

## Introduction

This special issue deals with the screening and early prevention of physical child abuse and neglect. These are topics which certainly are very relevant for clinical practitioners and policy-makers in the field of child and youth care. The success of screening and prevention, however, strongly depends on the output of research. Summarizing the efforts to develop instruments and procedures that can be used for large-scale survey purposes, there is but low optimism (Bartman, 1996; Rodwell & Chambers, 1992; Wald & Woolverton, 1990). Scholars tend to agree that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to adequately screen for child abuse and neglect, because of low base rates in the general population, a lack of well-validated screening instruments and procedures, and a lack of knowledge on the predictive power of risk factors related to both physical abuse and neglect. Further complicating screening efforts are definitional issues and the multi-determined nature of the phenomena. Does this salient lack of success mean that early prevention is an illusory and unrealizable goal? Does it imply that three decades of research on child abuse and neglect has nothing to offer to practitioners and policy-makers? We are convinced that the answers to these questions are clearly negative, but we will not reveal the ways to these answers yet. We hope the reader may find these throughout the reading of the various contributions in this issue.

Indeed, there is some optimism among researchers that screening and early prevention program for physical child abuse and neglect may be successful. Not unconditionally, of course, but only if certain research criteria, which have to do with etiological and measurement perspectives, are met. We are happy to have met some optimists during an international conference on methods and problems related to screening and early prevention, which was organized by Child & Family and the Section of Orthopedagogics (K.U. Leuven) in Brussels on December 4, 1998. This conference took place in the context of a project, which is aimed at developing a screening instrument that may help social nurses, employed by Child & Family, guide their observations and reports on early signs of problems in parent-child relationships during hospital visits, home visits and consultations (see *Grietens et al., this issue*). Two participants in the conference, who both are prominent and experienced researchers in the field of risk assessment (Milner) and prevention (Cerezo), expressed their willingness to cooperate to this issue

by offering us an extended version of their oral presentation (see *Milner & Crouch*; *Cerezo & Pons-Salvador*). This will enable the reader to hear at first hand about the possibilities (and the pitfalls!) of screening and prevention, as well as about the challenges and controversies with which researchers are confronted.

This issue contains five contributions. *Milner and Crouch* open the debate. They give a general review of difficulties related to child maltreatment evaluations, including conceptual issues and limitations of different assessment approaches. In addition, inspired by their own work with the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (*Milner, 1986*), the authors set out landmarks for other researchers to enhance the quality of screening instruments and to optimize current models of risk assessment.

Next, *Grietens, Hellinckx, Van Assche, Baartman, and Geeraert*, discuss the rationale and development of a screening instrument for social nurses on risks for abuse and neglect in 0-to 3-year-old children. Core of their rationale is a pedagogical view on the etiology of child abuse and neglect. Both physical abuse and neglect are considered manifestations of serious parenting problems, which can be characterized in terms of lacking parental awareness. This means that abusive and neglectful parents have limited capacities to take the child's perspective. Further, there is an imbalance between the child's and the parent's claims, in that the parent's claims permanently prevail over the child's claims. After the introduction of the pedagogical view, the authors describe the item selection procedure, the structure and the content of the preliminary instrument.

Whereas the aforementioned contributions mainly deal with screening and risk assessment, *Cerezo and Pons-Salvador* explicitly focus on prevention. They present the 'Mother-child Psychological Support Program'. This is a community-based primary prevention program, which is aimed at decreasing the risk of maltreatment in 0-to-18-months old children by promoting appropriate parenting practices. The authors define maltreatment in terms of parent-child interactions and parenting practices. These may vary on a continuum from adequate or competent to inappropriate or deviant, threatening or damaging the child's optimum development. In the first part of the article, several outcomes of inadequate parenting on the child's psychosocial development are summarized. In the second part, the 'Mother-child Psychological Support Program' is presented, together with some preliminary results on its effects.

*Baartman* also focuses on issues of prevention. He shows that there are parallels between the primary prevention of child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency. Risk factors of child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency strongly overlap. But there is more. Similar ethical questions have to be considered when starting early interventions in high-risk families. These questions deal with the parent's rights to autonomy and the enforcement of help. Is involuntary help allowed? The originality of Baartman's contribution is the introduction of the child's rights to adequate care and optimal development, next to the parents' rights to autonomy and the society's rights to safety, as a cornerstone in the debate.

One of the most enduring theories in the study of family violence is that children who have been maltreated can in turn become maltreating parents. This pattern has become known as the 'Cycle of Abuse'. Research shows that such a cycle indeed exists: around 30% of those who have been abused will go on to abuse their own children. However, *Buchanan* demonstrates that there is not just one cycle, but at least four separate cycles: a cultural, a socio-political, a psychological and a biological. Her central message is that if we want to reduce the overall levels of child maltreatment, we need to address the separate cycles and focus interventions on the specific mechanisms operating in each cycle.

## References

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