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I7 Why Do Mothers Abuse and Neglect Their Children?: An Update on 100 New Jersey Cases

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the primary risk factors leading women to abuse and/or neglect their children and how forensic evaluators should approach these cases.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by exploring and addressing the critical variables leading toward termination of parental rights in maternal abuse and neglect cases in New Jersey. Solid empirical data will be shared to support the hypothesis.

The goal of this presentation is to explore the four reasons which cause mothers to abuse or neglect their children. This presentation will impact the forensic science community, as well as all forensic evaluators and investigators who work with abused children and abusive parents and adults. By understanding the typography of the abusive mother, assessments and treatment protocols can be formed, which can be recommended to the courts. Likewise, meaningful risk assessments can be performed that will help prevent reunification of children with parents who are highly likely to be abusive again in the future.

This presentation builds on an earlier work from 2009 that examined only 30 cases. This presentation examines 100 cases that will provide much more clinically and statistically significant information.

The popular literature regarding child abuse was examined. While poverty, ignorance, lack of education, and immaturity are often correctly proposed as factors involved in child abuse and neglect, most studies look only at these environmental factors and not at the factors in the mothers themselves. In the presented study, personality, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors will be investigated and categorized into diagnostic terms that are easy to understand and to explain. Therefore, a systematic manner of approaching these cases will be proposed. The courts respect and rely upon expert testimony in cases of child abuse and neglect, so a definitive paradigm for understanding risk for child abuse is long overdue.

Forensic evaluations for the family courts in New Jersey were examined. Most psychological and psychiatric reports for the courts have numerous features in common. These include certain demographic data, objective information about the case, the subject's own understanding, and putative or working diagnoses, in addition to specific recommendations. Frequently, the recommendations are not unique. For example, in nearly every case of physical abuse against a child, anger management training was recommended; however, without a solid understanding of the underlying diagnosis and an interdisciplinary approach to treatment, many of these routine interventions become meaningless. Therefore, there is a need to understand the underlying problems that lead to difficulty in controlling the outward expression of emotion and to categorize and treat abusive mothers specifically for their own pathology. In this recent work, the four reasons for child abuse that have emerged are mental illness, mental retardation or other cognitive impairment, substance abuse, and psychopathy.

Correlation coefficients between the existence of abuse and/or neglect to these four causative factors will be investigated and it is hypothesized that as more of these factors are present in an individual mother, the more extensive the abuse and neglect. Additional statistical analysis will be utilized to estimate the significance of having one or more of the specified conditions. In the future, a model will be derived that can be used to estimate the risk of future abuse or neglect against children (similar to risk assessment for violence or sexual violence). The results of the data collection and analysis are expected to fully support the anecdotally observed hypothesis.



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Risk assessment for abusive mothers can therefore be understood with a four-pronged approach and this will assist the courts in assessing cases of child abuse and neglect in ways that will protect the children yet preserve the parents' rights to parenthood. This research is seminal in its applicability to various types of abuse against children by their caretakers by helping to conceptualize the reasons for abuse in a systematic way as well as by laying a foundation to derive an actuarial-type instrument that can be utilized in risk assessment and planning for reunification or parental rights termination. The practice of forensic psychology and forensic psychiatry frequently revolves around family law and violence against children by adults. A standard way to approach cases of child abuse, vis-à-vis the courts, can begin not only to explain past behavior but also to predict and prevent future behavior.

Child Abuse, Child Neglect, Termination of Parental Rights