



Single mothers of children with developmental delay:

Maltreatment and life stressors¹

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High levels of life stress may increase the risk of child maltreatment

Chronic stress appears to be one factor related to an increased risk of child maltreatment in homes led by single mothers.² Gottlieb suggested this is because life stress is associated both with decreased coping strategies and with increased levels of child behaviour problems.³ Single mothers, in particular, experience a high number of interrelated stressful life situations related to increased risk for abuse and neglect, such as poverty,⁴ everyday life stressors, depression, partner abuse, low self-esteem,^{5,6} insecure adult attachment style,⁷ low cognitive skills, violence, childhood sexual abuse, and poor social relationships.⁸

Single mothers of children with developmental delays often experience more life stressors

Life stressors related to mothers

Single mothers of children with developmental delays appear to be even more vulnerable to a broad range of interrelated life stressors.⁹ At the same time, the responsibility of raising children with disabilities typically rests almost solely on the mother,^{10,11} frequently negatively affecting her ability to manage multiple roles.^{12, 13, 14} This may contribute to the increased risk of child maltreatment for children with developmental delay noted in numerous studies.^{15,16}

Data from the 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS)¹⁷ shows that the single mothers of children with delays, as a group, had significantly lower levels of education, lower family income, and fewer social supports than the single mothers of children without

delays. They were also significantly more likely to depend on social assistance and to live in rental accommodation. In addition, higher rates of cognitive impairment, mental and/or physical health issues, drug abuse, and a history of maltreatment were found among single mothers of children with developmental delays reported for child maltreatment as contrasted with single mothers of children without delay.

Figure 1: Percentage of household concerns

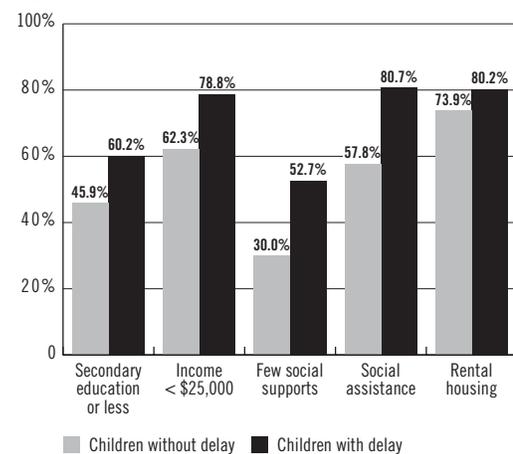
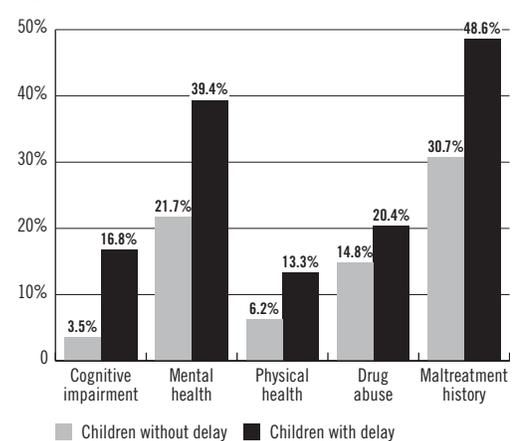


Figure 2: Percentage of caregiver concerns



Life stressors related to children with developmental delay

Data from the CIS describes children with developmental delay living in single-mother led homes reported for child maltreatment as having a broad range of additional concerns that have the potential to create additional stress for parents. This group of children was reported to have significantly higher rates of physical disability, additional health conditions, drug or alcohol related birth defects, and psychiatric disorders, including depression and anxiety, than children without developmental delay living in single mother families. They were also significantly more likely to demonstrate behaviour problems, self-harming behaviour, violence towards others, inappropriate sexual behaviours, negative peer involvement, and irregular school attendance.

Figure 3: Percentage of child functioning concerns (physical and mental health)

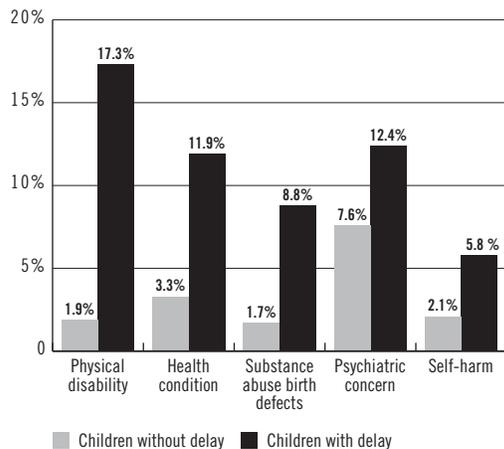
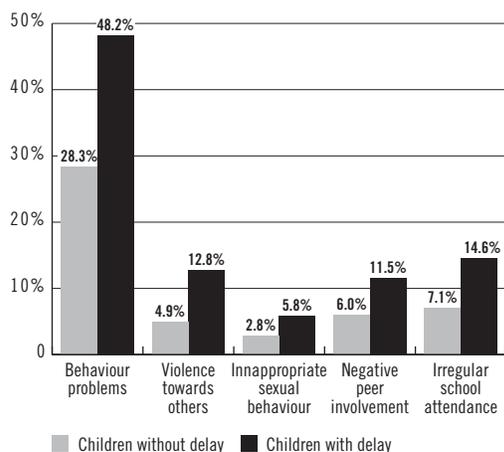


Figure 4: Percentage of child functioning concerns (behaviour)

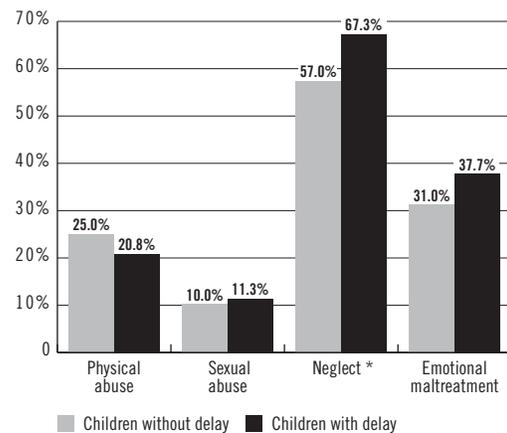


Single mothers of children with delays frequently reported for maltreatment

For children both with and without developmental delay, single mothers are frequently reported for maltreatment. The CIS data shows that 33.42% of cases of reported maltreatment for children with developmental delay involve children living in single mother-led homes. For cases of reported maltreatment for children without developmental delay, the figure is 39.02%. One reason for this suggested in the literature is that the risk of child maltreatment has its roots in the disadvantaged positions of women and their children in society.¹⁸

When these single mothers reported for maltreatment were considered separately, neglect was the most frequently reported type of child maltreatment. Neglect was reported for a significantly higher number of mothers of children with developmental delay than for the mothers of children without delay. In addition, these mothers were also more likely than the mothers of children without delay to be reported to maltreat longer term.

Figure 5: Percentage of substantiated reports by four maltreatment typologies



* $p < .01$

Summary

Single mothers of children with developmental delay reported for child maltreatment are noted to experience a high number of life stressors. These single mothers are caring for children with a number of concerns, they tend to have few resources, and have more problems themselves. This may, in part, explain why neglect was so frequently reported. The immediate service implication is that these mothers require greater supports to care for their children effectively. There is a need to understand more clearly the relationship between the life situations of single mothers and child maltreatment to guide intervention.

- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer reviewed article, Brown, I., & Fudge Schormans, A., (2003). Maltreatment and life stressors in single mothers who have children with developmental delay. *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*, 10(1), 61–66. “Developmental delay” refers to an ongoing, major delay in the process of a child’s development in one or more areas, such as motor, language, social, or thinking skills. Developmental delay can result from genetic defects (like Down syndrome), complications during pregnancy or birth (like prematurity or infections), or unknown causes. Some delays can be easily reversed if caught early enough, such as those resulting from hearing loss due to chronic ear infections.
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