

RESEARCH

PARENTAL AWARENESS AND CHILD ABUSE: A Cognitive-Developmental Analysis of Urban and Rural Samples

Carolyn Moore Newberger, Ed.D., and Susan J. Cook, M.A.

A cognitive-developmental analysis of parental reasoning on child-rearing issues is presented and applied in two controlled studies of parents of abused or neglected children. Significant differences in parental awareness were found between urban parents and their controls; this relationship is sustained in a rural sample, controlling for child handicap as well as for other familial characteristics.

The difficulty researchers confront in defining an appropriate perspective from which to study the parenting of abused and neglected children stems in part from our currently incomplete understanding of the dynamics of parental functioning. The human potentials realized in the parental role are often reduced to the singular notion that it is the capacity to love which provides the motivation, resilience, and understanding to nurture a child. Yet, loving parents can understand and treat their children in very different ways. Studies of family violence suggest that the emo-

tional investments of parenthood remain highly vulnerable to the stresses and demands of child rearing. There is a clear need in the current literature for closer analysis of the individual capabilities, developed during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, which may importantly influence parental ability to adapt to these demands.

This paper will report research analyzing parental conceptions of children and the parent-child relationship, a dimension of social-cognitive functioning referred to as *parental awareness*. This domain of parent-as-self/child-as-

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Authors are at: Judge Baker Guidance Center, Children's Hospital, and Harvard Medical School, Boston (Newberger); and Harvard Graduate School of Education (Cook).

other knowledge will be viewed from a structural-developmental perspective. An initial study of 51 parents,²⁴ in which responses were analyzed from this theoretical perspective, will be reviewed and two more recent studies that explore the relationship between parental awareness and behavior will be presented. Urban and rural samples of parents with histories of child abuse or neglect, matched with controls with no such histories, were interviewed. The implications that maturity of parental social cognition holds for the understanding of dysfunctional behavior will be considered.

Although the characterization of parental thinking and its effects on children has generated a large body of literature, research and theory have been primarily concerned with attitudes toward specific child-rearing practices and behavior.^{3, 6, 8, 29, 30} Parental attitude questionnaires, however, have been found to be poor predictors of parental behavior⁴ and of child outcome.^{22, 40} They have also been found to discriminate poorly between abusing and nonabusing parents.⁵ Several investigators have suggested that deeper patterns of understanding of the child underlie parents' surface attitudes as well as their behavior.^{11, 13, 25}

McGillicuddy-Delisi *et al*²³ proposed that parents construct belief systems about their children which provide the basis for a predisposition to act in certain ways. Sameroff²⁸ has suggested that characteristics of mothers' thinking about child development can be grouped into stages that are analogous to Piaget's levels of cognitive development

Several studies of parental dysfunction have observed relationships between parental thinking and parental

behavior. They have noted that parents who have abused their children frequently lack an awareness of the effects of mistreatment or lack of care of their children.^{1, 5, 35} In other words, they fail to comprehend their children's experience from the children's point of view. In a prospective study, Egeland and Brunnuell¹² found that the mother's ability to deal with the psychological complexity of the child and child rearing at 36-weeks gestation accounted for the most variance in a discriminant analysis that predicted later dysfunction at an 84% rate of accuracy. The characteristics of parental thinking noted by these investigators can be understood to be an aspect of parental conceptions or cognition.

Cognition refers to the *logic* a person employs in order to *make sense* of the world. The parent-child relationship is an aspect of the social world that falls within the domain of *social cognition*, the logic of thinking about persons and relationships in the social world. In the field of cognitive developmental psychology, a body of research on social cognition in childhood is building. The central question for investigators of social cognition has been: Are there coherent ways of thinking about others, and about the self in relation to others, that evolve during childhood? Research has demonstrated that there are.^{10, 14, 21, 27, 31} In our research, we have asked the further question: Can the ways of thinking about persons and relationships that develop during childhood be applied to, and continue to develop within, the parent-child relationship? The task of our research has been to describe systematic differences in parental social cognition and to examine the logical interrelationship of these

differences, toward the goal of enhancing understanding of development in this domain.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MEASURE OF PARENTAL AWARENESS

The Cognitive-Developmental Model

The theoretical and methodological basis of our ontogenetic analysis of parental understanding derives from the cognitive-developmental work of Selman,³¹ Kohlberg,²¹ and Gilligan.¹⁵ These investigators have described the development through childhood and into adulthood of awareness of persons and of relationships with others in three major dimensions of the social world. Selman has described the development of the self's interpersonal awareness and the awareness of the perspectives of others.³² Kohlberg has studied the development of concepts of rule-making and conflict-resolution between persons.²¹ Gilligan has analyzed the development of concepts of self-other responsibility and of interconnectedness between persons.¹⁵

Parenthood requires that these dimensions of social understanding be applied to a unique domain of interpersonal relationships, one marked by inherent inequality and interdependence, and by continuing changes in the balance of relationship. The parent assumes preeminence as creator of the prevailing rule structure while at the same time fostering the nurturance of a critical emotional tie. As the child grows, the parent's preeminence is challenged by the child's emerging personhood and autonomy. This places a demand on parental cognitive resources to interpret the meaning of the child's overtures, solicitations, and responses.

Similarly, the parental experience taxes and potentially expands previously held conceptions of reciprocity, communication, trust, and conflict-resolution in close relationships.

Drawing from Selman, Kohlberg, and Gilligan, this analysis depicts the social-cognitive world of parent and child as comprised of three logically-related aspects of self-other awareness: 1) conceptions of the child as a person—reflected in reasoning about the quality of the child's subjective experience and the availability of the growing child to environmental and psychological influence; 2) child rearing as a moral domain—reflected in conceptions of discipline and creation of rules for conflict resolution; 3) the parental role as one engendering interpersonal responsibility—reflected in reasoning about the self's adaption to parenting as a task of taking care of another person, and negotiation of the conflict between selfishness (meeting the needs of the self) and responsibility (meeting the needs of the other).

Method

An initial study of 51 urban parents identified four systems of logic apparent in different people when reasoning about child-rearing issues.²⁴ Reasoning on parental issues was elicited on a semistructured, reflective interview constructed around eight issues, or tasks, of parenthood. The issues concern conceptions of the child as a person, of the rules necessary for raising children, and of responsibility and connection in the parent-child relationship; they are listed in TABLE 1.

The parental awareness interview elicits parental reasoning and understanding through a series of personal

Table 1

ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THE PARENTAL AWARENESS INTERVIEW

Conceptions of the Child as a Person Influences on development Subjectivity: How the child thinks and feels Personality: How the child is defined; what is an ideal child
Conceptions of Child-Rearing Rules Reasons and methods for discipline and authority Reasons and methods for resolving conflict
Conceptions of Interpersonal Responsibility and Connection in the Parental Role Meaning of communication and trust Defining, assessing, and meeting needs Learning and evaluating parenting

questions* which directly address a parent's view or perspective on each of the issues, as well as through the presentation of three hypothetical dilemmas that deal with conflictual child-rearing situations. The dilemmas are summarized as follows:

The Jimmy Fox Story. The diary of a 15-year-old boy who had maintained his innocence when arrested on a shoplifting charge is found accidentally by his concerned and doubting father. The parent is asked whether the father should read the diary. Trust and communication in close relationships and the function of parental authority are explored.

The Working-Mother Dilemma. A conflict is presented between a bored and frustrated housewife who needs the stimulation and satisfaction a job will give her, and a ten-year-old who wants her mother to stay home. The issues of defining and negotiating conflicting claims, and resolving the conflict between selfishness (meeting one's own needs) and responsibility (meeting the child's needs) in the parent-child relationship are analyzed.

The New Baby Dilemma. The 3½-year-old-son insists he loves his baby brother, even though his

hugging sometimes becomes hitting. The parent's conceptions of the subjective experience and personality of the child are examined.

When administering the interview, initial responses to the questions are carefully probed to reveal the logic underlying the response. This elicits underlying conceptions that the parent calls upon in understanding and seeking resolution to child-rearing concerns. Each interview lasted 1-1½ hours and was tape-recorded and transcribed.

Results

From an analysis of reasoning on these 51 interviews, four qualitatively different levels of parental awareness were discerned and described. Each successive level represents an increasingly comprehensive cognitive perspective from which the relationship issues posed in the interview may be viewed and addressed: the perspective of self experience (the parental self alone); conventional norms for understanding and raising children; the perspective of the child's experience; and a systems perspective, from which parents comprehend all three viewpoints but see them as part of a larger dyadic relationship system that constitutes a process with its own development.

At the first, or egoistic, level of awareness, only the experiences and needs of the parental self are considered. With each successive level, parental reasoning expands to include a perspective not available (or expressed) at the preceding level. Thus, at the second level, the perspective shifts from parental experience to conventional norms. Although parental experience is

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* A set of sample questions from the parental awareness interview is available from the authors.

and practices, but an appreciation of the complexity and flexibility of the underlying cognitive resources a parent has available to interpret and to resolve conflicts and to address tasks inherent in the parent-child relationship.

A shift in orientation from what is correct (and incorrect) to what is cognitively and developmentally available can serve to liberate the interpretation of the parental role in parental dysfunction from a reliance on deficit formulations (such as lack of love or early bonding; parental psychopathology; inappropriate expectations; or faulty practices). Such a liberation is urgently necessary, as parents who abuse or neglect their children do love them, and cultural variations in parental practices may contribute to differential and inappropriate labeling. Parental love is not dependent on maturity of reasoning, nor does any level of awareness dictate a static formulation of "appropriate behavior." One might argue, however, that identifying a parent as reasoning at less mature levels of awareness can become another form of onerous labeling, and this is certainly a danger with any scale. What the developmental model offers implicitly, however, is an orientation toward the natural process of adaptation to the vicissitudes of relationships, in which levels of competence—and not simply islands of pathology—can be identified.

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still considered, parents reasoning at this level resolve issues and justify their child-rearing beliefs and choices by drawing upon the rules, explanations and "conventional wisdom" offered by the tradition or authority to which they ascribe. Reasoning at the third, or individualistic, level expands to include the child's experience from the child's point of view. At the fourth level of awareness, the analytic-systems orientation, parents understand these perspectives to be parts of an interacting system of mutual relational influence. The characteristic patterns of thought at each of the four levels may be summarized as follows:

LEVEL 1: Egoistic (Self) Orientation. The basis for parental activity and for understanding of the child is the child's actions in relation to the parent's needs. Child care tasks and parenting are seen as being carried out in response to external cues which affect the parent's emotional and physical comfort, or which offer approval to the parent. Intentions of the child are recognized, but as a projection of parental feelings, and are not separated from actions. The organizing principle is achieving what the parent wants, and the object of socialization of the child is to maximize parental comfort.

LEVEL 2: Conventional (Norms) Orientation. The basis for parental activity and for understanding of the child is the child's actions and inferred intentions in relation to preconceived, externally derived expectations. The child is conceived as having internal states and needs which must be acknowledged, but the parent conceives of the child's subjective reality in a stereotypical way. The child is not seen as unique, but as a member of the class of "children" and the parent draws upon tradition, "authority," or conventional wisdom, rather than solely upon the self, to inform expectations and practices. The parent and the child are understood to have well-defined roles which it is their responsibility to fulfill. The parent-child relationship is conceived as mutual fulfillment of role obligations.

LEVEL 3: Individualistic (Child) Orientation. Each child is recognized to have unique as well as

universally shared qualities and is understood in terms of his or her own subjective reality. The parent tries to understand the child's world from the child's particular point of view, and conceptualizes the parent-child relationship as exchange of feelings and sharing of perspectives, rather than only as the fulfillment of role obligations.

LEVEL 4: Analytic (Systems) Orientation. The parent can view the relationship between parent and child as a mutual and reciprocal system and understands the child as a complex psychological self-system. The parent can conceive that motives underlying a child's actions may reflect simultaneous and conflicted feelings. The parent can also recognize that there may be ambivalence in his or her own feelings and actions as a parent, and still love and care for the child. Individuals and relationships are understood not only in terms of their stable elements, but also as a continual process of growth and change. The parent-child relationship is built not only on shared feelings but also on shared acceptance of each other's faults and frailties as well as virtues, and each other's separateness as well as closeness.

From the interview material, a scoring manual was constructed which offers level-specific definitions of reasoning about each issue, with illustrative examples and procedures for assigning and computing scores.²⁴ The manual organization and scoring procedures are adapted from work by Selman.³²

In order to eliminate a possible tendency to bias scoring toward a central level on an individual interview, interviews were cut into issue segments (a question and follow-up probes), and scoring was performed on an issue-by-issue basis (*i.e.*, all responses from a group of interviews around a particular issue were scored together). Following the scoring of interview segments in this issue-by-issue fashion, individual interviews were reconstructed. An individual score on each parental awareness issue was first derived. The eight issue scores were then averaged into a global

parental awareness score. In order to assess interrater reliability, ten of 51 interviews were scored by two independent raters. A Pearson correlation of .96 was obtained.³⁹ This procedure has been followed in several subsequent studies of parental awareness, with interrater reliabilities ranging from .88 to .96 using the parental awareness manual.^{9, 18, 26}

An analysis of ten randomly chosen individual interviews revealed that reasoning tends to be consistent throughout the interview. On the average, 72% of responses were scored at one level, 24% at a second level, and 4% at other levels.²⁴ The following are examples of issue-concepts, scored at each of the four levels of parental awareness. Parents are addressing the issue of meeting and defining the needs of the child. The logic of each parent's response is also addressed.

LEVEL 1: *Egoistic.* (What do you feel children need most from their parents?) Love and attention. (When you say love, what do you mean?) Holding them, telling them you love them, make them behave so they won't get on that dope and stuff when they get older. I want my kids to feel proud of me. I know eventually when they get older maybe I'll fail, but I'm gonna try my darndest when they're younger and just hope they don't turn that way.

For this mother "love and attention" are the concrete actions that she takes in order to meet a specific concrete objective—making her children behave so that they will keep away from drugs. She expresses no understanding of a need for synchrony between her actions and the experience of her children as individuals with thoughts and feelings amenable to influence. She conceives of meeting needs in terms of her action only, rather than the child's experience

of that action, with the hope that what she does will keep the children from turning out badly. Her egocentricism is further underscored by her goal of meeting her children's needs because "I want my kids to feel proud of me." Meeting the needs of her children is synonymous, in a very concrete way, with meeting her own needs.

LEVEL 2: *Conventional.* (What do you feel children need most from their parents?) Love. (Explain.) Just letting them know you love them. Letting them know you care, that you are concerned about what they do, and just try to be the best parent you can. (Why do you think that is most important, conveying that love?) Because if children know they have love, then they are secure.

This level of response shifts in orientation from a focus on what the parent does (in the previous example, "telling them you love them") to a concern with how what the parent does affects children emotionally ("if children know . . . then they are secure.") Here, "trying to be the best parent you can" is reflected in part by the parent's awareness of the child's need to know of the parent's concern. In the previous example, the parent's child-rearing efforts are reflected in having her children "feel proud of me." The product of parental effort articulated in *Level 1* reasoning is in terms of an egocentric parental reward. At *Level 2*, the product of parental effort lies in part in the child's experience of parental concern.

LEVEL 3: *Individualistic.* (What do you think children need most from their parents?) Love and time, they need to have their needs considered, that they aren't always happy with things that we do and with the things that we want to make them happy. You have to look at them, and if they don't tell you, you have to ask them. You have to really try to find out what each child wants and what is going on in their heads.

ments under the best of circumstances are not always objective and value-free, and may express biases in identification which could be reflected in distinctions in parental reasoning.

With an awareness of these shortcomings and their ramifications for cautious acceptance, we can discuss some of the ways in which an analysis of parental conceptions may expand our knowledge of parental dysfunction and the growth of parental competencies throughout the life span.

Although the hypothesis of parental awareness as a developmentally acquired psychological phenomenon needs further testing, cross-sectional analyses suggest that the cognitive foundations for understanding the child and the parental role are built through a process which unfolds developmentally throughout childhood and into adulthood.^{24, 26} This work permits the focus of inquiry on parental competence to shift from experiences, thoughts, and behavior observable within the limited time frame of the child-rearing years, to a life-span context. In future studies using this paradigm, it should be possible to trace the strands of self-other awareness which later merge as a psychological matrix for understanding the parental role. A longitudinal follow-up study of the development of parental awareness in children and in parents from the urban child abuse sample and their controls is currently in progress.

It is important to emphasize that the construction of parental understanding is by nature embedded in the subjective experience of relationship and connection which the parent is aware of between self and child. Qualitative understanding of the nature of relationship between parent and child is subject to

variation. That variation is, in part, the focus of the parental awareness measure. Through the development of a descriptive measure of parental awareness, we have attempted to characterize in a systematic way deeper patterns of understanding that are hypothesized to underlie parents' attitudes and beliefs about the parent-child relationship. With the study of parental cognition, attitudes and beliefs are used as a starting point for exploring cognitive elements in the parent-child relationship that a parent can think about and draw from in constructing beliefs about the child and attitudes toward the parental role, and about the way in which these elements are organized in relation to each other. A parent reasoning at the conventional level, for example, is informed by two sets of elements, his or her own feelings and perspectives (the egoistic elements), and external guidelines for correct actions and interpretations (the conventional elements), with the conventional elements assuming preeminence as the parent seeks to explain and to justify his or her attitudes and beliefs.

At each successive level, more comprehensive sets of cognitive elements are available to construct parental understanding and to organize parental action. In other words, the parent's mental map contains more points of reference. The content of these perspectives (*i.e.*, the nature of a parent's feelings, the source and values of the external authority system, the personality of the child, and so on) are determined by each family's own particular realities, culture, and historical time. What is gained, then, from a cognitive-developmental approach to parenting is not an articulation of "correct" beliefs

naive to the hypotheses being tested in this research and to subjects' cultural, educational, or social class status evaluated six randomly selected protocols (three from each group). Before delivering protocols to the blind scorer, each transcribed interview was cut into scoreable issue-concepts segments, to eliminate segment/whole interview bias in scoring. After completion of scoring by the independent scorer, interviews were reconstructed and average issue scores determined. The unbiased reliability of the mean was .88 (intraclass correlation).³⁹

Results. Six of the eight mothers who had been identified by state welfare agencies as having severely neglected children scored lower than their matched counterparts on average issue score ($p < .10$, Sign Test³³). A t -test for correlated samples³⁹ was significant at the .05 level, one tailed ($t = 2.22$, Protective Service $\bar{x} = 1.39$, Control $\bar{x} = 2.16$).

DISCUSSION

The research reported here represents a beginning and continuing effort to analyze parental dysfunction from a cognitive-developmental perspective. The findings of these analyses of parental awareness in parents reported to have abused or neglected their children suggest that the developmental maturity of parents' awareness of children and the parental role may be importantly implicated in parental function and dysfunction. Significant relationships were found between maturity of parental cognition and a protective service history of having abused or neglected a child in two samples of parents from very different ethnic and geographic

backgrounds. These studies, however, have several methodological limitations which restrict the generalizability of the findings, and which reinforce the need for further research. The samples are small, and are limited to parents of low to modest educational and occupational status. The educational attainment of parents in the rural sample was especially low.

A related issue, and one with which all cognitive-developmental stage theorists struggle, is the relation between verbal proficiency and performance on the interviews from which cognition is measured. It is possible that some parents may be capable of feeling and acting on an understanding they cannot adequately articulate in an interview. The relationship between verbal competency and performance on the parental awareness interview needs further study, as well as a more sensitive analysis of the relationship between verbally expressed awareness and parental behavior.

Issues of definition are also of concern in studies of child abuse and neglect. Giovannoni and Becerra¹⁶ have identified wide variations in the criteria professionals use to label parents abusive or neglectful.¹⁶ Furthermore, operational definitions may vary with different studies or in different clinical contexts. In the studies presented here, the identification of child abuse and neglect was dependent upon the clinical judgments of medical and educational personnel and state protective service agency workers. Although professionals in both the urban and rural institutions are experienced and skilled in identifying and working with abusing and neglectful parents, clinical judg-

The underlying logic of this parent's response is that each child must be understood as a separate individual with his or her own particular needs. The parent reasoning at the individualistic level differentiates this child from children, so that the needs of the child as an individual are considered.

LEVEL 4: Analytic systems. (What do you feel children need most from their parents?) I will say love and you will say to me, "What do you mean by love?" and I will say, "I think it is an acceptance, unqualified, for what that person is in time." It has nothing to do with grades or cleanliness. I would like her to be clean and tidy, but it has nothing to do with love and the feeling that someplace in this world you are loved for what you are by the people who know you best and nevertheless love you. I think that is something that will help the child begin to love itself. (What do you mean, begin to love itself?) Well, I think that people can be so cruel to themselves, "Oh, I'm dumb, I'm stupid," words which tear down instead of build up. And I think one way to serenity about the way you are and the way you see the world, even if life is difficult, is if you can be gentle with your errors and failures and see them as part of a process. Then I think you will have a kind of stability and mental health that is a legacy from parents who love you unqualified.

This parent defines needs as more than specific requirements of the child. Needs are understood as embedded in human vulnerability, interactions, sets of human systems; the psychological self-system, relationship systems, self and the broader world, as well as being *processes* that are considered within a framework of change and adjustment and growth.

We hypothesize that these four reasoning structures or levels form a developmental hierarchy, progressing toward increased flexibility and adaptivity, and that each "system of thought" functions as an organizing matrix through which the parent interprets the relationship with the child.

In an analysis of 16 children's interviews (ages 8-16), parental awareness levels were found to be strongly age-related ($r = .76$, $p < .005$), offering preliminary support for the hypothesis that the parental awareness measure is a developmentally acquired dimension of social cognition which is accessible in the thinking of children. It is noteworthy that no children achieved the level of analytic reasoning, suggesting that the experience of the parent-child relationship may facilitate (but not insure) understanding at the most mature level. (It seems reasonable that adults in other close, dependent relationships with children, may also achieve analytic-systems awareness). A statistically significant relationship was not achieved between children's IQ, as measured on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, and parental awareness level within a limited IQ range (105-140). Evidence for a developmental progression of parental awareness in adulthood is also found. When parents with the same number of children are compared with each other, there is a .35 correlation between mean parental awareness score and increased years of experience as a parent ($p < .025$). This finding was replicated in a subsequent study of 31 white mothers between 25 and 45 years of age.²⁶ No significant relationships were found between parental awareness level and race, social class (as measured by the Hollingshead index¹⁹), and sex of the parent.

PARENTAL AWARENESS AND CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

In order to study in a preliminary way the relationship between parental awareness and parental behavior, two controlled studies were conducted, one

of urban and one of rural parents with histories of having physically abused or neglected a child. The application of this detailed analysis of parental logic to samples of parents with histories of dysfunction addresses two questions: 1) Does the parental awareness measure discriminate between parents with a history of serious dysfunction in the parent-child relationship and parents sharing similar social and familial characteristics without such a history? 2) Are there characteristic qualities of parental understanding in the abuse-neglect group which may be implicated in the etiology of their dysfunction?

Study 1: The Urban Sample

Subjects. Sixteen parents were selected from the population of children receiving treatment at a large metropolitan pediatric hospital. Eight were mothers whose children had been identified by state protective service officials and medical personnel as physically abused or severely neglected, and who, together with their children, were receiving intervention at an outpatient clinic for families with severe relationship difficulties. Seven mothers and one father were parents of children receiving treatment for orthopedic problems not related to abuse or neglect. These two groups of parents were matched on race, social class,¹⁹ family size and, in seven of eight pairs, age of the oldest child. Mean maternal education (range 8–12 years) did not differ significantly between the two groups. Years of parenting experience (based on age of oldest child) did not differ significantly between groups.

Procedure. Interviews with respondents in the protective service sample were conducted in the clinic setting by

an independent interviewer, who was unaware of the subjects' histories. Comparison group interviews were conducted in the clinic where their children were receiving treatment and were carried out by either the first author, or the independent interviewer. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed and were approximately one hour in length. Each transcript was assigned an identifying number to protect subjects' privacy. Scoring followed the manual guidelines described above. Copies of interview transcriptions were cut into issue concept segments. Issue concept segments from all the interviews were grouped together by issue. Scoring was then done issue-by-issue, rather than interview-by-interview. This procedure lessened possible scoring bias and the tendency to score a whole interview within a narrow scoring range. An individual score on each parental awareness issue was next calculated, and the eight issue scores summed into an average issue score.

Reliability. Ten randomly selected interviews were co-scored by an independent rater blind to subject categorization. The Pearson Product-Moment correlation between scores was .95.

Results. A *t*-test for correlated observations was performed on the average parental awareness issue score of abuse group versus controls. This was significant at a .01 level, two-tailed (*t*-value=5.20, Protective Service \bar{x} = 1.73, Control \bar{x} =2.36).³⁸ In seven of eight matched pairs, parents with abuse history scored lower than controls (Sign Test, $p < .05$).³³

These results suggest a relationship between parental cognition and parental treatment of their children. However, despite the careful matching between

the two groups on familial and social class characteristics, the possibility that other factors could discriminate between the two groups and account for differences in parental reasoning independent of parental dysfunction needed to be explored.

A frequent clinical observation is the amount of handicap and developmental delay abused and neglected children manifest. A review of clinic records revealed that all of the urban children with abuse or neglect histories presented developmental delays. This raised the question of whether less developed parental reasoning and parental dysfunction are both a product of the child's depressed functioning, or if parental awareness is related to parental dysfunction independent of the child's depressed developmental status. The generalizability of the parental awareness paradigm to other samples of parents with different cultural backgrounds also needed exploration. In order to address these questions, a second study of rural parents with histories of dysfunction in the parental role was designed.

Study 2: The Rural Sample

Subjects. Sixteen mothers were selected from a rural home-based intervention project providing services to preschool children with organic handicaps or developmental delays of undetermined origin. Because all children in the project were evaluated with the Alpern-Boll Developmental Profile,² indices of the developmental status of each child's functioning in several major skill areas (social, cognitive, language, motor, self-help) were available. Eight mothers whose children had been identified by state protective service officials

and intervention project personnel as developmentally delayed because of severe neglect were matched with eight mothers who had no such history, but whose children had organic developmental disorders necessitating intervention. Mothers were matched on race, social class,¹⁹ and family size. To control for developmental delay, subjects' children were matched on age (± 2 months, below age two; ± 5 months, above age two), sex, one area of delay (social with social or self-help score; cognitive with cognitive or language; motor with motor) and extent of delay score (± 2 months), based on Alpern-Boll Developmental Profile scores. Mean maternal age, years of parenting experience (based on the age of oldest child) and single or two-parent family status did not differ significantly in the two groups. Mean maternal education for the protective service group was 1.88 years less than for the control group. The *t*-test of this group difference approaches, but does not achieve, significance at the .05 level.

Procedure. Mothers were interviewed in their homes using the parental awareness interview. Each interview took about an hour and was tape-recorded and later transcribed. Each transcript was assigned an identifying number to protect subjects' confidentiality. After transcription, each interview was segmented into issue-concepts (a question, a response, and a probe). All the issue-concepts were scored separately and then reassembled into whole interviews. The average-issue score for each subject was tallied and a mean global parental awareness score derived.

Reliability. An independent scorer,