

# Changing Public Perceptions of Child Abuse and Neglect in Singapore

By: Jacky Tan, John M. Elliott & Cuthbert Teo, Singapore Children's Society

## Summary

### *Aims*

- This study is a replication of our earlier study (Monograph 1 & 2) on public (1994) and professional (1997) perceptions of child abuse and neglect in Singapore, with the aims to:
  1. Compare changes over the years in the public's perceptions of child abuse and neglect (CAN) in Singapore, attitudes on reporting CAN, and judgment of its seriousness.
  2. Compare current public and professional attitudes towards CAN in Singapore.

### *Methodology*

- Data from this current study was compared with data from Monograph 1 (a study on public perceptions of child abuse and neglect in Singapore conducted in 1994).

### *Sample*

- Current Study
  - 500 members of public living in public and private housing in Singapore (48.6 males, 51.4% female).
  - 1155 professionals who are likely to encounter abused and/or neglected children (33.8% males, 60.5% female, 5.7% unspecified).
- Monograph 1
  - 401 members of public living in public housing in Singapore (42.6% males, 57.4% female).

### *Procedure and Materials*

- Members of public were randomly sampled from four stratified housing types (e.g., HDB 1-3 room flat, HDB 4 room flat, HDB 5 room flat and other flats of greater size and landed property).
- Professionals were recruited through advertisement or referred by their colleagues.
- Members of public and professional were surveyed using the same questionnaire as in the earlier study.
  1. **Perceptions of child abuse and neglect** – To gather their views on the extent to which 18 behaviours from the four major categories of child maltreatment constituted abuse and neglect. The four categories were:
    - Physical abuse (e.g., burning a child and caning a child)
    - Emotional maltreatment (e.g., locking a child out of the house and always criticising a child)
    - Neglect (e.g., ignoring signs of illness in a child and leaving a child alone in the house)
    - Sexual abuse (e.g., having sex with a child and adults appearing naked in front of a child)

2. **Attitudes towards reporting** - To examine general attitudes to reporting child abuse and neglect. Members of public and professional were asked the following:
  - Whether or not child abuse and neglect should be reported
  - What types of child abuse and neglect should be reported
  - To whom should child abuse and neglect be reported
  - Whether or not they supported mandatory reporting
  - Who ought to be mandated to report child abuse and neglect
3. **Seriousness of incident** – To determine the seriousness of 21 actions taken by adults in which children experience maltreatment, harm or hardship.

## *Findings*

### **Perceptions of child abuse and neglect**

#### Changes in public perceptions of child abuse and neglect

- Compared to the 1994 study on public perceptions of child abuse and neglect, there was an increased acknowledgement among the public now that most behaviours in each of the four categories are potentially abusive.
- However, the public showed more hesitation to explicitly label behaviours with less visible harm (e.g., caning a child, always criticising a child, leaving a child alone in the house and adults appearing naked in front of a child) as child abuse and neglect.
- The public continued to agree strongly that behaviours with more obvious harm, such as having sex with a child and burning a child, constituted abuse.

#### Comparison of public and professional perceptions of child abuse and neglect surveyed in the current study

- The public, compared to professionals, were generally less likely to perceive behaviours suggestive of physical abuse, emotional maltreatment and neglect as abusive.
- For behaviours suggestive of sexual abuse, the public were more likely than professionals to perceive adults appearing naked in front of a child as abusive. On the other hand, they were less likely to perceive failure to protect a child from sexual abuse as a form of abuse.
- Similar to the public, professionals tend to perceive behaviours with more obvious harm as abusive. They also showed the same trend of acknowledging that behaviours with less visible harm can be abusive, but stopped short of labeling them as child abuse.

## **Attitudes towards reporting**

### Changes in public attitudes on reporting child abuse and neglect

- Compared to the earlier study on public perceptions of child abuse and neglect, the public continued to be supportive of reporting child abuse and neglect.
- They also felt more strongly than before that emotional maltreatment and neglect should be reported. But this was lower in comparison to their views on reporting physical and sexual abuse in which there were near total agreement on reporting them.
- The public still think that child abuse and neglect should be reported to the Police and Ministry of Social and Family Development. More respondents than before reported that they would also notify Singapore Children's Society.
- The public were more supportive than before to the idea of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect for certain individuals. They felt that it should be compulsory for family and relatives, and for professionals who have regular contacts with children and the expertise to detect abuse.

### Reasons for and against supporting mandatory reporting

- Reasons stated for supporting mandatory reporting:
  1. It will increase the efficacy of child protection
  2. It is one's duty to protect children from harm
  3. Seriousness of child abuse and neglect
- Reasons stated for not supporting mandatory reporting:
  1. Difficulty of identifying child abuse and neglect
  2. Respect for one's right to choose between reporting and non-reporting
  3. Limitation of legislation
  4. Safety of the person reporting

## **Seriousness of incident**

- Comparison of public and professional ratings of the seriousness of incidents surveyed in the current study
  - The public and professionals appeared to have similar perceptions of the seriousness of actions that cause children to experience maltreatment, harm or hardship.
  - They rated most incidents as being serious with the most serious ratings given to incidents that could be regarded as sexual abuse, followed by physical abuse, neglect and emotional maltreatment.
  - The context appeared to have little influence on public and professional ratings for incidents involving sexual abuse. In contrast, context mattered more when judging the seriousness of physical abuse, emotional maltreatment and neglect.

## Conclusions

1. For both the public and professionals, perceptions of child abuse and neglect may depend on the **visibility of harm** that behaviour may have on the child.
2. The public appeared to have difficulty in telling whether behaviours suggestive of **neglect and emotional maltreatment** constitute child abuse and neglect.
3. For both public and professionals, judgment of the seriousness of an incident may depend on the **ease of establishing harm and intention** from just the behaviour alone.
4. The public held **more favourable attitudes** towards reporting child abuse and neglect than before.
5. More needs to be done to clarify what abusive and neglect behaviours actually comprise, and this is especially necessary for **neglectful and emotionally maltreating behaviors**.
  - A possible way to address this issue in public education would be to focus on the long-term detrimental consequences of neglect and emotional maltreatment on children.

Note: This research study was published as **Research Monograph No.10** in 2015.

The full report is available at:

**Singapore Children's Society**

Tel:(65) 6273 2010

Fax:(65) 6273 2013

Email: [info@childrensociety.org.sg](mailto:info@childrensociety.org.sg)

And also online at:

[Insert hyperlink]