

# Measures Used in Experimental Research on Institutional Child Maltreatment

Executive Summary

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## 1. Introduction

Giving Evidence and partners produced an Evidence and Gap Map (EGM) of the rigorous experimental evidence available on interventions that address institutional child maltreatment. Their project collated available evidence from randomised control trials, quasi-experimental design studies, and systematic reviews. In this experimental research on institutional child maltreatment, there were numerous surveys, questionnaires, and scales that had been used. We rely on these measures to help us assess outcomes and to test whether interventions are effective. These measures might ask participants about times they have experienced abuse, how often they experience anxiety symptoms, or assess participants' improvements in knowledge after attending a program.

There are hundreds of these measures and it can be difficult to understand where to start or what to use. We have developed a Technical Report that provides a comprehensive overview of the measures used in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment.

When we have good measures, we can be confident that our results are accurate. We can also make better comparisons of results between studies. A good measure is one that actually assesses what we want it to (it is *valid*) and that it does so consistently (it is *reliable*).

There are several statistical techniques that we use in research to assess whether a measure is reliable and valid. A good measure will have statistical support for both its reliability and validity for the cultural setting in which you want to use it. The best measures will also have support that is based on a solid theoretical foundation. These "tests of strength" are broadly referred to as psychometric properties.

But this process can be costly, time-consuming, and difficult to do. Sometimes, a good measure does not always exist yet for a particular concept that we are interested in measuring. At times, this might mean that researchers will develop their own measures.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the findings with broad examples of the measures used in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment. For further detail and analysis, refer to the Technical Report.

For this project, each paper published in English was reviewed and details about the measures used in the research were extracted and collated for review. Details of any analysis on the reliability and validity of the measures reported by the authors of the study, along with key findings from other research, were reviewed (such as the original development and validation research paper) to provide a comprehensive overview of the available evidence.

## 2. Overview of Measures

In experimental research on institutional child maltreatment, there are 8 main constructs that we might be interested in measuring: institutional safeguarding practices, adult institutional care providers, child maltreatment disclosure, child maltreatment occurrence and recurrence, children's wellbeing, adult perpetrators, child/youth offender maltreatment behaviours, and parent/caregiver outcomes. An overview of some key themes on the quality of the measures used for these constructs is below.

## 2.1. Institutional Safeguarding Practice

Institutional Safeguarding Practice is broadly aimed at understanding institutional operations, environments, and cultures that contribute to conditions of safety for children and young people. This might include having good policies in place, having an environment that supports reporting of concerns, and workers that are knowledgeable and committed to reducing the risk of harm.

Most measures used under this construct were broadly aimed at assessing school operational cultures and environments. Only one (Emotional Climate in Organizations Scale (ECOS)) included consideration of other types of institutional settings, however the full details of this scale have not been made available yet. Therefore, a full review of the reliability and validity was not possible, but there seemed to be some promising preliminary support.

There were four measures in total for culture, five for environment, and none that were specific to operational practice (although some measures included items that tapped into this concept). The Delaware School Climate Survey, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)-K3, and the School-Level Environment Questionnaire – South Africa (SLEQ-SA) were examples of reliable and valid measures of institutional safeguarding practice. More research may be needed to determine the psychometrics of these measures in other cultural contexts, and the CLASS-K3 requires a trained professional to conduct observations of a classroom.

## 2.2. Adult Institutional Care Providers

Measures under this construct were broadly aimed at understanding the knowledge and skills, attitudes, and well-being of adult institutional care providers. This might include workers' knowledge of abuse and reporting requirements, attitudes towards corporal punishment or other harsh discipline practices, or feelings of compassion. Most were specific to teachers, but there were a few promising measures that could be used with other care providers.

### Knowledge and Skills

For knowledge and skills of institutional care providers, there was a disproportionate reliance on researcher-developed scales that had mostly not been analysed for their psychometric properties, or there was very little support for their reliability and validity. One promising researcher-developed scale for knowledge was designed to assess teachers' knowledge of sex education practices in Iran (Martin et al., 2020).

There were two well-established measures of knowledge: Knowledge and Attitudes Scale (Mathews et al., 2017) and the Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE). The first is specific to U.S. laws and the ORCE requires a trained professional to observe caregivers.

### Attitudes

Measures in this construct were broad and ranged from assessments of teachers' willingness to teach sex education, professionals' attitudes towards reporting abuse, teachers' attitudes towards corporal punishment, and professionals' perspectives on their role in an institution. There was a focus on sexual abuse in several of the measures, but a few also included considerations of child maltreatment more broadly. There were several quality measures with strong support for their psychometric properties in this sub-category.

For example, the Teacher Reporting Attitude Scale – Child Sexual Abuse (TRAS-CSA) was well-established for measuring teachers' attitudes towards reporting sexual abuse. There were several adaptations and translations of this measure that also had support for their reliability and validity.

## **Wellbeing**

There were several well-established measures for adult well-being used in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment. Self-reported self-efficacy, compassion, self-control, depression, and social safeness were some of the concepts measured.

For example, the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale was a well-established measure of teachers' understanding of things that make activities at school more difficult. It was created in the U.S., but only used in experimental research on child maltreatment in Jamaica. More research is needed to determine its validity in other cultural contexts.

## **2.3. Child Maltreatment Disclosure**

Measuring child maltreatment disclosure is aimed at assessing children's intentions to disclose through role-plays and scenarios, or collecting data (often from administrative sources) on children's actual disclosures of maltreatment.

Child maltreatment disclosure was among the most challenging to measure. One measure used in experimental research was the Application of Protective Behaviors Test-Revised (APBT-R). While there was support for the original version of the measure, more research is needed for the revised version. A key finding was that increases in children's knowledge about abuse did not always translate to improved intentions to disclose or improved safety identification skills (White et al., 2018, 2019). Therefore, including measures of disclosure, intentions to disclose, or child maltreatment occurrence can be very important to improve confidence in the effectiveness of interventions.

To gather information about children's disclosures, research often relies on administrative data (such as school records of disclosures), formal interviews that require highly trained professionals, self-reports from children to disclose or their intentions to disclose, or teacher or parent reports on if they have been the recipient of a disclosure. It is difficult to test whether these approaches reflect accurate data on the true prevalence of maltreatment. However, they can be useful ways to assess if interventions have been helpful in supporting maltreated children to disclose. While we are not always able to accurately determine the reliability or validity of these measures, they can still be useful approaches in research.

## **2.4. Child Maltreatment Occurrence/Recurrence**

Measures in this category were aimed at capturing specific data on children's self-reported experiences of maltreatment by asking if they had experienced certain events (such as sexual abuse, sexual harassment, neglect, physical abuse, corporal punishment, adversity).

There was promising support for several measures of child maltreatment occurrence/recurrence in experimental research on child maltreatment. There were a few researcher-developed measures, but there was limited support yet for their use.

One of the most used measures for this construct was the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Screening Tool (ICAST). It has been translated into 20 languages and there are several examples of its quality in a variety of cultural contexts. However, researchers often used adapted or shortened versions of the ICAST. It was not always clear that these adaptations remained reliable and valid measures of the prevalence of abuse and neglect.

## **2.5. Children's Outcomes**

This was the construct with the greatest number of measures and focus in experimental research. Measures under this construct were broadly aimed at understanding the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and well-being of children. This included measures of children's knowledge of abuse, attitudes towards gendered violence, and observations of children's behaviours in simulations and scenarios.

### **Knowledge**

Children's knowledge was the most measured construct in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment. The quality of measures was inconsistent. Unfortunately, even those with good support for their reliability and validity had notable limitations. A common problem was children performing well on these measures before they were even exposed to the intervention (ceiling effect). This meant that researchers were unable to accurately assess if there were improvements in knowledge as a result of the intervention.

Many measures in this category would also benefit from updated language and a more contemporary conceptualisation of abuse characteristics. For example, there was a disproportionate focus on stranger situations and an underlying assumption that children do not like certain touches from adults. Including consideration of the nuances of abuse and grooming in measures would improve our understanding of children's knowledge of abuse.

The research consistently showed that children's knowledge can be reliably improved as a result of a variety of interventions. It is important to note that improving children's knowledge did not always lead to changes in children's behaviour, confidence to disclose, or self-protective behaviours. Future research may be better suited to exploring concepts that do not yet have the breadth or quality of research on the prevention of institutional child maltreatment.

### **Attitudes**

Measures under this construct assessed attitudes relating to bystander actions, empathy, gender norms, and attitudes towards sexual assault and dating violence. They were mostly aimed at adolescents, and they ranged in quality of evidence.

Many of the measures used for this construct were originally designed for use with adult populations, such as college or university samples. More research was needed in some instances to determine the reliability and validity of the measures for use with younger populations.

The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Short Form (IRMA-SF) was an example of a measure with strong support. This questionnaire assesses attitudes and beliefs about sexual assault that are commonly used to "deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p.134).

## Behaviours

Measures of children's behaviours had some promising support, but further research is needed. Many of the measures in this sub-category used simulations or scenarios depicting abusive situations, where children were asked about what they would do or were observed in their response to a simulation. There are also several ethical considerations to consider with measures of this nature.

However, an important finding was that improvements in children's knowledge did not always predict success in simulated situations. Therefore, children knowing the right answer on a paper-and-pencil-based knowledge questionnaire did not necessarily indicate their ability to implement those strategies.

### 2.6. Adult Perpetrators

Measures of adult perpetrators were aimed at understanding adult's self-reports of the perpetration of child maltreatment. However, there were few measures that were specific to adult perpetrators in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment. Most were researcher-developed, with little or no support yet.

The Conflict Tactic Scale had good support for its reliability and validity. It was designed to measure parents' use of violence but has also been used to assess teachers' and institutional caregivers' use of violence in experimental research. These measures rely on adults' self-reports and so likely represent an underestimation of the true prevalence.

### 2.7. Child/Youth Offender Maltreatment Behaviours

Measures of child/youth maltreatment behaviours were aimed at understanding children's self-reports of engaging in violent, abusive, or bullying behaviours.

In studies on the EGM, there were few measures that were specific to maltreatment behaviours inflicted by children and young people. Researcher-developed measures were specific to bullying and sexual violence perpetration, but there was limited evidence yet to support their psychometric properties. There is promising support for Cook-Craig and colleagues' (2014) Sexual Coercion Measure, but further research would be needed. Many measures on other constructs may also tap into similar ideas (such as attitudes towards rape or gendered violence) but are more specific to attitudes rather than self-reports of engaging in those behaviours.

### 2.8. Parent/Caregiver Outcomes

Measures under this construct were broadly aimed at understanding the knowledge and skills, attitudes, and well-being of parents. This might include parents' knowledge of abuse, caregiving quality and attachment, and parenting stress.

Overall, there were several high-quality parent outcome measures that have been used in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment. They cover measures of parenting skills, knowledge, and trauma responses. For example, the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI) was designed to assess parents' and caregivers' experiences and knowledge of parenting practices for children aged 0 to 6. Parents with greater knowledge and skills reduce the risk of



children being involved in the child welfare system. Observation measures such as the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) also had strong support and were useful for assessing children's safety at home.

### 3. Summary

The Technical Report provides a comprehensive overview of the measures used in experimental research on institutional child maltreatment and includes a guide on how to interpret the key statistical findings. It is designed to be a resource for researchers, funders, and practitioners alike and provides a helpful starting point when exploring possible options for outcome measures in future research, evaluations, or practice.

If we want to take seriously the prevention of child maltreatment in institutional settings, then we need to do our due diligence in choosing sound outcomes in our research designs. It is generally not best practice for researchers to develop their own measure without doing (or reporting) the required processes to assess the psychometric properties of the measure. Often, time and money are barriers to effectively accessing, using, adapting, modifying, or translating established measures with strong support. Measures are also often created with Western, English-speaking populations in mind, so generally, more resources are needed to adapt and translate measures for use in other cultural contexts. We need to prioritise the efforts and resources needed to use measures that are valid and reliable. When we do this, we can then be more confident that our interventions and prevention programs are effective at protecting children and young people.