

Intergenerational transmission of abuse and neglect more complicated than previously believed

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A small child in Mumbai, with a shaved head, eating bread with her hand.
Credit: Wen-Yan King/Wikipedia

A study led by Cathy Spatz Widom, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at John Jay College, found that offspring of parents with histories of child abuse and neglect are themselves at risk for childhood neglect and sexual abuse but not physical abuse. Titled "Intergenerational Transmission of Child Abuse and Neglect: Real or Detection Bias?" the study's findings were reported in the March 27 issue of the journal *Science*.

As part of a prospective longitudinal study, Widom followed a large group of children with documented cases of [childhood abuse](#) and [neglect](#) and a demographically matched group of children without documented histories of abuse or neglect into adulthood. Widom and her team interviewed both groups of individuals who are now adults in their 40s and early 50s and a sample of their offspring.

Researchers found that the parents with documented cases of childhood abuse or neglect reported more neglect toward their children than parents without such histories, but did not report more physical and [sexual abuse](#). The offspring of these parents with a history of abuse and neglect were more likely to report having been sexually abused and neglected than offspring of parents without those histories. Given these surprising findings, the researchers speculated that a shift in societal attitudes toward physical abuse may account for the decline in the reports of this type child maltreatment.

Because self-reports are not always consistent with official reports, the researchers also looked at Child Protective Services reports. They found that parents with histories of [abuse](#) or neglect and children of parents with these histories were twice as likely to be reported to Child Protective Services. However, what is striking is that these analyses involved only parents and children who reported either engaging in or experiencing maltreatment, leading the researchers to speculate that these adults and their families may be disproportionately scrutinized.

More information: Intergenerational transmission of child abuse and neglect: Real or detection bias?, *Science*,
[www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/ ... 1126/science.1259917](http://www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.1259917)

Provided by John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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