

The Evaluation of Child Maltreatment Severity and the Decision-Making Processes in the Child Protection System

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Abstract : Professionals working in child protection services (CPS) need to have common and clear criteria to identify cases of maltreatment and to differentiate levels of severity in order to determine when CPS intervention is required, its nature and urgency, and, in most countries, the service that will be in charge of the case (community or specialized CPS). Actually, decision-making process is complex in CPS, and, for that reason, such criteria are particularly important for who significantly contribute to that decision-making in child maltreatment cases. The main objective of this presentation is to describe the Maltreatment Severity Assessment Questionnaire (MSQ), specifically designed to be used by professionals in the CPS, which adopts a multidimensional approach and uses a scale of severity within subtypes. Specifically, we aim to provide evidence of validity and reliability of this tool, in order to improve the quality and validity of assessment processes and, consequently, the decision making in CPS. The total sample was composed of 1000 children and/or adolescents (51.1% boys), aged between 0 and 18 years old (M = 9.47; DP = 4.51). All the participants were referred to official institutions of the children and youth protective system. Children and adolescents maltreatment (abuse, neglect experiences and sexual abuse) were assessed with 21 items of the Maltreatment Severity Questionnaire (MSQ), by professionals of CPS. Each item (sub-type) was composed of four descriptors of increasing severity. Professionals rated the level of severity, using a 4-point scale (1= minimally severe; 2= moderately severe; 3= highly severe; 4= extremely severe). The construct validity of the Maltreatment Severity Questionnaire was assessed with a holdout method, performing an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) followed by a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The final solution comprised 18 items organized in three factors 47.3% of variance explained. 'Physical neglect' (eight items) was defined by parental omissions concerning the insurance and monitoring of the child's physical well-being and health, namely in terms of clothing, hygiene, housing conditions and contextual environmental security. 'Physical and Psychological Abuse' (four items) described abusive physical and psychological actions, namely, coercive/punitive disciplinary methods, physically violent methods or verbal interactions that offend and denigrate the child, with the potential to disrupt psychological attributes (e.g., self-esteem). 'Psychological neglect' (six items) involved omissions related to children emotional development, mental health monitoring, school attendance, development needs, as well as inappropriate relationship patterns with attachment figures. Results indicated a good reliability of all the factors. The assessment of child maltreatment cases with MSQ could have a set of practical and research implications: a) It is a valid and reliable multidimensional instrument to measure child maltreatment, b) It is an instrument integrating the co-occurrence of various types of maltreatment and a within-subtypes scale of severity; c) Specifically designed for professionals, it may assist them in decision-making processes; d) More than using case file reports to evaluate maltreatment experiences, researchers could guide more appropriately their research about determinants and consequences of maltreatment.

Keywords : assessment, maltreatment, children and youth, decision-making

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