuse group differed from the neglect and control groups in that they expected their own child to attain developmental milestones later than the average child. The neglect and control groups did not differ from each other on this measure.

The four a priori predictions that abuse and neglect groups would display a greater bi-directionality of error than the control group using both their child and the average child as a referent were analyzed by means of multiple  $t$ -tests. Significant differences for both the abuse and neglect groups were found in the predicted direction when compared to the comparison group on these measures. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and level of statistical significance of the specific comparisons for the six measures.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study substantiated the a priori hypotheses that parents who have abused or neglected their children are less knowledgeable about children's developmental processes than are matched controls. These data clearly support the view that informational deficits exist. Moreover, a model that stresses educational deficits is intuitively appealing given that parents who have been reported for abusing and neglecting their children are often young and have not been provided with adequate professional counseling during pregnancy and their children's early development.

Although the empirical evidence presented in this study merely describes an assessment procedure, it has far-reaching clinical and theoretical implications. If inappropriate expectations are partly due to an informational deficit that pertains to child development, a directive, educational treatment for abuse and neglect is indicated. The forum in which to disseminate information about appropriate expectations that are congruent with the normal developmental sequence could be explored from many perspectives. For example, in considering the prevention of child abuse, educational sequences about child development could be incorporated into school curriculum, family planning agency services and educational television programming. With respect to treatment, an educational perspective would emphasize the development of appropriate parenting skills and expectations.

The results of this study also have salient implications for the explanatory models of child abuse and neglect. The current findings are in one sense incompatible with the model espoused by Steele and Pollock (1974), which emphasizes unrealistically high expectations. The abusing and neglectful parents did not expect more from their children than the matched controls. Indeed, the abusing parents stated they expected less from their children than the average child. This latter finding is consistent with the evidence obtained by Hoffman, Twentyman, and Perri (1980) that indicates that abusive and neglectful parents perceive their child as being less socially mature when compared to the perceptions held by parents matched on socioeconomic status.

The results from this experiment are not incompatible with Steele and Pollock's (1974) model if one believes that the abusing parents may expect too much from their child only in specific situations and that the abusive incidents are directly related to these inappropriately high expectations. In fact, the majority of abusing and neglecting parents in this study held inappropriate expectations in both directions. The inappropriately high expectations, however, might result in active abuse, whereas inappropriately low expectations might be associated with a retardation of normal maturity in the child. In the latter case, one would not expect the inappropriate expectations to be reported to child protective agencies as frequently as the former case. Clearly, future research needs to be conducted to determine the relationships between the directionality of the expectations and child maltreatment.

TABLE 2  
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE LEVELS FOR PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

	Abuse		Neglect		Control		Abuse vs. Neglect	Abuse vs. Control	Neglect vs. Control
	$\bar{X}$ (years)	$SD$ (years)	$\bar{X}$ (years)	$SD$ (years)	$\bar{X}$ (years)	$SD$ (years)			
1. Age estimate of their child— Age derived from normative data	-2.8	24.4	-7.4	14.9	-10.5	14.0	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
2. Age estimate of average child— Age derived from normative data	-2.2	23.1	-3.7	21.4	-6.9	12.4	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
3. Age estimate of their own child— Age estimate of the average child	4.25	9.19	-1.93	7.93	-3.06	3.75	$p < .05^*$	$p < .05^*$	<i>ns</i>
4. Age estimate of their child— Age derived from normative data Absolute Difference Scores	37.92	12.94	38.28	7.12	28.75	7.66	<i>ns</i>	$t(24) = 2.150$ $p < .042$	$t(25) = 3.340$ $p < .003$
5. Age estimate of the average child— Age derived from normative data Absolute Difference Scores	38.26	11.30	39.54	7.99	27.39	7.40	<i>ns</i>	$t(24) = 2.845$ $p < .009$	$t(25) = 4.052$ $p < .0004$
6. Age estimate of their own child— Age estimate of the average child Absolute Difference Scores	11.53	12.93	9.35	4.96	5.71	2.75	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

\*Duncan's Multiple Range Test.

Although a viewpoint that emphasizes educational deficits is forwarded, a rival hypothesis also could account for the present findings. That is, one can posit that the parents referred for abuse and neglect merely responded more randomly, which would account for the greater bi-directionality of error. This response style is unlikely, however, for several reasons. One of the most important of which is that many of the parents in this sample completed this questionnaire within the context of a psychological evaluation. These parents were self-motivated to "do well" on the tests because the results would have an impact on court decisions that, at the time, were in litigation. Moreover, the educational levels of the groups were equated so that educational factors could not be invoked as causing the differences.

It is probable that the phenomenon of unrealistic expectations is not a unitary construct. That is, statements about unrealistic parental expectations are likely to refer to a cluster of controlling variables (e.g., educational deficit, immaturity and self-centeredness, and psychopathological projection onto the child). The present study identified a single component of this complex phenomenon. Research directed at other components currently is being investigated in this laboratory. Preliminary results (Twentyman & Plotkin, 1981) indicate that projection and inappropriate beliefs about what constitutes effective child discipline are also factors in what are considered to be unrealistic expectations by child protective caseworkers on the part of their clients.

Greater attention should be directed toward assessing the differences between the subgroups of parents who have been referred for maltreatment. Presently, a major obstacle in determining whether differences exist between abuse and neglect groups lies in the fact that there is a lack of objective criteria for establishing a differential classification. In this study, comparisons between the abusing and neglectful parents were only significant on one of the six measures. The abuse group differed from the neglect and control groups in that they expected *less* for their own child as compared to the average child. This difference is somewhat surprising and warrants replication given that current theoretical models suggest that abusive parents typically expect more from their children. Before *Es* reasonably can expect to find whether differences between subgroups of abusive and neglectful parents exist, an empirically determined, reliable and valid schema for classification must be created.

In summary, the present study demonstrated that parents who have abused or neglected their children do not hold expectations for their children beyond the normative standards of child development. However, these parents did produce greater absolute errors when they stated their expectations for their own child and the average child's development. This bi-directionality of error was construed as evidence of an educational deficit that has the potential to interact with parental psychopathology and other risk factors.

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