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# Communicative Implications for Female Adolescent Delinquents Who Experienced Maltreatment

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Lauren Schaefer and Don Belau

This study explores findings of interviews from 26 adolescent female participants residing in a correctional facility and ranging in age from 15 to 18 years ( $M = 17.12$ ). All had experienced maltreatment and difficulty learning in school. The purpose was to examine participants' use of emotional language through modeling communicative strategies and requesting responses from two open-ended questions about their positive and negative experiences in life. Participants expressed positive and negative emotional words modeled by researchers. Preliminary findings suggested educational and communicative relevance as leaders plan programs for girls. Implications suggested that caution be used to determine whether the maltreated students suffered from alexithymia. Suggestions were offered for educators in leadership positions serving as members on multidisciplinary teams.

As educators listen to conversational interactions from children and adolescents who have experienced maltreatment, it appears as though their use of language and communication skills is similar to nonmaltreated children. However, research suggests that some, but not all, maltreated individuals have experienced many haunting and troubling events that can have deleterious consequences, impacting their interactions with family, friends and authority figures. Some children are at-risk for cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional problems. As Cicchetti (2004) pointed out, when individuals think of maltreated children, it is possible they imagine children manifesting characteristics such as bruises, burns, and malnutrition rather than the deleterious effects it may have on their socioemotional development. However, complex research that extends far beyond the expertise of educators in schools suggests that the likelihood of maladaptation and psychopathology increases in children who have been maltreated (Cicchetti, 2004). Thus, children who have experienced maltreatment will require services from a number of team members. In some instances, women in educational leadership positions will be best suited to provide a very important role in planning programs for these children.

## About the Authors

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There are still unanswered questions important to consider for planning intervention programs. For example, research has not sufficiently clarified whether adolescents who have experienced maltreatment and trauma are able to express their thoughts and feelings through emotional language. It is still unclear whether some maltreated students suffer from alexithymia—a condition that results in difficulty with describing or being aware of one's emotions or moods (Mellor & Dagnan, 2005). According to Mellor and Dagnan, the three core elements of alexithymia include difficulty with identifying and describing emotions, and an externally oriented thinking style and limited fantasy life. Reportedly, this thinking style refers to a preoccupation with minute details of external events, rather than by feelings, fantasies and other aspects of inner experience (Taylor & Bagby, 2000). This paper will provide preliminary information from participants' use of emotional language through the modeling of communicative strategies. Participants' responses to questions about their own positive and negative experiences in life from interviews will provide educational leaders with clues to plan programs for girls who have struggled in social and educational settings.

Prevalence figures for children and teenagers who have experienced maltreatment throughout their lives are a particular concern for specialists planning treatment programs in educational settings. In 2001, figures suggested 12.4 out of every 1,000 children up to age 17 in the United States were found to be victims of maltreatment (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, 2001). From reviewing an electronic merger of school records with Central Registry, Foster Care Review Board, and police data-

bases, Sullivan and Knutson (2000), reported a 9% prevalence rate of maltreatment for nondisabled children and a 31% rate for children with disabilities. The high incidence figures suggest school professionals, may encounter children and adolescents who not only have communication disorders, but who have also been maltreated.

The effect of maltreatment on communication can have serious social and academic consequences for children and adolescents. Researchers have found maltreated children show less academic engagement and more social skills deficits than nonmaltreated comparison children (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Those who have experienced maltreatment may have delays in their receptive and expressive language skills, and delays in vocabulary, syntactic development, and pragmatic skills. Their conversational discourse skills may contain fewer and shorter utterances (Coster & Cicchetti, 1993; Coster, Gersten, Beeghly, & Cicchetti, 1989).

Effects of maltreatment on communication were revealed in a qualitative study designed to explore how delinquents described their communication behaviors. Interviews were conducted with 20 maltreated female juvenile delinquents (Sanger, Scheffler, Drake, Hilgert, Creswell, & Hansen, 2000). Participants were asked four questions about their communication behaviors with friends, parents, and authority figures including, "How does maltreatment relate to your communication skills?" Participants responded with the following types of comments:

- "You feel like nothing, and when you feel that way it affects how you communicate."
- "Someone is quieter no matter where they are at or who they are with."
- "They could be either real shy or timid, or they could be just the opposite and angry."
- "Abuse affects our communication and how we act."

One participant remarked, "I think that people who have been abused sometimes don't know how to communicate. Sometimes they don't have every emotion that people should have. If they've been abused, most people are filled with anger and they don't know how to communicate anything but anger. So I think it plays a big part with communication roles." These types of comments from qualitative research add to the existing research supporting the connection between maltreatment and communication.

Clearly, more research is needed as educators in leadership positions plan programs for this population. Additional studies that involve children and adolescents in schools and the impact on educational practices will benefit students who have experienced maltreatment. However, research with this population must be carefully planned because vulnerable subjects, similar to those in this study, require methodologies that may be challenging to implement. Nevertheless, the impact of living with maltreatment suggests communicative and educational strategies are needed to help professionals plan programs for this struggling population of students. The

purpose of this study was to examine participants' use of emotional language through modeling communicative strategies and requesting responses from two open-ended questions about participants' positive and negative emotional words modeled by researchers.

## **The Current Study: Modeling Communicative Strategies with Adolescents Who Experienced Maltreatment**

In the current study, qualitative findings from modeling communicative strategies of 26 female participants who experienced maltreatment were analyzed. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 18 years ( $M = 17.12$ ), and were in grades 9 through 12. Twelve had been retained for one grade, and seven had histories of special education prior to their commitments. Demographic findings indicated 26 (83.87%) participants experienced a past history of emotional mistreatment, physical abuse, physical neglect and/or sexual abuse.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of modeling communicative strategies containing the use of emotional language and then requesting participants' responses to two open-ended questions about their positive and negative experiences in life. The girls were first asked to describe an experience in their life that they remembered as positive and were glad it had happened. During the interviews that followed the strategies, the participants were encouraged to talk about their feelings by using emotional words such as excited, thankful, happy, good, and nice. After describing a positive experience, the participants were asked to describe a negative or stressful experience. They were encouraged to use emotional words such as depressed, scared, confused, hurt, or sad in their response to the question. Although participants were told a response to the second question was optional, all 26 participants responded to both questions.

In response to the first question, comments commonly included positive remarks such as, "Um, the time I seen my grandma again and I felt happy because I was kind of lost when I didn't have her." Several participants expressed they were happy when their moms continued to pursue their educational goals. Still another stated, "I was happy when I got to the eighth grade and I got um my algebra teacher and he would just always help me with my work and I was really thankful that like he was there for me to talk to him and everything." One participant remarked she was really happy when her niece was born and she cried a lot. Overall, responses of respondents reflected their happy feelings about family and other authority figures.

Alternatively, in reply to the second question, participants often remarked about the negative experiences that had occurred during their child-

hood years and how these affected their relationships with authority figures, parents, relatives, and/or their peers. One participant indicated, "When I was shot three times and when my girlfriend cheated on me. Those really hurt like real bad." Another girl responded, "When I was four years old, I was getting abused by my step dad. My mom didn't really care. I would say she was confused, but she cared about him a lot. She started abusing us too. I was scared, hurt, confused. And I started doing negative things." Several others revealed that when they were sexually assaulted they felt hurt, sad, and depressed. They went on to report that during the time of the events, they really didn't know what was happening to them or what was going on.

Comments to the question about a negative or stressful experience occurring during childhood revealed the 26 participants tended to talk about maltreatment, drugs, violence, and death. As these four themes emerged and the interview and questionnaire information were analyzed, it became apparent many of the participants had less than positive experiences learning in school.

Though the participants tended to use emotional words in their responses to the communicative strategies, it was not clear whether their answers would have contained these words if they had not been provided the detailed prompts in responding to the two open-ended questions. Findings of researchers who have reviewed the major construct of alexithymia [defined as difficulty identifying, understanding, and expressing feelings] addressing the prevalence, characteristics, and measurement of this cognitive-affective communication impairment (Way, Yelsma, Van Meter, & Black-Pond, 2007), support the cautious interpretation of participants' responses. However, findings suggest that the communicative strategies involving the modeling of positive and negative words may provide clues of social and educational relevance as leaders plan programs for girls who have spent endless hours struggling from the consequence of experiencing maltreatment.

Methodological limitations concerning the number of participants and the procedures prevent firm conclusions, hence suggesting findings be considered as preliminary. In future practices, educators might find that the use or omission of words expressing emotions could lead to clues about individuals' attitudes, motivations, and awareness of their feelings during communication. Findings tend to support the need to address using emotional vocabulary to describe ones' feelings. Additionally, other communication needs such as the development of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills may need to be addressed in planning programs and serving these individuals. Moreover, students who have experienced maltreatment may benefit from intervention models involving: (a) goals and objectives that are mutually planned, (b) activities that focus on what the student perceives as interesting, (c) the use of learning strategies that include how to listen, how to take notes, and how to study, and (d) the need for appropriate professionals to provide counseling.

## Revisiting the Implications of Maltreatment on Communication and Learning in School

This paper provides insight into the social, linguistic, emotional, and academic difficulties that maltreated adolescents might have experienced during their childhood. Although the sample and number of participants ( $n = 26$ ) were limited, the findings are of importance for leaders in school settings. Given that all of the participants were females, the results are particularly relevant for women in educational leadership positions. The role of mentorship and intervention is fundamental to this population of youth who have experienced maltreatment. Findings about participants' positive and negative experiences in life are not intended to overshadow the language and learning problems these individuals' face. As previously stated, there is a 31% prevalence rate of maltreatment for disabled children, suggesting that educators are likely serving several children and adolescents who may have experienced maltreatment. This paper heightens awareness about the types of communication issues that these children and adolescents may be experiencing and how educators and those serving on multidisciplinary teams can assist individuals. The results suggest that adolescents' conversational interactions may provide clues about the presence or absence of emotional language as they convey their thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

Limitations in the qualitative methods of use of the communicative strategies and asking the two open-ended questions prevent firm conclusions concerning alexithymia. However, in a related study, many of the participants responded to survey items addressing their school failure and communication difficulties. The 26 participants experiencing maltreatment responded to three questionnaires including 15 items about their former teachers' language as well as the language found in classroom instruction (Sanger, Deschene, Stokely, & Belau, 2007). The fact that 50% or more reported difficulty with their former teachers' length and complexity of instructions and lectures, as well as teachers' organization of ideas is concerning. Also, their comments to items about the trouble they experienced in listening to their teachers is of interest. The participants indicated that the level of classroom instruction, usefulness of material presented in classes, and clarity of how information was presented in classes and in their textbooks was appropriate just "once in a while" or "not really." In general, these self-reports of information are not necessarily new findings, as they parallel what other researchers have reported and discussed for more than ten years (Bunce, 1993; Ehren & Lanz, 1989; Foley, 2001). However, to have also experienced maltreatment and be in trouble with the law, adds several other layers of challenges girls confront as they transition through the social, linguistic, emotional, and academic demands during their time in school. Findings tend to have important implications particularly for women in educational leadership positions.

## Potential Suggestions for Educators to Consider

Research involving children and adolescents who have experienced maltreatment is undoubtedly very complex and involves the expertise of a number of team members. However, communicative and educational strategies need to be explored to learn how to best serve the needs of this population. Educational leaders' sensitivity to the needs of this vulnerable population may increase the likelihood they will plan services in communication domains of listening, speaking, reading, writing, or thinking that can result in positive school outcomes. Though some of the studies cited in this paper did not involve large samples, the messages of those who have experienced maltreatment are worthy of consideration. Their remarks substantiated how family and authority made them feel happy, yet they also expressed troubling events as they responded to their negative experiences in life. Some said they did not know how to communicate, others reported school failure and all were in trouble with the law. For a population of girls so young and with so many challenges, those in need of our services may benefit from the following types of suggestions:

- Educators should consider whether maltreated students are preoccupied with monitoring the affective messages and nonverbal cues from adults in an effort to detect the adequacy of their performance. Educators need to determine if this preoccupation is interfering with overall comprehension of requests and expectations (Aber & Allen, 1987).
- Determine the need to address verbal problem-solving and expression of ideas, needs, and feelings in order that the student could interact in the classroom and other settings. A review of literature illustrates it is important that children and adolescents who have experienced maltreatment be engaged in school and have positive interpersonal interactions with teachers and peers (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Positive social and academic outcomes in school could be beneficial to these children.
- Determine if there is a need to improve the extraction of key ideas from lengthy narratives.
- Determine the need to use abstract language as well as narratives for literacy skills.
- Consider the need to address and/or improve literacy skills.
- Assess the use of coherent dialogue to improve conversational interactions with peers and adults.

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