

From Physical Abuse Victim to Aggressor: Deconstructing the Relationship

Stephen Ellenbogen

Centre for Research on Children and Families

School of Social Work, McGill University

Montreal, Canada

&

The Maltreatment and Adolescent

Pathways Research team

Toronto, Ontario

Explanations for the cycle of violence

- Biological- shared genes
- Epigenetics- abuse affects biology of child
- Incurred developmental deficits- lack of empathy
- Social learning-acquiring pro-aggressive cognitions
- Rage induced from shame about abuse
- Social transactional model- poor/inconsistent parenting

Research questions

Among youth in care, are the most aggressive adolescent more likely to (1) have suffered harsher physical abuse, (2) generate violence outcome expectancies that favour recourse to aggression, and (3) report higher levels of abuse-related shame? Respectively, the second and third hypotheses were based on social information processing (social learning) and shame-rage models of aggression.

Study Participants

- 398 Canadian 14-17 year olds involved in child protection services (via the MAP research study)
- Males (N = 145); Females (N = 161)
- Information on the aggressiveness of 176 youth was available (123 not aggressive; 28 aggressive) when study 1 was completed. The number of available subjects was 202 (165 not aggressive; 37 aggressive) for the latter two studies
- Most experienced serious maltreatment and are marked by precarious and insecure household situations

The Aggression measures

- Yes-no measure was created for first and second studies, based on three questions about fighting (OSDUS, 2007)
- A composite score (range 0-19) was calculated for the third study; it included questions about weapon carrying and bullying.

The Maltreatment measure

- **Physical abuse-** (Childhood Experiences of Violence Questionnaire; Walsh, MacMillan, Trocmé, Dudziuk, & Boyle, 2000). Physical abuse questions concern frequency, chronicity, and other details about five categories of physically abusive behaviours. Categories range from spanking and slapping to choking and burning. Dimensions were devised by present author.
- **Other maltreatment-** (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire; Bernstein & Fink, 1998). This is a standardized measure with subscales of emotional and sexual abuse, and neglect.

Study 1

Relationship between
physical abuse
characteristics and
aggression problems

Recently, researchers have examined whether aspects of maltreatment (e.g., subtype, severity, frequency, and chronicity) are associated with later problems like aggression. Experiencing harsh maltreatment was found to be associated with a higher risk for aggression problems, particularly in relation to severity and chronicity.

- In these studies, maltreatment dimensions were often quantified through an analysis of administrative records; there is tendency to under-report abuse compared to self-report measures.
- The current investigation examined the maltreatment-aggression relationship within a high-risk sample and using a self-report measure: the Childhood Experiences of Violence Questionnaire (CEVQ).
- Because the abuse was assessed by a different reporter and uses a different instrument, a fresh perspective on the matter is gained.

Research Question

Controlling for effect of other types of abuse and possible confounding factors, to what extent is aggression associated with dimensions of physical abuse (e.g., severity, frequency, chronicity, age of onset, and perpetrator)?

It is hypothesized that harsher maltreatment will be predictive of aggression in multivariate analyses, after controlling for confounding variables

Main dimensions of maltreatment

- Severity- high = kicking, biting, punching, choking, burning, and physically attacking; low = slapping, grabbing, and shoving
- Frequency- number of incidents (0-3)
- Chronicity-number of life periods involving abuse (0-3)
- Overall level of physical abuse- composite score derived from frequency and scope of physically abusive acts.

Aggression

- Youth with at least two fights in last year, or one gang fight were classified as aggressive

Results

- Only exposure to frequent and severe abuse was clearly related to aggression.
- Youth who reported exposure to frequent and severe abuse were more than twice as likely to be aggressive (38% vs. 15%) compared to other maltreatment victims.
- Chronic abuse, age of onset, type of perpetrator, and other characteristics were not predictive of aggression

Logistic regression predicting aggression

	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Physical neglect	.065	3.81	.051	1.14
Emotional abuse	.061	5.51	.019	.87
Gender(referent= female)	.471	4.69	.030	2.77
Severe Physical Abuse	.138	8.79	.003	1.51
Constant	.468	25.56	.000	.09

Conclusion

- Victims of physical abuse that is both frequent and severe face the highest risk for aggression problems. These acts tend to be ‘up close and personal’, demonstrate intentionality and require that the aggressor have physical mastery over the victim, akin to torture.
- From evolutionary-adaptational perspective, youth who endure this kind of violence in the home are likely to form a particularly hostile worldview; developing aggressive scripts (and the capacity to use them) would seem more urgent and necessary to survival.

Study 2

What maltreated adolescents think will happen if they behave aggressively towards a loved one: Comparing violence outcome expectancies by aggressiveness and maltreatment categories.

Aggression problems are thought to be mediated by cognitive biases and deficits, such as:

1. An overestimation that aggressive actions lead to favourable outcomes
2. An underestimation or ignorance of negative repercussions

Past research has investigated whether aggressive youth and males hold fewer negative violence outcomes expectancies, such as:

- parental disapproval
- peer disapproval
- victim will suffer
- Victim will feel bad about it

...and more positive violence
outcomes expectancies, such as:

- tangible reward (e.g., get the ball back)
- peer approval
- tacit adult approval
- less aversive treatment in future
- will feel good about it

However, there is limited research on:

1. Spontaneously elicited expectancies, or first impressions of the outcomes of aggression
2. Expectations about violence that take place within intimate relations
3. The expectancies of adolescents

The Measure

Question: What do you think would happen if you (1-yelled at) (2- slapped, pushed, pinned down, or hit) each of the following people (A-best friend, B-girlfriend/boyfriend, and C-adult caregiver)? For each person, list the three or four most important things that would happen to you.

Answer for scenario 2A- Hit Best friend:

	Would you like this?	
	yes	no
<u>Hit me back</u>	✓	
<u>Not talk to me</u>	✓	
<u>Cry</u>		✓
<u>Tell other people about me</u>		✓

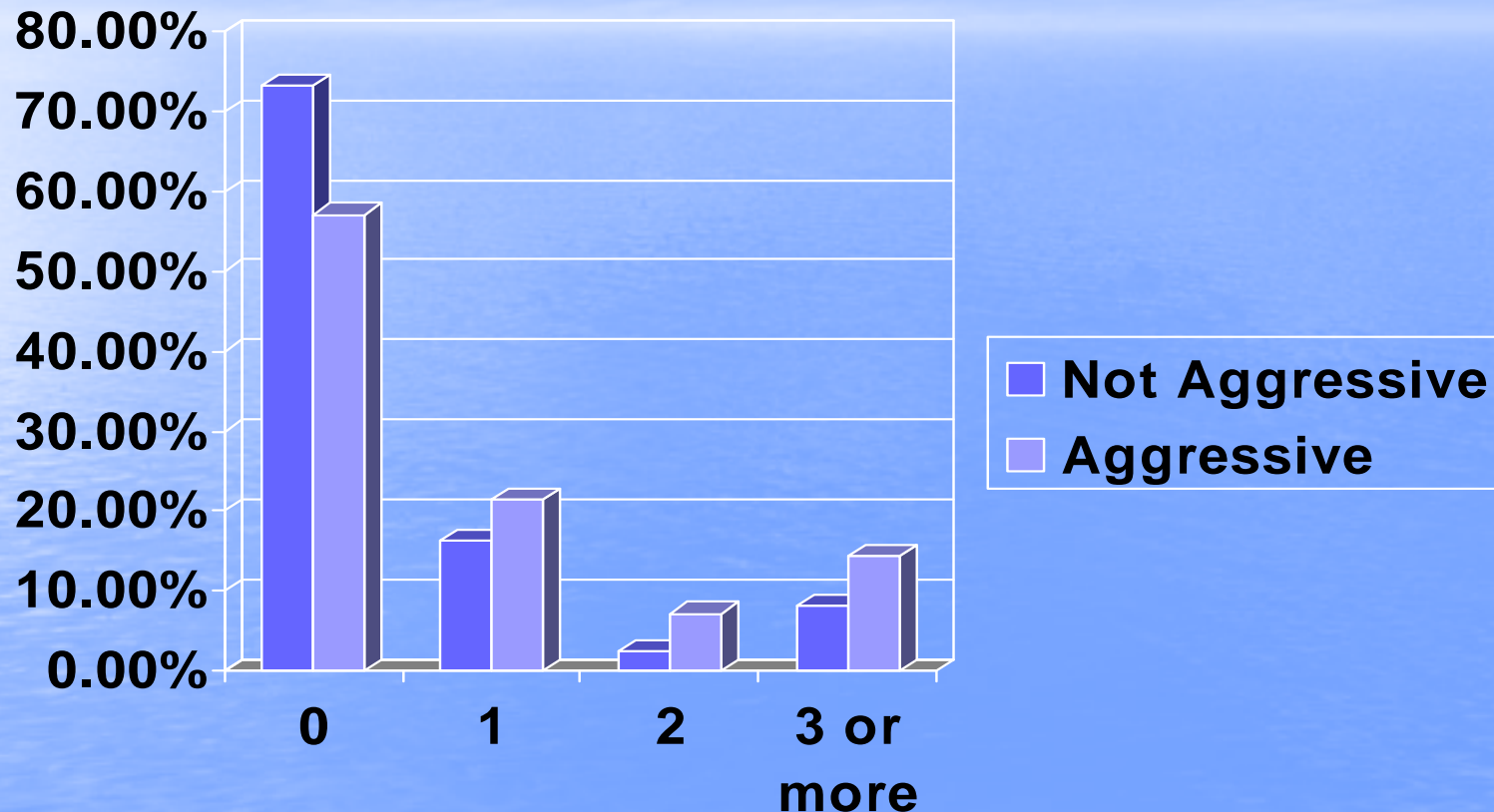
Results

	Mean number of responses per scenario Min=1 / Max=4	Mean number of scenarios completed
Aggressive	2.7	4.8 of 6
Not Aggressive	2.9	5.1 of 6

Expectancies of aggressive youth

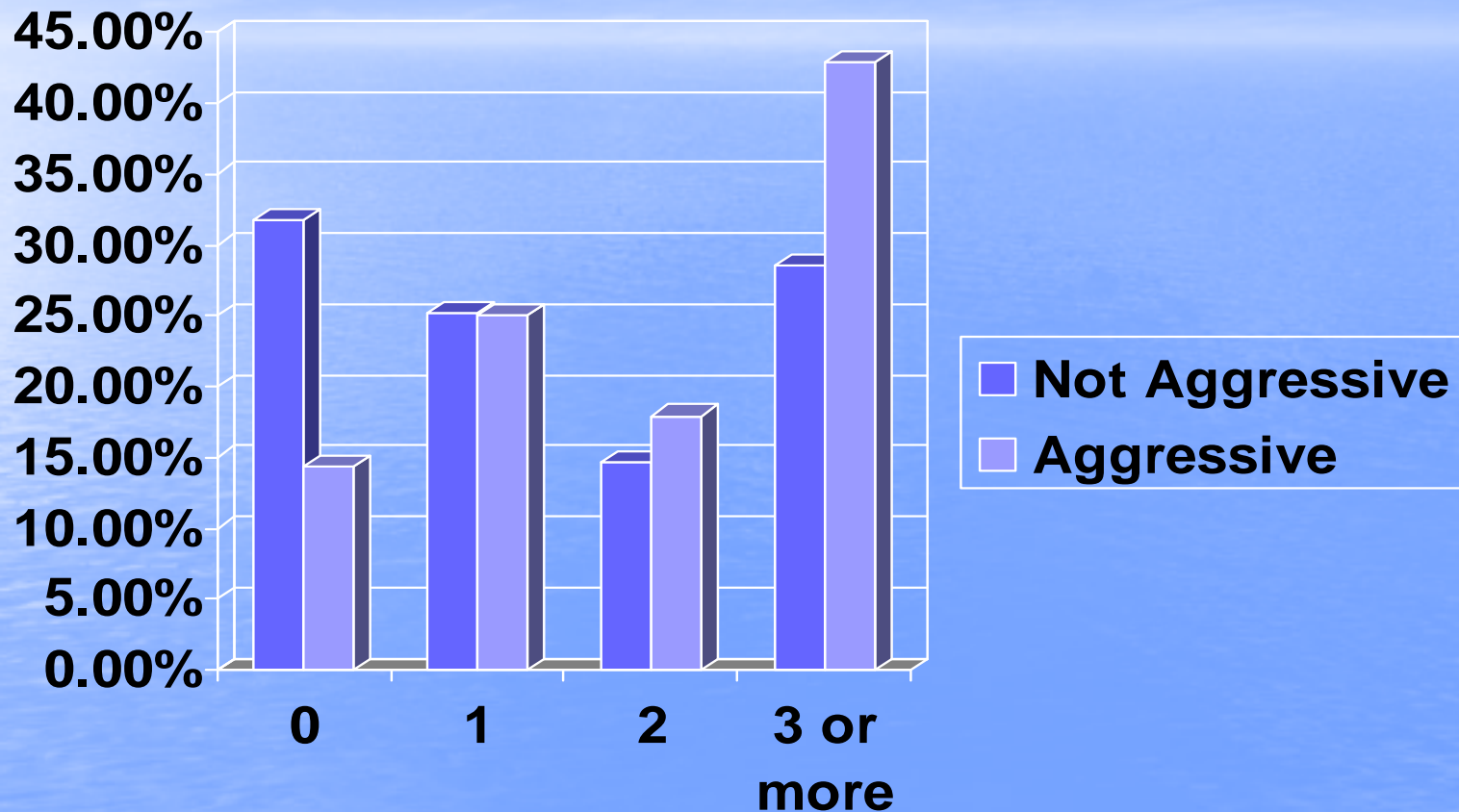
- Aggressive youth were more likely to expect the aggressive event will be minimized (e.g. we will laugh about it, nothing will happen) and that the victim will retaliate
- Aggression youth were less likely to expect appeasement
- No differences were found for other categories: victim will feel bad, victim will try to stop it, victim anger, social consequences, negative relationship effects, and other retaliation

Percent of youth expecting minimizing outcomes



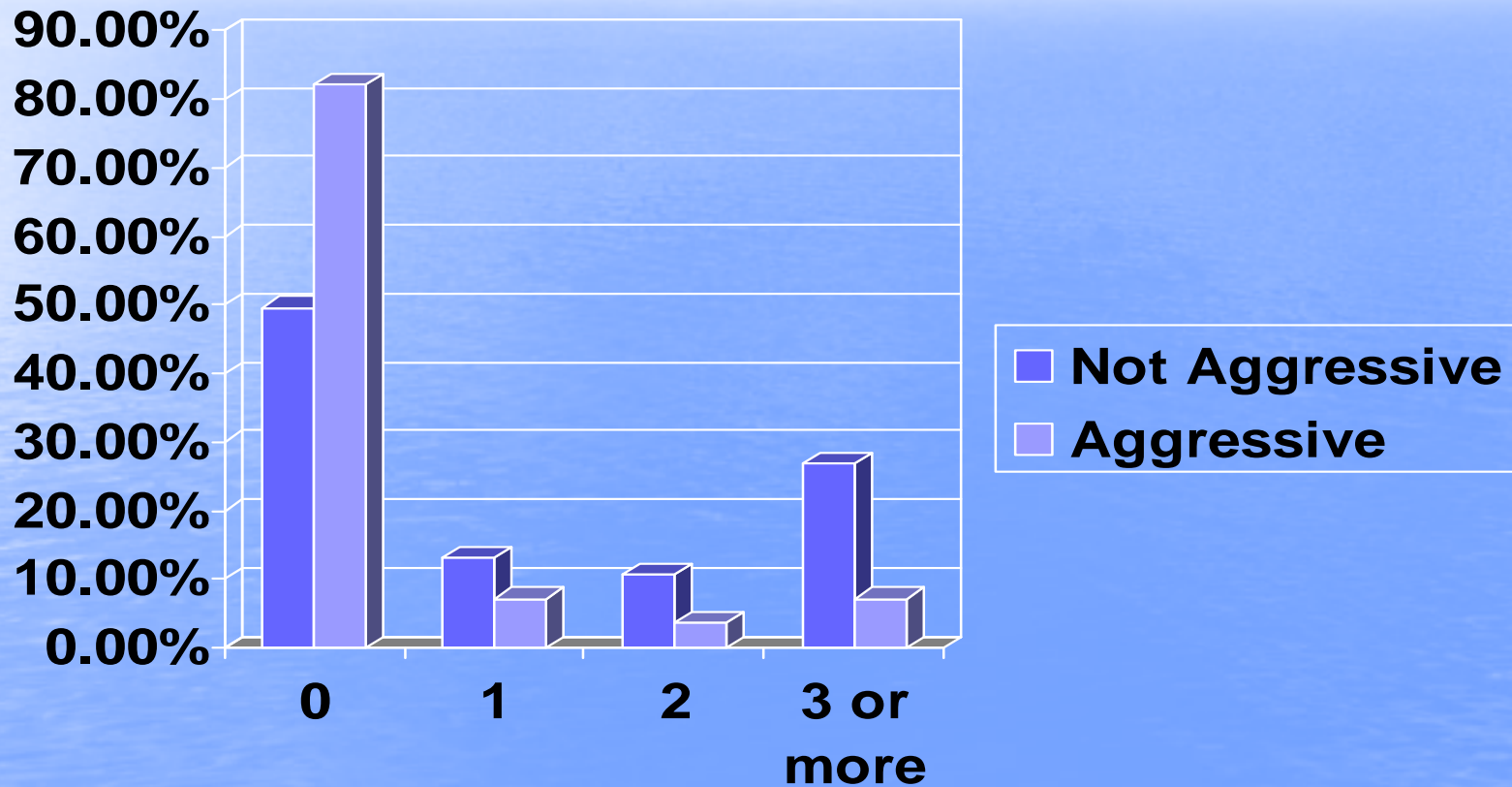
Number of minimizing references

Percent of youth expecting physical retaliation



Number of references to retaliation

Percent of youth expecting conciliation or appeasement



Number of references to conciliation/appeasement

Positive violence outcome expectancies

Category of expectancy	Aggressive		<i>p</i>
	No N=161	Yes N=26	
Pro-aggressive	23.7%	15.4%	n.s.
(4) Victim leaves, damaged relations	26.3%	30.8%	n.s.
Minimize (either 5 or 6)	15.3%	23.1%	n.s.
(8) Appeasement or reconciliation	44.9%	15.4%	.005

Positive outcome expectancies-summary

- Contrary to hypothesis, non-aggressive youth elicited more positive outcome expectancies than aggressive youth
- This is because many positive expectancies pertained to conciliation and appeasement (e.g. talk it out), and such expectancies were associated with non-aggressiveness
- A similar proportion of aggressive and non-aggressive youth elicited anti-social positive outcome expectancies

Violence outcome expectancies and abuse severity

- It was thought that victims of severe physical and emotional abuse might hold unique outcome expectancies as a result of their traumatic experiences
- No evidence of this was found

Expectancies of Aggressive Youth

Aggressive youth seem to hold a hostile view of their social world. Their expectations with regard to reactions to aggressive behaviour are that:

1. The victim will fight back
2. Reconciliation and appeasement is unlikely
3. Incidents are downplayed (we'll laugh)
4. However, aggressive youth do not perceive fighting with significant others as something that is desirable

Future Research questions

- Are the differences in the expectancies of aggressive and non-aggressive youth a reflection of reality (i.e., they are treated differently) or cognitive biases (i.e., they think differently) ?
- Do youth receiving child protection services hold biased violence outcome expectancies?

Study 3

Are abuse-related thoughts and emotion associated with maltreatment characteristics, negative affect, and aggression?

- It has long been established that maltreated children must deal with feelings of shame and guilt, as they struggle to resolve issues such as who is to blame.
- The presence of these is thought to be an indicator that the youth is having difficulty recovering from their maltreatment, and is at risk for internalizing and externalizing problems.

Past Research

- A clear link between shame and “hot” emotions like anger and hostility has been found. This has led to speculation that shame is related to aggression, but the results so far are inconclusive.
- Maltreatment has been linked to increased proneness to shame.

Problem and question

- In most studies, proneness to shame was measured, typically by gauging the subject's reaction to hypothetical scenarios.
- These might not accurately reflect how individuals experience shame in real-life, particularly shame induced by traumatic experiences.
- Question: Is shame and guilt stemming from physical abuse associated with anger, hostility, and aggression, level of physical abuse, and comorbidity?

Hypothesis

- Harsher maltreatment will cause victims to feel more intense shame, which in turn will be associated with higher levels of anger, hostility and aggression.

Measures

- Shame- (3 items) felt like a loser, want to go away and hide, people can tell from looking at me
- Guilt- (3 items) it occurred due to some characteristic of mine, I allowed it to occur, I feel responsible

Results

- Shame was associated with anger and hostility
- Guilt-free shame, as indicated with partial correlations, appeared to be negatively associated with aggression
- Shame was related to several indicators of the harshness of the maltreatment
- Gender differences were noted in the way maltreatment related to shame and guilt

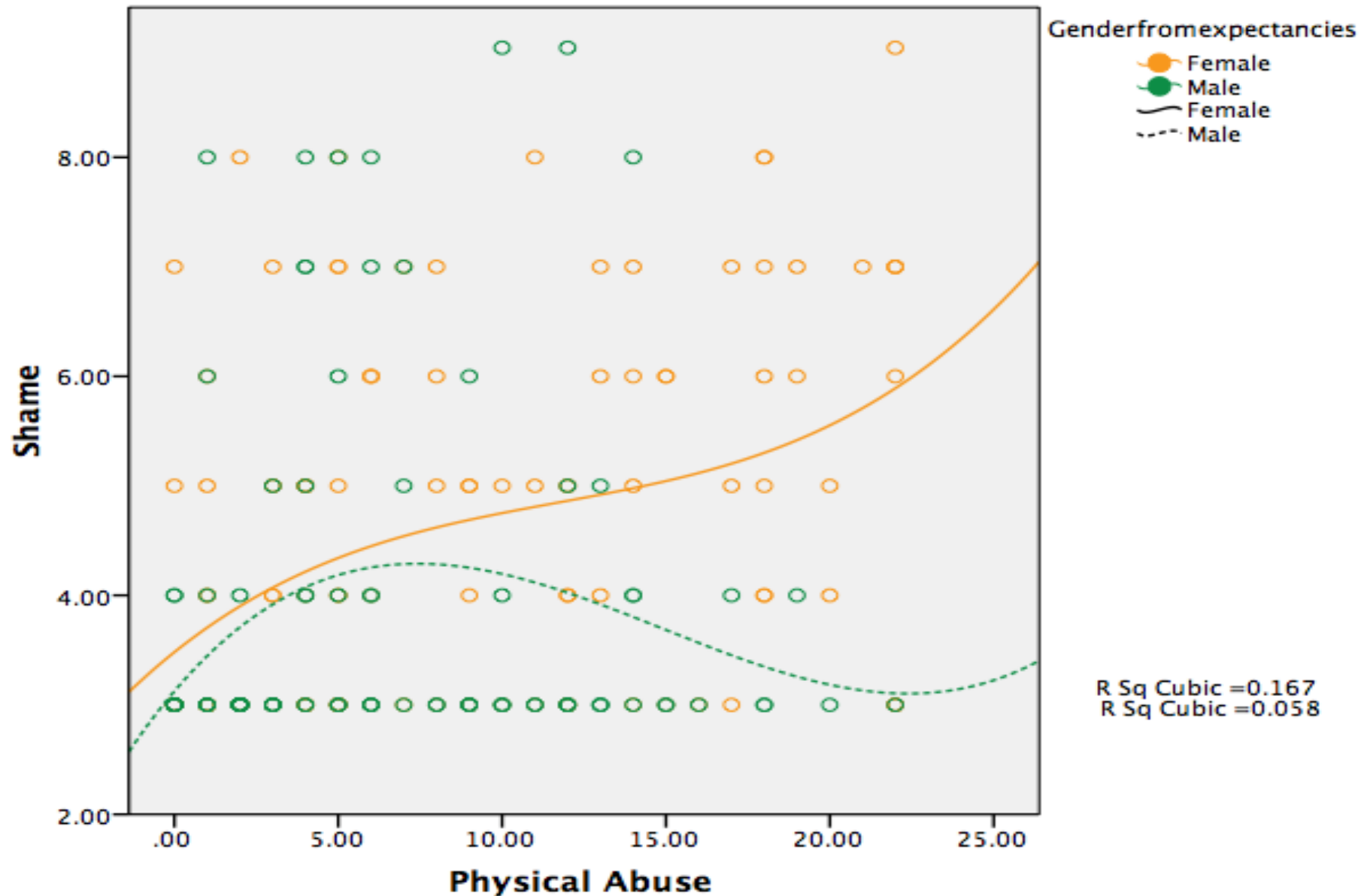
Shame/guilt and indicators of maladaptive outcomes

	Shame	Guilt-free shame	Guilt	Shame -free guilt
TSCC-anger	.264**	.174*	.181**	.163*
BSI-hostility	.379**	.275**	.255**	.181**
N	222	213	262	213
STAXI-anger out	.043	.040	.057	.026
-anger in	.337**	.270**	.264**	.175*
-passive aggression	.176**	.174*	.082	.006
-control out	-.055	-.023	.001	.003
-control in	.033	.051	.041	-.004
N	222	198	261	198
Aggression	-.129	-.206*	-.054	.065
N	115	107	130	107

Maltreatment and abuse-related emotions

	Males		Females	
	Shame	Self-blame/guilt	Shame	Self-blame/guilt
<u>Zero order correlations</u>				
Physical abuse	.047	-.167	.402***	.399***
Emotional abuse	.351**	.002	.457**	.238*
Emotional neglect	.104	-.128	.331**	.031
Physical neglect	.191	-.060	.234**	-.042
Sexual abuse	.199*	-.027	.351**	.016
N (Range)	101-104	124-126	118-119	135-139
<u>Partial correlations</u>				
Physical controlling for emotional abuse	-.209*	-.207*	.190*	.339***
Emotional controlling for physical abuse	.401***	.117	.259**	-.050
N (range)	97	120	113	132

Non- linear relationship?



Conclusion- main results

- There was evidence of a shame-rage spiral.
- Harsh maltreatment = abuse-related shame = anger
- However, there was no evidence that shame-rage led to increased aggression. If anything, it was associated with lower aggression.
- Abuse-related shame is related to pent-up anger. They form an angry and hostile group, but this shame-rage seems to inhibit rather than provoke action.

Gender Differences

- Males appear to be react most to emotional abuse and females to physical abuse.
- It may be that males and females are differentially equipped to handle hardship.
- Perhaps, males are more capable of shrugging off physical punishment, but not emotional attacks; for females, it is the opposite

General conclusion

- Harshly maltreated youth are more likely to become aggressive,
- But not because they learned from their experiences to expect good outcomes from violence
- And not because they were felt more shame.

- Their tendency to expect more retaliation and less reconciliation/appeasement from aggression might be the product of a hostile worldview.
- Victims of frequent and severe abuse would likely to hold a negative view of others.
- The low levels of guilt-free shame might also be a byproduct of adaptation to a hostile world.

Who is at risk

- The prevalence of aggression among victims of frequent and severe abuse (about 12% of CPS clients) make them an appealing target of early intervention.
- Youth who internalize a pessimistic view of the world seem to be at higher risk, but research is needed to verify this. If this proves true, practitioners should examine whether a change towards a more optimistic worldview is indicative of reduced aggression problems.

Special Thanks to

Nico Trocmé, Claire Chamberland,
& Delphine Colin-Vézina

Thesis committee

Christine Wekerle

MAP project director

Participants and staff